

Shakuntala

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Shakuntala

This famous story appears in the Mahabharata and has been narrated by many authors. The play by Kalidasa is perhaps the best and most popular rendering of this story.

Sage Vishvamitra was a king and warrior by birth. He had chosen the life of a monk and engaged in severe penance. His conversion had come in a dramatic manner. During a hunting expedition, he had come upon sage Vasishta, who lived an austere life in the forest. He was impressed when the sage offered to feed him and his large retinue when they had barged in on him without prior notice. Vasishta had Kamadhenu, the celestial cow, which had the power to grant anything that the sage wished. Kamadhenu had produced fabulous dishes and wine, to the delight of the entire party. The king was enamored by the divine cow and demanded to have it. How dare an ascetic possess such a precious gift which he, the king, did not have! Vasishta had refused, rather politely. When Vishvamitra had tried to remove the cow by force, she had produced warriors from her body and sent his army reeling. All his powers as a ruler were nothing compared to that of an ascetic, acquired by *tapas* and meditation.

Vishvamitra never accepted defeat. He sought to be an ascetic with powers excelling that of Vasishta, whom he loathed. He took up meditation with the gusto of a warrior in combat. His motives

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were suspect and they sent shivers down the spines of Gods. What would he do with the powers once he got them?

Indra sent the heavenly damsel Menaka to seduce him and thus break his penance. Menaka, with her extraordinary beauty and talent for the arts, did succeed. Vishvamitra was infatuated with her. He spent his time in her company, as if in a dream. A child was born to them. The baby girl had the charm and beauty of the mother and the strong will of the father.

One day Vishvamitra noticed that his feet were well inside water as he walked into the ocean to offer the morning prayers to the sun. His powers of meditation were slowly withering away. One day he would be totally unable to walk on water. He wondered what had set him off the course of his austerities. He felt like a prisoner in the bonds of Menaka's love. He had not given up his life as a king for this. He felt foolish and guilty. He walked away, never to return to his lover or his daughter.

Menaka missed her life in the heavens and had little interest in spending her life caring for the baby. She laid her on a bed of leaves and flew away, hoping and praying that the animals of the forest would care for the child. A group of Shakuntha birds watched over the baby until a monk saw her on his way. Sage Kanva fell in love with the lonely child. Her innocent smile and cooing sounds stole his heart.

Kanva named the child Shakuntala as a mark of gratitude for the birds who had cared for her. He raised her with the utmost love and affection. Two decades passed and Shakuntala grew up into a delightful young lady - kind, beautiful and loving. She loved the animals in the ashram and kept a garden, lush with rare species of plants with majestic flowers. The hermits in the commune loved her. Gautami, the old hermit, was like a mother to her and Anusuya

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and Priyamvada were her bosom friends.

One day, the young king of Hasti came to their part of the forest with his hunting party. He chased a deer which was wandering fearlessly and was about to shoot it. An agitated voice stopped him in his tracks.

“Please sir, stop what you are doing. Hunting is not allowed in these woods,” said the firm voice of a young woman. Dushyanta looked up to see three young maidens who were as beautiful as the flowers in their hair and as fearless as the deer that stood and watched him. The king was impressed by their sincerity. After mutual introductions, he begged their forgiveness and spoke.

“I hear that sage Kanva is away on a pilgrimage. I was planning to camp in these parts for a few days to rest and relax. Is it too much to impose on your hospitality? These woods are lovely and enchanting. So is your company.”

Shakuntala had not seen a young man, let alone one as handsome as Dushyanta. She felt shy to look him in the eye and to talk to him. It was a strange new feeling for her. Dushyanta, on the other hand, had never seen a maiden of such grace, charm and innocence. He watched her in the garden doing simple chores such as watering plants or picking flowers. Her every move was captivating to him. He hoped for an opportunity to talk to her.

