

TO THE BANKS OF THE GANGĀ

MY NAME IS KĀMANĪTA. I was born in

Ujjenī, a town lying among the mountains
far to the south, in the land of Avanti. My father was a

merchant and rich, though our family could lay claim to no special
rank. He gave me a good education and, when of age to assume the
Sacrificial Cord, I already possessed most of the accomplishments
which befit a young man of position, so that people generally
believed I must have been educated in Taxilā, at the great university.

I could wrestle and fence with the best. My voice was
melodious and well-trained, and I was able to play the vīṇā with
considerable artistic skill. I could repeat all the verses of the
Mahābhārata by heart and many others also. I was most intimately
acquainted with the mysteries
of poetic construction, and was myself able to write verses full of
feeling and ingenious thought. I could draw and paint so that few
surpassed me, and my originality in the art of arranging flowers was
universally lauded.

I attained an unusual mastery in the knowledge of the
colouration of crystals and, furthermore, could tell at sight from
what place any jewel came. My parrots and minah-birds I trained
so that none spoke so well as they. And to all these
accomplishments I added a thorough command of the game of
chess, the wand game, archery, ball games of every description,

riddles and of flower

games. So that it became, my friend, a proverbial saying in Ujjenī: “Talented as the young Kāmanīta.”

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When I was twenty years old, my father sent for me one day and said:

“My son, your education is now complete; it is time for you to see something of the world and begin your career as a merchant. A suitable opportunity has just offered itself. Within the next few days our king will send an embassy to King Udena in Kosambī, which lies far to the north. There I have a friend named Panāda. He and I have visited and stayed with each other at various times. He has frequently told me that in Kosambī there is good business to be done in the products of our land, particularly in rock crystals and sandalwood powder, and also in artistic wicker-work and woven goods. I have always, however, shunned such business journeys, holding them to be too hazardous an undertaking on account of the many dangers of the road; but for anyone going there and back along with the embassy there can be no danger whatsoever. So now, my son, we had better go to the warehouse and inspect the twelve wagons with their teams of oxen and the goods which I have decided on for your journey. In exchange for these items you are to bring back muslin from Benares and carefully selected rice; and that will be the beginning, and I trust a splendid one, of your business career. Then you will have an opportunity of seeing foreign countries with trees and gardens, landscapes and architecture other than your own, and other customs; and you will have daily contact with courtiers who are men of the highest station and of most refined aristocratic manners.

All of this I consider will be a great gain, for a merchant must be a man of the world.”

I thanked my father with tears of joy, and a few days later said farewell to my friends and my home. What a joyful anticipation my heart beat with as, at the head of my wagons, I passed out of the city gates, a member of this magnificent procession, and the wide world lay open before me! Each day of the journey was to me like a festival, and when the camp-fires blazed up in the evenings to scare the panthers and tigers away, and I sat in the circle by the side of the ambassador with men of years and rank, it seemed to me that I was in some kind of wonderful fairyland.

Through the magnificent forest regions of Vedisa and over the gently swelling heights of the Vindhaya mountains we reached the vast northern plain, and there an entirely new world opened itself out before me for I had never imagined that the earth could be so flat and so huge.

It was about a month after our setting out that, one glorious evening, from a palm-covered hill-top, we saw two golden bands which, disengaging themselves from the mists on the horizon, threaded through the immeasurable acres of green beneath, and gradually approached each other until they became united in one broad zone.

A hand touched my shoulder.

It was the ambassador who had approached me unperceived.

“Those, Kāmanīta, are the sacred river Yamunā and the divine Gangā whose waters unite before our eyes.”

Involuntarily I raised my hands, palms together, in reverence.

“You do well to greet them in this way,” my patron went on. “For if the Gangā comes from the home of the gods amid the snow-clad mountains of the north and flows from the Abode of the Eternal; the Yamunā, on the other hand, takes its rise in lands known

to far-distant

heroic days, and its floods have reflected the ruins of Hastinapura, The City of Elephants, and it washed the plain where the Pāndavas and the Kaurāvas struggled for mastery; where Karna raged in his tent, where Krishna himself guided the steeds of Arjuna — but of all that I do not need remind you, I know that you are well-versed in the ancient heroic songs.

“Often I have stood on that projecting tongue of land where the blue waves of the Yamunā roll onward side by side with the yellow waters of the Gangā, and blue and yellow have never mingled. Blue and yellow, warrior and brahmin in the great river-bed of Caste, passing onward to eternity, approaching — uniting — for ever

side by side — for ever two. Then it seemed to me that,

blended with the rushing of these blue floods, I heard warlike sounds — the clash of weapons and the blowing of horns, the neighing of horses and the trumpeting of war elephants — and my heart beat faster, for my ancestors also had been there. And the sands of Kurukshetra drank

their heroic blood.”

Full of admiration, I looked up to this man from the warrior caste in whose family such memories lived.

But he took me by the hand and said: “Come, son, look at the goal of your first journey.” He led me a few steps around some dense shrubbery that had, up until then, hidden the view to the east.

As it flashed upon my vision I gasped in admiration for there, at a bend of the broad Gangā, lay the city of Kosambī great and splendid in its beauty. With its walls and towers, its piled-up masses of houses, its terraces, quays and bathing-ghats lit up by the setting sun, it really looked like a city of red gold — a city such as Benares

had been until the unwholesome lives of its inhabitants changed it to stone and mortar — while the cupolas that were of real gold shone like so many suns. Columns of

smoke, dark red-brown from the temple courts above, light blue from the funeral pyres on the banks below, rose straight into the air. Carried aloft on these, as if it were a canopy, there hung over the whole a veil woven of the tenderest tints of mother-of-pearl, while in the background, flung forth in the wildest profusion, there flashed and burned every hue of heaven. On the sacred stream, which mirrored all this glory and multiplied it a thousand-fold in the shimmer of its waters, countless boats were rocking, gay with many-coloured sails and streamers. And, distant though we were, we could see the broad stairs of

the ghats swarming with people and numerous bathers splashing in the sparkling waves beneath. A sound of joyous movement, floating out upon the air like the busy hum of innumerable bees, was borne up to us from time to time.

As you can imagine, I felt as if I was looking upon a city of the *Tavatimsa* heaven, the abode of the Thirty-three Gods, rather than one of human beings; indeed, the

whole valley of the Gangā and the Yamunā with its luxuriant richness looked to us men of the hills like Paradise. And, in truth, this very place of all others on earth was indeed to become Paradise for me.

That same night I slept under the hospitable roof of Panāda, my father's old friend.

Early on the following day I hurried to the nearest ghat and descended, with feelings which I cannot attempt to describe, into the sacred waters which should not only cleanse me from the dust of my journey but also from my unwholesome karma as well. This was, owing to my youth, of no great gravity as yet; however I filled a large bottle from the river to take home to my father. Unfortunately,

it never came into his possession, as you will soon learn from my tale.

The good Panāda, a grey-haired old gentleman of

venerable appearance, now conducted me to the markets of the city and, with his friendly assistance, in the course of the next few days I was able to sell my wares at a good profit — and to purchase an abundance of those products of the northern plains which are so highly prized among our people.

My business was thus brought to a happy conclusion long before the embassy had begun to think of getting ready to start on its return journey; and I was in no way sorry, for I had now full liberty to see the town and to partake of its pleasures, which I did to the full, in the company of Somadatta, the son of my host.