

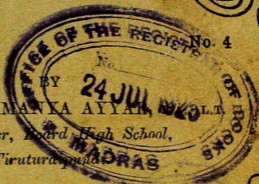
SHAKUNTALA

The Forest Maiden

GRADE I

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Kanva went near the place and saw a pretty female child, etc.

SHAKUNTALA

THE FOREST MAIDEN.

I

THE EARLY LIFE OF SHAKUNTALA.

Kanva was a holy rishi. He lived in a hermitage in the heart of a forest. He had many disciples studying under him. He taught them the sacred Vedas and Shastras. Many other Rishis also resided in the neighbourhood of Kanva's *ashrama* with their chelas. Oh, how happily they lived under the trees and spent their time in prayer and study! The Rishis loved their disciples like their own children. The disciples were obedient and loving in turn to their *gurus*. They felt quite happy and contented as if they were in their own homes.

There was in the hermitage also an old *tapasi* named Gautami who was perhaps the sister of Kanva.

Once when Kanva was returning home from a short tour, he heard a little child crying at a distance among some shrubs. He went near the place and saw a pretty female

child lying on the ground, and kicking its little legs into the air. Around it sat a few wild birds. As soon as the birds saw him approach, they flew away in fear. Kanva took the child into his arms and walked home with it. He gave it to Gautami and asked her to bring it up. From that day they called the child 'Shakuntala' as Shakunta is the name for the variety of wild birds that were seen by Kanva round the child.

Shakuntala was brought up with motherly affection by Gautami. Kanva also felt towards the child the love of a father. As she grew up, he educated her along with other girls in the hermitage.

Among those girls, Shakuntala had two little friends. They were Priyamvada and Anasuya. They used to read and play together. Kanva was very fond of young Shakuntala. He gave her a small garden putting in it some little plants and shrubs. Shakuntala with her friends, used to water the young plants daily and rear them. She used also to pluck the flowers tenderly and put them into her little basket and take them to her father for his *pūja*. Her little friends helped her in everything.

They used to play among the shrubs every evening. They lay on the grass and related stories to each other. Their friends, the spotted deer, the gay pea-cock and the frolicsome little calf also played about them. They jumped with the deer, danced with the pea-cock and ran hither and thither with the fat little calf.

The pea-hen ate out of Shakuntala's hand. She gave it chips of fruit and nuts and grains of corn. She taught her to dance whenever she sang. When the little bells and jingles of her anklet beat time to her music the bird danced gaily. She spread her tail over her body like an umbrella and made a graceful circuit round her little mistress. Oh, how pleasantly they played together! Would you like to play like this?

The deer she fed with tender grass and leaves. Once, the tip of a kusa grass pricked its tongue and caused a little blood to come out. How sorry Shakuntala was when she saw the blood coming! Quickly she ran in and brought a spoonful of oil. She put some of it on the wound and rubbed it gently with her finger. She fed her young pet with warm *kanji* till the wound was healed. How kind

of Shakuntala to treat the little animal so tenderly!

There was a tender creeper in her garden which she called Little Moonlight. She made it go round a mango tree. Its blossoms were white and shone like the moon. Whenever she went into the garden it welcomed her by waving its little branches. She reared it with her own hand.

II

THE MEETING OF SHAKUNTALA
AND DUSHYANTA.

Young Shakuntala grew to be a lovely girl. When she had passed her fifteenth year, sage Kanva became anxious to find her a proper husband. She was of middle height. Her form was beautiful and charming. Her hair was dark and crisp and hung down in little ringlets round her fair face. She had the soft dark eyes of the fawn. In short she was as lovely as the lotus in the pond.

One morning Shakuntala and her friends played in the garden as usual. Then they plucked some flowers and put them in the basket. The young deer, their domestic pet, jumped about on the grass. The girls drew

water from the well and poured it over the plants and herbs. I told you of a little creeper which Shakuntala reared with great care. Do you remember by what name she called it? It was the Little Moonlight. Shakuntala went near it and stood gazing at its beauty for a while. Her friends watched her from at a distance. They wanted to banter her a little. So Priyamvada exclaimed "Cousin Anasuya, do you know why Shakuntala gazes so fixedly at the creeper? She wishes in her heart that she should be united with a husband ere long. See how tenderly the creeper has twined itself round the mango tree! Our friend longs to have a similar prop to lean on."

