

TALES
from

INDIAN MYTHOLOGY



*Illustrated
by*
**GEORGE
KEYT**



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A. S. RAMAN
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In India, we have had a tradition where literature and religion have been organically related. Our highest literature consists of stories of our religious heroes, historical as well as mythological.

The Author has here retold twelve of the stories and legends which used to be known all over the country. These were being passed on from generation to generation by the village priests and the wandering minstrels. Sita's sufferings, Parvati's penance, Savitri's faith have helped to sustain our people in their trials and tribulations.

This book written with a nervous refinement of style will be a great boon to all those who suffer from cultural illiteracy. To the outsider, it will give a glimpse of the essential core of the Indian character.

The inspired illustrations by George Keyt heighten the impact of this volume.

**TALES
FROM
INDIAN
MYTHOLOGY**

Tales *from*

Foreword by
S. Radhakrishnan

Illustrated by
George Keyt

Indian *Mythology*

by
A. S. Raman



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To
SITA

FOREWORD

Shri A. S. Raman, Editor of the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, has written a beautiful book on "Tales from Indian Mythology". In India we have had a tradition where literature and religion have been organically related. Valmiki and Vyasa were God-possessed souls who poured forth their emotions in poems of beauty and joy, *nanrsih kurute kavyam*. Highest literature is the fruit of study and meditation—*svadhyaya* and *tapas*. In it we have a harmony of thought and emotion. By communion with the great minds of the past we acquire a little of their spirit.

Our civilisation has remained unbroken because the generations as they passed were imbued with the same ideals of serenity of soul and joy in living and strove to practise them to the best of their ability.

Some of the stories and legends which Shri A. S. Raman has here retold used to be known all over the country. Our village folk, though illiterate, were not ignorant. They heard from the village priest or the wandering minstrel these stories which gave a pattern to their lives. Sita's sufferings, Parvati's penance, Savitri's faith have helped to sustain our people in their trials and tribulations.

Unfortunately, many of our modern young men and women seem to be unaware of the great traditions which had sustained the life of our country for centuries. After all, a nation becomes conscious of itself through its history. This book, written with a nervous refinement of style will be a great boon to all those who suffer from cultural illiteracy.

Many who are unknown to name and fame have lived their daily lives inspired by the spiritual traditions of the country. Shri Raman's wife, who passed away under tragic circumstances while engaged in an act of worship, incarnated the great spirit of the country to the extent possible in modern conditions of

life. The pain of any individual is but a fragment of the pain of the world according to the Buddha. Our sorrow should lead us into a wider compassion, a tender regard for all persons. This book will lead us to realise the truth of the Psalmist's statement : "The paths of the Lord are mercy and truth."

S. Radhakrishnan

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A. S. R.

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The Marriage of Parvati

PARVATI grew up in the city of Oshadhiprastha like the phases of the moon and radiated a sweetness and splendour that transformed her father's Himalayan kingdom into a planet in itself, as it were. Her gracious presence infused a new vitality into everything around her. At the sight of her, the bird would break into song, the bud burst into flower, and the wind whisper something in the ear.

But that morning, on the banks of the Mandakini, there was an awkward pause in the cycle of Spring. For not a leaf stirred in the lush Himalayan valley. And the flow of the reluctant river had become feebler and feebler as though it might dry up any moment. The sun had already made his appearance in the east, but he lost his lustre and the lotus was still asleep. A strange staleness had crept into the song of the *shama* and the *koel* was wailing. Suddenly, however, flowed divine melodies from the strings of Narada's Veena, as he was passing through the clouds on his way to Oshadhiprastha. "Narayana! Narayana! Why is Nature in mourning?" demanded the son of Brahma.

"You know everything!" squeaked a cheeky squirrel and slipped into the bole of a pipal tree.

Parvati's parents, Parvateswara and Mena, were discussing the question of her marriage when Narada entered the palace. "Narayana! Narayana!" he began. "So Parvati will no longer play on the banks of the Mandakini! O King of Mountains! I have news for you. Parvati's destiny is that her husband shall be no other than the Lord Mahesha himself. So give no thought to her marriage. Narayana! Narayana!" Having fulfilled his mission, the emissary between the celestial world and the terrestrial disappeared.

There was great rejoicing in the palace. And her *sakhis* (companions) began to tease Parvati that it would be easier for them to have their prayers granted, when she became a goddess. They now ran towards the Mandakini for play, and Nature at once resumed her smiles and songs.

* * *

Shiva at the time had assumed the role of Mahayogin (supreme ascetic) and was in the midst of a great penance in the deodar forest at the foot of the Himalayas. He was unapproachable. One day Parvateswara beckoned to his daughter and said, "Parvati, you are a child, and you don't know the wrath of Shiva. But if it is your destiny that he shall become your lord, you alone have access to him—through devotion. So can you go and serve him during his *tapas*?" Parvati started on her dangerous mission.

Her presence at his feet enraged Shankar, but only momentarily. He allowed her to attend on him, but not a word passed between them.

Meanwhile there was panic at Indra's celestial court because of the depredations of the demon Tarakasura who had threatened the very existence of the *devas* (gods) and *rishis* (sages). Brahma had ordained that Taraka be slain by the future son of Parvati and Shiva. So Indra and all the other *devas* were impatient about the marriage of Parvati to Shiva. Indra hit upon a plan. He called Manmatha, the God of Love, and said: "You must at once go to the deodar forest at the foot of the Himalayas and cast your spell over Shiva so that he may fall in love with Parvati and marry her. Vasanta and Chandra shall also go with you and help you in your task." "My Lord, it is done!" said Manmatha, Vasanta (Spring) and Chandra (Moon) and set out on their joint errand.

Now the deodar forest, bathed in soft silvery moonlight, became a garden of enchantment. Birds and beasts moved in pairs, and everything in Nature seemed to be in love, seeking oneness with its beloved. The Gandharvas sang in *Hindol* and the Apsaras danced with a gay abandon. Manmatha chose this moment for his "attack" on Mahadev. Seated on a *krishnajin* (deer-skin) with his half-closed eyes fixed on the tip of his nose, the Supreme Lord was in deep contemplation. The snake round his neck raised its hood and began to hiss at the advancing God of Love. Manmatha suddenly stopped at a deodar tree which stood between him and Shiva. At the Lord's feet sat Parvati with her eyes closed, and holding flowers in her folded hands; a lotus garland was dangling from her right arm.

The Great Lord opened his eyes and offering the flowers at his feet, Parvati prostrated herself before him. Pleased with her devotion, Shiva said: "You shall have a husband who has

no equal in the Three Worlds.” Immediately she placed the lotus garland round his neck, and Manmatha’s *sammohanastra* (“The Arrow of Temptation”) struck the Lord, who began to feel amorous towards Parvati. But Manmatha’s success was short-lived, for Shiva in a twinkling assumed his terrific form and, opening his Third Eye of Fire, he reduced the God of Love to ashes. Realizing the futility of penance in the presence of a woman, Shiva disappeared.

No sooner did the news of her husband’s tragic death reach Rathi than she rushed to the deodar forest. Holding Manmatha’s ashes in her fist, she addressed her most poignant prayers to the Lord Mahesha, appealing to him to bring her husband back to life. But there was no response. Preferring death to the life of a widow, she was about to throw herself into fire when a voice from the heavens assured her: “Do not be rash. Your husband shall come back to life on the day Shiva marries Parvati.” Now she decided to keep a vigil on the ashes of her husband till he rose from them on the appointed day.

Parvati returned to Oshadhiprastha humiliated, but not frustrated. Her parents tried to persuade her to forget about Shiva, but she would not listen. “Father,” she said, “I can reach him only through the path shown by him, the path of penance. And permit me to do so.”

“My child,” cried her mother, “your place is in the palace and austerities are not for you.”

“Parvati, be patient,” advised her father. “The Lord himself will come to you and seek your hand. Narada’s prophecy never goes wrong. But don’t talk of penance, my child.” “Narayana! Narayana!” Announcing his arrival, Narada said: “King of

Mountains! Don't be a coward. Let her seek her Lord in her own way and her struggle shall not be futile. Narayana! Narayana!" He vanished into the skies.

Clad in a simple saffron sari and seated still and serene, on a mighty peak against the backdrop of snow-capped mountains, Parvati looked like an eternal dawn. The seasons changed and with them the fury of the elements, too. They had never been more fierce. It was the hottest summer, the coldest winter, the grimmest autumn, but, worst of all, it was the cruellest spring. Every living thing seemed to be on trial, along with Parvati. That little bird which dropped a fresh flower at her feet every morning was the only creature which still had its freedom.

One morning a young Brahmachari (bachelor) with a begging bowl arrived there and demanded Parvati's hospitality. She opened her eyes, and closed them again. "Young lady," he asked, "why are you inflicting such severe austerities on yourself? Have you no home? To whom are you addressing your prayer and penance?" Parvati gave no reply, but the name of Mahesha was faintly but repeatedly heard from her lips. "Oh, you are in love with Mahesha! You must be mad! What do you see in him? His only possession is a garland of skulls round his neck. He smears his body with ashes and performs crazy dances in the *smaśan* (cremation ground). He has an ugly face with three eyes and a perpetually hissing serpent in his hair. He has no means and depends on alms for his existence. But you seem to be a princess. Why do you waste yourself for the sake of this uncouth mendicant? You can still give him up?" Parvati became furious, but she did not say a word. She gave him a stare

and turned her face from him with contempt. After a little while, she looked around to make sure that he was gone. No, he was still there, but in a different form. Now she saw the Lord Shiva himself. He drew near her and tried to clasp her hand. But she evaded him. She stood before him blushing. "Parvati," he said, "you have conquered me with your penance. May I seek your hand?"

"My Lord," she replied. "I love you, but it is my parents who can make me your own. So you must obtain their consent."

"Be it so ! Arundhati and the Seven Sages shall see your parents on my behalf."

He vanished, leaving Parvati with the thrill of her greatest triumph.

* * *

The moment the Seven Sages accompanied by Arundhati arrived in Oshadhiprastha with a message from Mahadev, the whole city was aflutter with excitement. Parvateswara received them with great pomp and splendour. He said: "Great sages, your visit to my kingdom has the sweetness of showers unheralded by clouds. Pray, what is your command to me?" "King of Mountains!" replied the Sage Angirasa, "we have a proposal from the Lord Shiva. He desires to marry your daughter. Have you any objection?" Without answering the question, Parvateswara turned to his daughter and said in great ecstasy: "My child, your penance has borne fruit at last. Prostrate yourself before our holy guests." Parvati obeyed her father blushing.

The city of Oshadhiprastha began to prepare itself for the great day. Roads were strewn with flowers, and overhead hung

evergreen *torans* (festoons). The air was rent with music and *mantras*. There seemed to be a marriage in every house.

Led by the Seven Sages and Arundhati, Shiva, riding Nandi, with Brahma and Vishnu on either side and surrounded by all the *devas*, *rishis* and *pramatha ganas*, descended on the outskirts of Oshadhiprastha, and they pitched their tents there. Soon Parvateswara and Mena accompanied by the entire kingdom, as it were, received them and took them to the marriage *mandap*. The auspicious moment arrived. Parvati was seated beside Shiva with her head bent. Her downcast eyes remained fixed on her anklets where she saw the reflection of Shiva. To the chanting of *mantras* by the *rishis*, to the playing of music by Narada and Tumburu and to the rhythm of dances by the Apsaras, Parvateswara and Mena performed their sacred duty of *kanyadan*. Immediately came an arrow of flowers from somewhere and hit Shiva on the chest. It heralded the arrival of Manmatha who bowed to Shiva and said: "My Lord, I have come back to life, as ordained by you. Permit me to serve you now."

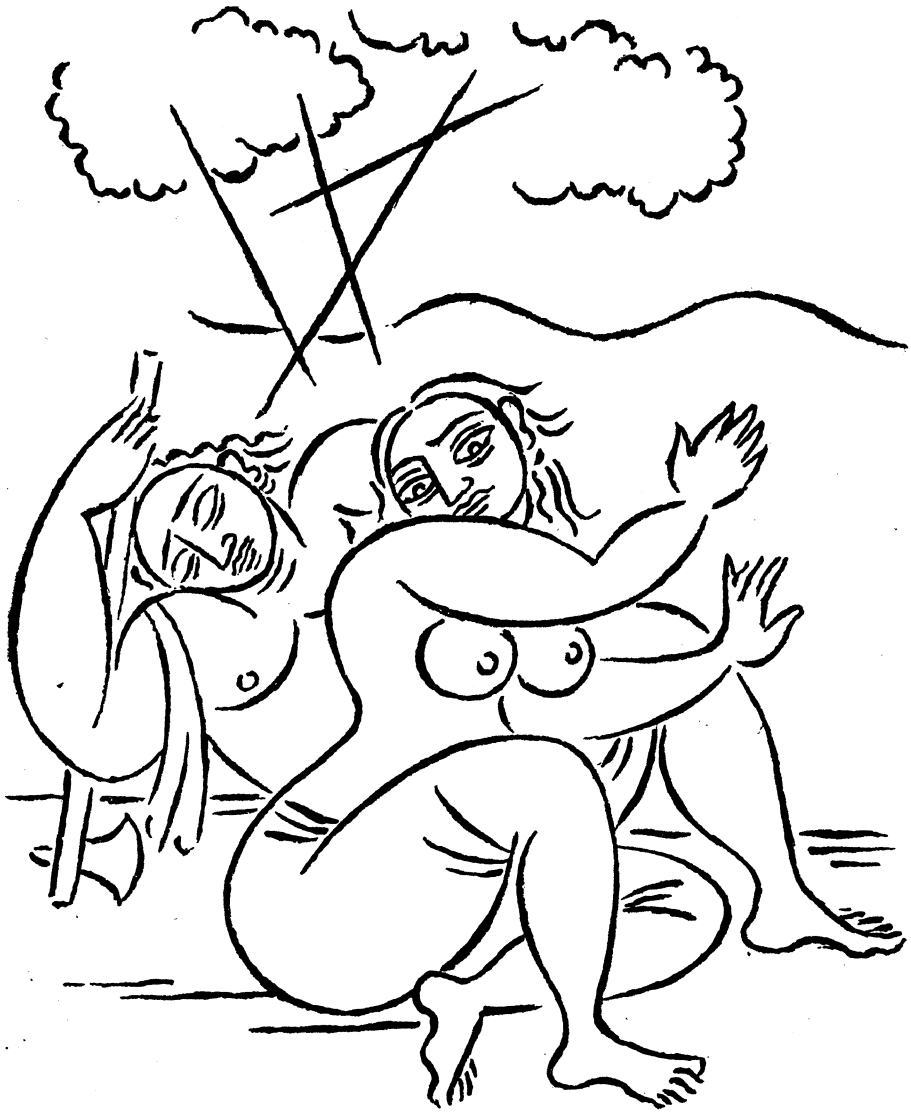
Savitri's

Triumph

IT was the hermitage of the Salwa king, Dyumatsena, now in exile. Blind and decrepit, he had been disgraced and deposed by an unchivalrous foe. Secure in the fastness of the forest, he and his wife spent their time in meditation, while Satyavan, their only son, attended on them. They had no rancour against the usurper. They even invoked divine mercy on him. They also prayed for perpetual peace and plenty in their kingdom. Their penance had no other purpose, and the sun, the moon, the stars—everything in God's creation—seemed to be at their service. For eternal spring reigned at the *ashram*.

Satyavan, still in his early teens, was the envy of the gods. In beauty, he challenged Manmatha, in wisdom, the *Devaguru* Brihaspati (the gods' Preceptor), in radiance, the sun and in forbearance, the earth. When he was not serving his parents or studying the *sastras*, he could be seen absorbed in clay-modelling. There was magic in his thin, sensitive fingers.

One morning as he was filling his pitcher with water from



a lake, he heard the gallop of horses in the distance. The sound of the hoofs became harsher and harsher. "Is it a hunting party?" he asked himself. A regal entourage was visible now, but it was not a hunting expedition. Lo! A princess emerged from a chariot and, asking her retinue to stay behind, walked alone towards Satyavan.

"Who are you, princess?" he began. "Are you on a hunting expedition? I do not allow even the mightiest of emperors to shoot a single bird or animal in this jungle."

