

Sundari and the Secret Message (1993)

For story-teller and chamber ensemble

Flute/picc, cello, sitar, tabla, electric keyboard.

Sundari and the Secret Message was commissioned by Shiva Nova, who gave the first performance at the Kings Lynn Festival, July 1993. It lasts about 20 minutes, and it is intended for a family audience. The story-teller recounts a traditional Indian tale, with a fine and humourous twist to it. I am indebted to Professor Anna Libera Dallapiccola for her help in finding the text. Sundari's story comes from *Women in Ancient Indian Tales* by Jagdishchandra Jain & Margaret Walter. I have retold the story of Sundari's Secret Message in my own words.

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Story-teller's text:

Once upon a time in the great city of Ratnapur, there lived a merchant. His name was Dhansar. He was the number one merchant in all the city, and he was very content. Not just because he was wealthy, but because he and his wife had seven fine sons.

One thing troubled him, and he decided to speak to his wife about it. "Tell me, Premavati," (that was his wife's name) "Why do you look so unhappy?"

"My dear," his wife said shyly, "What I should really like would be a daughter."

So Dhansar invoked a good spirit, and sure enough, his wife gave birth to a daughter. They called her Sundari, the beautiful one.

Sundari passed a happy childhood. She was very talented: she could dance and sing, she could paint pictures and play music. More than that, she was very clever; she liked doing mathematics and logic, she could write poetry and argue in philosophy. As she grew up, everyone could see that she was a remarkable young woman: intelligent and hardworking, beautiful and passionate.

Dhansar began to think about who Sundari might marry. "Who is there who will be good enough for our daughter?" he said to his wife. "I think the most promising young merchant in this town is Nivanag. I'm going to see if I can fix up their betrothal."

When Sundari heard about this, she said nothing. She didn't want to upset her parents. But she herself had very different ideas. "I already know who I want to marry", she said to herself. "It's King Vikram, the king of Ujjaini. Everyone says how wise he is, the most learned man of our time. And I've seen his portrait: he's very good looking, and very young, too. Oh Vikram! you're the one for me. Yet you don't even know I exist. What am I going to do?"

Sundari invoked a good spirit, and she made a secret vow: "Oh King Vikram, I promise myself to you. If ever I break my promise, may I straightaway die. You are the only man who will know my love."

And sure enough, Sundari saw her opportunity right away. Her brother Vacansar decided to go and do business in Ujjaini. "Vacansar" she said to him, "When you get to Ujjaini, you'll go to the court, to present yourself to King Vikram, won't you?"

"Yes, of course I will".

"Will you take him a gift from me? I'm going to send him my beautiful leather parrot".

"Your leather parrot? You do have odd ideas."

"Promise me you'll take it to him?" said Sundari.

"I promise," said her brother, and off he set on his long journey.

At last Vacansar arrived in Ujjaini. He went straight to the court to honour King Vikram. "Your majesty," said Vacansar "Please accept these gifts from Ratnapur. I have brought you these precious stones, and I have brought you this leather parrot as a gift from my sister."

King Vikram was delighted. People often brought him money and jewels, but never anything like the parrot. "What is your sister's name?"

"She is called Sundari, the beautiful one."

After all his guests had gone, King Vikram went on wondering about the leather parrot. His oldest servant came to him: "Your majesty, there is more to that parrot than you think. Tear it open!"

"Good heavens no," said the king, "That's the last thing I'd want to do."

"Yes," said the old servant, "Tear it open, and you will have happiness as long as you live". Vikram hesitated, looking at the beautiful parrot. Then he took his knife, cut through the leather, and what did he find? Hidden inside there was a secret message. There was a ring, with a letter in it. This is what he read: 'Great King Vikram: though we have never met, I think of you constantly. I believe we are destined for each other. How this shall come to pass I do not know, for at the festival of the solstice my family intend celebrating my marriage to a merchant here in Ratnapur. Yet I have vowed that I would die rather than give myself to any man but you. Oh Vikram, none but you shall know Sundari's love.'

King Vikram was astounded. "What a daring girl! She sounds passionate and brave; she's resourceful and beautiful. Oh Sundari! you are the bride for me. How can I possibly get to Ratnapur by the solstice? that's only two weeks! I must go by sea."

The young king called up a spirit to protect him on the voyage. "Oh no," said the spirit, sounding very scared, "Not possibly! I can't stand the sea! I'm the kind of spirit that gets seasick".

"So be it", said Vikram, "I'll go by land. I'm not afraid of the jungle." So he disguised himself as an ordinary young man, and set out on his long journey.