Shakuntala turned sharply round and rebuked her friend for the joke. She then hastily took her earthen pot and poured the water over the creeper. Immediately there was a buzz and a whizz and lo! a dark round bee was on her wings buzzing and fluttering about her face. She struggled hard to drive it away by striking her hands against it. The bee could not be scared away. So she cried out in her distress, 'O, how wicked of this bee to come and sting me like this! Will no one help me?'

Her friends laughed for pleasantry. They said that she should appeal to king Dushyanta to punish the rogue. Suddenly there was a stir among the neighbouring bushes and a man dressed like a hunter burst upon them. He carried a riding whip in his hand. He swung it around with the intention of driving the troublesome bee away. They were all astonished. Shakuntala ran to her friends and hid herself behind them. Priyamvada came forward and welcomed the stranger. She asked him to take his seat on a slab of stone that lay near. Then they themselves sat down on the ground near the stranger.

Who was the visitor? He was tall and handsome. His limbs were strong and sturdy. His manners were sweet and courteous. When he opened his mouth to speak, every one of the maidens thought him to belong to the city. He was certainly of a noble breed. The very manner of his talk showed that. But none of them thought that he was their sovereign, the great Dushyanta himself; for he it was that now sat before them. How did he happen to be there? Why did he seek them?

Dushyanta had been out hunting in the forest. He chased a deer which took him far

into the heart of the wood. He followed it hard behind. The animal took him as far as the open glade in the jungle where the hermits lived. One of the Rishis who saw the king running after the deer implored him not to kill it. It was an *ashram* deer. A King ought to protect life and not destroy it. So Dushyanta was glad to let the creature go.

The King wished very much to see the holy *ashrama* with his own eyes. So he asked his charioteer to stop at the outskirts looking after the horses. He left with him all his royal robes and put on plain attire and went in, so as not to be recognised.

When he came to the garden he saw these girls playing. He did not like to disturb them. He stood behind a tree and watched them. When he saw Shakuntala he was very much struck by her beauty. He stood gazing at her forgetting everything else. But when Shakuntala cried out in distress he ran at once to help her.

When Shakuntala saw the stranger suddenly presenting himself before her, she cast her eyes down in bashfulness. Something within her whispered to her that her own destinies were closely linked with his. She

felt a thrill of joy in his presence. She could not understand why. Perhaps she had already begun to love him.

Dushyanta seemed to love her at first sight. He had not felt so happy all his life. After talking with them a while he gently asked Priyamvada to tell him who Shakuntala was. She said that she was the daughter of sage Kanva. When Dushyanta seemed to doubt it, she said to him, "Sir, Kanva is the foster-father of Shakuntala. I shall relate to you her story in detail. Sage Visvamitra was once engaged in a hard penance. Indra was afraid of the possible consequences of the penance. So he ordered Menaka to go and tempt Visvamitra and make his penance ineffective. She went and stood before him. Visvamitra was struck by her great beauty. At once he fell in love with her. His penance was thus ruined. In course of time a female child was born to them. The sage saw his mistake and deserted them and went away. Menaka also left the child in the forest and returned to Indra. Sage Kanva found the child by chance and brought her up." The King was pleased to hear this story for he came to know that Shakuntala was the

daughter of a Kshatriya. So he resolved within himself to marry her.

They all talked for a while and Dushyanta had to hurry home at last, because all his retinue had come in search of him. Then only the maidens knew that he was their king. They begged him to pardon them for talking to him so familiarly. He laughed away their fears. Then sorrowfully he bade them farewell. As he was going, he turned behind again and again to look at Shakuntala

III

THE MARRIAGE AND THE CURSE.

Dushyanta visited the *ashrama* again. Shakuntala was already love-sick. They met at the hermitage. Kanva was away. The king waited a little for his return. But as he did not turn up, he urged Shakuntala to marry him. They were married. They lived together for some time. Then the king hurried to his capital as he was soon called there. He promised to return to the Ashrama and take her with him very soon. He gave her his ring and asked her to count the letters inscribed on it and said that he would return within as many days as there were letters on the ring.



Dushyanta taking leave of Shakuntala after their secret marriage at the *ashrama* of Kanva.

