

NEELAMBARI



MEENA SAPRE

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FOREWORD



These are only a few stories from my numerous story sessions with my grandchildren when they were young. I wish to share their joy which resulted from our interaction at that time with all the young children of the present generation.

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“VANASHREE”



Once upon a time in the dense Himalayan Jungle a great variety of animals lived peacefully. There were a few villages on the outskirts of the thick forest. A temple of the jungle goddess was situated in one of the villages. The villagers respected the sanctity of the temple more than anything, even more than their own lives. The goddess was known as Vanashree. Amongst the many animals who lived in the jungle, were tigers, Himalayan bears, deer, jackals, foxes, monkeys, snakes, pythons, leopards and a good variety of birds. All of them lived in perfect harmony. Unless driven by hunger they did not kill each other. Every year, during the spring season, a fete was organized to pay homage to Vanashree. People from the nearby villages gathered at the temple bringing whatever offerings they could. Some brought rice, some milk, while others brought only flowers. They firmly believed that all the animals of the jungle came to pay their homage too. The Priest told everyone to keep away from the temple after midnight as that time was reserved for the jungle folk. It was believed that the animals formed a procession. The tigers led it, with leopards behind the tigers. All other animals followed them. Only the tigers entered the shrine, holding the wild lotus flowers between their teeth. After offering the flowers, they turned back and walked back into the jungle. It was also believed that the Goddess blessed the animals by appearing before them in her full glory. She would be clad in a green sari, wearing thousands of multi-coloured flower garlands. She put on a crown of golden marigold on her head. In her right hand she held a torch of blazing pinewood. In her left hand, she held an axe. Her divine smile bewitched the animals and the priest vowed that the tigers shed sublime tears.

India was then under the British Rule. Although the Rulers did not believe in such tales there were amongst them a few, who had grown up with the locals and could not disregard the beliefs totally. Mac Henry was one such British man, who could not wave off the faith of the villagers as mere superstition. He was the District Forest Officer and had grown with the local children for some period of his early life before being dispatched to England for further education. His father was an administrative officer posted in India and had many Indian servants.

Deenu Singh the gardener was a close friend of Mac Henry. He had strange stories to narrate to the wide eyed Mac Henry who listened with rapt attention to every detail. At night when his father relaxed for an hour in the garden, Mac would bombard him with many questions regarding the credibility of the tales he had been told by the gardener and the father would nod mysteriously saying, “could be” or “could not be.” When Mac went to England for schooling, he narrated the gardener’s tales to his friends. Some of the friends believed those stories while many of them made fun of him. David was one of the friends who always teased and taunted Mac. It so happened that he was posted as the Commissioner of three districts of the Himalayan region in India after he had successfully completed the required education. He was very fond of hunting. The dense Himalayan jungle was his obvious choice to shoot the animals. He was one of those people who took pleasure in shooting innocent animals just for the sake of killing. He had a collection of many tiger skins, tiger heads, deer skin, sambhar heads, leopard skins etc., Mac Henry could not appreciate his friend’s pursuits. As David as the Commissioner of that area, Mac Henry just had to bear with him.

Once when David was touring that particular area, he came to know about the Temple and the lore associated with it. He spoke about it with Mac Henry and asked him about the credibility of the whole matter. Surprised, Mac told him not to believe in such tales. David laughed his heart out and said, “look who is talking about not believing? You were the one who always bragged about such local tales. And now you tell me you do not believe in them. Why? Perhaps you think I have intentions to shoot the animals when and if I see them in such great number and variety. Have no such fears. I get enough game without disturbing the local people’s faith in these matters. So tell me the truth Henry because if you don’t I have means to find out anyway.”

“Go ahead and do so if you will. I won’t be a part of your intentions whatever they might be.”, said Mac.

David tried to pursue the topic with the local priest but the priest was very adamant and refused to utter a word except that of caution and warning. Official work kept David busy for next two weeks or so. At the back of his mind though, the Temple tale nagged him most of the time. One fine warm morning, he started for a nearby village to attend some important court case which required his personal attention. Whole day was consumed by the case and by the time David could move back, it was already evening. He had no choice but to spend the night at the village Dak Bungalow. He settled there for the night with a hesitant,

mind for the structure of the Bungalow was not very sturdy. To sleep the whole night there would be quite dangerous. It was a temporary kind of shelter, suitable more for the hunters than for the officers. All the same he had little choice because darkness had replaced twilight, forming large black shadows. At about midnight he heard a scratching sound at the door. Wild life was abundant in the jungle those days. The officers were used to hearing such noises and David's only reaction was to get his rifle ready to shoot in case required. The noise increased in tempo and soon it reached an incredible crescendo. Annoyed and greatly puzzled, he decided to investigate the awful scratching noise. He knew only a tiger could make such a powerful scratching sound, but he also knew from long experience in jungle that, there would be more than one animal at the door.

His faithful guards were also present in the quarters just adjacent to the main bungalow.

It was evident that none had heard any noise or else they would have raised the alarm by shouting. He decided to open the door and investigate. Picking up his loaded rifle and releasing the safety catch, he opened the latched door very softly. The animals seemed to have walked away. He followed the pug marks for a long while. Eventually he saw the stone structure of the Temple, glowing with mellow light, from the beautiful mud lamps. At least a thousand lamps were alight, thought David. An inexplicable urge to walk towards the Temple seized him and, like one possessed, he reached the courtyard. Inside it, he found every species of the jungle animals he could think of. There were tigers looking mighty and regal, in their golden bodies with black stripes, their eyes full of a burning innocence. The silver skinned leopards with black spots were standing in graceful divine submission. The Himalayan bears in their silky black coats, the spotted golden brown deer, the alert monkeys, the mountain goats——. Name them and they were there. The birds were present too, in all colours and sizes. A Holy silence prevailed everywhere. As though under a spell David entered the otherwise dark but now perfectly illuminated inner part of the temple, where Goddess Vanashree was mounted on a tiger wearing garlands of fragrant, colourful flowers. She held a spear in her left hand and her right hand was raised in blessing. She was attired in a coarse green sari woven from jungle grass. David stood spellbound. The Goddess motioned David to come closer and spoke in a kind soothing voice. “My blessed son, be kind to these brethren of yours. They are helpless against your firearms. Do not kill them just for sport. Be their savior, not their destroyer.” Having uttered those words, the tiger took off and a

bewildered David, when he came out running after them, saw the tiger gaining altitude and flying above the clouds with the Goddess mounted on it.

David's senior officer was greatly surprised when the former handed over his resignation to him. "Why David, you are one of our best. Do you want to go home for a while? Take leave. Take rest at some hill station but don't make such a hasty decision. We need you here," said his senior.

Nobody ever knew why David resigned from his prestigious job and where he went after his resignation was accepted. Even Mac Henry was greatly puzzled. The village folk did not utter a word, but many of them whispered that they often saw a white man living in peace with the jungle folk. They believed solemnly that his rifle protected the animals from human beings. They could not say from where he received supplies for his firearm and believed wholeheartedly that Goddess Vanashree was responsible for that. Only the animals of the jungle knew that the Goddess had beseeched David to do so.

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