That chance came in a rather strange way while he was strolling in the garden unknown to the three maidens, who were chatting away. Shakuntala was picking jasmines from a bush when a bee hovered around her lovely face. She tried to shoo him away with no success. Anusuya and Priyamvada giggled and teased her:

“Shakuntala, call king Dushyanta to come to your aid. We are sure he would love to be where the bee is!”

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Shakuntala blushed and feigned anger. Dushyanta jumped at the opportunity. He put on an air of exaggerated concern and spoke with opened arms:

“Who dares to offend my dear Shakuntala! As the king, I challenge him to a duel.” Then he addressed Shakuntala by kneeling: “Dear Lady, I am your servant. I will lay down my life, if necessary, to protect your honor!”

All the three girls burst into laughter. This silliness on the part of the king had broken the ice. From then on, he could joke and talk freely with them. Dushyanta found himself talking to Shakuntala on one pretext or another. She found him interesting and liked his admiration of her. Soon they had fallen deeply in love. The lovely atmosphere of the ashram and the gentle teasing of Anusuya and Priyamvada accelerated the process.

One evening Dushyanta met Shakuntala alone and confessed his love for her.

“I love you more than anything in the world. In my heart I know that you have similar feelings for me. I cannot wait for Sage Kanva to come back from his pilgrimage. Let us marry this minute by the Gandharva rite. As a king I am permitted to use it. I am convinced that your father, who adores you, will understand.” Shakuntala consented by nodding her head.

They were married by a simple exchange of garlands. They passed a few days, which seemed like minutes, in each others’ arms. Dushyanta was getting restless to get back to his kingdom, but sage Kanva had not returned. Dushyanta decided to go. He bade farewell to Shakuntala with hugs and kisses. He placed his signet ring in her finger and said: “My dearest, I will send a chariot to bring you to Hasti. Keep this ring as a memento. It has my insignia on it. I cannot

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Dushyanta placed his signet ring in her finger and said: "My dearest, I will send a chariot to bring you to Hasti. Keep this ring as a memento. It has my insignia on it. I cannot bear to live without you."

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bear to live without you.”

Shakuntala felt the pangs of separation as he drove away. She was overwhelmed with many conflicting feelings. Too much had happened in a short time. There was the thrill of being loved and married to Dushyanta, and the excitement of living in the palace of Hasti. She would miss her ashram, pets, plants and above all her friends and her father. She sat in a daze immersed in these thoughts. She did not know how long she was in this state of oblivion. Neither was she aware of the misfortune that was to be hers due to this innocent transgression.

Sage Durvasa was known for his foul temper. He had arrived at the ashram and found Shakuntala in a state of stupor. He expected her to run to him to offer the hospitality he was used to -water to wash his hands and feet, a seat and refreshments. To his chagrin, Shakuntala did not seem to recognize him, nor did she get up. He fell into a rage and uttered a curse:

“You have ignored me, deep in your thoughts about someone else. I curse that he do the same to you. May he forget that he ever met you.”

Priyamvada came by at that moment. She begged Durvasa on behalf of her dearest friend by explaining to him the reasons for her anxieties. Durvasa was pacified.

“A curse, once uttered, cannot be recalled in full. Dushyanta will forget ever having met her,” he said. “However, he will recollect everything once he sees the signet ring on her finger.” The cloud on the face of Priyamvada was lifted. She felt safe for Shakuntala. She did not tell her of this incident lest she be unnecessarily worried.

Some days passed. Sage Kanva arrived from his travels. He noticed a great change in Shakuntala. His little girl seemed to have turned into a woman in the short time he was gone. He learnt from

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An eighteenth century Kangra painting, The British Museum, London.

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Gautami about Dushyanta's visit, and their secret marriage. Gautami informed him discretely that Shakuntala had missed her period and soon her pregnancy would be visible to others. The time had come to let her join her husband. The king had not yet sent for her, despite his protestations to do so. Sage Kanva felt happy for his Shakuntala. She would be the queen of the great house of Hasti. He knew that he would miss her dearly. He had spent his whole life in Yoga and meditation. He had led a life of detachment, learning to control his desires. But life without Shakuntala was harder to bear than any challenge he had faced. He controlled his tears and agreed with Gautami that Shakuntala should go to Hasti with a small retinue, and unite with her husband.

