

THE INDIAN RESEARCH SERIES

THE STORY OF

King Nala &
Princess
Damayanti



A Narrative Poem by

MAURICE LANGTON

From the Tamil of

PUHALENDI PULAVAR

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THE STORY OF KING NALA AND PRINCESS DAMAYANTI is one of the great love-stories of the world, and in its Tamil form as versified by Puhalēndi Pūlavār it is one of the gems of Tamil poetry.

Poetry in the Indian languages, and not least in Tamil, is notoriously hard to translate into English verse. But to this translation—a labour of love over many years—Mr Langton has brought gifts both of scholarship and poetic taste which make it an English poem in its own right. It will take rank among the very few satisfactory verse translations of Indian classics.

THE REV. M. C. LANGTON, M.A., was born in London in 1909. He was educated at St Dunstan's College, Catford, and Trinity College, Cambridge (Classical Scholar, 1927-30). After periods as Assistant Lecturer in Greek at the University of Leeds and as a student at Salisbury Theological College, he was ordained by the Bishop of Chichester and held an assistant-curacy at Horsham, Sussex. In 1937 he married and came out to India under the S.P.G. to the Diocese of Tinnevely, which he has served in a variety of capacities. He is now (among other things) Principal of the C.M.S. Schools for the Blind, Palayamkottai (Palamcottah). He lists his recreations as 'poetry, Oriental languages and four riotous children'.

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AND
PRINCESS DAMAYANTI

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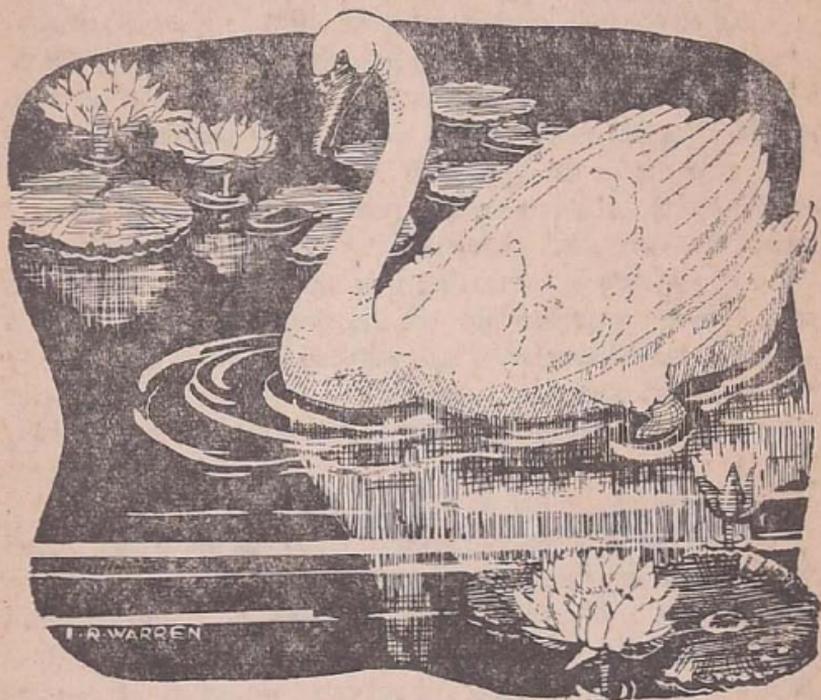
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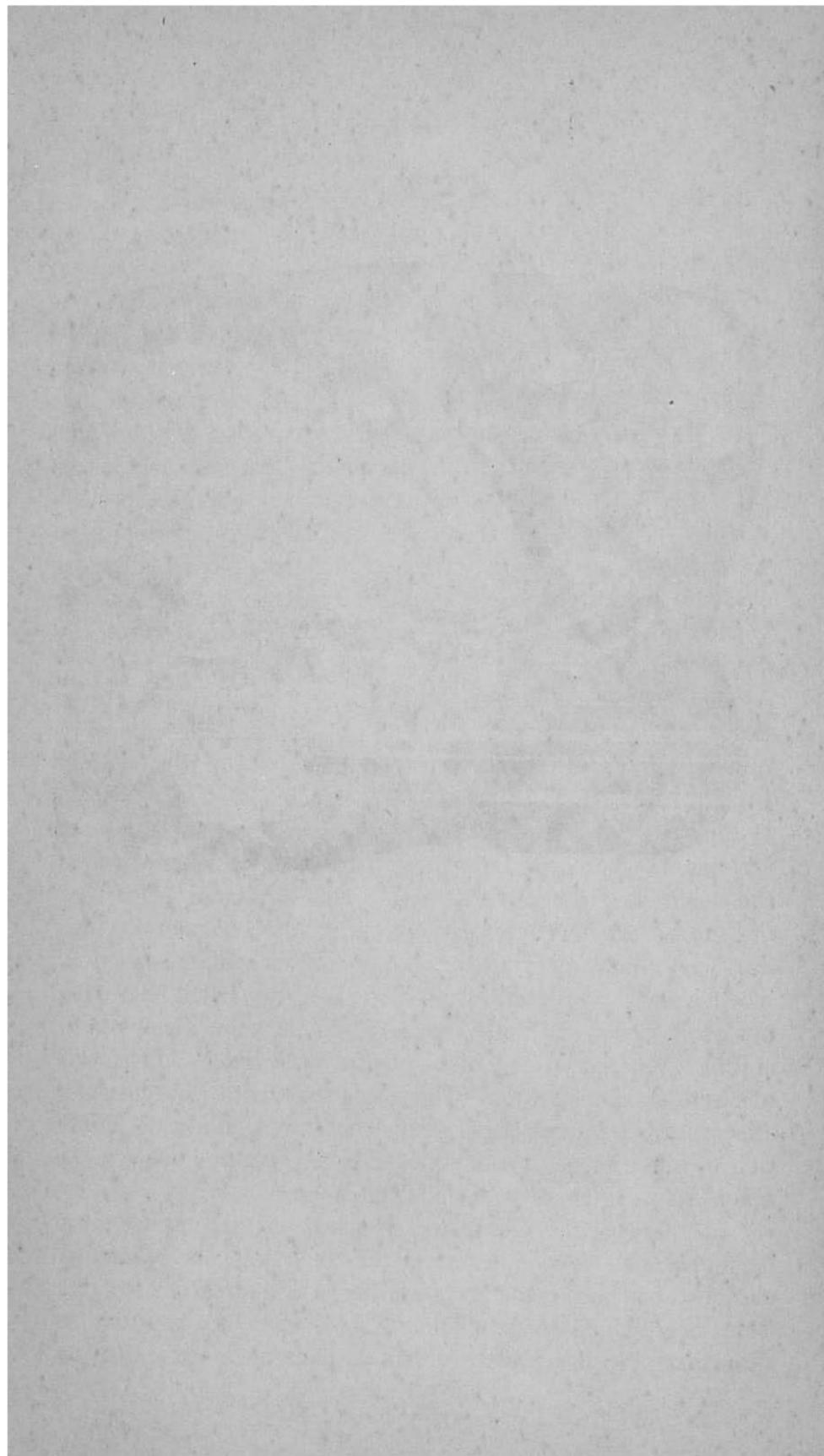
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TO
MY WIFE





TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

THIS TRANSLATION was begun eight years or so ago as a labour of love, without any thought of publication. Much of it was written to while away the time on wearisome journeys by train, omnibus, bullock-cart, cycle, or on foot across the plains of Puhâlêndi's own Pândian Land. Some stanzas call to mind a rest-house on the shore of the Indian Ocean, others a village Church after Evensong, when the lamps have burned too low to read, others again a railway waiting-room or wayside 'bus-stop in the sultry heat of a tropic noon. The translator makes no claim to be a poet, but as a great lover of poetry, especially of those poets who know that the chief business of a poet is to tell a tale in verse, he believes that Puhâlêndi's *Nala* is worthy to stand in the company of the great narrative poems of the world; and it is that belief that has urged him on to the completion of the task.

On the vexed question whether poetry, if it is to be translated at all, should be literally translated into prose or rendered into verse, the translator is clearly on the side of Fitzgerald and Conington. A literal translation of such a poem as this would be intolerable. It must be admitted that there are stanzas where, owing to the immense compression of which the Tamil language is capable, the less significant of a mass of conceits has inevitably been omitted, and occasionally an idea has been added to bring out the significance of the original. The frequently recurring otiose epithets of the Tamil poet have not always been faithfully rendered; on the other hand otiose epithets familiar to English poetry have been introduced as a kind of compensation. The whole style, with its archaisms, affectations, repetitions, and poetic *clichés*, is a deliberate imitation of the original. It is hoped that the resulting effect gives a not untrue impression of Puhâlêndi's poem.

In following the rule that each stanza of the original must be represented by one stanza in the translation, an occasional exception has been made in transferring a less important conceit from one stanza to another, in preference to omitting it altogether. In one place two stanzas have been transposed to

provide a more logical order. The extremely dull introductory verses have been compressed into a prose prologue, and the prayers to the gods with which each canto is prefaced have been omitted, as being so packed with allusions to Hindu mythology as to defy translation.

In reading the poem the reader should keep in mind a picture of Puhâlêndi seated in the palace at Múranai with his orchestra, in the presence of King Chandiran-swargi himself and an admiring throng of courtiers, the apparently irrelevant references to the monarch evoking a gracious smile from the throne and applause from the audience.

THE POET

Puhâlêndi was Poet Laureate at the court of King Varakuna Pândian at Madhurai in the twelfth century A.D. Hence the honorific title of Púlavâr appended to his name. He is said to have belonged to the Vellâla caste, the cultured and wealthy gentlemen-farmers of the Tamil land. Little is known of his personal history. One account gives as his birthplace a village near Chingleput, but his affection for the Pândian country would suggest that this was his native land. The greater part of the traditions concerning his life is occupied with the account of his life-long rivalry with Ottakkúttan, the court poet of the Chôla king, Kulôttungan. When Kulôttungan's father on his death-bed determined to negotiate a marriage for his son and heir with the daughter of the Pândian king, he sent Ottakkúttan to Madhurai as his envoy. It was here that the rivalry between the two poets began. Puhâlêndi incurred the jealousy of Ottakkúttan both by excelling him in poetic skill and by comparing the Chôla kingdom unfavourably with the Pândian. Quixotically King Varakunan decided to send Puhâlêndi to Urai-yûr as part of his daughter's dowry. The rivalry between the poets continued unabated, until Ottakkúttan succeeded in getting Puhâlêndi put in prison. By all accounts Puhâlêndi does not seem to have suffered very arduous confinement, and he spent his time writing poetry. He was eventually released through the influence of the young queen. He then retired to Múranai, to the court of King Chandiran-swargi, a vassal of the Chôla King. There in response to Chandiran-swargi's desire he composed the *Nala Venba*, the story of Nala and Damayanti.

The last glimpse we have of him is the story of his hiding in the house of Ottakkúttan with the intention of murdering him, where, upon hearing Ottakkúttan express privately to his wife high praise of his *Nala Venba*, he revealed himself and flung himself into Ottakkúttan's arms. So at last the two enemies were reconciled.

The other great poet of the age was the greatest and the most famous of the three, Kamban, the author of the Tamil *Rámáyana*. This period of Tamil literature, A.D. 1100-1400, is an age of Sanskrit influence, as may be seen from the fact that both the *Rámáyana* and the *Nala Venba* are based on Sanskrit originals. The ornateness of the style is also said to be imitated from the Sanskrit and is less highly esteemed by Tamil literary critics than the purer style of the three classical ages that preceded it. The language is also blamed for its admission of Sanskrit derivatives. For all that, the vocabulary of the *Nala Venba* is more than ninety per cent pure Dravidian. The whole setting too of the poem is South Indian; the names alone are Northern. In the account of Damayanti's suitors, for example, it is clear that the poet knows nothing of North India; the descriptions of Oudh and of the Punjab are purely literary, but when he speaks of the Pândian, Chôla and Chera kingdoms he speaks of the land he knows and loves.

METRE

This is not the place for an excursus on the metres of Tamil classical poetry. Suffice it to say that the *Venba* metre consists of four-line stanzas, of which the first three lines are tetrameters and the fourth a trimeter catalectic. The stanza used in the translation consists of three iambic tetrameters followed by a dimeter catalectic, as near an equivalent as could be expected. (The tetrameters are divided by a strong caesura and a hypermetric syllable is occasionally introduced for the sake of variety.) Acknowledgement for the source of this metre should be made to George Herbert; the debt will be obvious.

In the translation the lines rhyme in couplets, with occasional interior rhymes. In the original they rhyme in couplets, with a less pronounced interior rhyme after a caesura in the second line. In Tamil verse, however, the rhyme occurs at the beginning not the end of the line. This is occasionally found

as an incidental embellishment in English poetry, as in Keats' *Sleep and Poetry*, ll. 211-213:

‘Did not their shames
Affright you? Did our old lamenting Thames
Delight you?’