"Young hermit, I am definitely on a hunting expedition, but I have no interest in birds and animals."

"O, I understand you. I was watching the abandon with which the lotus was melting away in the caress of sunshine, when the heavy trot of your horses disturbed me. I could not imagine that they were the harbingers of something so sweet and sublime as your presence, and I welcome you, princess. But you have not told me your name."

"Hermits need not be told anything. They know everything. They do not ask questions. They only give answers."

"I am not a hermit yet. I am a Brahmachari. So I keep asking questions, and my parents have only one answer—silence."

"Can I see your parents?"

"How do you expect me to reply to your question when my own remains unanswered?"

"Young—how am I to address you? —Brahmachari?"

"No, call me prince. It is getting late for me. I have to keep the sacrificial altar ready for my parents. Permit me to go, princess. I invite you to our *ashram*. You may meet me there..."

He paused and then added, "After you have finished with your 'hunting'."

"I have finished with it," she mumbled coyly. At once a nervous smile flickered on her tender crimson lips, which quivered like petals in a breeze. He returned the smile, and hurried back to the *ashram*, followed by her.

She was Savitri, the only daughter of the King Aswapati. He was extremely fond of her, because she was the gift of the gods. He had remained childless for eighteen years, and during this period he sought the benediction of the sages and the gods through prayer and atonement. Her birth, as ordained by Savit, the Sun God, marked the culmination of his *tapas*. Savitri had the freshness of the dawn, the purity of fire and the sweetness of the moon, and everybody considered it auspicious to look upon her face. Thus she had only devotees, and no suitors. Her father felt perturbed, as the time for her bestowal drew nearer and nearer.

* * *

One day, the sage Narada, with the name of Narayana eternally on his lips, announced his arrival, when Aswapati was discussing matters of state with his counsellors. The king rushed out to receive him with due ceremony and conducted him to the throne where the son of Brahma was seated with Aswapati at his feet. "O virtuous king, the time for Savitri's bestowal has come. Have you received any proposals?"

"None from mortals."

"What have you decided, then?"

"The decision now rests with Savitri herself. For I have

asked her to seek her own lord, and her choice shall have my approval."

Meanwhile, Savitri's return to the palace was announced by the *dwarapalas* (sentries). The king was naturally excited at the news and at once sent for her.

Savitri came and bowed to Narada and her father. "Have you no news for us, princess?" Narada asked.

"There is a prince in exile in the forest not far from our frontiers. He lives with his venerable parents. I have chosen him as my lord, and let the *devas*, the *rishis* and all the elements shower their blessings on us."

"What!" exclaimed Narada. "Satyavan to be your husband!"

"What is your objection to him, *mahamuni*?" asked Aswapati.

"He is fit to be the husband of a goddess. But it is his fate that he shall die on his sixteenth birthday."

"My beloved child," implored Aswapati. "Can you not give him up and seek some other prince?"

Replied Savitri: "A woman chooses her lord only once, and the entire universe bears witness to her decision. How can she change it, O great king, and gracious sage?"

"Be it so, and may God be with you! *Mahamuni*, can you tell me something about this boy and his parents?"

"Satyavan was a little boy when his father, the saintly Salwa king, Dyumatsena, lost his throne to a tyrant and went into the woods. Now he is their only hope, but how ephemeral human hopes are! Savitri and Aswapati, I must take leave of you now. Be it well with all! Narayana! Narayana!" And he vanished.

On an auspicious day, Aswapati, accompanied by Savitri and some elders, arrived at the *ashram* of Dyumatsena. Prostrating himself before the royal exile, Aswapati announced the purpose of his visit. "You are not fair to your daughter," said Dyumatsena, "Why do you condemn her to the rigors of an *ashram* life?"

"O Splendour of the Salwa clan," replied Aswapati, "my daughter realizes that happiness and misery are like light and darkness. Neither is permanent. What endures is love, the sort of love that unites your worthy son and Savitri. So gracious sage, bless them both."

Dyumatsena at last gave his consent to the marriage of Savitri to Satyavan, which was presently celebrated at the *ashram* with ascetic simplicity and dignity.

* * *

After the wedding, Savitri put on the hermit's brown garb of bark and dedicated herself to the service of her husband and his parents. His joys and sorrows became hers too, and he found in her not only a companion but a counsellor. She would anticipate his interests and satisfy them in a manner worthy of the gift of the gods. He was always bright and vivacious and the nearer the day of his death approached, the greater became his lustre and liveliness. And she reciprocated his zest for living, at the same time concealing her grief over his impending doom.

"Look!" he said one morning pointing to the luxuriance by the lakeside where they first met. "That flower is waiting to pour its fragrance into your thick black hair. Let me bring it to you before it drops to dust." She smiled, and tears trickled down her cheeks. Having plucked the flower, he came back in

breathless haste to decorate her coiffure with it, as she was fondling an antelope.

"Now the flower has fulfilled its purpose. Savitri, I want to ask you a question. Why have you been fasting for the past three days?"

"My lord, tomorrow will be your birthday and I shall then break my fast."

"But we have taken vows not to celebrate birthdays till we regain our kingdom. I shall spend the day by hewing more wood."

"I have a request. Will you grant it?"

"It is granted, my precious Savitri. What is it?"

"I want to be with you tomorrow, when you cut the branches of trees."

"We shall have to go very far, trudging along dark narrow paths. Are you not afraid of thorns and snakes?"

"Fear is a stranger to me, my lord."

"All right. I think I can persuade father to agree."

"You may tell him that I desire to see the blossoms and streams."

* * *

The next morning, Savitri and Satyavan woke up at dawn song and went to the lake for a ceremonial bath. They wore new clothes. She put a *tilak* on his forehead and chanted hymns. She stood facing the east and offered flowers and silent prayers to the life-giving Sun God. Her long dark hair waved in the air like a cluster of bees.

"Savitri, you have promised to break your fast today."

"Yes, my lord. Today I shall have my first meal in three days, a little after midnight."

On their return to the *ashram*, Satyavan conveyed his wife's desire to Dyumatsena. Thereupon the old sage said: "Ever since she became my daughter-in-law, she has not made a single request to me. I am pleased to grant her this one, Satyavan. Look after her carefully during the perilous journey and return before sunset. You may go now."

A little before midday, axe in hand, Satyavan, accompanied by Savitri, set out on his last journey. On the way, he entertained her with songs and stories, which apparently she enjoyed immensely. At last they reached their destination. They drank water from a stream, rested a little while, and looked around to watch the whims of Nature in her wild state. Leaving Savitri at an idyllic comer he selected a huge tree and began to hew at its branches. Her anxiety increased moment by moment.

The sun was about to hug the western horizon, and the birds were hurrying back to their nests, the birds with whose first twitter Savitri and Satyavan had risen that morning. There was a sudden stir in the sands by the stream. Was it the wind? But there was not a single ripple on the water which for the moment remained still and stagnant. That was perhaps the stir of yet another crab which would crawl no more. A sinister silence and gloom began to envelop Satyavan and Savitri. And ominously the axe fell from his hands and, feeling dazed, he cried, "Savitri, a million arrows are piercing through my head. I want to rest awhile." She rushed to him and helped him relax on the ground. She sat and laid his heavily perspiring head on her lap. He closed his eyes, and immediately a lurid flame appeared in

front of them. From it sprang a terrific male form riding a ferocious buffalo. Black and burly, he was holding a noose in one hand and a mace in the other. His eyes emitted a ruddy glow. But she was not frightened.

"Who are you, stranger?" she asked calmly. "What is the purpose of your visit?"

"I am Yama, the God of Death", he answered. "I am here because your husband's appointed span of life is over."

"I was anticipating you. Salutations to you, O God of Death."

Yama cast the noose round Satyavan's neck, drew forth his last breath and attempted to go his way. Savitri followed him.

"Stay away, young lady, and perform your husband's obsequies. Where do you want to go with me?"

"Wherever you will take me—with my husband. I am a wife, and my place is beside my husband. How can you expect me to live a life other than that of a wife? There can be no widowhood for me. Death does not frighten me because the love that binds me and my husband is deathless. I have an unshakable faith in immortality, and it is a faith that only eternal values such as the truth, chastity and dutifulness can nourish. I have observed the code of conduct laid down by the deities. Will they betray me?"

"Noble princess, I am impressed by what you say. Beseech any boon, except your husband's life, and it shall be granted."

"My Lord, I pray that the sight and general health be restored to my revered father-in-law, Dyumatsena."

"He shall have them. Now you must leave me alone." Hardly did he pace a few steps when he realized that Savitri was

still pursuing him. He turned round and said, "Please go back. Listen to my advice. The path ahead is dark and dangerous and it is not for such as you."

"I am seeing it clearly and it is inviting me. Please do not turn me away from it. There is no darkness for me. You are not only the God of Death but Lord of Justice too. So I appeal to you to be fair and ensure that the noble and righteous are properly rewarded."

"Savitri, I am struck by the loftiness of your ideals and by the profundity of your wisdom. Do you desire nothing else except your husband's life?"

"With your blessings, let my father-in-law regain his kingdom."

"Your prayer is granted." He resumed his journey, but he felt Savitri's presence behind him. Enraged he demanded: "Why do you want to visit the Land of the Dead, when you have still many, many years to live?"

"O Lord! There is no Land of the Dead for me. I recognize only two classes of people—the good and the bad. And when the virtuous seek justice from the ever merciful and magnanimous such as yourself, can it be denied to them? Perhaps, according to you, there is such a Land as that of the Dead. But the moment the virtuous enter, it comes to life."

"Savitri, have you no more benefactions to seek—except, of course, the life of your husband?"

"My Lord, I beg of you to bestow a hundred sons on my father-in-law?"

"It is done. And, may you also have a hundred sons! Now let us part. Chase me no more."

But she refused to retrace her steps. "Savitri, it is past midnight, and have you no regard for your husband's decrepit, helpless parents? Please go back and serve them."

"Before I obey you, my Lord, I must ask you one more question. Is not your last favour false unless Satyavan comes back to life?"

"All right. May he live long for hundreds of years in ever greater and greater glory!"

Yama then disappeared.

Savitri returned to Satyavan's body and, as she caressed his cheeks, he opened his eyes saying, "I have had a bad dream!"

* * *

In the mean time, the *ashram* had been plunged in grief. Dyumatsena and his wife were seated beside the sacrificial fire, while sages and scholars offered prayers for the safe return of Savitri and Satyavan.

Presently the young couple arrived beaming with smiles. And at once Dyumatsena regained his sight and had a glimpse of the vast jubilant crowd surging towards the *ashram* with slogans and cries such as: "Victory to Dyumatsena! The enemy has been slain!" which rent the air.

"I am hungry," said Savitri casting coy glances at her lord. "I told you I would break my fast after midnight. So let me go and prepare food for all of us."

The Childhood of Sita

THE city of Mithila had never greeted a brighter dawn. Covered with the soft splendour of sunshine, everything began to behave differently. The earth looked greener and smelt sweeter than ever, and the sky, clear of the clumsy patches of clouds, was anxious to descend amorously with a view to hugging it. The Himalayan peaks gleamed in the distance like golden arrows challenging the supremacy of the gods. That was the best moment for song which filled the air. Even the unmusical peacock attempted to sing. But the busy citizens of Mithila had no time to spare for its unpredictable melodies. Amused by its vanity, they went about their daily round with great expectations. For they knew that some magnificent gift of the gods was in store for the kingdom of Videha that morning. What was it? Only the elders claimed to have an answer to such questions. But they would not share it with the youngsters, nor with one another. So the secret remained with them—at least till the bounty became tangible. And when it did, they would say :



"We knew it would happen, because . . ." When it did not they would say : "We knew it would not happen, because . . ." In either case, they had an explanation.

But that was the youngsters' day. They began to indulge in foretelling at its wildest. "Whoever digs the earth today," said one of them, "will land a pot of gold." "Whoever sows the seed today will reap a hundred years' harvest," predicted another. "Whoever goes to school today will become the wisest man in the world without reading a single line for the rest of his life," observed a third. "The wisest man in the Three Worlds," corrected a fourth. "Whoever marries today will become the father of a hundred children," asserted a fifth. "A hundred sons, all as radiant and resplendent as the sun," clarified a sixth. "Whoever poaches in the garden to-day can go on pilfering the fruit every day without being caught," remarked a seventh cynically. "Look !" they exclaimed in a chorus, "the entire city is surging towards the fields. It wants to watch the great King Janaka at the plough. Are we to be left behind ?"

* * *

Janaka, the popular king of Videha, was childless. He had decided to perform an important sacrifice. But he himself set about preparing the site for the purpose. Plough in hand, he began to prospect the land on the out-skirts of the capital, Mithila. His counsellors and courtiers as well as citizens accompanied him. But he would not allow them to assist him because he was engaged in a religious task to which he had to address himself in the spirit of dedication. At last he selected a plot of ground and began to plough it. One furrow.

Two. Three. Four. Five. And at once an elaborately decorated and ornamented *kalasa* (a sacramental vessel) turned up. Naturally excited, he picked it up, and lo ! it contained a female child, who glowed like a part of the moon fallen on the earth. The onlookers were jubilant that their king's prayers were granted. She cried lustily in his hands. Believing that it was the will of God that he should bring her up as his own daughter, Janaka took her to the palace and entrusted her to the care of his senior queen. With due ceremony, he christened the baby Sita ("Plough").

Ever since Sita entered Janaka's palace, an era of plenty had dawned upon his realm. The rains came at the right time, and stopped at the right time. The soil yielded at the mere sight of the plough. Nature threw upon her hidden treasures unasked. Even the senior queen who had remained sterile for many years now gave birth to a beautiful daughter who was named Urmila. The barrenness had completely disappeared from the kingdom of Videha, and the people began to feel that a goddess was in their midst.

Sita and Urmila grew up in the sunshine of love from everywhere—from the gods, the five elements and the mortals. They lived in unison like the twin beats of a single heart. They studied and played together, and at the proper age all the accomplishments came to them not only naturally but spontaneously. But what they most enjoyed doing was to live close to Nature—and closer to Mother Earth. With the first glimmer of the dawn, carrying pitchers of gold, they would go to the river, and, before bathing in its sacred waters, they would play for a little while on its banks. They would raise palaces of sand and make boats with pieces of bark and leaves, till their

handiwork crumbled in a gust of wind. Sometimes they themselves would destroy it, not satisfied with its foundations, and concentrate on creating a likeness in clay of their rotund dance preceptor. Then, before taking a dip in the river, they would write love letters on water addressed to the gods and burst into laughter. After their bath, they would hurry to the garden and empty their pitchers beneath the creepers and trees which they had planted. Now they would feed the doves and deer with the choicest grain and grass, now they would smile at the *champak* flower, now they would greet the jasmine, now they would salute the *parijaat*, now they would bow to the lotus in the pond nearby, now they would sing to the sonorous rhythm of the distant waterfall.

* * *

On a Monday morning, they were in the garden watering the plants. Urmila was her usual bright self, but Sita was pensive. "Sister, why are you sullen and silent? Are you thinking of your future husband? Father's offer that whoever strings the bow of Shiva shall become your lord is worthy of you. And the great God will take care of you. You know, father is going to propitiate Him today through a big *puja*. So be cheerful, Sita." "No, Urmila. You do not know anything. Father is preparing himself to meet the challenge of Sudhanva, the ruler of Sankasyapuri, who is threatening Mithila with death and destruction if I do not marry him. And the King Janaka is invoking Mahesa's grace, during the impending battle. Urmila, I can no longer be the cause of Videha's troubles. I want to put an end to my life." The nibbling deer cast its desperate glances at her and a sad smile forced itself on Sita's lips.

"Why do princes seek love through bloodshed? Sister, father will win. Let us examine that tender *kadali* (plantain) plant which was infested with pests yesterday."

Suddenly the blare of trumpets and the battle-cries were heard in the distance, and Sita and Urmila climbed the tallest tree in the garden to see what it was all about. Seized with a frenzy, the Four Arms of Janaka's forces—the chariot unit, the elephant corps, the cavalry and the infantry—were on the march at a terrific speed, while the women from the housetops strewed flowers along their path and sprinkled anointed water on them. In a moment the scene faded into clouds of dust, and Sita and Urmila returned to the plants deeply concerned about the outcome of what they had seen.

