

**NEW TALES
OF KING
VIKRAM AND
THE VETALA**

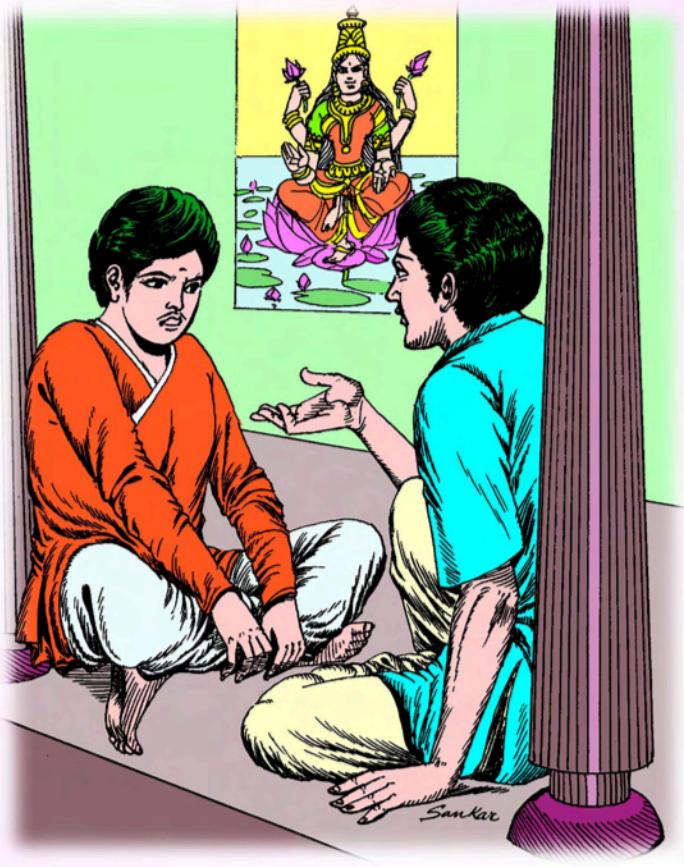
THE MAGICAL SWORD

The cremation ground presented an eerie spectacle on that dark night. The moon was hidden behind the clouds, and it was drizzling intermittently. The pitch darkness was relieved only by occasional flashes of lightning that lit up the sombre scene, causing an eerie dance of jerky shadows in the cremation ground.

Occasionally, a jackal's spine-chilling howl or the blood-curdling laughter of some invisible evil spirit cut into the silence that hung like a shroud over the area. Altogether, it was a scene that would strike terror into the bravest heart. But nothing could daunt the intrepid King Vikram. Once again, he made his way to the ancient gnarled tree from which the corpse was hanging. Bones crunched under his feet, and a screeching ghost rose from the dust in shuddering frenzy as he marched determinedly ahead.

Oblivious to everything but the mission at hand, he brought the hanging corpse down by cutting the rope with his sword. Slinging it astride his shoulder, he had just begun his return journey when the vampire that possessed the corpse said, "O King! I have never seen anyone as fearless as you are. Without the least heed of personal risk, you are entering this dreaded cremation ground in the dead of night time and time again. Nothing seems to faze you; it is as if Fear itself is afraid of you and keeps his distance! Your courage and tenacity are praiseworthy indeed. I'm reminded of a youth of another time, who struggled against impossible odds, to come up victorious. Listen to his story; perhaps it would inspire you."

The vampire proceeded to narrate the following tale: Sasank was a young man of Kanakpur village. He was both well educated and trained in the martial arts.



He was especially good at sword-fight. His father had been a rich merchant. Unfortunately, his parents died in an accident when he was in his teens. Subsequently, his father's partners had assumed full control of his flourishing business and swindled the boy of his rightful share of the property. Thus, Sasank was left destitute. He now maintained himself by doing odd jobs.

One day, his friend Jayant called on him. Moved by his plight, he said, "Sasank, you're an expert in sword-fight. With a great future ahead of you, it's a shame that you're wasting your talent by burying yourself in this godforsaken village where there's none to appreciate it! If you move to a city, you'll certainly get the recognition you deserve. Our king holds competitions in archery and sword-play in the capital every Vijayadasami day. I suggest you try your luck there."

Sasank liked the idea. Vijayadasami was just a week away, and the capital, Veerpuri, was quite far from his village. As he had no money to hire a carriage, he would have to travel on foot. So, he had to act immediately. The very next morning, he set out on his journey.

