

TALES FROM

THAKURMAR

TWELVE
STORIES
FROM
BENGAL

JHULI

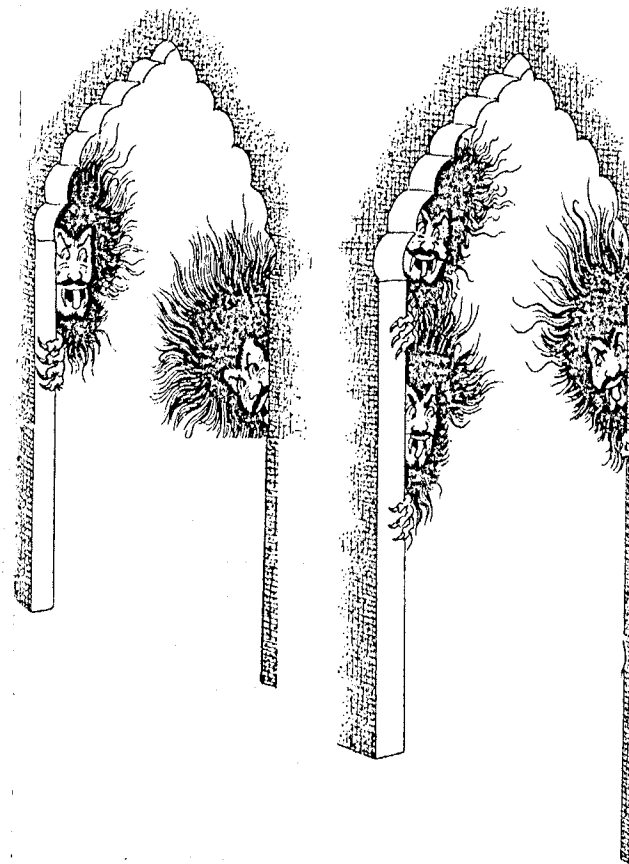
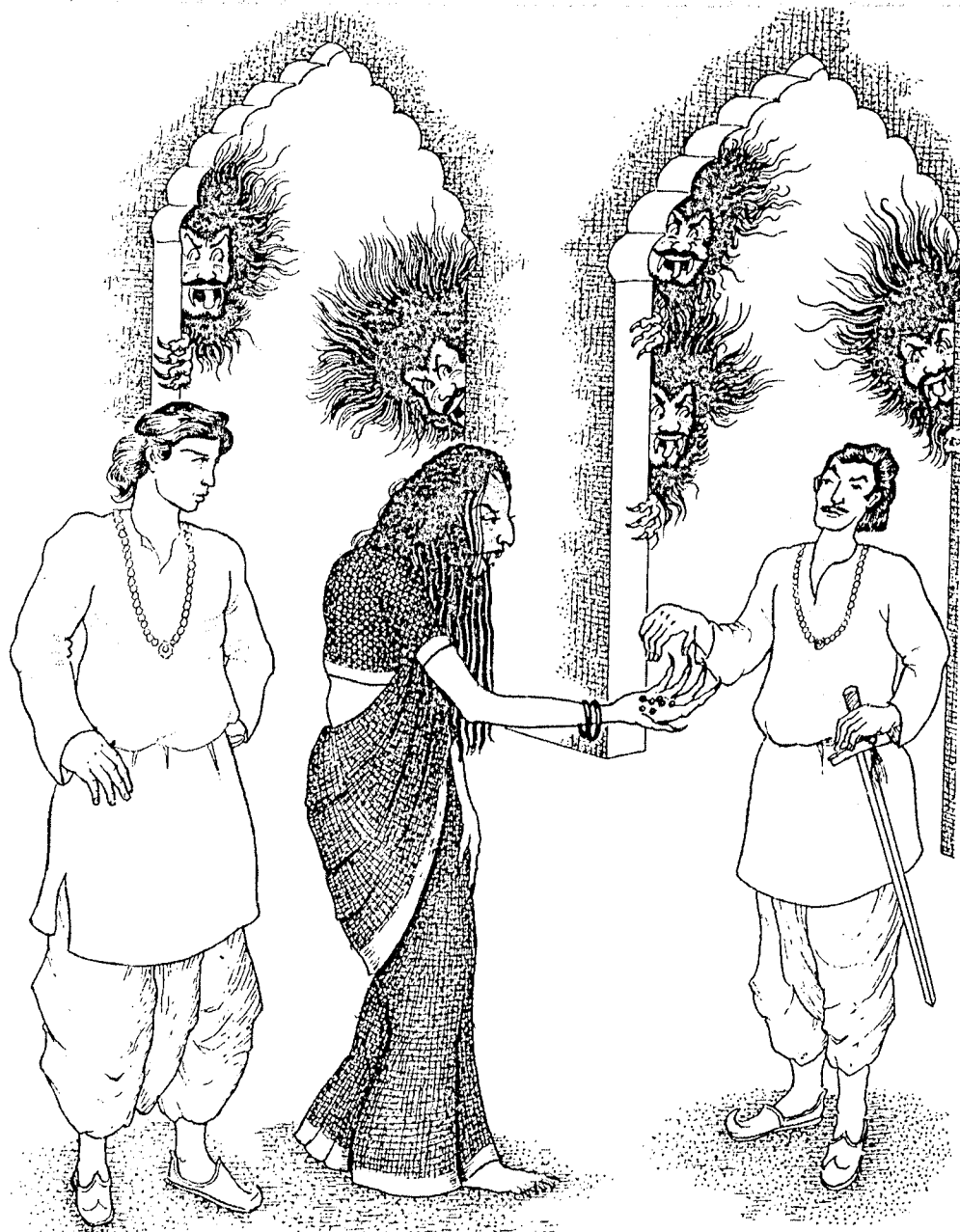


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Neelkamal and Lalkamal



A long time ago, there lived a king who had two wives, but one of them was not a human being. She was actually a rakshasi (a demoness), but no one knew this.