The King Janaka inflicted a crushing defeat on Sudhanva who was slain. Janaka nominated his cousin Kusadhwaja successor to Sudhanva with the approval of the sages and citiborate proclamation that he would gladly give away his daughter from the reign of terror which Sudhanva had perpetrated on them for many years. Now Janaka decided to perform a sacrifice to commemorate his victory. But before doing so, he repeated his offer to princes all over the world through an elaborate proclamation that he would gladly gave away his daughter in marriage to the noblest, bravest and strongest prince in the world and the only test of the suitor's qualities would be provided by the Lord Shiva's bow which the King of Videha had inherited from his ancestors. Whoever wielded it, Janaka announced, would win the hand of Sita. His message reached the ends of the earth, and an interminable procession of princes crowding the streets of Mithila became a regular sight, but

none of them dared even to touch the formidable bow, which appeared to rival the Himalayas in weight.

Meanwhile brisk preparations for the sacrifice were in progress. Invitations were sent out to all courts and hermitages. Princes and sages soon began to arrive in large numbers. Among them was the proud and powerful royal sage Viswamitra, accompanied by Rama and Lakshmana, the illustrious sons of the King Dasaratha of Ayodhya. Janaka accorded them a reception of unsurpassed regal splendour. "O Gracious Sage! I am sure the sacrifice you were to perform at your *ashram* went off well," said Janaka.

"Yes. These boys made it a success by slaying the demon Tadaka and by keeping a constant vigil at the *ashram* as I was in the midst of the oblations."

"Have you had a pleasant journey?"

"Yes. On the way, we spent a night with Sumati, the King of Vesali. Then we proceeded to Gautama's deserted *ashram*, as the time had come for his errant wife's deliverance. The moment Rama set foot on the stone, to which she had been reduced under Gautama's curse, she emerged from it, as fresh and beautiful as ever, and presently arrived Gautama from somewhere. He accepted Ahalya who had been thus purified by the touch of Rama. Now we are here—in Mithila—and Rama is ready to try his strength with the Lord Shiva's bow."

"He will succeed, if Sita is lucky," said Janaka. "For, great counsellor of the gods, what can please me more than to see my beloved daughter preside over an Ikshvaku home?"

* * *

The sacrifice was over, and Janaka impressed by the presence of an unprecedented number of princes announced that

he would give them a chance to wield the bow. An auspicious day was fixed for the purpose, and in the mean time every prince would, in his dreams, see himself crushed under the weight of the mighty bow. But when awake, he would regain his confidence in his victory.

One moonlit night, Sita and Urmila retired into the palace garden and squatted on a lawn covered with *mallika* flowers. "Sister, what will happen to me after your marriage? I cannot live without you," cried Urmila.

"Do not weep, my beloved Urmila. You will get over your present fondness for me when you are married."

"No, sister, I do not want marriage, if it means our separation. Can we not marry brothers so that we may continue to live together under the same roof?"

"It all depends on who strings the Lord Shiva's bow tomorrow. I hope it will not be Ravana, the doughty demon King of Lanka."

"In sheer physical strength, it is said, he has no equal in the world. Will not the wielding of this bow be child's play to one who has borne the mount Kailas on his back?"

"What do you think of the two Ayodhya princes—Rama and Lakshmana?"

"They look so sweet and slender and, beside the giant Ravana, they seem mere children."

"But figure is not an index of strength, Urmila. If Viswamitra wills, the princes are bound to win the ordeal. The powers of the great sage are unfathomable."

"Let us pray for their success. For my worry also will be over."

"But how can you presume that Lakshmana will marry you?"

"Do not tease me, sister," cried Urmila. "What is wrong with me? And why will Lakshmana refuse me?"

"He will not, my sweet sister," consoled Sita. "I shall plead for you, and to this day none of my requests has been turned down. Urmila, since morning, my right eye has been throbbing."

"A goddess is immune to omens."

"Now, do not try to flatter me."

As they were thus teasing each other, a maid-servant announced that the senior queen was waiting for them in their own apartment.

* * *

At last the auspicious day dawned. Janaka's court assembled. The royal contestants for the hand of Sita arrived one by one and were seated in order of precedence. The stately figure of Ravana dominated the perspective. Rama and Lakshmana, led by Viswamitra, entered, bowed to Janaka and took their seats. Overhead, in the inner apartments of the palace, women had gathered in large numbers to watch from the windows the mighty trial of strength. Sita was among them, too, holding a garland and trembling with excitement.

The massive iron case containing the great bow lay open in the centre of the hall. Janaka stood up and, saluting the august assembly, declared that whoever bent the bow would win the heart of Sita. He resumed his seat. Everybody hesitated to be the first to come forward. But there was a flutter. The suitors began to whisper to one another about the chances

of their success. "I am not afraid of this bow. It is just a piece of thread as far as I am concerned," said one complacently. "I have not only bent but broken many such rusty bows in my life," boasted another. "But do you realize that this one was once used by the Lord Shiva?" cautioned a third. "What does it matter? He must have thrown it away when it became useless," pooh-poohed a fourth. "What do I care for this bow? I have thrust my head into the mouths of many lions," bragged a fifth. "Either they are not lions or your head is no head," snubbed a sixth. "I was not keen on coming here," confessed a seventh. "I do not need another wife. But then it becomes a question of prestige, you see." "Who, do you think, will win?" challenged an eighth. "I want to bet. I have no other interest in this silly affair. Is any one prepared?" "Ravana," answered a ninth. "What is your stake? Mine is half my kingdom." "And you have lost it," asserted a tenth. "For I am going to be the winner." And he hurried to the bow, looked at it, perspired profusely and returned to his seat. He was followed by another prince, who repeated the former's performance. Others came in quick succession, but none of them could even move the mighty bow. Now it was the turn of Ravana. If he also failed, everybody mumbled, the bow should be returned to the Lord Shiva who should be asked to decide as to whom Sita should rightly belong. Chanting the name of the Lord Mahadev, Ravana took a deep breath, lifted the bow and prepared himself to string it, as the heart of Sita began to beat faster and faster and she felt a dismal abyss ahead of her. Lo! Ravana collapsed under the impact of the bow which nearly killed him. Extricating himself from it, he returned to his seat, greatly humiliated.

At last Rama appeared on the scene. Nobody took him seriously, not even the ladies on the balcony. But Sita said her silent prayers for his success. He made obeisance to the bow by touching it thrice and then lifted it with one hand, as it were a hollow wooden cape. Hardly did he pull the string when it snapped into two with the sound of a million peals of thunder and the distant rocks and ravines resounded. And flowers rained on him. Janaka rushed to him and embraced him. Viswamitra proudly patted him on the back. All the princes, led by Ravana, departed in consternation, swearing revenge.

"May I send word to your father, so that we can celebrate the marriage soon?" suggested Janaka. "If it pleases you," observed Rama, bowing to Viswamitra who said, "Be it so. And, Lakshmana, Urmila shall marry you." Lakshmana reverently acquiesced in the great sage's demand. Turning to Janaka, Rama humorously remarked, "I have two more brothers." "And we have consorts for them too—Mandavi and Sruthakirithi, the beautiful and virtuous daughters of my cousin Kusadhwaja."

Thus it all ended happily. But Sita's right eye did not stop throbbing.

K a v e r i

a n d

A g a s t y a

IN the shadow of the mighty Sahya mountains lay a string of hamlets, and on the slopes, an *ashram*, while the peak, untouched by mortal feet, remained the abode of the gods. When Nature was liberal, the youth of these villages was the proudest on earth. Glistening in the golden streaks of the dawn, like dainty ebony dolls, the maidens, with sickles in their hands, would walk with the abandon of rain-laden clouds. The young farmers, confident of the power of their ploughs, would defy the five elements. The adolescent artisans would aim their chisels and hammers at the heavens and challenge Brahma for a contest in creation. And every shepherd boy would flit about with the swagger of the Lord Krishna, while the merchant princes would show a naïve conceit and complacency, as though they were the sons of Kubera, the God of Wealth. Only the elders who had survived many famines and droughts silently invoked divine pardon. For they alone understood the message of the gods borne by the clouds.



The inmates of the *ashram*, however, lived in a different world. They had little interest in the vanities and struggles of the people below. The *munibalakas* (young hermits) were still in their teens and they had their eyes constantly fixed either on the *sastras* or on the skies. And their godly Gurudev forgave them their dreams.

It was their first holiday after many, many years. They squatted on a boulder and began to scan the skies which were heavily overcast. "Look!" exclaimed one of them.

"There goes a procession of flying elephants. Oh, it has already swollen to a range of floating mountains. No. Now it has assumed the uncouth form of a colossal giantess and is heading towards us." "I want to ask you all one question," said another. "Can you tell me why Gurudev has declared a holiday today?" Many and spontaneous were the answers.

"Because he believes that we have nearly finished with our studies."

"No, you have not even begun them. My answer is: Gurudev is expecting a visit from the king."

"No. He is himself going to be honoured at Court."

"Do you think Gurudev needs or cares for royal receptions? My reply to your question is simple. He considers us a nuisance, and wants to have a rest at least once in five years."

"No, that cannot be the answer, because Gurudev has never resented our ways."

"Surely, you know that he is not a complaining type. Thrown among us, has he not assumed the attitude of a martyr? Now, listen to me—all of you. This is the most auspicious day in our lives, because a goddess is going to be in our midst

soon. She revealed herself to Gurudev in a dream last night. Do you now realise why we are on holiday?"

Immediately, there was a flutter among them, and they pressed their companion to expatiate on his enigmatic prediction. But he would not. "I have said enough," he replied, "and the rest you will see for yourselves presently. In the meantime, let us seek shelter somewhere before the heavens leak. By the way, where is Agastya?"

"Where is Agastya?" they all repeated and began to examine one another's faces thoroughly. "He is not among us," they observed with an air of finality. "But where is he?"

"Can it be that he ran away in search of a bride?" queried a red-haired, squint-eyed lad from Kalinga whose nightmare had been the grammarian Panini.

"Do not be frivolous," rebuked the burly bully from Anga who forecast the descent of a goddess. "Frivolous! What do you mean?" demanded the Kalinga boy somewhat timidly.

But for the fear of the impending downpour, there would have been a serious altercation which might have even led to an exchange of blows. Fortunately, thunder and lightning intervened. The cloud in the enormous female form became blacker and heavier and swallowed up the sun. He never made his appearance again for the rest of the day and darkness reigned in his place. The boys' fright increased, moment by moment, and they secretly scolded themselves for having come so far away from the *ashram*. Fear had not only rendered them speechless but forged a strange unity and camaraderie among them. Soon the cloud became restless and moved faster and faster towards the young hermits with groans and growls, as though it were in labour. The young recluses desperately clung

to one another and closed their eyes and ears. They were now prepared for the deluge. From the villages below could be faintly heard a babel of frantic cries in which were mingled joy and sorrow, love and hatred, hope and despair. The birds, precariously poised in their flimsy nests, tossed in the gale, while the animals resignedly looked on. Mother Earth, it appeared, shirked her responsibility and was anxious to sink into the seven seas. Suddenly the cloud emitted a blinding flash of lightning and burst into a furious, frenzied downpour. Nothing else seemed real, but only for the moment. For presently a poignant paternal voice was heard from somewhere penetrating the peals of thunder. "Where are you? Is Agastya also with you? I am particularly worried about him. Are you all safe? Why did you not join me during my pilgrimage to the Sahyadri peak? Never mind, it was futile. But I want to take you home. Where can I find you? And where am I to seek my daughter? Do you hear me?"

"Yes, yes Gurudev," answered the brahmacharis. "Here we are—on the boulder just in front of the pipal tree where you performed the sacrifice last spring. And where are you? Agastya is not with us. He did not accompany us. Gurudev, come and join us. We shall all search for your daughter and Agastya."

"I am coming," cried the venerable sage who began to walk towards the boulder, somehow feeling his way.

Meanwhile the rain slowed down its tempo and Agastya, holding a beautiful female child in his hands, stumbled upon his fellow-pupils who looked at him with dazed eyes.

"Who is she?" they asked. "Gurudev's daughter," said

Agastya tersely. "Where did you find her?" This was their next question, to which his reply was a stern stare.

The moment their Gurudev arrived, Agastya bowed to him and handed over the baby to him.

"Where did you find my daughter, Agastya?" asked the saintly preceptor.

"Gurudev," replied Agastya, "I knew of your vision and I rushed to the pond behind the rock a few feet below the peak, as soon as I saw heavy cloud formations in the firmament. And with the very first rain-drop, I heard the cries of this child who lay floating on the pool."

"You are lucky, Agastya. You have discovered a goddess. From today you shall be her only companion. But never again take her to the site where you found her. The moment she sets foot there, she will be lost to us. By what name would you like to call her?"

"Kaveri," replied Agastya.

"Kaveri," repeated his Gurudev who kissed and fondled her. "You are," he said to her tenderly, "both my mother and daughter, and Agastya shall look after you during your sojourn at my *ashram*."

The rain stopped. The sky was clear but for a patch of pallid cloud which hovered over their heads. The hermits and Kaveri trekked back to the *ashram*.

* * *

One sunny spring morning, Kaveri, now grown into a maiden glowing with the lustre of lightning, was watering the *mallika* creeper, as Agastya was collecting sticks for the sacrificial fire. The curls on her forehead concealed her eyes which otherwise would have shamed the Sun God because of their

life-giving radiance. But Kaveri would caress the flowers and mumble something to them, as she emptied her pitcher of water beneath the creepers and plants. "Why do you quiver?" she would ask. "Why do you wither? Why do your petals fall off? I want you to enjoy perpetual youth and fragrance. Then you can defy the wind and the worm."

Turning to her, Agastya would say, "Kaveri, you can speak to the flowers!"

"Yes, I know their language, Agastya. I want to be with them for ever and with you too. Oh! You have done so much for me. But somehow I feel the time for my departure is approaching."

"I will not let you go. Kaveri, look at that lovely pair of pigeons. Nothing has ever succeeded in separating them. In the severest of storms and in the cruellest of droughts they manage to remain together protecting each other."

"Agastya, I need your protection. You are to me what the tree is to the creeper. Oh, why do I feel so helpless this morning? Agastya, I seem cast into a dark, loveless world," she cried. Consoling her, Agastya assured her, "The world cannot be dark and loveless with Kaveri and Agastya in it. But if some prince takes you away, what will you do?"

"His kingdom shall be drowned in my tears. How can you associate princes and palaces with me? Agastya, I somehow feel that you do not love me as intensely as I love you. Oh, you mean so much to me, and I nothing to you! Agastya, just touch me, and I shall shrink into a breath and dwell in your heart as the source of the smile in your eyes. O handsome hermit, I want to realise my nothingness in your arms. I want to tear open my heart and show you how I have enshrined you

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there ! Agastya, I feel like dancing with you on the edge of the cloud. 'What a wild dream !' you will say. But it is not so wild, Agastya."

Caressing her curls, he said softly: "Kaveri, I understand you and all the fears that you imagine. These are only natural where there is true love. But, let me assure you again, nothing shall separate us, my precious Kaveri."

"I always seem to feel some unseen footsteps behind me. Some strange, distant voices are constantly beckoning to me." She held fast to him. Wiping her tears with the petals of a lotus, he said, "Kaveri, I can certainly protect you from princes and mortals. But if the gods covet you! Perhaps, when I grow up, I shall do penance and recover you from them. No, Kaveri, pure and profound love such as ours knows no danger. It is time we returned to the *ashram* and allayed Gurudev's fears and anxieties. Also, he will have prepared his sacrificial altar by now, and he will be expecting you to light it."

As they reached the *ashram*, the *munibalakas* had got everything ready for their Gurudev's oblations. They would have rebuked Agastya for being late but for Kaveri's presence and his own intimidating look. They were mortally afraid of him, including the bully from Anga who, on many occasions, had his ears boxed by his formidable senior. Their Gurudev at the moment was in the midst of his *madhyanhikam* (Midday Meditation), but he could not help smiling graciously at Kaveri as if to enquire whether her favourite flowers were in full bloom.

"Yes, Gurudev, they are all right with your blessings." She set about making the necessary preparations for lighting the sacrificial fire.