After walking for several miles, he found himself in the midst of a dense jungle. Feeling tired, he stopped to rest under a tree.

Suddenly, he heard a loud scream – "Help! Help! Tiger!"

Sasank sprang to his feet at once. Drawing his sword, he raced towards the source of the sound. He did not have to go far. Before long, he spotted a yogi cowering beneath a tree. A huge, ferocious-looking tiger was crouching a short distance away, ready to pounce upon him.

Brandishing his sword menacingly, Sasank charged at the tiger with a loud yell. The tiger was taken aback, but quickly turned on him. Soon, man and beast were locked in a fierce battle. Midway, Sasank's sword broke. Undaunted, he wrestled with the wounded tiger and eventually killed it with his bare hands.

The yogi, who had been watching all this, hugged Sasank and exclaimed, "Bravo, my boy! You are courageous indeed. You had unhesitatingly risked your life to save a total stranger. That shows your nobility. Your unselfish action deserves a reward."

He pulled out of his bundle lying at his feet a sword in its scabbard. He handed it to Sasank, saying, "This is a sword with magical powers. But you should take care never to use it in an unjust cause, or against a defenceless opponent. If you use it the right way – with courage, honesty and conviction, its powers will come to your aid. Victory shall be yours!"

Sasank accepted the sword gratefully and bade him goodbye and continued on his journey.

After travelling for several days, he finally reached Veerpuri a day before Vijayadasami. He repaired to an inn for the night, intending to present himself at the palace the next morning.

To his dismay, he learnt from the innkeeper that the elimination rounds of the competitions were already over. Apparently, a young warrior named Chakradhar, who hailed from a noble family, distantly related to the king, had won the sword-fighting contest by defeating all the other contestants.

All had been greatly impressed by his performance,

and the king was going to honour him at a special function the next day.

Although disappointed, Sasank was by no means dejected. He decided to go to the palace and try his luck anyway.

The next morning, just as the king was about to honour Chakradhar at a packed arena, Sasank walked up to him and said, "My lord, pardon me for coming in late. But I'm a swordsman from a distant province, and I would like to pit my skill against that of Chakradhar." He then drew out his sword.

This new development irritated Chakradhar, and he shouted angrily, "Who's this fellow? He looks like a country bumpkin. If he wishes to be trounced at my hands, I've no objection!"

"And what if you're defeated?" asked Sasank quietly.

On hearing this, Chakradhar looked as if he was having an apoplectic fit. His eyes bulged and his face went red with fury. For a moment he was dumbfounded. Then, finding his voice, he thundered:

"If I'm defeated, I shall leave this kingdom!"

The contest began. The spectators, who fully expected a walk-over for Chakradhar, were astonished at the mettle displayed by the unknown warrior. Even a trained fighter like Chakradhar was no match for his obvious dexterity.

Seconds into the fight, Chakradhar's sword was knocked out of his hands and sent flying in a wide arc, to finally land with a clang on the floor at one end of the arena.

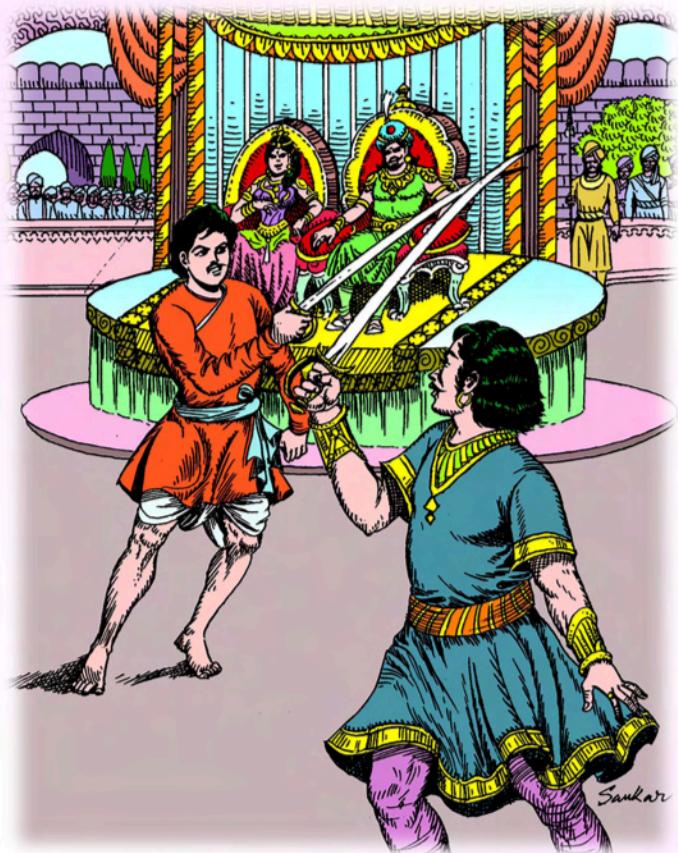
The arena erupted into a pandemonium as all the onlookers rose to their feet and applauded as one man. The king and the royal family members were also seen applauding the stranger.