Shakuntala bade farewell to her lord with great sorrow. She clung to his robes and would not let him go. He assured her that he would return without fail and take her in state to his court and have their wedding celebrated openly with great pomp. At last he went away. The poor innocent Shakuntala looked longingly at him as he went. When he had disappeared she sighed deeply and thoughtfully.

Days passed and still no Dushyanta. The poor woman became more and more sad. She had no sleep. Her food became tasteless for her. She became pale and care-worn. One evening she was sitting in her leafy hut, thinking of Dushyanta. "Oh, how long will he take to come? Has he forgotten me? No it cannot be. How fond he was of me when he was here! How he swore that I was the light of his eyes! Will he be so untrue as to disown me?" These thoughts troubled her much. In her pain of mind she did not know what took place about her? Some one called at the gate 'Who is within?' but none answered. It was Durvasa the choleric sage. He called again and again and still no answer came. He grew angry and cursed Shakuntala loudly, saying that the

man of whom she was thinking would forget her completely. Priyamvada heard him curse. She ran to him and went down on her knees before him and begged him to forgive her mistress as she was beside herself on account of grief.

The sage became softened a little and said that her husband would remember her when she showed him his ring and disappeared. Priyamvada did not tell her friend of the curse. She was afraid that it would give her much pain.

• IV

MISGIVINGS.

Weeks and months passed and Dushyanta neither came nor sent a messenger to take her. Shakuntala felt that she would soon be the mother of a child. She did not know who her father and mother were. Perhaps her child also would know not its father. Her heart was full of grief when she thought of the coming child. Yet she did not blame her husband. It was her fate, she thought.

Sage Kanva tried to comfort her. He said that Dushyanta was noble and good. He would not forsake her. Perhaps he

was busy. He might have important affairs of state to attend to. He had no time to think of her. Old Gautami treated her very tenderly. All that was of no use. She was as sad as ever.

V

KANVA'S FAREWELL TO HIS
DAUGHTER.

At last the holy rishi, her father, resolved to send Shakuntala to her husband. He too was tired of waiting.

He asked Priyamvada and Anasuya to make all the preparations for her departure. They took Shakuntala to the bath and gave her a pleasant dipping. They dressed her hair and tied it round and decked it with flowers. They gave her a pretty cloth to wear.

Shakuntala went to all her friends and companions and bade them farewell. At first she went to the little creepers and plants in her garden. She kissed some of them; she stroked some with her tender palm; she spoke tenderly and lovingly to all. She did not forget her Little Moonlight. She placed it under the special care of Priyamvada. She asked her to attend to it first and to her own wants

next. The creeper itself seemed to understand what its mistress said. Its little branches at once twined themselves round her. Shakuntala embraced it fondly and took leave of it sorrowfully.

She also bade adieu to her animal friends one after another. They all seemed to know that she was about to leave them. The peacock crowed loudly. The birds in the trees twittered. The deer ran about her uneasily. Shakuntala's eyes were filled with tears when she saw their love. She left them behind one after another.

The sage Kanva went with her for some distance. Then he bade her good-bye. His voice began to shake. Even he, a yogi, was greatly affected. Tears were seen in his eyes when he spoke. He gave her fatherly advice regarding the way in which she should conduct herself towards her lord and the members of his family. Bidding her farewell he sent Gautami and two other Rishi-kumaras with her to the court of Dushyanta. Shakuntala embraced her father and her two bosom friends. Priyamvada and Anasuya could not bear the idea of their separation from her. They wept silently. At last they sent her away. Just when Shakuntala was about to

go, she felt something tugging at her knee. She turned round and saw; it was a little fawn. She took it in her arms and kissed it. It was a motherless little baby which she had brought up. She gave it into the arms of Anasuya and begged her to bring it up tenderly. Then she left the hermitage.

* * * *

VI

SHAKUNTALA AT THE COURT
OF DUSHYANTA.

King Dushyanta was sitting in Durbar. He was surrounded by his courtiers. The waiter announced that some rishis desired to see him. The king ordered them to be shown in. Immediately four persons entered the Durbar hall. Two of them were Rishikumaras and of the other two one was an old *tapasi* and the other a young veiled lady. The young rishis greeted the king with "Success to the king and glory!" The king stood up and received them courteously. He begged them to be seated.