Both the queens had a son each; the human Queen's son was named Kusum while the Rakshasi's son was called Ajit. Both the boys were deeply devoted to each other.

The Rakshasi, however, harboured evil thoughts about her stepson. Every time she saw him, her mouth watered and her tongue hung out. When, oh, when, would she be able to sink her teeth into the tender flesh of Kusum? This was a constant source of temptation for her. But could she do it? No, she could not. Her own son stood in her way—he would not leave his stepbrother alone, not even for a second. The demon Queen gnashed her teeth in silent fury.

The Rakshasi sought revenge for her failure to attack Kusum by darting

poisonous glances instead towards his mother, the human Queen, whose blood slowly drained from her body, making her very ill indeed. All this while, the Rakshasi, her greedy face hidden under a veil, roamed around hungrily, looking for fresh prey.

The human Queen died shortly thereafter. Everyone mourned her death, but no one had the slightest idea of what had actually happened. With the good Queen gone, the Rakshasi turned extremely vicious. She was very cruel to her stepson and abused him day in and day out. In fact, she did not spare even her own son.

Poor Ajit. All he could do to protect his stepbrother was to keep him away from his mother, and try to comfort him. Ajit was a strong lad, and could take a lot of punishment, but Kusum was a delicately built boy who could take it no more. 'We will not see my mother at all', declared Ajit, and they started avoiding the Rakshasi completely.

'How absurd!' raged the Rakshasi. She fumed, 'Fee Fie Foy! My worst enemy is my own boy!' Seething with fury, she decided that something drastic had to be done.

Soon afterwards, in one single night, thousands of the King's horses, elephants, and cattle perished. The King was stunned. The following night, the King's sleep was disturbed by a strange noise: 'glk, grnt, glkt'. The King got up, sword in hand. He found his sons Ajit and Kusum asleep on their golden beds. Then suddenly, from thin air, there appeared a huge rakshasa (a demon), who picked up Kusum from his bed. Poor Kusum was like a lifeless puppet in the arms of the monster. At the same time, the Rakshasi rushed in, pulled out a strand of hair from her head and threw it on the King. As a result, the King immediately became as stiff as a statue—he could not even move his limbs.

The Rakshasa started swallowing up Kusum before the very eyes of the King. The hapless King could do nothing, except cry his

heart out. Unable to move even his arms, he could not even wipe his tears. And all this while, the wicked Rakshasi kept chortling and chuckling.

All of a sudden, Ajit woke up with an uncanny feeling. It was well past midnight; but where was his brother? He sprang from his bed. There was something eerie in the air. The only sound he could hear was the tinkling of his mother's bangles. And then he saw a huge rakshasa gobbling up his brother. Outraged by this sight, he lunged at the Rakshasa and dealt him a mighty blow. With a howl, the Rakshasa spun on his feet and fell. Then he escaped, but before doing so, he spat out a ball of gold.

The Rakshasi's world had turned upside down! Once again, her own son had foiled her plans! Senseless with rage, the Rakshasi caught hold of her son and ate him up, flesh and bone and all. And then she ejected a ball of iron from her mouth. In a frenzy, the Rakshasi picked up both the iron ball and the golden ball, and climbed to the roof of the palace.

On the roof, a strange horde of demons had assembled. They were very wild and unruly. Some were shouting:

Hor hor hor
Let's eat more
More more more.

The other demons yelled:

Krik krak krak
Let's go back
Back back back.

The Rakshasi shouted at them:

Glob glob glook
Glob glob glot
I'll stay here
Go back, you lot.

Like a swarm of locusts the horde of demons flew away, destroying everything in their way, uprooting trees, crushing homes, churning up river waters. The spires of the King's palace came tumbling down, and the petrified King, who could not move, trembled in fear.

The Rakshasi meanwhile returned to her rooms. She felt feverish all over, while her body was aching and her mind was on edge. The long night seemed unending. Finally, her patience ran out and she got up and, sailing on a magic cloud, landed on the other side of the river near a bamboo grove. She buried the golden ball and the iron ball under a bamboo and then, feeling somewhat better, returned home.

She did not stay long enough to hear the screeching of a crow and the howling of a jackal, omens of danger to come.

The next day, the entire kingdom was in turmoil. People saw heaps and heaps of human bones strewn all over: the demons had seized their country. When the people came to know that the demons had also eaten up the two princes, those who were still alive fled the kingdom. The country had now been taken over completely by the demons. The only human left was the King, and he had been turned into a stone statue under the evil queen's spell.