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It was Kaveri's fifteenth birthday. After her bath she said her prayers and received blessings from her Gurudev and the *munibalakas*. But Agastya was not there, and she feared for him. Knowing her anxiety, the sage suggested that she seek his benediction also on the auspicious day. She first blushed and then bowed to him and went in search of Agastya.

He was found in an unlikely site—in the cool fragrant shade of the flowering trees. What was he doing there? Nobody could tell, because he was covered by the blossoms. Kaveri softly arrived behind him and amorously tickled him in the ear with the hem of her garb. "Oh, it is you," he said amusedly. "Kaveri, I am making this garland for you. This is my birthday present to you." She sat by his side, but he refused her offer of help in his pleasant preoccupation.

"Agastya," she began, "today I want to make you one request. Will you grant it?"

"It is granted, my dear Kaveri."

"I desire to spend some time with you in the idyllic setting near the peak. You say I was born there. I am anxious to see the place."

Agastya was stupefied. But exercising great restraint, he patted her on the cheek and said: "Kaveri, I can take you wherever you want to go. But there is nothing in the thick thorny wood, near the peak, and it is a long and steep climb. There are much better ways of spending your birthday."

"But I am curious to see the place where you first found me, and, remember, you have promised to take me there."

"All right," said he resignedly and rose, holding the half-strung garland. "Let us go."

He shed no tears, because his secret sadness was too intense for them; she thought that he was after all happy about their journey ahead.

Hardly had they walked a few steps when they saw in the distance the villagers surging towards the *ashram* screaming for rain. Their voices seemed familiar and intimate to Kaveri. She said: "Let us prevent them from disturbing the life at the *ashram*. Will you fetch them here? Perhaps we can satisfy their demands."

Agastya climbed a rock and from there beckoned to them at the top of his voice. They soon arrived there trembling with anger.

"Who are you?" asked Agastya.

"Who are we? Is not the answer written on our faces? This is the fifteenth drought in succession, and we can suffer it no longer."

"But hermits cannot help you," declared Agastya. "You must go to the king."

"No, he will not help us either. He is interested only in his taxes, and drought or no drought, he must collect them! Only you *rishis* can help us."

"But how?" asked Agastya.

"Now we need rain and you alone can induce it through penance. Our prayers to God have remained unanswered."

"We have no interest in mundane problems. We have renounced the world as you understand it. We can live on air."

"But then what can be the purpose of all your austerities? Do you want to ascend to Heaven? What is Heaven anyway? How can you live in a Heaven where there are only smiles and no

tears, only light and no darkness, only triumphs and no defeats ?
Of what use is your immortality when you are forgotten by us ?”

“We do not seek anything except peace and tranquillity.
We wish to be left alone.”

“Like the dead.”

“Whatever you may say, we are not prepared to meet your
sordid demands.”

At this stage, Kaveri, intervening, observed: “Agastya, can
you mention any *maharshi* in whom does not lurk at least one
mundane desire ? Are we not all drawn towards the earth—
the gods, the sages, the elements, the spirits. So is it not neces-
sary that the austerities of the *rishis* should have the sole pur-
pose of removing misery from the world ? There is no Heaven
or Hell other than the abode of mortals.”

At once the whole concourse exclaimed: “A goddess has
spoken !” . They prostrated themselves before her. She assured
them thus: “Now you should all go back to your villages. I
shall persuade my Gurudev to perform a big sacrifice to pro-
pitiate Varuna, the God of Rain.”

They bowed to her and, infused with new hopes, retraced
their steps.

“Now, Agastya, let us resume our journey,” suggested
Kaveri and he instinctively followed her instead of leading.
On the way they amused themselves with blossoms and butter-
flies. But Agastya found it very hard to hide the heaviness
of his heart. The peacock saw the clouds gathering in the
sky and at once spread his plumage and began to invite them.
It was the month of Sravan, and clouds could be easily sum-

moned. But they were all barren and there seemed to be a curse on the villages at the foot of the Sahyadri.

"Agastya, can we reach the peak? I really want to float on that grey cloud hovering over it."

He said nothing, because he knew that her strange desires would soon deprive him of her. But lest his silence be misconstrued, he smiled his assent.

At last, they arrived at the thick shrub a few feet below the summit. They sat there and looked at the sky which was suddenly overcast.

"Agastya, how enchanting! Why did you first hesitate to bring me here?"

"You insist on an answer? Listen. Here we are so near to Heaven and the gods may snatch you away from me, you see."

"I do not care for them, Agastya, so long as you love me. I am tired and thirsty. There seems to be a pond behind that rock over there. May I go there?"

"But see that your feet do not touch the water."

"Why not?"

"Lest you become a goddess."

"Oh, your old joke again," she smiled and ran towards the pool. As she drank water from it, he held her fast, and lo! she suddenly slipped into the pond, melted away into a furious torrent and surged forth with serpentine sweep and splendour, hugging to her bosom everything that came her way. He sat on the rock feeding her with his pent up tears and meanwhile there was a downpour from the heavens too. "Kaveri! Kaveri!" Agastya called out. But the only res-

ponse he received was a resonant rhythm in the current which seemed to say:

“Salutations to you, Agastya !”

“Salutations to you, Gurudev !”

Agastya looked at the half-finished garland in his hand, offered it to the stream, and rose to go. But before he departed, he made his last request to Kaveri: “Will you tell the world that my tears are all mingled in your waters and I have no more left to shed for its misery ? Will you. . .” He mumbled something, but it was lost in the patter of the rain.

The Birth of Krishna

THOSE were dark, dreadful days. It was truly an age of anxiety, much like our own. Sin and savagery reigned supreme, and the end of the world seemed in sight. Though the absence of modern inventions necessarily limited the scope for man's madness, and localized his adventures, they basically remained almost as murderous as their contemporary variations. The difference, however, lay in the weapon with which the victims armed themselves—Faith. They would not surrender it in the worst of crises. For they knew they would ultimately triumph, as their forefathers, similarly armed, had done in the past. The incarnations of the Lord Vishnu, after all, had no other purpose but to wipe out the wicked and redeem the righteous.

It was Vaikuntha, the heavenly abode of the Supreme Preceptor Vishnu. Reclining on the Seshha serpent, he was sedulously teasing his consort Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, amorously, softly stroking his tired feet. "Lakshmi," he said, who was



"you are not returning my sallies today. You are sullen. What is the matter? Oh, you fear I shall marry yet another wife in my next incarnation. It will not be one, but thousands and thousands and you will have to suffer me." But she did not say a word in reply. All that she could not help was a slight twitching of her lips. "No," continued he, "you cannot answer me with tears and sighs. My questions demand brains. Otherwise accept your defeat." Still she remained sad and silent. "I see," he declared, "you are defeated. But as victory over a woman's wits is no victory at all, I am prepared to withdraw all that I might have said to tax your limited intelligence, and let us be friends once again. Now, tell me, what is the cause of your secret sorrow?" "O Lord of Lords," she cried bitterly, "you know everything." She collapsed at his feet, bursting into tears. Pressing her to his side and patting her on the back, he consoled her thus: "Devi, yes, I can visualize Kamsa's blood-curdling reign of terror and I realize that the time for my descent to Earth has come. I am only awaiting your command, Lakshmi." She smiled.

* * *

Kamsa, the fiendish king of Mathurta, was the symbol of his times. Having wrested the throne from his venerable father, Ugrasena, he had crowned himself, while the old man had to rot in prison for the rest of his life. There was opposition to the usurper, but it melted away in the blood-bath that followed. The *ashrams* and homes were desecrated; the sages filled his prisons, and the housewives his palaces. His nobles and ministers became his mere shadows, and the *asuras* (demons), who were the diminutive versions of the modern nuclear weapons,

were the instruments of his will. He had no use for counselors; he needed only slaves. Everything in God's creation seemed to obey him. For even the defiant Yamuna had to give up the divine blue of her waters and assume a deathly purple to accommodate the blood spilt by him. So there was no room for love or light in his realm, except in prisons.

Another exception was provided by Devaki, Kamsa's beautiful and noble sister whose virtue and piety shielded him from the wrath of God. Kamsa and Devaki were extremely fond of each other. But she was too sweet and soft to have any decisive influence on his ways. "Devaki, you are a doll," he would say, whenever she tried to correct him, "and dolls should not talk."

One day he beckoned to her and made an important announcement: "My beloved sister, your infallible brother has found your future lord. His name is Vasudeva. He is worthy of you, even of the goddesses you keep worshipping all the time. Devaki, it is time you realized that you are greater than they and, with Vasudeva as your husband, you shall have no equal in all the Three Worlds."

"My redoubtable brother, I have never questioned your authority to take decisions on my behalf. But where a suitor for a girl's hand is concerned, no one, you will agree, can judge him better than she. I would, therefore, request you to give me a chance to see him, before we accept his proposal."

"All right. I am sure you will like him. I am anxious to celebrate your marriage before I launch my next *dandayatra* (Pilgrimage of Conquest)."

"*Dandayatra!* Is there still any kingdom left unconquered by you?"

“Yes, the Kingdom of God, as you may describe it. I will have no rest until I vanquish him.

* * *

That day Mathura itself was transformed into the Kingdom of God, because the marriage of Devaki to Vasudeva was in progress. There seemed to be a truce between Heaven and Kamsa’s Mathura. For the gods sang and danced and blessed, as Vasudeva and Devaki, hand in hand, paced the seven sacred steps around the fire. And Kamsa flattered himself with the thought that the divine participation in the wedding ceremonies was due to his own prowess and prestige. Splendid success attended the festivities and Kamsa was so excited about it that he offered to drive the bridal chariot himself the following day. “My mighty brother-in-law,” said Vasudeva, “we are greatly honoured by your generous gesture, and it augurs well for us.”

“What can please me more than to serve my only sister who is dearer to me than my own heart? Vasudeva, I am convinced that you represent the fulfilment of all her vows and austerities. Together you can meet any challenge in this or any other world. I wish you both all that man can achieve without the help of God, but under the benign guidance of a greater force—Kamsa. Now please tell Devaki to make the necessary arrangements for the journey.”

The next day, at an auspicious moment, Devaki and Vasudeva mounted the magnificently decorated bridal chariot, with Kamsa as the driver. He waved his whip at the horses which at once flew, as it were.

"You fool," thundered a voice from the heavens all of a sudden. "On whom are you lavishing your love? Do you realize that you are driving to your own grave? It is the will of God that you shall die at the hands of Devaki's eighth child." Was it the voice of some goddess, jealous of Devaki? wondered Kamsa. Whatever it might be, its portent was sinister, and he would take no chances. So he sprang from his seat and unsheathed his sword. He kicked out Devaki and Vasudeva and himself leapt forth after them with the fury of a serpent. Holding Devaki by her hair and flourishing his ever-hungry sword which had been accustomed to tasting innocent blood, he burst into a volley of abuse which he uttered for the first time, and which he had spared even the worst of his enemies. His mad rage reached its crescendo when he could only go on hysterically repeating. "You . . . you . . . you . . ." for want of words. His sword was about to cut Devaki to pieces when Vasudeva, intercepting him implored. "My powerful brother-in-law, be sensible, if you cannot be generous. How can you raise your sword on women? Surely you deserve foes worthy of your steel! You are already under the curse of the many mothers and children with whose blood you have swelled the waters of the Yamuna. So shed no more of it, lest you hasten your own doom. Moreover it is not Devaki, who shall slay you. It is one of her children and I beg of you to spare her own life in return for that of each of her issues." Accepting Vasudeva's suggestion, Kamsa addressed himself to his men thus: "We drive back to Mathura. Throw Devaki and Vasudeva into the filthiest and grimmest of our dungeons where they shall remain for the rest of their lives. Inform me the moment she gives birth to a child. And of course I need not remind you what punishment

awaits you when you are remiss in your duties. You may go now."

Devaki and Vasudeva thus had to set up their home behind the bars. They spent their time in prayer and meditation patiently putting up with the indignities meted out by the guards.

* * *

Years passed. Kamsa had already killed seven of his sister's children. But he became restless and unsure of himself as the day of the birth of the eighth approached. He would consult astrologers who assured him that he was immortal. He would increase the number of guards at the prison and order fresh rigors to be imposed on Devaki and Vasudeva. He would surround himself with musicians and dancers and try to drown his fears in all sorts of amusements. He would propitiate in a grand manner the spirits in which he believed. But still he knew no peace. Nightmares continued to torment his soul of which he now suddenly became aware.

One morning he summoned one of his uncles, a righteous and fearless old man in his eighties, and asked him: "Uncle, in another eight days from today, Devaki will perhaps give birth to the child who is predicted to be my destroyer. I want you to help me in belying this prophecy. If you cannot, I am sure you realize that you will die much sooner than I do."

"Death has no terror for me, my cruel, errant nephew," replied the old man, "even at the hands of a tyrant. As regards your impending doom, who can prevent it if, as you suggest, it is the will of God? I do not know how I can save

one life, even if it be that of the most diabolical despot on earth. If you think my death will bring you deliverance from the curse that is on you, I am prepared to face it cheerfully."

"Oh, stupid, insipid talk, as usual. It really matters little whether men such as you are dead or alive."

"If you ask me, I have an assurance for you. You will not die soon, since your sin is not ripe enough. So I suggest you go slow with it and thus prolong your own life."

"Sin ! What does it mean ? Is it sin for soldiers to wage wars, and win them ? Is it sin for a spirited, selfless young man to rescue his fellow-citizens from the impotent rule of an old idiot Is it sin for kings to crush opposition, so that they may serve their subjects in the best manner possible ? Is it sin for practical administrators to refuse to waste their precious lives in the pursuit of such wild illusions as God and Heaven ? Is it sin for princes to seek sensual pleasures of which your so-called Heaven, wherever it may be, must be reeking, I am sure ? Is it sin for statesmen to work for a new and virile social order capable of defending itself without the assistance of a supernatural force which does not exist ? Is it sin for Kshatriyas to aspire for more power and for greater and greater material success in all walks of life ?"

"I do not care for your questions which shall be answered in Heaven or Hell, wherever you happen to go ultimately. Now I await your punishment for speaking the truth."

"Get away, you conceited old fool. I have no use for you, and you shall be executed in the market-place today—before sunset. Get away, I say !"

It was *ashtami*, the eighth day, after the Sravan full-moon.
c₁ A cool and pleasant night, indeed, even for Devaki and Vasu-

deva who were admiring through the bars of the prison-doors the ecstasy of the Yamuna waves which were trying to reach the moon. The sentries were snoring. Exactly at midnight the Lord Vishnu revealed himself to Devaki and Vasudeva in his original form. Embodying the blue of the entire sky, and clad in red and yellow, with the Sun God himself serving as the halo around him, he appeared with four arms, each bearing his characteristic emblem. He spoke thus: "I am your eighth child. You will presently find me in Devaki's arms. Take me to the village of Gokul where Yasoda, the pious wife of a local chief, Nanda, has just given birth to a daughter. Replace her with me, and nothing shall bar my path. Be well with all !" He disappeared to emerge again as Devaki's eighth child, quietly asleep in her arms. As there was not a moment to lose, Vasudeva put the baby into a basket, and started on his journey to Gokul. The doors of the prison threw themselves open, the guards snored all the more and the Yamuna showed the way. It rained softly. But the Sesha serpent in his anxiety to serve his infant Master raised his enormous hood with a view to protecting the child from the fury of the elements. He accompanied the father and son till they reached Gokul, and then vanished into the void.

Before entering Nanda's house, Vasudeva kissed the child who had neither cried nor opened his eyes so far, which puzzled Vasudeva. He found himself in Yasoda's apartment. She was fast asleep with her infant daughter by her side. He quietly removed Yasoda's baby, left his own in her place, and retraced his steps.

When he returned to his cell in the prison, he found Devaki anxiously waiting for him with her gaze fixed towards

Gokul. She clasped Yasoda's baby warmly and kissed and hugged her with all the passion of a mother who had to sacrifice all her children the moment they were born.

The news of the birth of Devaki's eighth child reached Kamsa before daybreak, and he at once stormed into her cell. But he was intrigued to find a niece instead of a nephew lying by the side of his sister. As he did not want to take risks, he seized the baby and when he was about to strike her against the stone which had already licked the blood of Devaki's seven children, the infant flew from his hands, and soared higher and higher assuming the form of the fierce eight-armed Shakti (the Supreme Mother) who declared, "Kamsa, you cannot kill me. And the boy who shall destroy you is safe at Gokul." She disappeared, leaving Kamsa, Devaki and Vasudeva in a stupor. Bitterly frustrated, Kamsa kicked his sister and brother-in-law and, swearing to slay his enemy at Gokul, he returned to the palace.