When they were asked their business they said that they were the *chelas* of sage Kanva and that the venerable Rishi had sent the



Shakuntala at the Court of Dusshyanta.

king his blessings and the young lady whom he had married in the forest in his absence. They asked him to accept her and make her his queen.

The king first looked at the Rishi-kumaras and then at the lady in her veil. He was very much astonished. Could it be true that he had married her? He did not remember. He had a great reverence for Kanva. How could *he* send him such a message? He was much puzzled. He asked them again and again whether Kanva had really meant what they had said. The visitors were astonished in their turn. They could not understand how Dushyanta could talk so. They had thought he was the very soul of honour. Now they found that he was a false man.

One of the youthful hermits, Sarangarava by name, said to Dushyanta, "Oh King of kings, your words have come on us like a bolt from the blue. Say you that we are all rogues who have come here to deceive you? Do you not know the character of our *Guru*?" The king was in a fix. However much he tried, he could not remember anything. Little by little he began to think that they were deceiving him. So he answered in wrath, "Oh,

you false hermits! why do you put on the garb of holy men? Fie upon your false life! Begone, your actions are most unholy."

The king and the hermits bandied hot words with one another. Gautami drew Shakuntala forward. The miserable daughter of Menaka trembled all over. She could not believe that her dear lord would be so unfaithful to her. Gautami removed Shakuntala's veil and asked the king to examine her face and see whether he could recognize it. Tears ran down Shakuntala's cheeks. The courtiers looked on in wonder.

Dushyanta was as unbelieving as ever. Then Shakuntala reminded him of many incidents in the forest with which they were both familiar. The king only shook his head in flat denial. Gautami pleaded with him. She entreated him to be merciful. All her entreaties were in vain. The king was as stubborn as ever. Then the old lady told him that Shakuntala would soon be a mother. She begged him to show some consideration at least for the coming babe. This made the king still more angry.

Shakuntala was sorely grieved but she was not angry with the king. She thought

that it was only her ill-luck. Now a thought struck her. The king could be made to see his mistake, if she showed him his ring. He had given her one at the time of the marriage and asked her to keep it safe. His name was inscribed on it. How could he disown her, if she showed him the ring? With renewed hope, Shakuntala felt her finger, and lo! the ring was gone!

In her eagerness she even uttered the words, "There is your ring, false traitor". The King and all the courtiers heard the words. They looked at her with fixed eyes. Dushyanta was now certain that they had all come purposely to deceive him. His eyes were red with anger. His lips trembled and, in a stern loud voice, he ordered them to be gone. Then he rose from his seat and went out.

Poor Shakuntala! she was all tears. Her heart was rent in anguish. Where was the ring gone? Did she drop it on the way? Perhaps it had slid down her finger at the pool, on her way where she washed her hands, when drinking water. It was her fate. Her companions refused to take her back to the hermitage. They left her there and went away. In vain she called after them. They

would not even look back. She had consented to marry Dushyanta without telling anyone. She must suffer for her folly. A married woman must live only under her husband's roof.

At last the miserable and forsaken forest-maiden appealed to her divine mother. Menaka heard her cry. She came down from *Indraloka*. She clasped her dear daughter in her arms and flew away with her to her abode. All the people were astonished. They thought the king had behaved improperly towards her.

VII

THE RING!

Have you ever heard of Hastinapuri? It was a beautiful city. The river Jumna flowed through it. The palace of King Dushyanta lay on its bank. There were temples and turrets, castles and stupas besides, on either side of the river. If one looked into the clear stream of the sacred Jumna, he could see that wonderful city in it.

Two Kotwals were one day dragging a fisherman through one of the streets of the city towards the palace. The fisherman cried aloud that he was innocent. Many people collected in the street to see what it

was. One of the kotwals was holding a ring in his hand. The fisherman was protesting that he did not steal it but found it in the inside of a big fish which he had caught only that morning in a forest-lake.

The Kotwals could not believe his story. It was the King's ring. The word 'Dushyanta' was inscribed on it. How could it find its way into the inside of the fish? It was all a silly story got up by the fisherman. So they dragged him to the King.

VIII

REVIVAL OF OLD MEMORIES.

Dushyanta was sitting in his chamber. More than five years had elapsed since the day on which Shakuntala was sent away weeping, from his presence. Somehow that thought had come into his mind. He was wondering who that stranger woman was and where she could have gone.