Early in the morning, as the bamboos were swaying gently in the breeze, along came a farmer. He chopped off a bamboo. A bamboo has no branches only stalks, and when he split the stalk into half, he found two eggs lodged inside. Assuming that they were the eggs of a snake or of some other animal, he threw them away. As soon as the eggs hit the ground they broke, and out came two princes, Lalkamal and Neelkamal. The two princes, with crowns on their

heads and swords in their hands, strode away without looking back. In utter shock at these occurrences, the poor farmer collapsed in a heap.

When he came to his senses, the farmer saw some fragments of a golden shell and an iron shell. He forged a scythe for himself from the iron shell and used the golden shell to make a bracelet for his daughter-in-law.



Lalkamal and Neelkamal carried on walking till they reached the land of another king. At that time, this kingdom was being terrorized by the khokkas (ogres), who were wreaking havoc there. Each day, the King would appoint a new minister, and by nightfall, the Khokkas would arrive and gobble up the new minister as also a handful of the King's subjects. Desperate to liberate his kingdom of this terror, the King announced that anyone who could get rid of the Khokkas would win his two daughters in marriage and inherit his kingdom. But, alas, no one succeeded. Many princes came with high hopes of destroying the ogres but ended up as their dinner instead. The scourge of the Khokkas meanwhile continued unabated.

When Lalkamal and Neelkamal heard this fearful story they went to the King and told him, 'We will destroy the Khokkas.'

Torn between hope and despair, the King agreed to let the princes have a try at vanquishing the ogres. The two princes locked themselves in a room and kept watch with their swords besides them.



The night advanced but no one came. Even well past midnight, there were no visitors. The princes waited and waited, but no Khokkas appeared. Both of them were now very sleepy. Neelkamal said to Lalkamal, 'Brother, let me sleep now, while you keep watch. Wake me up later and then you can have your sleep.' He also warned Lalkamal, 'If the Khokkas come and ask who you are, give them my name first and not yours. Do not make a mistake in this.' Neelkamal then went to bed.

Deep in the night, there was a knock on the door. Lalkamal was awake with his hand on his sword.

The Khokkas had arrived. Since they could not see too well except in the dark, the first thing they asked was for the lights to be put out.

'Snuff out the lamps', they commanded.

'No, never', was Lalkamal's bold refusal.

Angrily, the leader of the gang shouted, 'Oh, you won't? Who are you? Who is it, that is still awake?' Other ogres joined in the chorus, 'Yes, who are you, who are you?'

Lalkamal answered:

Up and awake is Neelkamal with his brother Lalkamal
Our swords are sharp and bright
And on guard are a thousand lamps with blazing flames.
Who is it that wants a fight?

The very name of Neelkamal struck panic among the Khokkas. They knew that Neelkamal had rakshasa blood flowing in his veins. So they retreated in fear.

Later someone said, 'Wait. How do we know that he is truly Neelkamal? Let us test him.'

Now, both the rakshasas and the khokkas are full of tricks. So the leader of the Khokkas advanced and asked, 'Well, if you are

truly a rakshasa, let us have some proof of the same. Show us your nails!

Although Lalkamal was not very strong, he was very clever. He pushed the tip of Neelkamal's crown through the door, balanced on his sword. As soon as the ogres touched it, they were alarmed. 'Eee, eee, eee! ooo, ooo, ooo! If his "nails" are so big and sharp, what does the rest of him look like?' they said in chorus. Once again, they ran away.

But not for long. They returned and this time they asked for Neelkamal's tongue to be put out. This time, Lalkamal thrust out the tip of Neelkamal's sword through the door. The leader of the gang caught hold of the sword and told his followers, 'Pull, pull hard, we will rip his tongue out.' So, all of them tugged as hard as they could, but what happened? The edge of the sharp sword cut into the hands of the leader who soon had thick black blood oozing from his wounds. Screaming and shrieking, the leader fled. But he still refused to give up. Mustering up courage, he returned and asked yet again, 'Who is there? Who is up and awake?'

Poor Lalkamal. All this waiting had made him very sleepy, and he had dozed off. He forgot Neelkamal's warning and replied, 'It's Lalkamal.'

No sooner had Lalkamal spoken than the Khokkas gang forced open the door, flooded into the room, and pounced upon Lalkamal. The room became a shambles, lamps were blown out, Lalkamal's crown slipped from his head and his sword fell from his hand. A helpless Lalkamal faintly called out his brother, 'Neel ... Neel ...'

Neelkamal quickly jumped up, and though the room was dark, he immediately understood what had happened. But he was calm. He took his time and casually said:

Get up my guards, get up and see
Who comes at night to bother me?

At the sound of Neelkamal's voice, the ogres shrank back, half dead with fright. Neelkamal quickly lit all the lamps. Then, he caught the ogres one by one, killing each one of them. The hapless leader of the gang looked like a miserable little mouse in Neelkamal's grip!

After polishing off all the ogres, the two brothers cleaned themselves up, and happily went back to sleep.