* * *

With the dawn, Gokul and the neighbouring villages woke up to receive the happy tidings that Yasoda had given birth to a son, as blue as the sky and radiant like the sun. Men, women, children—all vied with one another to be the first to kiss him. And Yasoda's house became a veritable temple. The baby was passed from hand to hand and after everybody had finished with fondling and blessing him, he was put back in the cradle. Nanda and Yasoda, with the approval of the sage Garga, christened the boy "Krishna" ("Dark"). But he would not open his eyes or cry, and soon the women began to gossip. "I should not ask such a question

at this auspicious moment. But I cannot help it. Do you think he is alive ?” queried a schoolmistress from Brindavan. “Who knows the ways of God ?” declared the devout old mother of a carpenter. “How can you presume that this little lump of flesh is a god ? And, of all women, Yasoda to be his mother, just imagine !” pooh-poohed the proud wife of the local priest. “And look at her stupid faith. He does not show a single symptom of life, and she gives him a name !” rebuked Yasoda’s mother-in-law.

At last arrived Radha, Nanda’s sister. The women began to twitch their lips and whisper to one another all sorts of things, as she approached the cradle with folded hands and half-closed eyes. She bowed to the boy before taking him in her arms. And the moment she touched him, lo ! he opened his large, lustrous eyes and burst into loud, lusty cries.

Y a m a

a n d

M a r k a n d e y a

I T was the longest and severest penance ever performed on that steep, narrow precipice overlooking a bottomless gorge. This forbidding mountain retreat, with room hardly enough for three ascetics or two others, was much favoured by recluses who were in the last phase of their austerities. But whoever sat there in meditation never rose again, because it was the citadel of death, as it were. However, the hapless *rishis* who rolled headlong into the ravine below had the strange spiritual satisfaction that they were on their way to the Kingdom of God—strange because they seemed content, not with an ascent, but with a descent, and what a descent it was ! Thou none of thhem had survived, and it appeared Mrikandu and Marudwati also might join them any moment. Of course the aged hermit couple would rather perish praying for a son than live for ever without one. Many wild winters passed and to these succumbed nearly all life in muffled groans. But Mrikandu and Marudwati did not move. They met the challenge of the elements with the only weapon they had mastered—penance. Determined to emerge triumphantly from their rigors and austerities, they sat still



and serene in the posture of the Yogis, nonchalantly chanting hymns addressed to Mahesa, as hungry vultures hovered over them and restive jackals howled in the valey.

It was midnight and a wild storm broke out. Rocks, rivers and ravines—they all at once became its accomplices and began to spell ruin to everything that came their way. And the God of Death rejoiced that at last his moment had arrived, and he could strike the holy pair lost in contemplation. Perhaps he would, for the very mountain on the top of which they were sitting threatened to cave in. Suddenly a cloud roared and rumbled, and it was a thunder, the like of which Mrikandu and Marudwati had heard in none of the long and lurid succession of storms they had miraculously survived. They opened their eyes for the first time in many, many years, and lo ! Shiva himself was standing in front of them. They rose and prostrated themselves before him singing his glory.

“O noble and exalted couple,” began the Supreme Lord, “I am moved by the purity and intensity of your prayers addressed to me. Tell me, how can I reward your devotion adequately ?”

“We are not able to believe our own eyes and ears, Mahadeva,” replied Mrikandu. “There is no craving in our hearts, let me assure you. But, we implore you, be merciful and prevent damnation that awaits a couple who have no son.”

“Mrikandu, I appreciate your anxiety to see that your progeny continues. And I can bless you with, not one son, but a hundred, but you will not be proud of any one of them. Or do you want just one son, worthy of you and your great ancestors ? You may have him, but he shall die on his sixteenth birthday. Whom would you prefer ?”

"My Lord, what are we to do with a hundred sons ? We do not need them. If it pleases you, bless us with the only son. It does not matter how long he lives, if he lives in virtue."

"Your request is granted." A flash of lightning blinded Mrikandu and Marudwati but only momentarily and, when they opened their eyes again, the Supreme Lord of the Three Worlds had already vanished. Beaming with smiles of fulfilment, they trekked back to their *ashram*, where antelopes, in their own way, *had been at penance*. At once they greeted the holy couple by obstructing their path till Mrikandu and Marudwati smothered each one of the herd with kisses and caresses.

In course of time, Marudwati gave birth to a son, and people from far and near began to surge towards Mrikandu's *ashram*, as they had heard that the child was yet another form assumed by Shiva himself. And those who actually saw the baby felt that he was the reincarnation of, not just one god, but of all the thirty-three crore deities of the Vedic pantheon put together. "I am still thinking of his eyes," said one of his admirers. "Are they not like the sun and the moon?" "Oh, you should have seen his forehead!" exclaimed another. "It dazzles and overawes like Mahadev's Third Eye." "I wish the boy had brought Ganga also along with fire," observed a third. "Of course, he has. Did you not notice the tears he shed at the sight of the poor and the afflicted?" "Yes," echoed a fourth. "I am sure he will prove our saviour, as he grows up."

* * *

With due ceremony, Mrikandu named his son Markandeya, as the elders chanted the Vedic *mantras*, according to which he

was to live long in ever increasing glory and grandeur to the delight of mortals and to the envy of the gods. At a very early age began his passion for study which he gratified under the guidance of the seers. At five, he showed the mental maturity and receptivity of a boy thrice his age, and all the Vedas, Upanishads, and Sastras came to him naturally. They seemed familiar and intimate to him, as though he had already read them somewhere. Now he would emulate his parents by repeating the *mantras* after them, now he would collect a group of rustic urchins and try to impress on them the richness of the cultural heritage bequeathed by his great forbears, now he would make small images of the gods in clay and sing and dance around them, now he would seek in Nature living illustrations of what he had read in the scriptures, now he would thrill his preceptors by discoursing on the *sutras* which they had never taught him, now he would compose his own hymns in praise of God and sing them in the village temple with the melody of the Gandharvas and the fervour of the *rishis*. His precocity thus was phenomenal, and when he was twelve, his parents decided to perform his *Upanayanam* ("Sacred Thread Ceremony") so that he might assist them in their oblations.

The function was an occasion for great rejoicing at the *ashram* and the surrounding country-side. Simple peasants bought him presents of all sorts, which they considered precious. Some gave him cattle, others milk, honey and fruits, still others clothes, and a few, gold and silver. But none of his visitors approached him with empty hands, as if they were at a shrine. Markandeya, however, behaved as though his guests were the

gods. For he would reverently touch their offerings with his eyes, and return them politely saying, "You should not spoil ascetics with your gifts. You need them more than we do. So please accept them as my offerings. Of course, you deserve much else which no man can do without, and that is—education. And I shall see that it is not denied to you."

The part played by the *rishis* in the ritual was naturally significant. They bestowed their choicest blessings on him through the Vedic recitations. They invoked God's own gracious guidance during Markandeya's studies ahead, as there was now nothing that man could teach him. They propitiated the spirits and the five elements so that they might preserve him for many, many years to come. They sought their ancestors' benedictions too, for Markandeya was worthy of all the good that anybody would care to do to him.

The ceremony over, Markandeya at once set about the exacting duties of a *brahmachari*. But his perennial energy and enthusiasm made them seem lighter. As years passed, his parents began to lose interest in life. The mere thought of his sixteenth birthday chilled their spirits. They would be remiss in their oblations, would forget to feed the antelopes, observe fast more frequently and rigorously, keep awake by night and sleep by day, and neglect their duties towards their guests. Their condition had become a source of anxiety to Markandeya. But when he knew that he himself was the cause of it, he assured them thus, "My godly parents! Grieve not for me. Permit me to propitiate the Lord Shiva whose gift I am. I am confident that I shall return to the *ashram* and celebrate many, many

birthdays." "My son!" replied Mrikandu, "I admire your faith and fortitude. You may seek the protection of your Creator and our blessings are with you. How one reaches him we do not know, since each devotee follows his own path. But the learned such as you know all the roads leading to Heaven." "Father," replied Markandeya, "I have no desire to go to Heaven. I insist that the gods descend to Earth. So pray for my safe and early return, mother. Bless me, father." He prostrated himself before them. With their *asirvad*, he started on his pilgrimage without caring to decide what his destination should be.

At last Markandeya found himself on the shore of the southern sea. He made a *lingam* (the symbol of Shiva) with sand, and to him it assumed a benign living aspect because he believed in it. He concentrated all his worship on it. He would rise with the sun, bathe in the sacred sea waters, pluck flowers that should please Shiva, sit in front of the *lingam* and sing the praises of the Great Lord, strictly as stipulated in the scriptures. At last, he would dance round the *lingam* in sheer ecstasy. Senses ceased to make their demands on him. There was only one problem for him now and that was: How best to dedicate his learning to the service of God. What mattered most to him thus was the simple joy in his own faith.

* * *

It was his sixteenth birthday. He was absorbed in his mid-day meditation in front of the Shiva symbol. There was a sudden outburst of flame on the southern rim of the horizon and he felt its warmth. Yama, the God of Death, leapt forth from it and thundered his arrival. Markandeya

opened his eyes, and looking menacingly at Yama, demanded: "Who are you ? And why did you disturb me when I was in communion with the Lord Mahesa?" He hugged the *lingam* passionately.

"You impudent son of a beggarly Brahman," roared the God of Death with rage. "Do you realize that you have completed your allotted span of life ? I am Yama and have come to take away your soul with me. You may have scared away my attendants with your incantations. But you cannot resist me."

"Salutations to you, O Mighty God of Death! I cannot go with you, as I am yet to finish with my prayers. Perhaps you do not know that you have no power over those whose faith is firm and formidable, who have the blessings of the sages and who live in virtue. They transcend Fate, and do not touch them lest you yourself perish."

"I am not concerned with what you believe in or what you do not. I must perform my duty. That is all."

"And, you will agree, I must perform mine too."

"I have no time for disputations with you. Now down you drop dead." The moment Yama flung his noose at Markandeya, Shiva sprang from the *lingam* and kicked Yama on the chest. The Supreme Lord placed one hand on the head of his devotee while the trident in the other was pointed threateningly at Yama. Markandeya burst into an impassioned, magnificent panegyric, his own composition, singing the praises of his saviour, as Yama, with his noose in shreds and himself reeling under the heel of the Great Lord, fumbled his prayers, appealing for mercy.

Stroking Markandeya gently on the head, Shiva declared, "My son, your devotion remained steadfast even in the face of death. I am pleased to grant you endless life so that you may utilise your faith and wisdom for the benefit of humanity. Arise, my child, and go home."

"My Lord !" replied Markandeya. "I seek just one more favour, before I rejoin my parents. I beseech you to pardon Yama so that he may return to his kingdom and resume his duties, as justice demands."

Shiva smiled graciously at the God of Death and they both disappeared.

Devayani

and

Sarmishtha

THE Sun God had the worst rebuff that afternoon when he tried to take his revenge on the demons (*asuras*). When he shone on the dense forest skirting their capital, he became meanly aggressive. Even the tallest and thickest trees gave way, and his rude rays fell on a bevy of *asura* princesses who were amusing themselves with antelopes. Naturally, feeling limp and listless, they took off their clothes and jumped into a lotus-filled lake for a brisk swim. As the Sun was about to gloat over his success, an enormous monster of a cloud whisked him off, as it were, thus preserving the privacy of the girls.

Not all of them, however, were the daughters of the demons. For thrown among those magnificent, monolithic maidens was the slender, self-willed brahman girl, Devayani, who could take care of herself. They indulged themselves in pranks and pleasantries of all sorts. "Who is a god? I wish to meet him," said one of them, "just to see whether he can survive a slap from me." "I would not mind even marrying him," generously confessed another. "Shame on you," rebuked a third. "Perhaps,"



clarified a fourth, "she expects a sane, peace-loving progeny from such a wedlock." "Ah, these despicable gods, and their agents, the brahmans!" exclaimed Sarmishta, the daughter of the *asura* King Vrishaparva. "Let us not spoil our fun by mentioning them. Devayani, I wonder how you lost your head over that sly serpent, Kacha." "It is," retorted Devayani, "better to lose one's head over others than over oneself. Sarmishta, I am sure, you will fall by your pride." "Oh," pooh-poohed Sarmishta, "is it a curse or a compliment? I wish you would also cultivate a sense of pride. How foolish of me! I always forget that you are a brahman." "You also forget that you and your father are perpetually at the mercy of the brahmans," observed Devayani with dignity. "But, Sarmishta, we are here to play, and not to quarrel. So let us not, to repeat your own slogan, spoil our fun. But I do not know what you mean by fun. Do you find it in slighting the brahmans? For my part, I derive it from not merely tolerating the *asuras* but from trying to love them. We brahmans can afford to be generous."

Meanwhile, their garments on the bank had played hide and seek with a gale, and when Devayani returned there, she found them all mixed up. She was followed by Sarmishta who was also in a fix. In their anxiety to cover up their nudity, they wore each other's clothes, which provoked a sharp comment from Devayani, half in jest and half in earnest. "You must be feeling fine and exalted, in that clean garb of a brahman girl. My congratulations. Now let us disappear into the bush over there and dress ourselves properly." "Say it again!" thundered Sarmishta, trembling with rage. "I need not,"

observed Devayani nonchalantly. "Surely, you are not deaf." "What did you say?" demanded Sarmishta who went on hysterically thus: "Feeling fine and exalted in that clean garb of a brahman girl!..." Interrupting her royal companion, now roaring like a wounded lioness, Devayani remarked caustically, "You have an amazing memory." "You disgraceful destitute girl!" exploded Sarmishta. "Do you have the cheek to take liberties with a princess on whose charity you depend?" She slapped Devayani on the cheek severely and pushed her into a deep, waterless well nearby.

The other girls now joined Sarmishta who told them what had happened. Some sympathised with Devayani and the rest with Sarmishta; but they all shuddered at the mere thought of Vrishaparva's violent reactions when he knew that they did not side with his daughter. Presuming that Devayani must be dead by then, they returned to the capital.

The Sun having lost his face was no longer visible. And the moon was too soft and modest and would not dare to penetrate the jungle. So Devayani, left to darkness and to herself, did not know what to do. Now she would cry, now she would attempt to clamber, now she would just clasp the weeds in the well passionately telling herself that they were her only companions for the rest of her life, now she would chant the *mantras*, but suddenly realize how ineffectual they were. As she was thus struggling, the silence of the night was broken by the blare of trumpets which she at once identified as those of a hunting expedition. In the meantime she had succeeded in climbing to a position of advantage. Now she stretched her hands and screamed for help. Soon someone from above clasped her right

hand and dragged her out of the well. Bowing to him in gratitude, she said, "You have given me a fresh lease of life. May I know who you are?" "I am Yayati," he replied. "They address me as 'Your Majesty!' I happen to be the Emperor of Bharat."

"O Emperor Yayati! Do not tell me that you have not heard of Sukracharya, and I am his daughter. In your desperate attempt to help me out, you have committed a serious offence. Can you guess what it is?"

"Prostrations to you, revered child of a great sage! My mind is too dazed to comprehend what you say. But I beseech you to be merciful and to pardon me for my offence, whatever it may be, and however serious."

"You have held my right hand. Do you know what that means? You know nothing. I wonder who made you emperor. Perhaps you always have wise brahman counsellors around you. Listen, whoever clasps a virgin's right hand becomes her lord. So I am afraid you will have to marry me under any circumstances. I do not know how many wives you already have. Never mind, I can tackle them."

"O noble lady! You are a brahman and I am a mere kshatriya. How can we marry?"

"Yayati, you cannot flatter me with edifying epithets, such as 'noble' and 'revered'. Do you realize that, if you do not marry me, I shall go to Hell? And, if you marry me, perhaps, you will go to Hell; but even there you will have the privilege of being looked after by Devayani. So do not reject me. I assure you, I consider you worthy of me."

"A woman's purity must be preserved at any cost."

"That was my determination too, till you touched my sacred right hand. I agree that a man of an inferior caste should not marry a woman of a superior caste. But when he does, the bond becomes indissoluble, and it transcends all ethical injunctions."