The next moment, Chakradhar stormed out of the palace, never to be seen again.

The people of the capital hailed Sasank with great fervour and the king, in a glittering ceremony, conferred on him the title of 'Best Swordsman'.

The king asked Sasank to meet him in the royal garden later in the evening.

The king repaired to his chamber and requested his



queen, his only daughter, and his minister to join him. He then asked them, "What do you think about this youth, Sasank? There's no doubt that he's an excellent warrior. He's also robust and looks handsome. But he comes from a remote village; so, perhaps he may be uneducated."

The minister said, "No, sire! He is staying at an inn nearby. I sent my men after him to make secret enquiries about him. I find he is from an aristocratic family. Unfortunately, he lost all his wealth after the untimely death of his parents. I understand that he's well-trained in all martial arts. He came here seeking his fortune, hoping to get a job by virtue of his skills."

The king said, "As you all know, my daughter is the crown princess of the kingdom and the one to marry her would get the throne. I had announced earlier that she would be married to the winner of the sword-fighting contest. At that time, I had no doubt that Chakradhar would be the winner. But now, after this turn of circumstances, I feel that Sasank deserves her hand more. What do you say?"

All, including the princess, were happy with this

proposal. It only remained to meet Sasank and break the happy news to him.

It was evening and the king, along with the others, was waiting for Sasank in the garden.

Just then, the chief of the king's spies approached him and said in a low voice, "Sire, I'm afraid I have some bad news for you. One of my men has just brought me the information that Chakradhar is mobilising the people at the frontiers of our kingdom to revolt against you. Apparently, he is instigating the people by telling them that Sasank won the fight unfairly by using a magic sword obtained from a yogi, and that he does not deserve to become the king's heir. Chakradhar intends to seize the throne and marry the princess himself."

On hearing this, the king turned pale. He muttered, "It is shocking that one of my own men – one whom I trusted implicitly – has turned against me!"

The minister now smilingly spoke up, in a reassuring tone, "Don't worry, your majesty! Chakradhar's propaganda is going to harm no one but himself. There'll be no threat to our kingdom. In fact, we're going to benefit from his misrepresentation. As word spreads that the crown-princess's fiancé possesses a sword with magic powers, our enemy kings won't dare even to look in our direction! So, all's well that ends well. If both the parties agree, we can go ahead with the marriage."

Concluding the story at this point, the vampire demanded, "O King, how could the minister make such an unrealistic claim? It may sound convincing, but there's

no truth in it! Secondly, how did Chakradhar come to know of Sasank's magic sword? The transaction that took place between the yogi and Sasank in the middle of the forest was a secret one, wasn't it? If you know the answer, speak out – otherwise, your head shall shatter into fragments!"

Without any hesitation, King Vikram promptly answered, "There is nothing unrealistic or untrue about the minister's claim. It is quite true that hostile neighbours would think twice before launching an attack on a kingdom whose ruler was known to possess a magic sword capable of winning any battle. Thus, the magic sword was indeed a strategic asset not only for Sasank but for the whole kingdom! Coming to your second question, Chakradhar merely cooked up a story to discredit his rival and justify his own defeat in the contest. It was just a coincidence that the story of the magic sword happened to be true! Anyway, there is no doubt that Sasank thoroughly deserved to win the contest as well as the throne. Chakradhar's strategy of defaming his rival is unbecoming of a warrior, and shows him in very poor light."

On hearing this, the vampire nodded in approval, before going off into peal after peal of thunderous laughter. The next moment he, along with the corpse, moved off the king's shoulder with a jerk and flew back to the tree. King Vikram gave a little sigh as he gazed upon the scene. Then, he squared his shoulders and retraced his steps towards the tree.