The following day, a nervous King went into their room, fully expecting to find two dead princes. But wonder of wonders! He found instead a room littered with dead ogres. The two princes, looking as fresh as flowers, were peacefully asleep. A relieved and delighted King started singing hymns of praise to the princes. True to his promise, he gave away his two daughters Ilavati and Lilavati in marriage to the two brothers, as well as his kingdom.



Meanwhile, remember the Rakshasi? The one that had held the King, her husband, under her magic spell, and had seized his palace with her horde of rakshasas? Two demons, Aye and Kye, came and reported to the Rakshasi about the massacre of the Khokkas by Neelkamal and Lalkamal. Mad with fury, she started yelling:

O brother Aye, O brother Kye
 Surely I think my end is nigh
 The poison of my very own womb
 Is hatching a plot to build my tomb.
 Go, don't wait, go slay them fast
 Rid me of these pests at last.

So Aye and Kye assumed the shape of two human soldiers and went off to meet Neelkamal and Lalkamal. To the princes they said, 'Our King is very ill. He suffers from cramped muscles all over his body, and the only remedy for his ailment is to use the fat from a rakshasa's brain.'

The princes told the soldiers, 'Very well, we will go and get you some rakshasa fat; meanwhile you wait for us here.'

Carrying their newly honed swords, the two brothers set off for the land of the demons. After a long journey, they reached a forest, and tired from walking, they sat down to rest under a banyan tree. Upon that tree was the nest of a pair of birds—Bengama and his wife Bengami.

Bengami was talking to Bengama, 'Is there no kind person in the world who would give his blood so that we could use it to open the eyes of our chick?' Overhearing them, Lalkamal and Neelkamal said, 'Who is up there? We can give you our blood.'

A happy Bengami said, 'Oh, will you, will you? How very kind you are!' Bengama came down and the two princes gave him drops of their blood by pricking their fingers. Bengama went up with the blood, and soon thereafter, two chicks, who could now see, hopped out of their nest.

'Who are you, princes', the chicks asked, 'who have so kindly given us our sight? Please tell us what we can do for you.'

'Thank you very much', replied Neelkamal and Lalkamal politely, 'but at the moment we need no help.'

'But, surely, you are going somewhere', the young birds persisted. 'Can we not fly you there?'

So, the two brothers climbed on the backs of the two birds, and took to the air. They flew ... and flew ... and flew. They flew over many countries and forests, crossed many rivers and seas, flew

above mountains and hills, passed through the domains of the sun and the moon....

For seven nights and seven days, they travelled, and on the eighth day, the baby birds finally descended on the top of a hill. Down below was a vast stretch of green land, and beyond the green land lay the rakshasa lair.

Before setting out for the land of the demons, Neelkamal had picked up some grains of chickpeas and given them to Lalkamal, while cautioning him, 'When the demons give you any chickpeas to chew, eat the chickpeas I gave you.'

Away they went, again on foot and, as they crossed the green land, hundreds and thousands of rakshasas came after them, all screaming:

Ho hum haw, ho hum haw
We smell a man, let's eat him raw.

Sensing danger, Neelkamal called loudly, 'Grandma, Grandma, where are you? It is me, Neelkamal, your grandson. I have come to see you, come and meet me.'

'Really, really? My grandson?' In rushed a hideous-looking crone, loping along on her long arms and legs, with dangling strands of rope-like hair. 'Stop, stop!' she signalled the onrushing demons. Then she picked up Neelkamal in fond embrace and crooned, 'My Neelkamal, my little grandson.' Poor Neelkamal, the vile stench of his Grandma almost made him faint. The Rakshasi Grandma then spotted Lalkamal and asked, 'Who is that lad with you?'

'He is my brother', answered Neelkamal.

'Your brother?' the old woman was suspicious. 'Then why does he smell like a human? If he really is my grandson, then let him eat these chickpeas', she said. And then she snorted thunderously and out poured some iron chickpeas through her nose.

Lalkamal was prepared for this. He hid the iron peas and brought out the real ones, which he then munched and ate. Now convinced that Lalkamal too was a rakshasa, the old Grandma lovingly gathered both the boys in her arms and started singing joyfully:

Hibidum zibidum hibidum zee
My darling grandsons are here with me.
Neelkamal and Lalkamal are as sweet as can be
Hibidum zibidum hibidum zee.

Despite this show of affection, however, the Rakshasi Grandma could not get over the fact that 'her Lalkamal' still smelt like a man. Her mouth watered at the very sight of him. She was dying for a nibble, but how could she eat him? After all, he was her grandson! Controlling herself, the old Rakshasi took the boys to her home.

And what a home it was! A great big mansion, almost the size of a town. Milling about in this mansion were millions of rakshasas. They roamed the world and brought back carcasses of the creatures they had killed. As they were being carried on the shoulders of two demons, Lalkamal and Neelkamal saw heaps of dead bodies everywhere, of human beings and of animals—rotting and festering. The sight was so sickening and repulsive that it could have frightened away even ghosts and monsters. A dismayed Lalkamal remarked, 'Brother, our world is coming to an end.'

'True', nodded Neelkamal, equally depressed.