"That is why I say we cannot marry."

"What you say is absurd, since both of us stand committed."

"Whatever you may say, I cannot marry you, and I have already told you why. Permit me to restore you to your father who must be pining for you, Devayani."

"Why not call me Devi for short, Yayati? My home is here now—in the wilderness. And my father will stop pining for me the moment he knows the truth about myself, the truth that only you and I know at present. Sarmishta threw me into a mere well; you have cast me into Hell."

"I am helpless, Devayani."

"You are, indeed, you are. But I know you shall marry me some day. You may go now."

"I do not know. Be well with you!" Thus leaving Devayani reluctantly to her own fate, Yayati and his retinue rode off and the darkness enveloped them.

* * *

Sukracharya, who had many, many anxious moments since his only child's departure, had sent a woman attendant in search of her, and now nervously prepared himself to receive the worst possible news about Devayani. At the moment the maid's return seemed to him more important than his own daughter's.

At last the servant came and bowed to him and remained silent. "Did you find her?" asked Sukracharya anxiously. She

would not say a word in reply. He implored her again and again to break the news, however bad it might be. And when he was about to touch her feet, she intercepted him bursting into tears. "My master," she addressed him in a tone quivering with emotion, "she has refused to return to the capital." "So she is safe somewhere," he declared in ecstasy. "Where is she? What is her grievance? Against whom? Will you take me to her? Who knows, she may refuse to see me! Tell me all about her."

"My revered master," she began to explain. "Devayani is in the north-west jungle." "No," he said interrupting her, "you need not describe her plight. I can visualize it. Take me to her."

Sukracharya, accompanied by his maid, rushed to the forest to meet Devayani who at the time was sitting under a big, burly banyan tree wrapped in her own dreams and fears. "My beloved child," cried Sukracharya, embracing her. "Father," she said, "there is no place for me in the kingdom of Vrishaparva. I have exiled myself from there." "What was the provocation?" demanded Sukracharya. "Who caused it?"

"Is it true that you and I depend for our existence on the charity doled out by Sarmishta's father? Why did you conceal this fact from me? Perhaps you feared that I might disown you."

"My beloved child, now I know who has insulted you. Sarmishta is a stupid, spoilt child. Why do you take her seriously?"

"You cannot imagine how murderous her stupidity is. Having heaped the worst of abuse on me, on you and all the

brahmans, having slapped me on the cheek with a severity of which only the demons are capable, she threw me into a well. I should have died there if the Emperor Yayati had not rescued me. Father, how do you expect me to see Sarmishta's face once again?" "Devayani, you seem to have learnt nothing from your father. You are angry. You are stubborn. You are vindictive. You have all the qualities of an *asura*, and none of a brahman."

"Oh, these brahmans! I do not know when they will learn to respect themselves. Why was I born among them?"

"Do you wish you were born an *asura*?"

"No, a kshatriya. Then I would have slaked my thirst with Sarmishta's blood. Father, please do not reject the kshatriyas, too. You have a habit of rejecting everybody except the brahmans. Ah, these brahmans! Perhaps Sarmishta was right about them."

"I do not reject anybody, for your sake. What do you demand now, my precious Devayani?"

"Revenge. This is the only remedy for Sarmishta's stupidity, and please warn her father—and your employer—that the day is not far off when his daughter shall become my slave."

"Devayani, I shall meet Vrishaparva presently and see that his daughter comes to her senses."

"How?"

"I shall tell him that he will have to choose between me and his daughter."

"Oh, my dear father! That is like you!" she prostrated herself before Sukracharya who blessed her, and leaving her there returned to the capital.

* * *

The next day, early in the morning, he hurried to the palace where Vrishaparva received him with the customary honour and ceremony. "Great and gracious *guru*," began the *asura* king, "I can predict, a resounding victory awaits me in the grim battle ahead. For yours is the first face I greet today."

"Good. But are you sure that you did not see your daughter before me? She forebodes evil. Avoid her." Vrishaparva was stupefied at Sukracharya's outburst. "I do not understand you," he said in all humility. "I hope she still enjoys your blessings."

"Blessings! What is their worth? Why does she need them, as long as she shares your glory? Vrishaparva, whenever I visited you unaccompanied by Devayani, you used to make anxious enquiries about her. But today you seem to have forgotten all about her."

"Pardon me my remissness, O Light of the Three Worlds! I am sure she is all right."

"Of course, she is not. She has banished herself from your realm. She is now in the wilderness, and naturally I cannot leave her alone. So I have decided to join her. You do not need the services of a beggarly brahman. You have your own power and prowess which can shake the Three Worlds to their foundations."

"My own power and prowess! Are they not your gifts? Without you, where are they? If you abandon me, I shall have no alternative but death, and at my own hands at that. But please tell me what has happened."

"Ask Sarmishta, and if she is not a liar, she will confess what she has done to Devayani. You say you cannot live with-

out me. But you know I cannot live without my daughter. What shall we do?"

"Can we persuade Devayani to pardon Sarmishta?"

"You are not likely to succeed where I have failed. So it is no use appealing for Devayani's mercy."

"Permit me to request her to suggest how best I can punish Sarmishta."

"Perhaps she herself would like to punish Sarmishta."

"Nothing would please me more than to get rid of my daughter, if she is the cause of our estrangement. Please postpone your decision to abandon me till we all make another approach to your worthy daughter. Of course, Sarmishta will be with us too, and she shall accept whatever terms Devayani will condescend to offer."

"I agree. The sooner we start, the better."

"Straightway. I must ask the charioteer and Sarmishta to get ready. I am grateful to you for your generous gesture to give my daughter a chance to make amends."

Vrishaparva, accompanied by Sukracharya and Sarmishta, drove fast to the banyan tree in the jungle, Devayani's temporary abode, and found her asleep. They waited till she woke up. And when she did, she looked triumphantly at Sarmishta whose face fell. "You thought," said Devayani, turning to Sarmishta, "I was dead." Intervening, Vrishaparva poignantly declared, "From today Sarmishta is dead, as far as I am concerned. No father will be proud of such a daughter. Devayani, you may inflict on her any punishment you like."

"Sarmishta, have you heard your father's words?" asked Devayani.

"Sister," cried Sarmishta, "forgive me."

"Yes," said Devayani sternly, "but on one condition—you shall serve me as an attendant when I set up my own home after marriage."

"That is a very mild punishment, and you have been generous to me, sister Devayani. I shall serve you as a maid most cheerfully." Sarmishta fell at Devayani's feet.

"Let us go home, father," said Devayani smiling at Sukracharya.

* * *

Meanwhile, Devayani had complained to her father that Yayati had clasped her right hand and refused to marry her. Sukracharya assured her that the great emperor of Bharat was destined to become her husband.

One day, after some years, Yayati and Devayani met again by accident. She reminded him that he had been shirking a great moral duty, and that this lapse on his part had tarred his reputation. Presently, Sukracharya also arrived and spoke to Yayati thus: "O mighty emperor! My daughter has told me on what grounds you have been refusing to marry her. These are no reasons at all—only pretexts—since the proposed marriage has not only my approval but my blessings too. So it is time you vindicated your own honour as well as that of my innocent daughter."

"Be it so, noble sage! What more do I desire if I have your benedictions?"

On an auspicious *muburtam* fixed by Sukracharya himself, the marriage of Devayani to Yayati was celebrated with regal pomp and splendour. As Devayani was about to mount her bridal chariot, Sarmishta arrived with a small baggage containing her personal effects, and knelt before Devayani. "Who is she?" asked Yayati. "What does she want?" Devayani did not reply; she only blushed. "Your Majesty," explained Sarmishta, "I am the Empress's personal attendant. I am here to report myself for duty." "I see," observed Yayati. "Do you know where to find a servant's carriage?"



The Fall of Nahusha

“**B**Y now, tell me, what would be our ruler’s reputation in Heaven?” queried a voice from the hysterically jubilant multitude surging towards Nahusha’s palace. The gates remained open, as usual, but his birthday being an occasion for national rejoicing, the fort had been magnificently decorated by every citizen who knew anything about an art or a craft. “There, in Heaven, they must be feeling jealous of him,” answered a retired soldier. “You know, he can defeat any combination of divine forces, if the battle is fairly fought.” “No,” asserted a pious third voice, “you know nothing about the *devas*. Nahusha needs their blessings. So let us speak well of the givers of our beloved monarch’s supremacy and splendour.” “Are you,” demanded a credulous fourth, “wiser than our *rishis* and *gurus* who have unanimously declared that the Emperor Nahusha is today the envy of all the gods—including the Trimurthis?” “I think you are right,” agreed a fifth. “For I hear his glory sung everywhere.”

Indeed everything in Creation seemed to chant Nahusha’s

name which could be heard in the rumble of the thunder, in the giggle of the mountain-stream, in the quivering of the flower and in the invocation of every living being. All the hermitages, temples and homes gave one the overwhelming impression of having been dedicated to his worship. Mothers named their children after him and maidens compared their lovers, not to the sun or to the moon, but to Nahusha. But how did he become such a legendary figure in his own lifetime? The secret lay in his dazzling career of conquest and consolidation, and, what was more, in his exemplary qualities of head and heart. He had no foes, and no person was too high or too low for him. Everybody was his equal, but when his patronage or protection was sought, he acted with the graciousness and generosity of the Lord Vishnu himself.

His subjects were dearer to him than his own children, and his realm was more than a mere extension of his home. He would inflict on himself the severest of austerities just to test his spiritual integrity, perform the most exacting of sacrifices to propitiate the gods and spirits of his choice and participate in the profoundest of literary discourses and discussions astounding the sages and scholars with his learning. His solicitude for the greatest good of his people resulted in the disappearance of crime, poverty, disease and squalor from his empire, where peace, prosperity and sublimity in all forms reigned supreme. It was thus a golden age at the zenith of its glory, and Bharat had never seemed nearer to Heaven.

But those were very bad days for the gods. Their king Indra had lost his throne because of his deadly, dastardly attack on Vritra, a heinous sin. Now in disgrace, he was spending his time in exile on the Manasarovar in the Himalayas. Out of

shame he had reduced himself to a mere atom, with the stem of a lotus as his dwelling. As he thus lay low, anarchy threatened to rend his former kingdom. So one day all the senior gods and sages met to discuss the question of succession. It was eventually decided that the crown should be offered to Nahusha who, they thought, had even a better reputation, as a ruler, than Indra. They elected a delegation of the elders who were requested to convey their proposal to Nahusha.

The Emperor of Bharat was discussing matters of state with his counsellors when the gods and *rishis* announced their arrival. He received them with befitting dignity and honour, and conducting the oldest and most venerable of them to the throne, sat at his feet. The purpose of their visit was revealed to him, and naturally he could not believe his own eyes and ears. Modestly declining their offer, he said, "My Lord ! I am your servant, and please permit me to continue as such, as I have no other ambition in life." "No," replied they, "you have earned the throne of Indraloka through your own unprecedented record of righteousness. No power shall prevent you from fulfilling the will of the gods." He went on remonstrating politely but firmly. "Nahusha, do you realize what it is to insult the gods ? For the first time, and perhaps for the last too, they have elected a mortal their ruler, and you have the cheek to flout their collective will ! You cannot perpetrate a greater profanity on them. We give you the last chance now. Do you accede to our request or not ? If you do, we shall all not only serve you as your counsellors but share our individual power and influence with you. Yama, for instance, shall make you immortal, Manmatha shall bestow on

you eternal youth and beauty and Ravi, perennial radiance, and the *saptarishis* shall address all their oblations to you."

"I do not know what to say," submitted Nahusha.

"We warn you, think well before you decline our offer."

"My Lords, as you command."

* * *

On an auspicious day, Nahusha was proclaimed king of the gods. As he had the protection of the Trimurthis, because of the splendid succession of his good deeds while on Earth, and as all the lesser deities had sacrificed part of their glory for his sake, he acquired an unassailable supremacy of which he became gradually conscious. He honestly believed that there was no power in the Three Worlds apart from his own, and he was proud that the pleasures of Indra's palace, which were now his, had come to him unasked, as though in reward for his long and intense waiting in Bharat. "What more can I achieve?" he asked himself. "Nothing," was his narcissistic reply. "What is the purpose of the super-abundance of luxury in which I find myself? It is here, certainly, not to be spurned."

Thus he slowly became a slave of his senses. Now he would summon Urvashi, Menaka, Tilottama and a multitude of junior *apsaras* and make love to them in public, now he would kick the Gandharvas and Kinnaras if their music bored him, now he would most irreverently stroke the beards of the *rishis*, now he would command Narada and Tumburu to sing his glory, now he would try to take liberties with the goddesses and the wives of the sages, now he would threaten to launch fantastic expeditions of conquest to Shiva's Kailasa, Vishnu's

Vaikuntha and Brahma's Satyaloka, now he would spit on Indra's image and insist on its removal, now he would make a bonfire of the *Vedas* and the *Sastras* saying that they were meant for the ignorant and not for him. The gods and the *rishis* had to suffer him because they themselves had elected him their ruler. They, however, realized that anarchy would have been better.

One day, Nahusha, seated in state on his throne, shouted at Manmatha thus: "You little rascal ! You have cheated me. Of what use, do you think, are my perennial youth and beauty, if I do not have a new woman every night ?" "No women here," correct the God of Love, "only goddesses." "Ah," grunted the tyrant. "I do not see any difference." "We do," retorted Manmatha. "*We do*," repeated Nahusha with a cynical, contemptuous drawl. "Listen. Ever since I was crowned king of the gods, I have had no access to Sachi. Does she realize who her present lord is ? Manmatha, you have been remiss in your duties. Tell me, where is she ? I must have her within a week from today." There was a flutter in the august assembly.

"Swerve not from the path of virtue and righteousness," they all cautioned him immediately, "which you used to follow so religiously while on earth." "Virtue and righteousness !" roared Nahusha with rage. "Not in the kingdom of the gods, do you understand ? What were you doing when Indra seduced the holy Ahalya, when he butchered in cold blood the sage Viswarupa lost in contemplation, when he treacherously slew Vritra ? Where was your moral code, then ? Where was your righteous horror ? I must teach Indra a lesson now,

if he is still alive. I must, I repeat, possess Sachi within a week. You may all go now."

Meanwhile Sachi Devi, the consort of Indra, had sought asylum in the house of the venerable Brihaspati, the high-priest of the gods. When she was told of Nahusha's evil intentions, she burst into tears. Consoling her, the sage said, "Indrani, continue your penance for Indra's return and all will end well." "That is all right, father. But the moment Nahusha touches me, I shall be no longer pure and my prayer will be futile. So please protect me from this filthy beast." "Believe me, my child, no one shall lay his hands on you. And as I can see clearly, Nahusha's end is drawing near. But you do not seem to realize that you are going to be the instrument of it. So face him cheerfully when he sends for you. When he approaches you amorously, just pity secretly and tell him to wait till you have finished with your penance. In the meantime we shall have decided how best to tackle him." Sachi Devi felt greatly reassured by Brihaspati's words of cheer and courage.

One morning she invoked the Goddess of Chastity who at once transported Indrani to Manasarovar. There Sachi Devi identified her lord, Indra. When she explained her plight to him he also advised her not to irritate Nahusha by refusing to see him. He asked her to return to Brihaspati's house immediately and prepare herself to be received by Nahusha.

Meanwhile the gods and the *rishis* in despair had fled to Vaikuntha and implored Vishnu to intervene and save them from the results of their own folly. "I have already ordained," assured the Supreme Lord, "that Sachi Devi shall be the cause of Nahusha's fall, and he shall meet her very soon. So go back

to Indraloka and put up with him a few more days. Be well with all !”

That was the day when Nahusha demanded a meeting with Sachi Devi. He would wait no longer, and he summoned Manmatha, Vasantha and Chandra and commanded them to fetch her to his apartment immediately.

Indrani was already anticipating an invitation from Nahusha. So when Manmatha, Vasantha and Chandra arrived with a message from him, she was not at all surprised. She smiled significantly and accompanied them. They left her outside Nahusha’s apartment and, convinced that she could take care of herself, they vanished.