But the translator felt that to imitate the Tamil practice regularly in English, even if practicable, would be pedantic and wearisome. Only twice has it been attempted: in I.5, where it is demanded by a play upon words in the Tamil; and again in II.92, where a repetition in the original requires it, and the effect there is carried on by the repetitions of the succeeding stanzas. Both in the original and in the translation alliteration is freely used for purely decorative effect.

PROPER NAMES

The Tamil language possesses no aspirated consonants, no true sibilants, and does not distinguish between b and p, between d and t, ḍ and ṭ, g and k. To preserve the Tamil flavour of the poem the Tamil spelling has been in the main retained, though for the sake of euphony the Sanskrit form is sometimes preferred, as for instance Nishada rather than Niṭada. Nor has the process been carried to extremes; ‘Damayanti’ might have been written ‘Tamayanti’, as it actually is in Tamil. For the same reasons the final n or r of the Tamil masculine nominative ending is used along with the more usual form; i.e., ‘Nala’ and ‘Nalan’, ‘Vîma’ (Skt. ‘Bhîma’) and ‘Vîman’, ‘Viyâsar’ (Skt. ‘Vyâsa’). For those who are ignorant of Indian languages, the names should be pronounced as in Italian, except that the short a has the sound of the u in ‘butter’; e.g., ‘Nala’ rhymes with ‘duller’, and ‘Kali’ with ‘gully’. In the text no distinction has been made between dentals and linguals (between t and ṭ, d and ḍ). This distinction holds good in Tamil, and those acquainted with Sanskrit will be able to make it for themselves. On the first occurrence of a name all the long vowels are marked with the circumflex accent, and where doubt might arise the stress is marked on a short syllable by the acute accent. In conclusion it may be added that the h in Puhaleṇḍi’s name is actually a very soft k and the l is a letter peculiar to Tamil, a retroflex liquid pronounced in different parts of the Tamil country sometimes as ṛ, sometimes ḷ, sometimes almost zh.

THE PHILOSOPHY

The main interest of the poem is of course aesthetic—it is a good story told in lovely verse. Students of religion will also find a subsidiary interest in studying in it a popular form of the doctrine of *karma* which is universal in Hinduism. When a character acts meanly and plunges himself and his dear ones in distress, the poet ascribes this to his *karma*, the fruit of his misdeeds in earlier lives. This concept is quite alien to Western ways of thought: those to whom it comes as a strange doctrine will do well to remember that it is the attempt of a great religion to deal with the same problem of human suffering and Divine justice as is wrestled with, in the Christian Scriptures, in the book of Job.

But, once more, it is as a love story in verse that this poem has its main appeal. The closing couplet of Dryden's *All for Love*, applied by him to Anthony and Cleopatra, could more justly be applied to Nala and Damayanti—

‘And fame to late posterity shall tell
No lovers lived so great or died so well.’

I should like to take this opportunity of thanking Miss I. R. Warren for the beautiful illustrations which she has made for this book.

Palamcottah, 1948

M. C. LANGTON

TO PUHALENDI

*Sweetest of Púlavars, Puhaleñdi! long
Hast thou been wont to lead me by the hand,
And on the gilded pinions of thy song
Transport my soul to that enchanted land,*

*Where in clear waters swans sedately steer
And spicy trees perfume the summer gale,
Where pearl-enamelled on the crystal mere
The lily and the lotus never fail;*

*Where lords and ladies in their garlands gay
With buzzing of innumerable bees
Walk peacock-like in beauty night and day,
And aye for gods and men a Fate decrees*

*Virtue and courage have their guerdon due,
And hate is shamed, but love is ever true.*

M.C.L.

PROLOGUE

PRINCE DHARMA, eldest of the sons of Pându, was driven from his kingdom by his brother Duryôdhana. In exile he is visited by the Brahman sage and poet, Viyâsar. From him he seeks encouragement and consolation. Viyâsar proceeds to relate to him the story of King Nala, who in ancient time was likewise driven unjustly from his throne.

The whole succeeding story is thus put in the mouth of Viyâsar, but this original *mise en scène* is entirely forgotten as the tale proceeds, and outside the prologue neither Dharma nor Viyâsar is mentioned again.



CANTO THE FIRST

SYNOPSIS

IN THE LAND of Nishada and in its capital city Maha Vindapuram there dwelt a noble and virtuous king named Nala. One day king Nala, walking with the ladies of his court in the royal park, sees a white swan floating on the lake close to the shore. He sends the girls to catch it, and, when they bring the swan to him, addresses it with gentle and flattering words. The swan, pleased with the king's favour, tells him of a fair princess named Damayanti, daughter of Vima the king of Vidarpa, whom it promises to make his bride. Nala falls in love with Damayanti at first hearing of her beauty, and sends the swan to plead his cause with the princess. The swan flies away to Kundinapuram, Vima's capital, where she finds Damayanti, and, telling her of Nala's high courage and renown, causes her to fall in love with him as he with her. The swan then flies back to king Nala, who anxiously awaits its return.

Damayanti's lovesickness is at once known to her maids-in-waiting, and by them reported to her mother and father. King Vima, impressed by his daughter's beauty, resolves to invite all the princes of India to attend a Swayamvaram, at which according to ancient Indian custom she shall choose her own husband by putting a golden garland about his neck.

The suitors, Nala among them, throng in hundreds to Vima's court. The news of this event is reported even to Indra in heaven by the sage Narada. The gods themselves join the procession of suitors, and on their way the four great gods, Indra, Yama, Agni and Varuna, encounter King Nala. Indra begs Nala to act as their advocate to press their suit with Damayanti. Nala agrees to their request before knowing what it is. Learning what they ask he resolves to put loyalty to his plighted word before the attainment of his own desires. Made invisible by Indra's magic power, he enters the palace and the apartments of the Princess and converses with her in secret. Although he speaks only of Indra's suit and conceals his own passion, Damayanti knows the truth and promises him her hand. Nala returns secretly as he came. The gods approve his conduct of their suit and grant him a fourfold boon.

At the Swayamvaram the four great gods attempt to confuse Damayanti by appearing before her in the guise of Nala side by side with the real Nala among the suitors. Damayanti, remembering in time the four attributes of Divinity, distinguishes the human Nala among the five Nalas she sees before her and puts the garland about his neck.