In the dead of the night, when all the rakshasas were hunting in distant lands, when not even a child rakshasa was left at home, Neelkamal got up. He shook Lalkamal awake, and together they went out. They reached a well south of the mansion. Neelkamal

The Rakshasi Grandma had large nose different marks on her face, dark, dark, eyes, etc. The Rakshasi in comparison to the other Rakshasas had a very long nose and a very long neck. She had a very long neck and a very long nose. She had a very long neck and a very long nose. She had a very long neck and a very long nose.

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took off his robe and went down the well. When he came out of it, he was carrying a gold box and an axe. The gold box had two hornets: the male hornet contained the life of all the demons, while in the female hornet rested the life of the Rakshasi, Neelkamal's mother. Neelkamal kept the male hornet with himself and asked Lalkamal to guard the female hornet.

Released from the depths of the well and out in the open air, the hornets began twitching with the touch of the breeze, and immediately, all the demons started getting a headache and their hearts started palpitating. The Rakshasi, far away in her own land, fell into a deep slumber.

What was the reason for this pain in their heads? Why were their hearts thumping furiously? Bewildered, all the rakshasas turned homewards with rapid strides, through hills and across rivers. When Neelkamal saw them approaching, he pulled out a few of the legs of the male hornet. At once, all the demons lost their legs. Undaunted, they still rushed forward, walking on their hands. Neelkamal then hurriedly tore out the remaining legs of the male hornet, and all the demons lost their arms too.

But the rakshasas would still not stop. Having lost both their arms and legs, they recklessly crawled on their stomachs, yelling wildly:

Ho hum haw
 We will kill our foe
 Cut him up,
 Eat him up.
 Ho hum haw.

But not for long. Neelkamal lost no time in chopping off the male hornet's head too with his axe, and promptly all the demons became headless and fell dead. And what about the old Grandma? Her severed head came rolling violently towards Neelkamal and Lalkamal, as if to gobble them up. But there was no such danger

now; all the demons were dead, and the huge mansion was like an empty shell.

The two princes wrapped up the rakshasi Grandma's head in a bundle and, carrying this bundle along with the gold box containing the female hornet, they summoned the young Bengama chicks. Riding on the back of the birds, the princes flew back home.



After three months and thirteen days, Lalkamal and Neelkamal reached their kingdom. Their people welcomed them back with much joy and celebration.

The first thing that the princes did was to send for the soldiers who had asked them to get some rakshasa fat as medicine for their ailing King. But there was no response. Where were they? Of course, they did not exist any more. The two soldiers had been but two demons, Aye and Kye, in disguise, and they died the same day that all the rakshasas had perished.

Unaware of this deception, Neelkamal and Lalkamal sent the head of the Rakshasi Grandma to the country of the sick King.

'Eee ... eee ... eee ...', shrieked the Rakshasi, as soon as she saw the severed head of the old Rakshasi, her mother. Startled out of her skin at this sight, she assumed her own rakshasi form and flew off towards the kingdom of Lalkamal and Neelkamal to take revenge, all the while cursing viciously:

Ho haw hum ho haw hum
 Lal and Neel, here I come
 I'll crush your bones,
 I'll smash your head
 I will not rest till you are dead.

When she reached the kingdom of Lalkamal and Neelkamal, the sentries tried to check her, 'Stop, stop, right there.'

When Lalkamal saw her, he opened the gold box, with the female hornet inside, which he had kept all along. As soon as the Rakshasi saw the hornet:

She lost her nerves
She lost her sight
She fell down dead
All in a fright.

'Who could this weird creature be?' the people wondered. 'Perhaps she was a relation of the khokkas, and had come for a bit of fun.' Everybody was highly amused.

With the Rakshasi dead, the spell she had cast on the King, her husband, was broken. The King was restored to normalcy, and his recovery was announced throughout his kingdom. His subjects, who had fled when the demons occupied their country, now returned home. But they mourned their missing princes, Ajit and Kusum. 'Alas, where are our dear princes?' they asked. The King, no less grief-stricken, also lamented, 'Where indeed are my sons, Ajit and Kusum?'

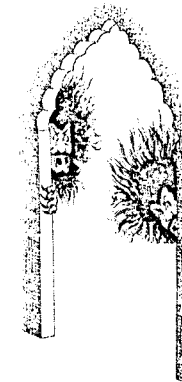
Suddenly there was an uproar outside the palace, with a loud beating of drums. The King commanded his men, 'Go and find out what is happening.'

Well, what had actually happened was that Lalkamal and Neelkamal had walked in, and greeted the King, kneeling before him.

'Are you my sons, Ajit and Kusum?' asked the King, stunned.