Suddenly he heard a gentle knock at his door. He opened it and in came the two kotwals dragging the terrified fisherman with them. The King enquired what the matter was. The officers of the law stopped a little to recover their breath. One of the kotwals then

advanced and knelt down before the King. He held out his palm respectfully to the King. Oh it was a beautiful little ring. The fisherman trembled all over and he stammered, 'Sire,...I... did...not...steal...it...I... am...innocent.'

The King first looked at the angler and then at the kotwal. He wondered how his ring could have gone into the fish and asked the fisherman to say where he caught the fish. The poor fellow answered that he caught it in the lake of Sasi. Dushyanta at once remembered what Shakuntala had said.

Here it was that she washed. He snatched the ring hastily from the kotwal's hand. He looked at it carefully. Oh, it was the ring that he had given the forest-maiden. He now remembered all. Durvasa's curse passed away. He woke up as from a dream. Oh what a terrible sinner he had been! He called his treasurer and asked him to reward the angler well. The fisherman was overjoyed at his good fortune and he fell down on his knees before the King and wept for joy. The kotwals also were amply rewarded.

IX

HAPPY RE-UNION.

Next day Dushyanta was sitting in his garden. It was evening. The sky was a little cloudy. A soft wind was blowing. The plants and creepers were waving their branches and leaves in the wind. The soft breeze carried the smell of the flowers from one end to the other. The birds fluttered among the trees. Everything was gay and joyous all around. But the King was moody. He thought of nothing except the great wrong he had done to Shakuntala. Where was she then? How could he get at her? He sent messengers everywhere to find out where she lived.

All of a sudden the king saw something coming down from the sky. He looked up carefully. It was an aerial car. Whose could it be? Was it Indra who was coming? In a few seconds the car reached the earth. Out stepped a person. Evidently he was not of the earth. He was a divine being. It was Matali the charioteer of Indra. The King and Matali greeted each other. Matali told Dushyanta his errand. He came to take the king to *Indraloka*. His help was urgently required by Indra against the *asuras*. The King

could not refuse to go. So he got into the car along with Matali and the car at once flew up.

Up they went higher, higher and still higher. The earth below grew smaller and smaller before their eyes. The huge mountains became little hills. The big ocean looked like a small lake. At last the whole earth seemed to be a tiny speck in the great void.

What had happened to poor Shakuntala in the meanwhile? She was taken to *Indraloka* by her mother. Very soon she there gave birth to a child. It was a sweet little boy. The mother was happy to see the child. She thought she could forget her misery when the child was near her. Alas, it was a vain hope! As days and weeks went by, her sorrow became only more keen. As the child grew, it seemed to resemble its father more and more. This made Shakuntala think of her lord very often and grow sadder and sadder.

The child had now grown to be a boy of five years. He was named Bharata. He was brave and clever beyond his age.

One evening he was playing in the garden with a little lioness. He tried to open her mouth with his hands. He wanted very

much to count her teeth. When the lioness refused to open her mouth, he beat her with his small whip. Just then, a stranger came that way. He wondered how the little boy could be so brave. He ran up to him and took him in his arms. He was struck by the beauty of his face. He looked at little Bharata closely. It must be his child he thought. He then asked Bharata who his father and mother were. Bharata answered that Shakuntala was the name of his mother and that he had no father.

Do you know who that stranger was? He was none other than King Dushyanta. He had helped Indra to win his battle against the *asuras*. Indra pressed him to stay yet a while in his kingdom. Dushyanta wanted to see his famous garden. So he was slowly walking through it.

When Dushyanta came to know that the wife whom he had forsaken was there, he ran straight to her with the child. They met at last. Dushyanta went down on his knees before her and begged her to pardon him. Shakuntala was only too glad to forgive him. She was not angry with her husband. It was all due to fate. Dushyanta showed her the ring which helped him to remember

their wedding in the forest. They then came down to the earth taking little Bharata with them. All the people rejoiced at the restoration of Shakuntala to her legitimate rights.

By and by, they came to know of the curse of Durvasa, the cause of their misery. This made them love each other all the more fondly. They lived long and happily together as king and queen.

Little Bharata grew to be a tall and handsome young man. When he became king, he conquered the whole of India from the Himalayas in the north to the big ocean in the south. The whole land therefore came to be called Bharatavarsha after him.