On their way back to heaven the gods meet the demon Kali who has come too late for the Swayamvaram. In spite of Indra's warning he threatens out of jealousy to ruin the happy pair. For all his threats, however, the marriage is joyfully celebrated without mishap.

CANTO THE FIRST

THE BETROTHAL

The Land of Nishada

The poet describes the land of Nishada,

There's a land where the silver minnows play
and lily-buds burgeon all the year,
And from their prison honey-sweet
the crimson lotus-petals flare.
To thee creation sees no peer
but radiant Lakshmi's eye serene,
Land of all lands the Queen!

and the city of Maha Vindapuram. °

And there's a city broad and fair,
where girls of flower-frail loveliness
Full oft the cool well-waters pour
o'er saffroned frame, o'er musky tress;
Then flows the fragrant ooze so rich
the ambling tusker in the street
With effort keeps his feet.

On pennant-flaunting balconies
as oft the crisping locks they dry,
From countless sandal-reeking fires
thick odorous fumes ascend the sky,
Till wafted by the southern breeze
the trailing clouds on hall and tower
Descend in perfumed shower.

Here's nothing crook'd but the bending bow,
nothing droops but the trailing tresses,
Naught but the anklets' silver speech
a note of agony expresses;
Trembles naught but the rippling wave,
naught from the straight path turns
But the maiden's glancing eye. [awry

and describes the beauty and virtue of King Nala.

The Swan—

‘A Prince I saw whose martial mien
 might any maiden’s mind emprey;
 Nor earth nor heaven knows his peer
 and boundless is his sceptred sway—
 Nalan, the flower of chivalry
 and crown of magnanimity,
 A spouse most meet for thee. (35)

‘Oh, how describe his eye benign,
 or how declare his soul sincere?
 And for his valiant victor arms
 in this wide world where find the
 If Vishnu vies not, the Violet-eyed, [peer?
 of mortal monarchs who would dare
 With Nalan to compare?’

Damayanti falls in love with the swan’s description of the king’s grace and valour,

That golden maid, gold beetles gilding
 the braided blossoms of her hair,
 Hears and with passion sighs to hear
 the wing’d words of that wingèd fair;
 Her golden lustre gently fades,
 her cheek forgets his ruddy gleam
 To ape the pale moon-beam.

Her maiden musing all enthralled
 by that so passionate narration
 Foretastes her lover’s fond embrace
 in exquisite anticipation;
 And, gazing on her heaving breasts,
 her eyes in innocent collusion
 Confirm the sweet illusion.

To rhythmic melody of bees
 upon rose-braided tresses humming
 The Princess Damayanti stands
 and waits her august father's
 Then, like a slender vine bowed down [coming,
 with full-ripe clusters, at his feet
 Inclines in reverence meet.

and resolves to hold a Swayamvaram for her betrothal.

Her sweat with pearly drops engems
 the radiant crescent of her brow,
 'No common fate such beauty claims;'
 her raptured sire resolves, 'I vow
 From all the realms of Hindustan
 a thousand suitors I will call
 And she shall choose from all.'

The Envoys

Vima's envoys carry the invitation to all the Princes of India.

So spake the lord of that goodly land
 where the holy Ganges' silver spray
 Spumes o'er the áreca's emerald fronds;
 his envoys speeding on their way
 Proclaim through all the realms of Ind
 for Damayanti's nuptial
 A seven-day festival. (45)

(O King of wealth and beauty rare,
 that bearest Hari-Chandira's name,
 Swargi! as through the haunts of men
 in Tamil numbers spreads thy fame,
 So spread the splendid cavalcades
 of royal suitors and their trains
 Across the sunlit plains.)

With their troops and trains to the rousing sound
of the curly conch and the morning
The royal suitors come. [drum

among them King Nala.

At street-doors 'mid the grazing calves
blue petals winking in the sun
Are Damayanti's eyes to him
who for those eyes hath penance done,
As striding through the royal demesne
he enters, none more brave, the
Pavilion of delight. [bright

Damayanti enters the Hall.

Like butterflies each king's heart flutters
circling, as dawns upon their sight
Damayanti, damosel divine,
in all the gems of heaven bedight;
Her ear-ring diamonds in red-gold bars
by the dancing glances of her eyes'
Transmuted to sapphires. [blue fires

For like a gentle peacock preening
amid a herd of wondering fawns
She moves a gentle doe-fawn queening
in rose-apparelled elegance,
The while, a willowy lattice weaving,
they screen her from irreverent view,
Her maiden retinue.

And like a swan whose ruby webs
stain the still waters, and the mere,
Pink-starr'd with lotus, gleams with flash
of silver lightning, Beauty here
Sails the pavilion's golden sea
all radiant with the blossomings
Of nodding lotus-kings. (120)

Here Manmadan now bends his bow
and barbs his arrows of desire
With petaled poison; now he stands,
his golden quiver slung, to admire

'And this the prince, on Lanka's¹ shore
 who washed his arrows in the sea;
 Who sat enthroned in sacred haunts
 of music and of poesy;
 Once went on embassy to heaven;
 and fought in Mahâbârata—
 The Lord of MATHURA.²

'And this the lord of an ancient land
 where o'er the marshes all night long
 Like sleeping water-snakes the buds
 of lotus lie, and with a song
 The heron lulls her quaking brood,
 the peasant mother lulls her child—
 The KURU-DĒSA mild.

'And for this youthful prince's sire
 the bright chank in his ivory whorls
 On a proud red lotus sheds a tear,
 and the broad leaf that idly sprawls
 Beside her holds a glistening pearl
 in the deep canals and the waving
 Of MATTRA'S watery meads. [reeds

'A land there lies in midmost Ind,
 where red juice from the sugar-mills
 O'erflows into the rich rice-fields,
 and from the cow's lip-corner spills—
 This noble youth before you stands
 heir to that rich raj of RANGPORE
 And lord of Dinajpore.

'And hast thou heard, O virtuous Maid!
 of Āvanti, the Muses' sward,
 Where reigns this youth of valiant mien
 thewed like an elephant, MĀLVA'S
 There, as the calves stretch out their tongue [lord?
 to tender lily-buds, they refrain
 To hear the bees' sweet strain. (130)

¹ Ceylon.

² This stanza is exceedingly obscure, and involves an obvious anachronism; Nala belongs to an earlier age than that of the *Mahabharata*.

Then Damayanti's maidens all
 whose only life is in her smile,
 Adorn, with leaden hearts a-quake,
 fingers in fumbling haste agile,
 (Too dazzling beauty hid must be
 with flowers and jewels overlaid)
 The tabour-waisted maid.