Feeling Indrani’s presence, Nahusha was seized with animal lust and he rushed towards her with outstretched hands. When she threatened that the moment he touched her he would be reduced to ashes, he recoiled, knelt before her and began to woo her tenderly. “O Mighty King of the Gods,” she said suavely. “Perhaps I am already yours. So you need not fear me. But you must be patient for a little while. I do not know whether my husband is dead or alive.” “Oh, he is dead,” interrupted Nahusha. “If he is, as you say,” continued she, “there is no point in my prolonging my penance till his return. But let me conclude it with due ceremony, before you touch me.”

“When will you do so ?”

“On Friday next. And on the same day you can take me away to your palace and keep me there. I have one more request and I am sure you will grant it. You are greater than all the deities including the Trimurthis. But there are the

rishis, greater than the gods, and I presume you are greater than the *rishis* too. So I want you to meet me in a manner worthy of your supremacy. Can you, therefore, arrive at my abode in state, in a palanquin borne by the Seven Sages?"

"That is all? Oh, that is nothing. I can command not only the Seven Sages but Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesa to do anything for me."

"The Seven Sages will do for the present. So I shall be expecting you on Friday evening. Of course, you know where I live these days—at Brihaspati's humble home."

"Sachi, I am impressed by your affection and admiration for me. Let me thank you for suggesting a method by which I can demonstrate my supremacy over the Seven Sages. I shall be seeing you on Friday evening. You may go now." He sent her back with an escort. Hardly had she left when he summoned the Seven Sages and explained to them how he had decided to meet Sachi Devi on the following Friday evening. They were shocked to be told that they were to be his palanquin-bearers. "Nahusha, this is the limit," they said. "Who knows, he may not come back," observed the impulsive, irascible Agastya. "You impudent mendicants! I shall have none of your nonsense in future. Go and have proper rehearsal for your new duties. Get away."

It was Friday evening. The palanquin was huge and heavy, and the *saptarishis* nearly collapsed under its weight. But, inside, Nahusha, comfortably seated, was sporting with his moustache. Now he would flog his holy palanquin bearers as though they were beasts of burden, now he would flatter them, now he would throw away some of his superfluous ornaments

just to attract the attention of the passers-by, now he would lapse into silence and conjure up visions of his future happiness with Sachi Devi, now he would order the palanquin to be abruptly stopped and ask the *rishis* to pluck for him flowers from wayside plants, now he would sniff contemptuously and say what a foul and filthy place the kingdom of the gods was. The nearer his destination, the greater his excitement, and his mad lust overpowered him. At last, in a hurry to be in Sachi Devi's arms, he kicked Agastya, shouting: "Sarpa ! Sarpa !" ("Move on ! Move on !") At once Agastya toppled the palanquin and, trembling with rage, repeated the word, "Sarpa ! Sarpa !" (which also means "Serpent ! Serpent !"). And, in a twinkling, Nahusha fell headlong into a deep, densely-wooded ravine in the Himalayas, where he was immediately transformed into a python.

Meanwhile the other six sages, taking pity on Nahusha, reproved Agastya thus: "You have been too hasty. You know it was not Nahusha's fault. It was ours. We crowned him king of the gods. He was doing such good work as the monarch of Bharat, and we interrupted him. We shudder to think how Indra himself would misbehave if he were to become an earthly emperor. We are sure his ways would be much more wicked than Nahusha's in Indraloka."

"I am sorry for what has happened," replied Agastya. "But I cannot recall my curse."

"Curse is a precious weapon," they said to one another. "In the hands of irate *rishis* such as Agastya and Durvasa, it has become cheap and contemptible. Perhaps the day is not far off when they shall lose their mastery over it."

"I do not care for your threat. But I do appreciate your solicitude for Nahusha who was a veritable god among men, and I realize I was too harsh and hasty in condemning him to live on earth like a serpent. But I can soften my curse. He may be crawling in the wilderness, but he shall continue to use his intellect. And he shall resume his original human form, when he meets some one capable of satisfying him on problems of man's *Dharma*."

Nahusha's questions, however, remained unanswered for thousands of years.



Ganga

and

Santanu

SHE had already spent ten dark, dreary nights there without a single symptom of life and cheer around her except the gracious Ganga which flowed at her feet. She would wait no longer. But then what could she do? Nobody seemed to care for her. "Where am I to go from heré?" she asked herself. "I have never been in places such as this before, and the earth must be a strange planet indeed. Here even youth, beauty and love are not wanted, it appears. But am I still young and pretty and capable of loving, and being loved? I am not sure that the sage Vasishtha in his fury has not condemned me to ugliness and decay too. I know nothing except my own future, and it is going to be one of eternal misery and mourning. So I must be prepared for it."

As she was doodling in the sand, a dainty dove flew from somewhere and perched on her left shoulder. It was her first glimpse of love in a silent, unknown land where she thought everything was dead. Stroking the bird softly, she began to

scan its secret message. Suddenly she was disturbed by the harsh sound of the galloping hoofs and by the still harsher cacophony of human voices which she heard in the distance. "Oh, they are coming at last !" she said to herself. "So I am no better than a mere beast, the target of hunters !" The nearer the noises became, the rougher they sounded. Ignoring them, she went on amusing herself with her newly-found pet. All of a sudden, an arrow just missed it by a hair's breadth. Now she was convinced that she had been cast into a world of wanton destruction where the stronger preyed on the weaker, the armed, on the unarmed, the many, on the few. She would stay there no longer, she decided. But where could she go ? And how about Vasishtha's curse ? She burst into tears hugging the dove to her bosom. Lo, another arrow ! It fell at her feet and lay half-buried in the sand. Pulling it out she held it in her right hand and stood up proudly, ready to take up the challenge, as it were. Now she could see the cavalcade riding towards her. "Who is there ?" she shouted. "Oh, it is a sweet feminine voice !" came the reply. "Who are you ? We are defeated, and we surrender our bows and arrows to you. Pray, tell us who you are. You must be some goddess, we are sure." "Is this a ruse to capture my dove ?" she demanded. "Anyway I can concede that a solitary woman can defeat a mighty army. How absurd you men in love look !"

The party arrived. Their leader was Santanu, the king of Hastinapura, whose valour and virtue, beauty and brilliance, splendour and sanctity had inspired minstrels in the Three Worlds. Bowing to her, he introduced himself.

"Oh, you are Santanu !" she observed. "Your name sounds familiar. Where did I hear of you first ?"

"I do not know young lady. I have no recollection of my having ever seen you before. We could not have met, because you and I seem to belong to two different worlds. I make obeisance to your charm and comeliness the like of which I have never seen in my life."

"Not even in dreams !" she said in jest. "You must be a thoroughly boring, unimaginative type and your wife—or wives ?—must be feeling miserable, indeed. Anyway I am flattered to be told that I am beautiful. But, I repeat, I have heard of you before."

"I hope you have no prejudice against me on that account."

"I thought you were really worthy of your reputation. Are you not ashamed of parading your prowess before tiny birds and beasts ? Perhaps your army is good only at hunting and not at fighting."

"Is this all you heard about me and my army ? Now may I know who you are ?"

"I myself do not know who I am, I seem to belong to none and none to me. But I cherish my freedom and obscurity."

"You are telling a lie. No, you are not happy."

"Have you found happiness ?"

"No. I often ask myself: 'Am I not seeking it in killing ?' Can you give me the answer ?"

"Is it not obvious ? You need a woman who can wean you away from your diabolical diversion."

"Perhaps. But where can I find one worthy of me ?"

"Oh, how conceited ! Any woman is worthy of you, a congenital killer. It is a question of her choice, not yours."

Why are you wasting your time here ? Have you finished with your hunting ?”

“Yes, for ever.” He smiled at her seductively.

“Then why not go back to your capital ?”

“Not without the one whose very presence is a perennial source of happiness.”

“Oh, you are trying my own advice on me ! How could you ever think of keeping me without marrying me ? And you cannot marry me, because you do not know me.”

“I need not know you. But you must become my queen.”

“How absurd ! What do you see in me ?”

“It is something I have never seen in any other woman, and I cannot express it. Please do not reject me.”

“You seem to be a fool and I do not think I shall have the patience to suffer you after marriage.”

“All men are fools, and women are to blame. But we realize that you are not only the cause of our foolishness but the cure too. That is why I seek your hand.”

“I pity you.”

“I can predict, your pity will soon turn into passion.”

“Santanu, you are young and handsome. You rule a vast empire. You are descended of a most distinguished line of kings; one of them even ruled over the gods. And me ! You do not know who my parents are, where I come from, who I am, you know nothing about me. How can you marry me ? You will perhaps abandon me, when your subjects refuse to accept me as their queen. Then what will be my fate ?”

“You say I do not know you. But you do not know me

either, when you think I am just a slave to my senses and to my subjects. I am prepared to sacrifice anything for my ideals which I find personified in you. So please trust me, and I shall cheerfully accept whatever conditions you may impose on me to ensure your marital status."

"All right. Here they are. Neither you nor anybody else shall ever ask me about my identity or parentage. No one including yourself shall tell me what to do and what not to do, scold me or question my authority over you, or be wroth with me or ask me where I go and what I do. You shall never raise your hand against me. The moment you do any of these things or anybody else does, I am gone."

"I accept all your terms." Santanu pledged his word.

"I accept you," she said gracefully and coyly returned the arrow to him as if it were a symbol of love. The dove joyously flapped its wings. Trumpets were blown, drums beaten, and that was indeed the occasion for spontaneous rejoicing among the royal retinue. Led by Santanu and his bride, they all rode back to capital awakening the slumbering villages on the way with their lusty cries of victory. By the time they approached the city of Hastinapura, their number had swelled immeasurably, converting the hunting party into a merry, marriage procession.

* * *

For many years, Santanu and his wife lived happily. Though all the time he was anxious to know who his wife was, he would not commit the indiscretion of asking her about her antecedents. He also warned everybody not to be inquisitive about her. Gradually, however, he outgrew his curiosity

and reconciled himself to her mentally without any reservations.

It was a bright morning which seemed brighter to Santanu. For his wife had just borne him a son and it was indeed a great day in Santanu's life. At once the glad tidings spread all over the empire and everybody rejoiced with unprecedented gusto. But the joy of Santanu and his subjects was to be only momentary. For at midnight a ghastly tragedy happened. She took the baby in her arms, smiled at her husband and quietly walked out. He was stupefied, but he had to suffer silently for fear that he might lose her. He tried to follow her, but when she turned back and stared at him fiercely, he had to retrace his steps.

She walked towards the river all alone in the dead of night, kissing and fondling her infant son all the way. By the time she reached the bank of the Ganga, the sky had assumed a hideous aspect because of the cloud formations which looked like leprous patches. That was the moment when ghosts would grin, when Death would strike. For some time she amused herself with tossing her child in the air and, as it fell on the sand crying, she giggled. At last, she flung it into the raging river with all her force. She returned to the palace and began to console her husband who naturally felt greatly intrigued by her behaviour.

"Are you annoyed with me?" she asked him seductively.

"Oh no, my beloved queen," he said pressing her to his side. "Let us sleep now. You must be feeling tired."

The next morning the people insisted on seeing their infant prince. Santanu's answer was: "He is dead." No, they

were not satisfied with his cryptic reply. They demanded an explanation. But when they saw tears streaming down his coarse, manly cheeks, they left him alone.

In course of time, she gave birth to another son who shared the fate of the previous one. Another son after some years, yet another, a fourth, a fifth, a sixth, a seventh, and they all went the same way. Everybody began to abuse Santanu for having married a mad, bloodthirsty witch of an unknown, mysterious origin. The time for her separation from Santanu seemed to be drawing near, because he and his subjects lost their patience.

Meanwhile, her eighth child, also a son, was born. At midnight, as on the previous occasions, she took him in her arms and was about to set out on her fiendish errand, when Santanu held her back. Turning to him, she said : "Do you remember the pledge you gave me at the time of our marriage ?"

"Yes," replied he, "I do, and I mean to break it. Do not take away my son, you devil !"

"Oh, you are angry with me ! So we must part now ?"

"I do not care, but give me my child."

"No, not now. Do you still want to know who I am ? Santanu, do you realize how blessed you are ? Listen to my story. I am no other than the Goddess Ganga herself, and the eight sons I have borne you are all alive. There is no death for them, because they are the Vasus, the celestial attendants of Indra. The eldest of them, Prabhasa, who is in my arms, shall live on earth for many, many years as the symbol of the very best in man. But he shall spend his early childhood with me, since I cannot leave him at the mercy of fools like you.

You may be wondering why the Vasus were born to you and me. Let me explain. They stole Vasishtha's cow Nandini with her calf, and he condemned them to earthly life. But when they implored his forgiveness he softened his curse by adding that they would be released from their mortal bonds as soon as they were born. At about the same time I had also incurred the wrath of Vasishtha by dressing myself improperly in his presence. Thus I too happened to fall a victim to a similar curse from him. When the Vasus begged of me to be their mother during their brief sojourn on earth, I readily agreed." Having thus revealed her identity, Ganga vanished with her baby, leaving Santanu in a stupor.

Since Ganga's departure, Santanu had practically renounced the world. He now felt very lonely and miserable and gradually lost interest in matters of state, causing concern to those around him. If they advised him to marry again, he would ask: "Is there another Ganga?" Feeling remorse for having lost her through his own folly, he began to behave like a mad man.

* * *

Many, many years later, one sunny morning, Santanu, accompanied by his entourage, happened to pass by the site where he first met Ganga. He stopped for a while and stood still, as his tears fed a wild *mallika* creeper. The river was swelling and surging furiously and there was the imminent danger of her destroying everything that came her way. As he looked around lazily, he saw in the distance a boy, rivaling the sun in radiance, engaged in the amazing feat of raising a formidable dam of arrows across the river. Rubbing his eyes, Santanu asked his men. "Do you think a human being

is capable of achieving it? Let us meet that child. Who knows, he may be some god !”

When Santanu and his party approached the boy, he sprang to his feet, pulled out an arrow from his quiver and aimed it at them. Santanu smiled and raised his hands to suggest surrender. Suddenly Ganga rose from the river and spoke to the boy thus: “My precious Devavrata ! He is Santanu, your father. Salute him, my child.” Turning to Santanu, she said, “Now I can give you back your son. Devavrata has Parasurama’s skill in archery, Sukra’s proficiency in all the arts, crafts and sciences, and Brihaspati’s wisdom. As long as he lives on earth, he shall remain its supreme glory.” She disappeared.

Devavrata bowed to Santanu who took him in his arms and smothered him with kisses. The party returned to the capital, and on an auspicious day, with due ceremony, the prince was named heir-apparent.

Devavrata later became famous as Bhishma and shaped the destinies of many generations of heroes of the *Mahabharata*.

Indra

and

Ahalya

AHALYA, the consort of the sage Gautama, had many enemies because of her beauty. No woman either before or after had been prettier, and she was considered to be the Creator's first child. Indeed he must have concentrated all his skill on fashioning her, for she conformed to the highest conceptions of feminine form and grace. Everyone, naturally, predicted that she would have no peace. And she soon became the subject of envious and intrigue in the Three Worlds. Goddesses and nymphs were particularly envious of her.

One day, Indra taunted the Apsaras (the celestial courtesans) thus: "My highest homage is reserved for Ahalya."

"And we know," they retorted, "what you mean by homage where women are concerned. We are glad that she has attracted your attention. But please make sure that you do not perish while paying your *homage* to her."

"Oh," observed the King of the Gods, "you want her to



perish and not me ! How mean ! Of course, I should not expect you to be different."

"Please, please," interrupted Rambha, "Moralising ! Surely, not from you."

"What do you expect from me then ?"

"Not much, now that, as you say, you have reserved your homage for a miserable mendicant's wife. When are you meeting her ?"

"You seem to think I have designs on her. No, I simply worship her."

"Yes, we know when you worship a woman. Please let us have no moral pretensions. We are convinced that you are going to betray us and your credulous wife, Sachi Devi, in the pursuit of your mad designs on Ahalya."

"Why do you say it is mad to admire Ahalya ?"

"Is it not madness to keep thinking of someone who does not know you—someone who does not care for you even if she knows you ?"

Indra felt that his prestige was now at stake. "Ahalya's highest homage," he declared proudly, "is reserved for me, as mine is for her. You cannot imagine how flattered she feels to have won the admiration of the King of the Gods ?"