After many days struggling across the country, King Vikram was exhausted. Deep in the forest he could see a little hut, so he knocked on the door, hoping to find someone who could give him food and shelter. An old, old man let him in. "You must eat and you must rest" said the old man and he gave Vikram some cachari melons. They were very refreshing. Vikram ate all the wild melons he could, and then the old man insisted on putting some melons in Vikram's bag, for later in his journey. Then Vikram was anxious to be getting on. "What is the quickest way to Ratnapur?" he asked. The old man looked at him curiously. "What can you hear?" he said.

"I hear the wind in the trees, I hear the birds and I can hear a strange music like little bells," replied Vikram.

"Good fortune is with you", said the old man, "For that is the music of the fairies! Climb up that tree to the very top, and you will find the fairies are waiting to take you to Ratnapur."

Vikram hurried out and scrambled up the tree. And sure enough, he no sooner reached the top than he found himself flying through the air, as swift

and safe as if he had wings. He saw the stars above, and the lights below, and in no time at all they were arriving at Ratnapur.

What a city! Vikram was amazed at the crowds, at the decorations, at the dancing and singing. "What is going on?" Vikram asked a passer-by, "What are you celebrating?"

"Don't you know?" came the reply, "There's going to be a big wedding here. Tomorrow two great families will be joined."

"Tomorrow!" said Vikram, "And who is the bride?"

"Oh, it is Dhansar's daughter. She is called Sundari, the beautiful one."

Vikram thought of Sundari, of her secret message and his extraordinary journey. "Oh my love, may heaven help me find you before it is too late," he whispered to himself.

Suddenly a proclamation rang out. The royal elephant is dying! Cease the celebrations until the elephant is cured!

Quickly the word spread through the crowd. The elephant had swollen to an enormous size. It couldn't belch and it couldn't fart! The old king of Ratnapur had sent for Dhansar the merchant to provide melons, because the doctors had said that wild melons were the only food that could cure the elephant.

Even though he was in the midst of the wedding preparations, Dhansar had to go to the palace. He came back in a great rage. "What a fuss about an elephant with constipation," he complained to his wife. "Wild melons indeed! How can I find a cachari melon in Ratnapur? None of my suppliers have any at this time of year. And just when we're about to start Sundari's wedding! What are we to do?"

"Why don't you offer a reward?" suggested Premavati. So now Dhansar made a proclamation.

"Reward! Reward! If anyone can bring a cachari melon and save the royal elephant, Dhansar the merchant will give you whatever you ask for."

Vikram saw his opportunity. Still wearing his disguise, he bowed to Dhansar and said, "I am a traveller, and I am at your service. Here are cachari melons."

Dhansar was amazed. What luck! He and Vikram went straight to the palace. There lay the poor elephant. Quickly the doctor munched up the melon in some milk and poured it down the elephant's throat. Everyone waited...

First the elephant gave a burp like a thunderclap! Then it let out - well, you can guess the rest! Everyone was excited - the elephant was cured, and the wedding celebrations could begin again.

"Now claim your reward, young man," said Dhansar.

"I wish to spend tonight with your beautiful daughter, Sundari."

Dhansar was appalled. "Impossible!"

"But you promised," said Vikram.

"Out of the question! It's the night before her wedding."

"You gave your word of honour."

Dhansar hesitated, but he had to agree. So Vikram was led to the chamber where Sundari lay sleeping...and together they passed a night of love.

Vikram knew that everything had come true. They were destined to have happiness as long as they lived. But he was careful not to reveal who he was. Lost in a dream of love, Sundari did not know if she was sleeping or waking. At daybreak Vikram slipped away unseen, without disturbing her. He found the fairies and flew off with them, back to his kingdom in Ujjaini.

As dawn gave way to day, Sundari began to wake. "Vikram...Sundari..." she murmured. It seemed to her she had spent all night with the love of her dreams...but where was he now? Suddenly Sundari woke up completely.

"Today I have to marry Nivanag the merchant! Did I really sleep with King Vikram? No! I lay in the arms of a stranger! I have not forgotten my vow. Oh Vikram, we shall be united in death, if not in life."

Sundari took her sari and prepared to hang herself. As she folded it to make a noose, she saw there was something written on the hem.

"A leather parrot guarded a secret of love

So may a silken sari."

There was her ring with a secret message. This is what it said:

"My beloved, now we are truly man and wife. I came here in disguise, but I shall return in state to make you my queen. To Sundari the most beautiful from Vikram, King of Ujjaini."

Sundari's happiness knew no bounds as she said to herself over and over again, "Vikram...Sundari...Vikram...Sundari...Vikram...Sundari..."

And so it came to pass. Vikram returned with great ceremony to claim Sundari as his bride: all Ratnapur was in festival. Dhansar gave feast after feast. There was dancing and singing...there were fireworks. And the old king of Ratnapur himself came to their wedding, riding on his favourite elephant.