Shakuntala was in two minds about this proposition. She had been puzzled that Dushyanta had not called on her or sent for her. Had he been distracted by an imminent affair of the state? Or, could it be that he had forgotten her! She remembered the expression on his face at the moment they parted. It was one of pure love and sincerity. They both had felt it. She played with the ring he had given her, which was too big. It dangled loosely on her finger.

Finally, the day chosen by Kanva for her departure to Hasti came. Gautami, who had been a mother to her, would accompany her. Shakuntala bade good-bye to her dear father and bosom friends Anusuya and Priyamvada with tear-filled eyes. She missed the deer and parrots who were her fondest pets. Every creeper and plant in the garden was dear to her. She had nursed them and watched them grow. There was a lump in her throat as she looked back at the ashram for the last time. She tore herself from that life of security to prepare for one which was new and uncertain, yet exciting.

It took a few days of travel to the city of Hasti. They had broken the journey a few times and rested on the banks of Sachi,

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which flowed on the outskirts. Hasti was a large city with palaces and gardens, in contrast to the quaint surroundings in which she was raised. They arrived at the splendid royal residence and asked to have an audience with the king.

They were shown to the royal chambers. Shakuntala skipped a heartbeat when she saw her Dushyanta, dressed in his royal robes and looking elegant. She expected him to come running to her but he looked at her as if he had never seen her before. She felt a pain of rejection, which was enhanced by the words he spoke.

“Please come in,” he said with a formal air. “I am told you come from the ashram of sage Kanva. How is he? I hope his health is good. Have you brought me any message of significance?”

Gautami answered the king, suppressing her anger:

“Dear Dushyanta, Sage Kanva regrets that he could not meet you on your last visit to the ashram. He sends his blessings with Shakuntala, your dear wife and the mother of your child. I have come here to rightfully unite her with you, though we would miss her terribly.”

An expression of surprise, marked with derision, came over Dushyanta as he surveyed Shakuntala from tip to toe. “I do not see the humor in this, venerable lady,” he retorted. “You both seem respectable and sincere. How could this young lady, whom I never recall meeting, be the mother of my child? Please do not insult me. State the reason for your arrival. If you need any favors, ask without such preposterous allegations.”

Those words felt like molten lead poured into Shakuntala’s ears. She broke down into a sob. “How dare you speak such cruel words?” she shot back. “Do you have no shame or honor? Were all those words of endearment you spoke to me a mere pretense? You gave me your word when you left. Here is your ring with the royal

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insignia to prove it.”

So saying she rose to remove the ring from her finger. To her shock and dismay, the finger was bare and the ring was nowhere in sight.

“Oh God, I have lost the ring!” she gasped. “It must have slipped out when I stopped at the river Sachi to get a drink of water.”

“How convenient!” chided Dushyanta. “You have a ready wit. What more do you have to say of our alleged rendezvous?”

Shakuntala felt like a wounded deer with a poisoned arrow in her lungs. “We shall not hear one more word of insult. Let us run as far away from this evil house in as little time as possible,” she said and led Gautami, who was in total shock, out of the chambers. Dushyanta watched in disbelief as they sped out of his sight, not to be seen again.

As days passed, Dushyanta was haunted by what had transpired in his chamber. He honestly did not recall ever meeting that young lady, who showed clear signs of pregnancy. Yet, her face haunted him in his dreams. There was no deceit in that face. Could she be honestly mistaken him for someone else? Or was she an impostor with a plan to blackmail him? He spent sleepless nights tossing in bed. He could not shake her image from his mind.