So were those twain upon the time
 By skill'd soothsayers certified,
 Nala and Damayanti, wed—
 for peerless prince a peerless bride—
 When to the rich gold-ceil'd abode
 by fussy chamberlains attended
 The bridal progress wended.

Then Love his arrow-petals five—
 the lotus, and the jasmine frail,
 Nelumbo, and sweet blossoms of
 the mango and the asôka pale—
 Arrays with deadly art to strike
 two hearts with fiery poison through,
 And bends the sweet-cane bow. (155)

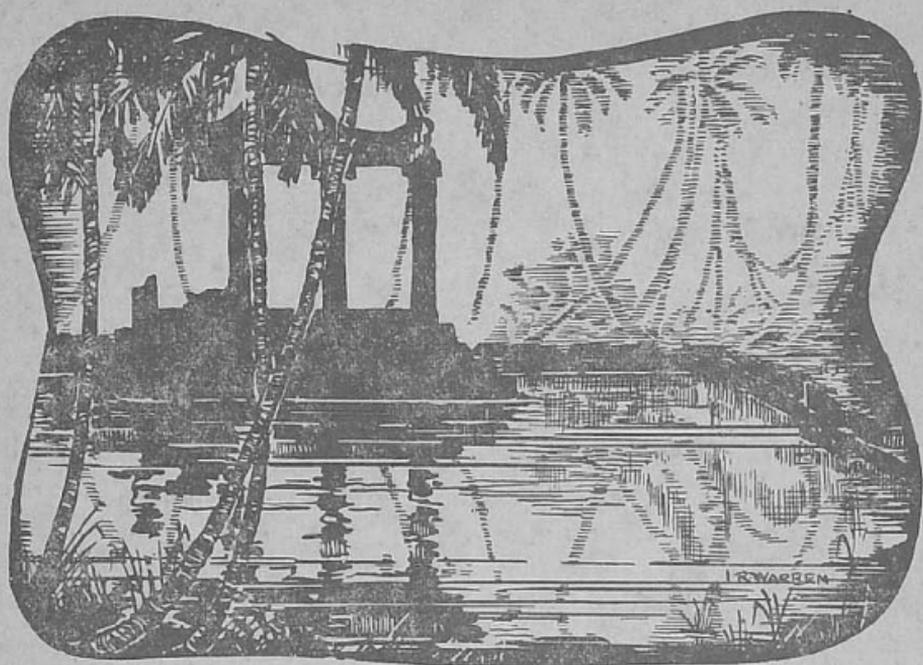
There strength and beauty, grace and fame,
 by Love's fierce interfusion,
 Two hearts, two bodies throb as one
 blended in nuptial unison,
 As when two mountain-torrents pure
 their waters once commingling seem
 Were never but one stream.

Her gaze, that with swift-lifted lids
 stole one glance in her husband's eyes,
 Shyly surveys the silken cloud
 that o'er her shoulder billowing lies;
 While on his tunic's chequered field
 her bosoms gay in mimic fray
 Like dainty chessmen play.

Lord of the chariot and the lance
 to Lakshmi's clasp his arms resigning
 The broad field of his bosom bathes
 in rippling tresses sable-shining,
 While from her sandal-fragrant sweetness
 in torrent-streams of living fire
 Flow rivers of desire.

Till faded lies the lotus, soft
 and softer every fond caress;
 Jangling the jewelled harmony,
 and tangled all the cloudy tress;
 Eye-embers smouldering, vainly strives
 the pupil in eye-corner mewn
 With ear-tip to commune.

So Nala in his vasty palm,
 lord of the towering tusker-hordes,
 Took Damayanti's dainty hand
 and wooed the maid with winsome
 And many a sweet secluded hour [words;
 of lawful bliss they took their fill
 Undimmed by dreams of ill. (160)



CANTO THE SECOND

SYNOPSIS

AFTER THE marriage Nala and Damayanti return to Vindapuram, where they live in peace and prosperity for twelve years. Twin children, Prince Indrasena and Princess Indrasenai, are born to them. But all these years Kali has been watching for his opportunity. At last one evening Nala in performing his daily ablutions leaves one speck of dirt uncleansed, and by this ritual impurity allows Kali to enter and take possession of his soul. Kali incites Nala's brother and vassal Pushkara to challenge Nala to play at dice. Under Kali's spell Nala consents, and by Kali's assistance Pushkara wins from him his kingdom, his treasure and all his possessions. Nala refuses to stake Damayanti as a final wager, and they set off with the twin children into the jungle with nothing but the clothes they wear.

When the children are weary with the journey, they entrust them to a passing Brahman, who conveys them safely to Kundinapuram. Nala himself refuses to seek hospitality as a poor relation in his father-in-law's palace, and Damayanti declines to leave him. They shelter for the night in a ruined shrine. While Damayanti sleeps, Kali incites Nala to abandon her. They have nothing but Damayanti's saree to cover them, since Kali in the guise of a bird has flown off with Nala's cloak. Nala divides the saree with a knife, and, wrapping one half round him, steals out into the night.

When Damayanti awakes, she searches in vain for Nala, and, while she is tracking his footprint in the sand, stumbles over a python, which with one gulp swallows her down all but her head and shoulders. From the python she is rescued by a hunter, only to find herself the object of his lust. Fleeing from him and unable to escape, she turns and blasts him to ashes with one glance of her eyes. Finally an honest merchant takes her up into his chariot and conveys her to the town of Chedi. There she wanders disconsolate in the streets until the Chedi queen, hearing of her plight, brings her into the palace. There Vima's envoy finds her, and in his charge she returns home to Kundinapuram.

The five marks of their shameful way
 are whoring, gaming, drinking, lying,
 And charity-denying.

'For gaming rips up Virtue's roots;
 it cleaves the clearest path to hell;
 And gaming steels the heart to hate
 and soundeth gentle mercy's knell;
 The dice-box and its deadly lure
 all princes to their honour true,
 All noble hearts eschew.

"'Tis lovely Virtue's mortal foe;
 'tis death to honour and to truth,
 To wealth and bounty, fame and friendship,
 self-respect and mutual ruth;
 When one small cause confederates
 so many evils in its train,
 Will not the wise refrain?"

'What is the verdict of the Sage,
 the wise and worthy Counsellor,
 Has sifted all life's verities
 and studied all our ancient lore?