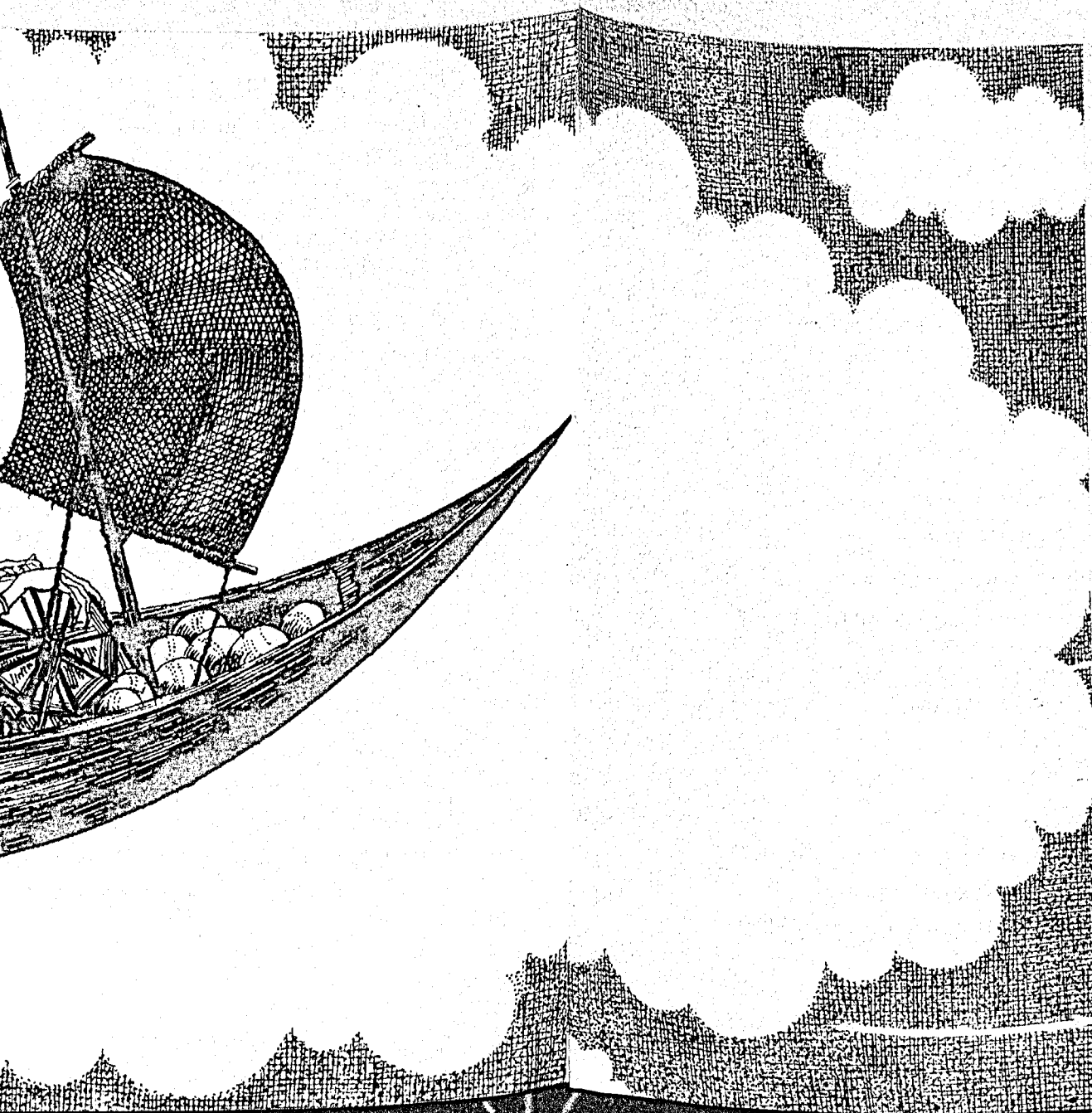
'Yes, indeed, Sire, they are our missing princes, Ajit and Kusum', cried all the King's subjects.

Well, that is the end of this amazing story. The two kingdoms were united, and Lalkamal and Neelkamal reigned in peace for many years with their wives Ilavati and Lilavati.



Notes leading to the story of Ajit and Kusum, and then, as Neelkamal and Lalkamal, comp. to the double life of the poi. Kothim (orig. name) Bhabha - How neelkamal entered into the world.

MONIMALA



Two friends, one of them a Prince and the other, a minister's son, once set off on a long tour. One night, they reached the foothills of a mountain. The minister's son cautioned the Prince, 'My friend, these hilly areas are full of danger. Come, let us spend the night up on a tree.'

The Prince agreed. They hitched their horses to sturdy trees and selecting a tall tree by the side of a lake, climbed atop it.

Deep in the night, their sleep was disturbed by a terrifying noise. They awoke to find the whole place brilliantly lit, as though it were daylight.

But where was the light coming from? Oh my goodness, it was a killer python! Huge and monstrous, its hood spread out dangerously, nearly touching the sky! And it was gobbling up the poor horses of the two friends, which were struggling to break free. The Prince and the minister's son went numb with fright, their hair standing on end.

After eating up the horses, the python slithered around, catching whatever animal it could find to eat. The Prince, still scared and shaken, was calmed by the minister's son who said, 'Do not be alarmed. Can you see that jewel? All this light comes from that jewel. It belongs to the killer python and it is priceless. We must steal it from the python.'

'But how? How can we carry out this perilous task?' cried the Prince in panic. 'We will get killed!'

'Do not worry, just wait and watch', said the minister's son, and then he quietly slid down the tree, scooped up a fistful of soft clay, and flung it on the jewel. At once, it became dark all around. The minister's son pinned his sword into the soft clay, with its sharp edge pointing up, and then quickly ran back up the tree.