One day, his minister brought him a ring with the royal insignia that had been found in the belly of a fish caught in the river Sachi. The fisherman who found it had kept it to himself in his greed and tried to pawn it for some gold. It had finally come to the attention of some honest official who had recognized the royal seal and had returned it to the minister. As Dushyanta toyed with the ring in his hand, strange feelings came over him. A fog seemed to lift from his memory. He distinctly recalled placing it in the nimble finger of

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Shakuntala on the happiest day of his life. The curse of Durvasa had been lifted and the memories came gushing to him.

“What have I done!” he said to himself. “How could I have forgotten my dearest Shakuntala all these days. Is it a curse or a disease, or am I going mad?” He felt a pang of shame and guilt at his behavior when Shakuntala had come looking for him. He had wounded her with his harsh words. He felt like whipping himself for his actions.

Dushyanta set out immediately for the ashram of Kanva on his fastest steed. He wanted to apologize to Shakuntala, and beg her forgiveness for his behavior. He found the doors of the ashram ajar, and all the hermits gone. The place had been abandoned, as it was evident from the garden, which was in ruins, with no pet animals in sight. No one would answer him as to the whereabouts of Shakuntala or her kin. Frustrated and sad, Dushyanta looked all over for Shakuntala, who had simply disappeared.

The king was brokenhearted and spent his years in isolation. He lost interest in food, hunting and games. He tossed in his bed with remorse. The memory of his days with Shakuntala was like a double-edged sword. He cherished every minute of it. It kept him alive while he felt tortured. Eight years passed since he had seen his beloved wife.

There was a war in a distant land in which one of the allies of Dushyanta was involved. Dushyanta was invited to join him in his fight. As a sign of friendship, Dushyanta traveled to that land with his army and fought alongside his friend. They were victorious. Dushyanta was sent off with honors by his ally. On his way back, Dushyanta came upon a forest of exquisite beauty. He felt peaceful for the first time in years. His right eyebrow twitched, which was a

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good omen. Dushyanta rode on admiring the serenity of the land when he saw a hermitage at a distance. To his shock, he heard the growling of lions nearby. He got off his horse and walked gingerly to investigate the odd presence of wild animals near an ashram. He saw a little boy, as radiant as the moon, playing with lion cubs as if they were kittens. The boy was fearless and extremely handsome.

An intense feeling of love came over Dushyanta as he came near the boy. He had never felt like this with a child before.

“Who are you?” he asked the boy. “Who are your parents? Who lives in this ashram in such a remote setting?”

The boy looked at the stranger with curiosity. He had never seen one so strong or dressed in such a costume. Before he could answer a female voice called out.

“Whom are you talking to, Bharata? I have warned you many times to call me if you see strangers.”

The voice, which betrayed concern, was familiar to Dushyanta. He stared in anticipation as a young lady appeared around the corner. She was dressed in the simple costume of a hermit. She looked thin due to the severe life of an ascetic. Her face was as serene as the full moon, but a tinge of sorrow hung around like a cloud. She was Shakuntala.

Tears welled in his eyes as he looked at her face. Now she was looking at him and had recognized him. She turned to leave but stopped and looked back. Dushyanta was sobbing like a child. He came up to her, and collapsed on to his knees, clutching her hand.

“Who is this man? Why is he crying like this?” the boy demanded to know. “Now he has made my mother cry too.” Priyamvada arrived in a hurry. She had heard strange noises and was curious. Her keen mind sorted out the tangled web of events in a flash. She gathered the boy and quickly walked away leaving the

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two lovers to themselves as she spoke to the boy:

“Leave them alone. They have a lot to say to each other. You are too young to understand it.”

“No!” protested the boy. “I want to be with my mother. I do not want to miss anything. Tell me who he is and why they look at each other that way. My mother cries but I feel I have never seen her happier before.”

Bharata did return some time later, led by Anusuya and Priyamvada, to be greeted with joy by the stranger who picked him up and caressed him. He had met the father he had never known. His mother was radiant as she stood snuggled against his father. There were tears of joy in the eyes of everyone except Bharata. He felt only joy.