"Who falls for harlot's empty lure,
 who falls for gaming's gaudy snare,
 Is fast in Folly's lair.'" (40)

Nala rejects this advice,

But anger blazed beneath the brows
 of Nala at their warning words,
 (How rich his turgid waters teem
 with leaping fish and lowing herds!)

'My word is given; my honour pledged;
 and who are ye to say me nay?
 Come good, come ill, I'll play.'

'And now, O King!', quoth Putkaran,
 'down whose broad estuaries the
 With thwacks of sweet-cane thrust the herds [churls
 o'er nature's, not men's, tribute-pearls!

If this imponderable sport
 in earnest thou'rt resolved to play,
 What wager dost thou lay?'

and wagers his jewelled chain against Putkara's bull.

Cried Nala: 'First this jewelled chain,
 whose coruscating stones outshine
 The gaudy bow of heaven, this prize
 my wager be; and what of thine?'
 Then Putk'ra, 'neath whose garlands gay
 a wrestler's massy shoulders rear,
 Wagers the wild-eyed steer.

Putkara plans with Kali's assistance to win Nala's wealth and also his queen.

And as the loathsome fires of lust
 revolve within his whirling brain,
 How he may win him Nala's wealth
 and Damayanti's couch attain,
 E'en so within the whirling dice
 the foul fiend's fume infesting all
 Revolves and guides the fall.

Nala loses all his treasure and all his possessions,

'Aha! your chain I capture—so!
 quoth Putkaran, 'and now your plea-
 And Nala stakes, and stakes again, [sure?]
 till piling treasure upon treasure
 By constant cumulation mounts
 the wager million upon million
 To twice ten thousand billion. (45)

He stakes, he loses, loss on loss,
 a hundred hundred noble stallions,
 He stakes his pearl-encrusted cars
 by thousands, bowmen by battalions,
 He stakes his elephants—heifers huge
 and bulls whose vasty bulk reproves
 Indra's celestial droves.

Once more the upstart insolent
to all who company their flight
Like fearful penalty proclaims;
but through the town no house that
But mourned as for a brother dead, [night
no infant but for love ill-used
His mother's milk refused. (60)

The Jungle

The children complain of weariness.

'My silver-shackled feet are throbbing',
little Prince Indrasênan cried;
'My ankles silver-bell'd are aching',
the Princess Indrasênai sighed;
'Where are our rope-rein'd tuskers now?
Our fair frail limbs are weary. Oh!
How far yet must we go?'

As at their tearful cry he turns
to view their pitiable state,
And in their innocent distress
sees the remorseless hand of fate,
There he in fond compassion seeking
a remedy beyond his skill
Stands like a statue still.

Nala and Damayanti discuss whether to part from one another or from them.

To her who once before the gods
enwreathed and chose him for her
King Nalan: "'Twere a crime to take [own
upon this forest-journey lone
These tender blossoms of our love.
Go, seek for them sure sanctuary
In Vima's fair country.'

Then Damayanti through her tears:
'O King! a maid of royal race
May get her winsome prattling babes
and find her favour in their face;

But how should prince's daughter mild,
 abandoned in world unkind,
 A loving consort find?'

Quoth Nalan: 'Though his heart from guile
 his hand from every knavish sleight
 A man refrain, and with all care
 perform each penitential rite,
 Who hath no son to purge his sin,
 his feet shall never tread the road
 To Indra's blest abode. (65)

'What though a man all wealth attain,
 and the world's highest honour gain,
 And hath no little cherry lips
 his cheeks with fragrant kiss to stain,
 And hath no dimpled fingers small
 to dabble in the mulsèd meal,
 What worth is all his weal?'

'And what avails to comprehend
 philosophy's design complete
 To one who never knows the sound
 of tinkling bells on tiny feet,
 Nor ever hears about his board
 the merry first milk-drooling trips
 Of lisping baby lips?'

To whom his tender queen and true:
 'Your wealth, your kingdom, and your
 Lost in the hazard of the game— [throne
 there this mischance need not be
 Come, gentle husband, come with me; [known;
 there shall be shelter for us all
 In my dear father's hall.'

Nalan—

'Whoe'er shall at the rich man's door
 his fortune to restore endeavour
 With one swift blow his whispered "Give"
 like a sharp sword his pride shall
 [sever;

His honour in dishonour lies,
his virtue from corruption flies,
His hope of heaven dies.

'My gentle glowing-eyed gazelle!
the prince who, maniac fool, would
At prince's board to gorge his fill [live
and fawning in his favour thrive—
That creature, as the proverb says,
like eunuch-manhood's beardless jowl,
Is neither flesh nor fowl.' (70)

They decide to send them to King Vima in the charge of a Brahman who chances to be at hand.

'If to thy noble mind,' sighs she,
'my sceptred lord! this seemeth well,
Send them away, yea, send them hence
to Vima's shining citadel.'
So Damayanti, as at last
she steels her heart those loves to hate
Her love did once create.

Nalan—

'If mother-love be tempered thus,
can not a father's courage knit
The broken heart that ne'er before
to tears surrendered? So be it!
Sir!¹ wilt thou these sweet babes conduct
to their grandfather's loving arms
Secure from all alarms?'

The while both weeping out their eyes
between them stands that pretty
They gaze upon their mother fair, [pair;
they gaze upon their father dear,
'Oh! will you tear us from your side?
And will you send us all alone
Where we are all unknown?'

¹ According to tradition this is addressed to a Brahman, but who he is or how he comes to be present at this juncture is not explained.

Shall she', he cried, 'benighted thus
 upon the rude earth make her bed
 And not a tear be shed?'

The Separation

Kali induces Nala to abandon Damayanti.

But even as his fingers touched
 the withered roses in her hair,
 An evil thought, a fell design,
 a devil's counsel of despair
 Did Kali's cursèd craft contrive,
 those ne'er inconstant eyes to blind
 And warp that noble mind.

As when the coiling serpent turns
 to one black coal the sun's red fire,
 Black clouds of folly round his heart
 t' eclipse that pure serene conspire.
 A traitor to his martial name
 will he desert his winsome mate
 And leave her to her fate?

But now to his delirious eyes
 repugnant is her piteous plight,
 And madness goads him, demon-driven
 to plan a swift and silent flight,
 And for his own habiliment
 that one, that only robe divide
 That wrapped them side by side. (100)

Finding a knife at his side,

And Kali, lest he lack the means
 to perfect the inspired design,
 Forsaking, faithless knight, the maid
 whose speech was melody divine,
 In steely sheath his loathsome form
 at Nala's waist discreetly laid
 A sharp and shining blade.