Masked by the clay, the jewel had lost its lustre. In a frenzy, the python writhed wildly around, looking for its jewel. But it was hidden under the clay and could not be seen. The python started hitting out furiously with its fangs, but cut itself badly on the sword. Blood came flooding out from its many wounds. With its eyes darting flames and its fangs spewing venom, the python went totally mad. It lashed out at everything with its tail, bringing down trees, and churning up the waters of the lake. Finally, in anguish and despair, it killed itself as its hood hit the sword again.

The two nervous friends somehow managed to pass the night up on the tree. When the sun rose the next morning, they came down cautiously to see if the python was really dead. It surely was. They picked up the hidden jewel and walked towards the lake for a wash.



As soon as they plunged into the lake, wonder of wonders, the water parted and showed them a path. Down the path the two friends went, until with the light of the jewel, they found a route leading

to the Nether World. Following this path, they soon came across a beautiful palace, surrounded by lovely gardens. There were flowers everywhere, creepers linked with creepers, leafy trees mingling with leafy trees. The two friends tiptoed into the palace.

Once inside, their ears were greeted by a shrill whistling sound, like a gusty wind. This made the poor Prince shudder in fear again. The minister's son assured his friend, 'No, no, there is no cause for alarm. As long as we have this jewel with us, we are safe.'

They were in a very strange building indeed; everything was made of snakes. With the jewel in their hand, they walked dauntlessly over millions of snakes—shiny, lolling, many-coloured snakes. Then they entered an amazing room. Its walls were made of snakes, so were its floor and ceiling, as also the furniture. And, in the centre of the room, on a bed made of thousands of snakes, Princess Monimala was sleeping peacefully.

The Prince asked, 'My friend, what is all this?'

'We are now in the Nether World, and she is the Princess of the Nether World', replied the minister's son.

The wonderstruck Prince could not stop staring at the sleeping Princess. Meanwhile, the minister's son quietly crept to the bed, and touched Monimala's head with the jewel. Immediately, Monimala sat up, fully awake. As soon as she saw the two men, she cried in alarm, 'Who are you? How did you come here? Do you not know this place belongs to the killer python?'

'Do not worry, Princess', the minister's son told her, 'we have destroyed the killer python. Now accept this Prince as your husband.' At this, both Monimala and the Prince shyly lowered their eyes.

Smiling in delight, the minister's son got them to exchange garlands. As if in celebration, millions of snakes raised and waved their hoods.



For quite some time all three of them lived happily together in the killer python's palace. Then one day, the minister's son said, 'We are truly very happy here, but we have had no news of our home for a while. We have no idea what is happening there. I suggest that I should go back, and then return with men and musicians to take you both back to our home.'

The Prince agreed, and with the jewel in hand, he and the minister's son went up through the lake. When they surfaced, the Prince bade farewell to his friend, and went back to the killer python's palace.

Now only Monimala and the Prince were left in the Nether World. He told Monimala about the earthly world where his home was, and Monimala, in turn, revealed all about the Nether World to the Prince. One day, Monimala said wistfully, 'I have never been to the earth. I do so wish I could visit it.' To this the Prince made no comment.

One afternoon when the Prince was taking rest, Monimala picked up the jewel and went up to the earth through the lake. She was amazed by what she saw. 'Oh, how lovely everything looks!' she exclaimed.

Monimala then spoke to the jewel, 'Light up, my jewel, light up. I wish to bathe in the lake.' Immediately, from nowhere, there sprang up a set of milk-white marble steps on the bank of the lake. And flocks of white swans appeared in the middle of the lake. Monimala sat down on the steps to prepare for her bath.

Unknown to her, a Prince, the son of that country's King, was passing by while out on a hunting trip. He spotted Monimala, and jumped down from his horse into the lake to catch her. Startled, Monimala promptly dived into the lake, carrying the jewel with her, and vanished. All this happened in the twinkling of an eye. The King's son returned home, very depressed. An old woman, known to all as Pencho's mother, had seen everything, but she told no one.



Meanwhile, the King's son returned home sick and delirious.

Various treatments were tried to cure him, but nothing worked.

The King and his Queen became very worried; and the King's subjects became equally depressed. Then the desperate King made an announcement made through his drum beaters: 'Anyone who can cure the King's son will receive as a reward half the kingdom, and also the hand of the King's daughter in marriage.'

The drum beaters went around the country with this message, but no one, absolutely no one, came forward to help cure the Prince. Finally, Pencho's mother heard about this reward. She ran as fast as she could to the King and said, 'King, O King, I can cure your son, but as I am an old woman, you must promise to marry your daughter to my son Pencho. Then and only then will I get you the medicine for the ailing prince.'

The King had no choice but to agree.

Pencho's mother then climbed on to her boat, which could fly, and took along with her a spinning wheel and a supply of cotton. She then chanted:

Spin, spin, my wheel of fortune, spin
The King's son waits pale and sick
For Monimala's hand.
Fly, fly, boat and reach me quick
To Monimala's land.

In no time at all, the flying boat reached the shores of the lake. The old woman sat there and started spinning.

