



DAMAYANTI

*She who spurned the gods
...all for love of Nal*

Shivdutt



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THE MORTAL WHO RIVALLED THE GODS

*'Brilliant as Surya... fair as Chandra...
handsome as the Ashvins... desirable as Kama...
glorious as Indra'*

Rishis and sages praised his noble character, learning and valour...

Chitrakars and shilpakars competed to capture his godlike appearance...

Sutradhars and bards outdid one another in praise of his skills as a charioteer...

He was the envy of princes and warriors in kingdoms far and wide...

And, he was the fantasy and the dream of every woman.
He was Nal.

The extraordinarily handsome and valiant prince of Nishadha.

The heir apparent of King Virasena.

With its capital city at Giriprastha¹, the prosperous Nishadha kingdom of Virasena lay north of the Vindhya mountain range that separated it from the kingdom of Vidarbha. Linked by busy trade routes that connected it to the kingdoms of nearby Chedi, Dasarna, Kosala, Matsya, Magadha, as well as with that of Vidarbha – it thrived on its rich mineral wealth of semi-

¹ According to the Mahabharata (Book 3 – 324, 12), the capital of the Nishadhas was Giriprastha, which most likely is the present-day Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh.

precious stones, such as lapis lazuli that were mined from the Nila mountain, and the opals from the Sweta mountain, while the metals were mined from the Sringavat mountains nearby. The land owed its fertile soil and greening to the largesse of the Pyoshini River. Teeming with fish and marine life, it flowed from the Vindhya through the Nishadha kingdom and then, upon entering from the northern point of the wild, dense and dreaded Dandaka forest, it ran to flow into the ocean.

Walking along the riverbank with his childhood friend Rudra, the young prince was idly casting stones when a palace guard rode up to them. Saluting briskly, he stuttered, ‘Ra-Ra-Rajkumar... Her Highness, your mother, requires your presence in the Lotus Hall.’

‘Catch your breath, Purshottam... what’s the rush? I hope it’s not another painter who has come to paint my portrait!’ sighed Nal.

‘Well, that’s the price you have to pay for your good looks!’ ribbed Rudra. ‘By the way, how many portraits are there adorning the hallways of the palace? At last count, there were twenty-two I think. Oh-oh... I get it. You will be turning a year older in a few days from now, so I think your mother wants to commemorate your birthday by having a new portrait painted.’

‘What on earth is she going to do with this collection, I can’t fathom!’ said Nal, throwing up his hands.

‘Probably get a few copies made of the latest one to send out to fathers of prospective young girls of marriageable age,’ chortled Rudra.

‘Ha-ha, you are always thinking of girls!’

‘Well... I wish they would start thinking of me for a change, instead of mooning and swooning over you! I don’t look half-bad you know, Nal!’

‘Oh, not at all! You just remind me of the backside of a bull!’ teased Nal. ‘Hey-hey... stop, stop...’ he laughed as Rudra playfully pounded him with his balled-up fists. ‘Okay, okay. I take that back... your face looks like the dark night of amavasya!’

‘Come on... race you back to the palace,’ shouted Rudra as he sprinted away gaining a headstart over Nal and laughing at his own cleverness.

‘You rascal,’ Nal shook his fist and ran after him. Kicking out his left foot, he tackled Rudra who tripped and stumbled on the path while Nal jeered and raced ahead.

Huffing and puffing, the two friends arrived at the palace and ran down the corridors towards the Lotus Hall.

‘Ah-ha, there you are! Son, come and look at the portrait of this lovely princess which Chitrakar Visheshwara has brought,’ the Queen Mother gestured towards a painting that rested on a stand and was draped over with fine muslin.

‘Oh, Mother... you called me just for this!’ moaned Nal clutching his hair. *She will be just another pretty face of some kingdom or the other.* Rudra clapped a hand to his mouth and tried to smother the snigger that was rising in him.

‘At least take a look, Nal,’ the Queen Mother said gently. Pushkar, her younger son added his plea to hers: ‘Yes, brother... please do! If you don’t get married first, my turn will never come!’

‘Besides, Visheshwara is famous for his art of capturing the very likeness of his subjects and has travelled many miles from Madra to bring her portrait to us,’ said his mother. Then she added the clincher, ‘and as you well know, the princesses of Madra are famed for their beauty!’

Rudra made sounds of clearing his throat, ‘Your Highness... if I may say something...’

‘Of course, son... you are as dear to me as Nal,’ Queen Vasumati encouraged him.

‘Nal has been raving, quite madly if I may say so, about a damsel who has been appearing in his dreams...’

‘What utter rubbish!’ exclaimed a flustered, blushing Nal. ‘Mother, no such thing... don’t listen to this mad fellow, he is lying...’

Visheshwara came forward and bowing low, suggested, ‘Your Highness, if the young Prince can describe the fair maiden

of his dreams, perhaps I could paint a picture of her likeness...'

The Queen Mother clapped her hands, delighted with this. 'Yes, of course... what a brilliant idea! Our Nal is quite the poet and I am sure he will wax lyrical over this dream girl,' she laughed.

'Mother!' Nal blushed several shades deeper. 'Honestly... you people are just too much!'

'I will hear no more of it, Nal!'

Then turning to Visheshwara, she said: 'Will you please paint a portrait of this girl while my son describes her to you?'

The painter stroked his beard thoughtfully and mused, 'It may take a while but I shall do all that is within my talents to capture her likeness, Your Highness.'

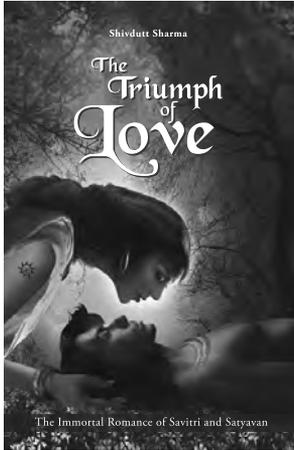
'You are a traitor, Rudra!' groaned Nal when they were alone. 'You blabbered what I told you in confidence about my dreams.'

'Rubbish, I just proved what a good friend I am! At least now we will see who has been haunting you in your dreams these past nights, and soon we will know if she is just a figment of your imagination or whether such a maiden really exists!'



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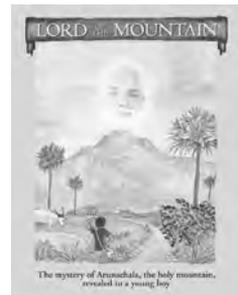
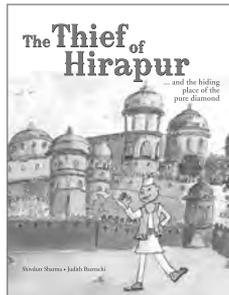
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