The Brahman—

‘Oh, knew you not your cousin’s face
 in woe and weariness forspent?
 Oh, knewst thou not thy sister’s child
 for that her royal robe is rent,
 For that her locks hang all unkempt,
 and senses like the linch-pin reel
 Of sorrow’s whirling wheel?’

In Chêdi land, where wallowing herds
 through floating lotus-gardens bore
 Their hornèd course, and overhead
 indignant herons circling soar,
 The queen swoons in her daughter’s¹ arms,
 her limbs forget their natural force
 In anguish of remorse.

and send her back to her father.

Then spake the king: ‘By doom of yore
 afflicted though she be, this grief
 In her belovèd children’s sight
 will find by sure degrees relief.
 Come, let us send her home, where yet
 Vidarpa opens wide its gates
 And loving welcome waits.’

*Kundinapuram*²

Damayanti returns to Kundinapuram,

Thronged were the palace and the hall,
 the walls with waving banners gay,
 And thronged were all Vidarpa’s gates
 with royal and popular array,
 To greet the maid who for her love
 bade farewell to each winsome child
 And dared the dreadful wild.

¹ ‘Daughter’ is here used for ‘niece’, a natural usage in the Tamil country, where sister’s daughters call one another ‘sister’ not ‘cousin’.

² Capital of Vidarpa, Vima’s Kingdom.



CANTO THE THIRD

SYNOPSIS

NALA, leaving Damayanti in the forest shrine, wanders on through the night. He rescues a serpent from a forest-fire, for which he is treacherously rewarded. The serpent's bite transforms him into an ugly dwarf. But the serpent assures him that it is decreed that he should live in concealment until the time of his restoration, and gives him a magic robe which will restore his proper shape at the appointed time. At the serpent's bidding Nala journeys to Oudh and takes service with King Rutuparna as cook and charioteer, under the name of Vahuvan.

Meanwhile Damayanti sends a Brahman to search the world for her husband. The Brahman recognises Nala by his answer

to a riddle without betraying his true name to Rutuparna. On hearing of his disguise Damayanti devises a stratagem. She sends the Brahman back to Oudh with an invitation to a second Swayamvaram. Rutuparna accepts the invitation and Nala accompanies him as his charioteer. On the way Rutuparna imparts to Nala the principles of mathematics in return for instruction in the art of the charioteer. Nala now possesses the knowledge and skill to beat Putkara at dice, and Kali's spell is broken.

Arriving at Kundinapuram Nala retires to the kitchens unrecognized. But Damayanti's intuition assures her that it is he. Vima commands him to resume his proper form, and Nala puts on the magic robe. Restored to his wife and children Nala is congratulated by men and gods, and even Kali is reconciled.

Nala and Damayanti return with their children to Vindapuram. Putkara accepts Nala's challenge to a second game of dice, loses all his former gains and returns home as he came. Nala re-enters his own city amid universal rejoicing.

The serpent's bite transforms Nala into a dwarf.

That glorious form, whose total grace
 e'en Damayanti's eye defies,
 Shrank with the poison's magic power
 and wasted to a dwarfish size,
 As wastes the wealth of one who grasps
 with clutching hands his golden store
 And gives not to the poor.

'O serpent! ne'er to foe did yield',
 cried Nala, 'in my days of pride
 The lance whose flashing signals bright
 brought Yema¹ striding to my side.
 For what cause hath thine unprovoked
 twi-fanged infusion venomous
 By guile unmanned me thus?' (10)

The serpent explains that Nala is fated to live in concealment until the time of his restoration, and gives him a magic robe which shall restore his proper shape at the appointed time.

'O king, for towering tuskers famed
 in battle as in lust ferocious!
 Since in concealment thou must live
 henceforth, I dared this deed atro-
 For good by evil means devised [cious;
 who bear the world will bear the
 Kârkôdakan² my name. [blame;

'O prince of that delightsome land
 where shoals of skipping crayfish shake
 The lotus-pods' green honeycombs
 and gaping frogs their sweet thirst
 Thy hands did pluck me from the flames, [slake!
 the guerdon of thy clemency
 This magic robe shall be.

¹ The god of death.

² One of the eight serpents that support the eight cardinal points of the earth.

'Lord of the streams where scaly tribes
 in beds of water-hyacinth breed
 And tender pike poke forth the tongue
 for nectar! in thy hour of need
 This noble robe about thee wrapped
 shall swiftly to his pride of yore
 Thy shrunken form restore.

He advises Nala to seek employment with the King of Oudh.

'The hand that held the sceptre, now
 must hold the reins of alien steeds.
 In far Ayôtti¹ lives a king
 will give thee hope of glorious deeds;
 His golden chariot be thy care,
 and from thy shoulders' shrivelled
 Thy name be Vâhuvan.'² [span

Nala, proceeding on his way disguised,

Grateful in this disguise to hide
 the form so famèd, so admired
 That save this stratagem could ne'er
 dwell unobservèd and retired
 Though through th' eight-serpent-pillared world
 he wander, forth without delay
 King Nalan went his way. (15)

is reminded by the sight of every creature he sees of his abandoned love.

So onward through the night he passed
 beside the never-slumbering sea,
 And 'neath the creeper-ribboned shade
 a love-lorn egret there saw he
 His coy mate softly stalking, then
 a tempest of frustrate desire
 Did set his heart on fire.

¹ Tamil for Ayôdhya = Oudh.

² Sanscrit Bâhuka = dwarf.

‘My love I left who left for me
 the land where the bustling dragon-
 Six-footed on the lotus lights [fly
 and treads them with his honeyed
 For that I left her sleeping there, [thigh;
 O egret in the bosky tree!
 Hast thou no word for me?’

He sees a speckled beetle-swain
 the laurestine’s sweet pollen spil
 And stand aside with courtly grace
 till his fair mate hath sipped her fill
 And then he heaves a mighty sigh
 for his attained courtesy
 And blighted chivalry.

‘O nimble crab! why dost thou straight
 into the roaring ocean creep
 From my dread presence? Dost thou know
 at midnight in the jungle deep
 My darling I deserted, that
 the company of such a one
 In horror thou dost shun?’

‘Ye shore-long groves whose mazy glades
 the cool south breezes dancing thread
 Ye marsh-bred herons! tell! oh, tell!
 ye marsh-fed lilies blue and red!
 When my love wakes and all alone
 her jewels glitter to the stars,
 What thoughts attend her tears?’ (20

‘O sea! is it thy fate like mine
 to come and go, and take no rest,
 To reel in anguish to and fro,
 and bear upon thy heaving breast
 A cargo of desire? Thou too,
 hast thou abandoned in distress
 Today thy fond mistress?’