It was a quiet afternoon, and the Prince was resting in the python's palace in the Nether World. Monimala once again surfaced on to the earth and spotted the old woman. She called out to her, 'Hullo, old woman, who are you? Can you weave a nice sari for me?'

So, Pencho's mother wove a beautiful sari for her, and asked to be paid for her work. Monimala said, 'But I have no money. All I have is this jewel!'

'Yes, I will take it', the old woman agreed readily.

As Monimala was about to hand her the jewel, the old woman grabbed her and put her in the flying boat. Once again she chanted:

Spin, spin, my wheel of fortune, spin
The King's son longs all day and night
For Monimala's hand.
My boat shall fly me fast as light
To his father's land.

Having kidnapped her, the old woman delivered Monimala at the King's palace, and went home with the jewel well hidden.

The King's son recovered, and it was decided that he would marry Monimala soon—and that Pencho would marry the King's daughter.

Meanwhile, Monimala announced, 'I have taken a religious vow which is to last a year. We must wait till then.'

Everybody agreed to her condition.

But where was Pencho? He had left home and had remained untraced for seven years. The old woman searched high and low for him, and sent people all over the country to look for him.

In the meantime, things had gone horribly wrong in the Nether World. With Monimala away and the jewel lost, all the snakes there came alive, poisoning the air with their breath. The Prince felt faint from the effect of the poison. Writhing and hissing, the snakes coiled round the Prince, who fell into a deep sleep on a bed of ice-cold snakes.



Meanwhile, the minister's son returned to the lake with men and musicians from the Prince's home. From its banks, he shouted, 'Prince, O Prince, I am back. Come, show us the way to the Nether World.'

But who would answer him? There was no reply at all to his entreaties.

Days and nights passed but the Prince did not reply to the minister's son. The latter was now very worried. What had gone wrong? He told his men to wait for him and set out to solve the mystery.

A little later, while on his way, he met some people who asked him, 'Who are you? Have you seen our Pencho? Pencho is supposed to marry our King's daughter, and his mother is looking for him everywhere.'

'Yes, I may have seen Pencho', the minister's son said, not very truthfully. 'But tell me, how did Pencho win the hand of the King's daughter?'

The people told him the whole story.

'Good, very good, but please, can you tell me what Pencho looks like?' the minister's son asked. He was then given a description of Pencho.

The following day, the minister's son discarded his own clothes, put on some old tatters and smeared dirt on the face. He then went to the old woman's house, where he started dancing like a wild person, flaying his hands and feet like a mad man. Laughing and coughing by turns, he made a frightful din.

The old woman came scampering out, and screamed joyfully, 'O my darling son, my precious treasure, where had you been hiding so long? Come in and see what I have got ...'

Half a kingdom, pots of milk
Coins of gold and robes of silk
To marry you a princess fair
And best of all, this jewel rare.

'... and all of it is yours.' The jubilant old woman then handed over the jewel to the man who was purportedly 'Pencho'.

Pencho almost snatched away the jewel and, in three bouncing leaps, entered the house. 'Look, Ma, I am all right now. Look at me, see how handsome I am.'

The old woman, all excited, said, 'Indeed, indeed, where had you hidden all this beauty of yours? Don't you know that the King's daughter is pining for you?'

The old woman lost no time. The next morning she got dressed, tied up her untidy hair in a knot, and shakily carrying her staff, proceeded to the King's palace. She called to the King, 'King, O King, bring out your daughter, for my son Pencho is back. I can hardly tell you how handsome my son is.'

What could the King do? He had to keep his promise, and marry his daughter to 'Pencho'.



After the marriage ceremony was over, 'Pencho' who was really the minister's son, told his wife the whole truth. The poor young Princess heaved a sigh of great relief. She told her husband that her brother was keeping Monimala in confinement.

Then the minister's son said to his wife, 'Now do as I tell you. Go and see Monimala, tell her everything, but do it quietly and give her this jewel.'

The Princess did as she was asked, and on the fourth day, Monimala announced, 'The period of my vow is over. I now wish to go to the lake for a ceremonial bath, but no one must come with me except for Pencho and his wife.'

The road from the palace to the lake was covered with canopies. Monimala set off for the lake, and with her went 'Pencho' and the Princess.

The bath was only an excuse. As soon as Monimala stepped into the water she said, 'Where had you been so long, jewel, my jewel, did you forget me?'

To which the jewel replied, 'I was hidden in the old woman's bag.'

Monimala said, 'Then how did you come here, jewel, my jewel, how did you find me?'

And the jewel said, 'Out from Pencho's rag.'

'Then take me deep down into the lake', commanded Monimala.

At once the water parted, and Monimala, 'Pencho', and his wife vanished into its depths.

The King's son groaned, the King and the Queen moaned, and the old woman, bitterly disappointed at the turn of events, dropped dead.



And meanwhile, what was happening to our Prince lying unconscious in the Nether World? With the return of the magic jewel, the snakes released the Prince and slithered away. He woke up, and all ended well. With the jewel, they went up to the earth—the Prince, the minister's son, Monimala, and the other princess. To the accompaniment of music and along with their men, they all went back to the Prince's country.

And what happened to the snakes? They all vanished into thin air, without any trace!



Who killed the snakes? - to have of a prince in absence - (Dedicated)