Oudh

Nala arriving at Oudh is laughed at for his comic appearance, but comforts himself with thoughts of his native land.

When Nala to Ayôtti came
 beside the thrice-replenished¹ sea,
 The fisher-maidens gathered round
 and shewed their pearly teeth with
 But the golden lotus-honey bursting [glee;
 and golden bees a-thirsting seem
 Of Nishada to dream.

He presents himself to the King, and seeks employment as cook and charioteer.

'Go tell, ye guards!' he cried, 'whate'er
 puissant monarch here resides
 That one in horsemanship expert,
 in culinary art besides
 Supreme, seeks service at his court;
 as steward or as charioteer
 Knows Vahuvan no peer.'

The courtly messengers conveyed
 his courteous message to their lord,
 And he upon reflection due
 gave gracious credence to that word,
 'Go, to our presence swiftly bring
 the author of this noble boast,
 That we may be his host.'

Then Nala to the presence strode,
 and Rutuparnan smiled to greet
 That master of munificence
 whose noble heart abhorred deceit;
 'O master of all crafts!' he cried,
 'of what dost thou most valiantly
 Profess the mastery?' (25)

¹ Thrice-replenished, i.e., by river-, spring- and rain-water. Oudh, of course, is five hundred miles from the sea, but to the Tamil poet the sea-shore is as much a part of his local colour as it was to Shakespeare.

So prince and charioteer they sped
and came within the destined hours
To Vima's golden towers.

Rutuparna enters the palace expecting to see the rival suitors arrayed for the Swayamvaram, but finds himself alone in the presence of Vima,

And when within those gates at last
to rest the coursing chariot came,
That prince in presence-chamber bade
his advent and his style proclaim;
Then wreathed in mingled blossoms fair
he entered blithe and debonair
To find no rival there!

‘Lord of a land where the brinded bees
o'er the crimson lotus swarm and
There sip and rest and afterward [play,
to the blue nelumbo¹ dance away!
Come, tell me’, cried Vidarpa's king,
‘whence hath thy heart conceived
This visit to inspire?’ [desire

and, addressing the absent Princess, declares the purpose of his visit.

But that fond prince as he advanced
did still of Damayanti dream:
‘O damosel divine,’ he sighed,
‘whose eyes flash with a dagger's
For that my heart with longing of [gleam!
thy balmy garland was distraught,
Thee, thee alone I sought.’ (50)

Reconciliation

Nala, still in disguise, retires to the kitchen,

Meanwhile the Lord of Nishada,
(where buffalo-mouths with lilies
His matchless chariot did unyoke [bloom)
and those celestial coursers groom,

¹ The blue water-lily.

Then entered with a pensive air
 the royal kitchens to prepare
 A feast of savour rare.

where all the vessels fill automatically at his magic touch.

Minds in celestial wisdom steeped
 with virtuous thoughts inconscient
 So, when through Vima's storehouse strode [fill;
 that golden waggoner, at his will
 Without all human aid appeared
 each vessel of its own accord
 With viands richly stored.

Damayanti sends first her attendant,

'Is't he who left me', mused the maid,
 'betrayed, benighted, and forspent?
 Is't he, my noble-hearted lord?'
 she sighed. A damsel then she sent
 And sweetly bade her mark his ways,
 how he performed in every part
 The caterer's cunning art.

then her son and daughter, to meet the stranger.

In pensive mood as she surveyed
 on wasted wrists her bangles slide,
 Her son and daughter she despatched
 to their supposed father's side
 And bade them frolic thereabout,
 his high celestial arts appraise,
 And note his noble traits.

Nala converses with his own children unknown by them.

The king their father sees them come,
 his breath he heaves in fiery gasps,
 His spirit thrills with anguish sweet,
 close in his arms the pair he clasps.
 'How to my own', he cries, 'ye bear
 a likeness wonderful to see,
 Come, tell me whose ye be!'

and even Kali adds his blessing.

Then Kali too with reverence low :
 'Where doth in all the world abide
 A prince so virtuous or a spouse
 so chaste as Nala and his bride?
 A boon I grant you—fear no more
 from envious Kali ache or ill—
 Ask of me what ye will.'

'O Kali!' cried that glorious prince,
 'for this one boon my spirit yearns—
 When through the circling spheres of time
 thine own appointed age¹ returns,
 Touch not with thine effulgent sword
 the souls that shall in graceful verse
 My thralling tale rehearse!' (75)

'When with the circling years return
 the centuries of Kali's reign,
 The eager hearers of your tale
 no act of mine shall e'er restrain'—
 So mighty Kali spake and swore
 that promise never to betray,
 And softly went his way.

Nala and Damayanti are feasted in the palace.

Through golden glades where pollen-tufts
 are drowned in pools of honey-dew
 Beauty and virtue hand in hand
 went Nala and his consort true,
 Where Vima led them with their babes,
 and feasted them right royally
 With rout and revelry.

¹ Kaliyugam, one of the four epochs of time, is the Evil Age, the last of the four ages of the world; it is reckoned as beginning about 300 B.C., and its length is 432,000 years, after which the Golden Age will return.

A golden ring, the gift of him¹
 who slept upon the darkling sea,
 His golden gage to be.

In one game Putkara loses all he gained before,

One game sufficed; and with delight
 the whole august assembly roared
 To see the victor vanquished—all
 long-festered wrongs to right restored,
 Wealth incomputable, cohorts
 unnumbered, cities wide-demesned
 In one brief hour regained.

and departs to his own place.

For Putkaran there staked and lost
 that land of surging source and spring
 To him whom Tamil poets true
 in sparkling numbers love to sing;
 Then all his state and sovereignty
 resigning to the victor's claim
 Departed as he came.

Nala enters his own city once again, and is rapturously entertained by his adoring subjects.

Then Nala clomb the golden wain
 and charioted down the golden ways,
 While armed troops about him thronged
 and crownèd warriors sang his praise,
 As when great Indra with the gods
 returns in radiant majesty
 To Amarâvati.²

As blue clouds to the thirsty swan,
 loved eyes to longing lover's eye,
 As water to the thirsty pool—
 the answer to a people's sigh
 King Nala to his city came;
 the rapture of that city fair
 To what shall I compare?

(90)

¹ Vishnu.

² The celestial city of Indra.



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