"Oh, no," they said giggling contemptuously, "you are deceiving yourself. Ahalya is not only the prettiest woman ever born but the haughtiest too. She would not care even for the Lord Vishnu. So be sensible and think no more of her. There is no possibility of your ever seeing her."

"You may be right, but I continue to admire her. I have no desire to meet her and your silly, cattish talk cannot tempt

me to commit the sacrilege of coveting her. Do you understand? You may all go now." The Apsaras bowed to him and departed sullenly. But they would, they decided, patiently wait for the day when they might take revenge on Ahalya. And that day could not be far off, when they had the support of all the goddesses who were also bent on punishing her for no fault of hers. But they realized that nothing could be done except through the instrumentality of Indra. Perhaps Chandra (the Moon) and Manmatha (the God of Love) would help them in persuading Indra to seduce Ahalya.

* * *

One night, Indra was relaxing in the Nandanavan, waiting for Sachi Devi to join him. But, instead of her, Chandra arrived and saluting him, said : "My Lord ! I have a feeling that you are not yourself these days. Perhaps I am wrong and all is well with you. You may correct me."

"You are right, Chandra. But I do not know the cause of my mental unrest."

"Perhaps I know it. Can it be Ahalya ?"

"I am not sure. But I am fond of her. The more I see her from here—"

"The more you desire her ?"

"I am not sure. I have great respect for her."

"You know, respect is much inferior to love, where women are concerned. One cannot therefore pay her a higher tribute than to lavish all one's love on her. Pardon me my impudence. Who knows the ways of women better than my Lord ?"

"Chandra, I know nothing about Ahalya. But somehow I cannot persuade myself to love her as you suggest."

"My Lord, permit me to say how little you actually care for her. You think you have great respect for her. But you have none, and she means just nothing to you. You do not even seem to desire to meet her in the flesh. Are you sure you are not afraid of Gautama's temper? Then please stop thinking of her."

"Chandra, I am not afraid of anything. And I cannot give up paying my homage to Ahalya."

"You cannot please her that way. What she expects from you is not empty adoration."

At this moment Manmatha also arrived and confirmed what Chandra had said. "Ahalya," observed the God of Love, "is quite conscious of her unsurpassed beauty and she does not want to waste it in the dreary sands of austerities. For her, therefore, no bliss can be greater than your kisses and caresses. So please do not hesitate to meet her in the flesh, my Lord. And you have it on the authority of the God of Love that she is now ready to throw herself into anybody's arms, because of her irrepressible passionate youth. My Lord, this is the right time, if you really love her."

"I do, I do. But still I cannot reconcile myself to the thought of seeking the fulfilment of my love in the manner you suggest. Anyway, indeed I must at least meet her and see how she takes me. But how about her husband?"

"I shall tackle him," assured Chandra.

"And I shall dwell in her secretly and persuade her to accept you the moment she sees you," assured Manmatha.

"But I cannot visit her as Indra. I must go in disguise."

"Yes, can you assume the form of Gautama?" enquired Chandra. "I will transform myself into a cock and crow exactly at midnight. Gautama will at once wake up thinking that it is the time for his morning oblations and go out for a bath in the river. Then you should disguise yourself as Gautama and enter his *ashram*. I assure you, Ahalya shall not suspect you."

"All right," agreed Indra. "Let us see how it works. There is no doubt that I am impatiently waiting for my meeting with Ahalya, just to tell her how much I admire her youth and beauty. But I do not know what is in store for all of us—including Ahalya. I really wish her well and we must ensure that nothing happens to her."

"My Lord, leave everything to us," said Chandra and Manmatha, "and all will end well." They departed at the sight of Sachi Devi who sat at the feet of her Lord, Indra.

He now began to imagine wildly his future happiness with Ahalya. But Sachi Devi had strange forebodings about what was going to happen. She cautioned him but he would not heed her warning. Encouraged by the assurances given by Chandra and Manmatha he naively anticipated Ahalya's enthusiastic response to his amorous advances. He scolded his consort whenever she tried to argue with him. She was among the few goddesses who were not jealous of Ahalya, because she realized how ephemeral merely physical charms are. Her piety, her devotion to her husband, her hospitality, her sense of right and wrong—these were the enduring traits in Ahalya's character that Sachi Devi admired most. She feared the worst for her husband

because of his foolish fondness for Ahalya who, she knew, was as pure as fire. He had often found himself in intractable situations for having defied her.

Gautama and Ahalya had been a devoted couple. She had been much misunderstood by the goddesses and the nymphs because of her matchless beauty, of which, however, she had no consciousness at all. Being the worthy wife of a great sage, she had greater interest in the affairs of the *ashram* than in anything else. Naturally, she all the time found herself preoccupied with this thing or that. For instance, she had to keep everything ready for his elaborate rituals. Then there was the constant stream of guests on whom she had to attend while Gautama was absorbed in meditation. The feeding time for the birds and the beasts around the *ashram* also claimed her affectionate services. Watering the plants was another exacting job. But everything she would set about doing most cheerfully and unselfconsciously.

But the gods went on wooing her surreptitiously, as it were. The Sun's rays would leave a scar on her lips. The Spring would fill the forest with colour and fragrance of all sorts and thus try to rouse erotic desires in her. The Moon would caress her cheeks softly and make her long for some tender, tangible touch. The Wind would constantly whisper something in her ear. But she would try to ignore them all by burying herself in work.

* * *

"Ahalya," said Gautama one bright morning, "you must be feeling miserable here. You should have been a goddess, my precious Ahalya."

"O Exalted One!" replied she, "I have no desire to be anything other than what I have been, and certainly not a goddess. Your happiness is my happiness, and therefore please tell me if you have ever felt uneasy on my account."

"Ahalya, I should not have spoken these words, I do not know how much I would have suffered, if I had no wife such as you. Without your devotion and services I would not have attained to my present spiritual stature, and Ahalya, believe me, you are greater than I am, because you have made my austerities and oblations possible. But I do not know how long we can live together happily and harmoniously. For I have a vague fear that soon someone may deprive me of your love and devotion. I do not know who it is going to be. It could be anybody—even one of the Trimurthis. You are so beautiful, you see." He caressed her curls.

"Do not have such fears, my lord," she said. "Nobody can separate us. For your faith in me and my love for you shall always keep us together."

"Ahalya, we can do nothing against the will of God, which seems to be all the more aggressive and formidable where women are concerned. Oh, why were you born so pretty! You have always put my austerities to the severest test possible."

"I do not seem to understand you this morning. I imagine your own intense love for me makes you fear the worst for me. But I am all right. It is getting late for your oblations. May I make the necessary arrangements? You had better feed the doves and deer in the mean time."

"As you command." He smiled and stroked her softly on the cheeks. But suddenly her right eye throbbed ominously.

She at once remembered the fears expressed by Gautama a little while ago. She could not guess what trouble lay ahead of her. What could it be? It could be anything because of her looks. But she would face it bravely, she decided. She rushed to the river and invoked the blessings of the five elements by chanting *mantras*.

By the time she returned to the *ashram*, Gautama had set the sacrificial altar to be lit by Ahalya. But, to his surprise, she hesitated to do so. "What is the matter with you? I cannot begin my oblations unless you light the *homam*."

"But, my lord, my right eye is still throbbing. How can I taint the sacrificial altar by touching it?"

"You taint nothing, Ahalya. Everything, even fire, becomes purer at your touch."

"No, you must forgive me today. I do not feel worthy of you. Now it seems to be my turn to hug all sorts of fears and anxieties. Perhaps they are imaginary. But I need a rest. May I relax for a little while? I am ashamed of not being able to assist you in your sacred duties this morning. I feel the earth is slipping from under my feet. I have never had such a feeling before, never. Perhaps I shall be all right if I lie down for some time." With the help of Gautama she withdrew herself into the interior of the *ashram* and collapsed on the hard wooden floor.

* * *

The *ashram* looked like a nuptial chamber that night. Flowers lay strewn in profusion all round. Bathed in the soft, silvery splendour of moonlight, their colour and fragrance seemed irresistible even to the austerest of the ascetics. Birds

and beasts amorously beckoned to their mates, who had been late in homecoming.

Exactly at midnight a cock crowed and at once there was a flutter among the birds which began to fly hither and thither. A strange, sinister orange glow seemed to emerge from the eastern horizon. The moon was fading, the flowers were joyously quivering and there was a rude, restless rustle in the foliage and a cool, crisp twang in the air. Gautama's sleep was disturbed. He sat up and, rubbing his eyes, searched for his *kamandal*. He would now get ready for his morning meditation. Meanwhile Ahalya also woke up and was surprised to learn that their day had already begun. "You are not feeling well," he pleaded with her. "Please stay in bed till I return from the river. Then I shall assist you in your ablutions before I sit for my prayer." She agreed and, stroking her gently on the head, he left for the river.

Indra was already at the *asbham* door, but he was invisible. The moment Gautama disappeared in the grey haze of the deceptive dawn, the King of the Gods assumed the form of the venerable sage and stepped in. He quietly slipped into Ahalya's bed and embraced her, while she was still asleep. Suddenly she turned round and opened her eyes. She coyly smiled, closed her eyes again and surrendered herself to him, drowsily muttering thus: "I am glad you are back so soon. It is just midnight now, I think, and we can still sleep for another four hours at least."

In the meantime, Gautama, having finished with his bath, was preparing himself to say his prayers to the Sun God. He selected a clean, quiet spot on the river-bed, sprinkled sacred

water on the sand, and spread his *krishnajin* (deer-skin). As he was about to meditate, he noticed a strange phenomenon. The birds were hurrying back to their nests, the lotus closed its petals, the moon emerged gloriously from somewhere, the eastern horizon became dark and distant once again and a strange sense of staleness and stillness was creeping in all round. "What does all this mean?" he wondered. "Nature's moods are mysterious indeed. Anyway let me wait for a little while and watch her closely. Whoever disturbed my sleep shall be punished."

He looked around and was intrigued to find the darkness deepening. Black monster clouds played hide and seek with the moon. Swarms of bees descended on a solitary flower and went on squeezing it. A gust of wind blew off the kingdom of the gods built with sand by the children of hermits, in the evening. An uprooted tree of thorns dashed mercilessly against a *mallika* creeper in full bloom. Boulders toppled and rolled aggressively on the delicate mountain-stream. A giant branch suddenly gave way and fell into the river along with the old monkey couple, entwined in each other's arms, who had made it their habitat. Every leaf in the forest looked like the tongue of Yama, the God of Death. It was these sights that irritated Gautama. Convinced that the dawn was still far behind, he picked up his *kamandal* and *krishnajin* and began to trek back to the *ashram*. Hardly had he walked a few steps when a big thorn challenged him, as it were. But he trampled it under his feet and resumed his journey, bleeding all the way. The nearer the precincts of the hermitage, the greater his solicitude for Ahalya because of what he had seen on the river-bank. He

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quicken his pace and followed short-cuts along dark, narrow, untrodden jungle paths.

* * *

At last, he reached the *ashram* and at once rushed in. But alas, he was shocked to find Ahalya in Indra's arms! In the presence of Gautama, the King of the Gods could not hide his identity. So he stood before the great sage in his original form and implored Gautama's forgiveness with folded hands. Ahalya was stupefied at what she saw—Indra beside her looking abjectly apologetic; her husband in front of her trembling with rage, and the whole universe covering itself with darkness as though averse to seeing her face. She fell at Gautama's feet and invoked his mercy. But, no, the offence committed by her against him was much too heinous, and there could be no pardon for her. She must prepare herself for whatever punishment he would inflict on her. He kicked her aside and, ignoring her for the moment, thundered at Indra thus: "Do you understand what you have done? No, you are too conceited and, morally, too depraved to judge your own actions."

Finding Indra in no mood to reply, Gautama continued: "You have nothing to say; you have never said anything worth saying, nor done anything worth doing. You are worse than a drone. Oh, I do not know when you will grow up. May your body, your only asset, be split into a thousand revoltingly uncouth, unseemly segments!" At once, Indra found himself disfigured and he now looked like an ugly, dripping net. He fell down unconscious.

Turning to Ahalya, Gautama began: "What did I tell you this morning? Indeed the time has come for our parting. I

must lose you. But I am not sorry. I am not concerned with the circumstances under which you violated the sanctity of our marriage. Perhaps you have been the victim of a wicked conspiracy in the Kingdom of the Gods. But you have to suffer the consequences." Interrupting him, Ahalya cried bitterly, clinging fast to his feet and spoke to him thus between the sobs: "My lord, forgive me. I was not at all a party to what had happened. Do not spurn me. I am still pure and I shall always remain so, because you are enshrined in my heart."

"You want me to forgive you!" replied Gautama. "But my conscience will not forgive me! And what will posterity say if I forgive you! You silly little girl! You do not realize that your conduct does not concern you and me alone; it concerns the Three Worlds. Forgiveness thus is not something that I can dole out for the mere asking of it. I have decided to discard you, like a stinking, soiled garment. Your protestations of purity can only amuse me." Instantly Ahalya wept all the more piteously, like a just-born baby with none to console it, and clasped his feet passionately as though nothing existed beyond them. Continuing sternly, Gautama declared: "Brahma has bestowed on you feminine charm and comeliness at their finest. But you have abused them. Perhaps it was his intention that you should fall by them. They are too precious and you do not deserve them any longer. I therefore condemn you to rot here in the form of a rock, so that you wreck no more marriages." Before his curse became effective, she implored him desperately to soften it at least, if he could not recall it. He graciously added: "You shall become pure once again when, thousands and thousands of years hence, the Supreme Lord Vishnu in the incarnation of Rama delivers you from my curse."

I may then rejoin you.” He sprinkled water on her and she was immediately transformed into a formless boulder.

Leaving her there to the fury of the elements and to the frolics of the hermit boys, he abandoned the *ashram* and retired into the Himalayas, a broken man. Now invisible and secure in the amorphous obscurity of a stone and immune to the envious eyes, Ahalya must have spent all her time in prayer and penance, for many millenniums.



The Birth of Karna

PRITHA was her earlier name. She was the daughter of Sura, the grand-father of Sri Krishna. She was renamed Kunti when she was adopted by Sura's cousin, Kuntibhoja, who had been childless.

Kūnti, naturally, became everybody's favourite. But she remained unspoilt because of her innate poise and dignity. Her only response to the doting of those around her was just a condescending smile suggesting that she was not a doll. She was, however, very sweet and pretty and her elders would treat her indulgently ignoring her superior airs. Her foster-father was particularly fond of her; in fact she was his eyes, ears, heart and he could not do without her even for a single moment. So, at ten, she had almost a motherly maturity of mind and tenderness of heart, preserving, of course, the essential innocence of her age. She would, for instance, accompany Kuntibhoja on his hunting expeditions. But as his men were about to hunt the dumb, defenceless deer, she would intercept them saying sternly: "No, you can kill them only after killing me." "The jungle

gradually assumed an altogether new meaning, as far as Kuntibhoja and his subjects were concerned. It was now the abode of God. "Father," Kunti would say, "God dwells among the weak. We must therefore worship them." Impressed by her idealism and wisdom, he would fondly believe that she was a veritable goddess on earth.

One day he received word from the sage Durvasa that the latter was on his way to Kuntibhoja's capital where he had decided to spend some time. The king became nervous because he did not know how to entertain the irascible hermit whom even Indra's hospitality might not satisfy. Kuntibhoja consulted his counsellors who were equally nervous. They could not even think. For they made the stupid suggestion that Durvasa be requested to drop their city from his itinerary. If Kuntibhoja had followed the advice of these wiseacres, he would have found himself reduced to the lowest of the lowly under the irate sage's curse. He told them. "You are already thoroughly demoralized. Let me consult Kunti. If she also cannot guide me now, no one else can. Bring her here." He thus used his ministers as mere messengers. They naturally resented the confidence he had reposed in the ten year old child. But as their minds at the moment best to avenge her. On the contrary, they would never concede that—but they flattered themselves that instinct might succeed where intellect has failed ! They approached her and made obeisance to her. Feeling much embarrassed, she said: "Please never bow to me again. I am as young as your grand-daughter. You are all venerable old men and I need, not your salutations, but your benedictions. Have you forgotten, what the seers have said? No, it does not augur well

for youngsters if elders salute them. Now please tell me what brings you here. I am sure father is all right”.

“No,” was their clumsy reply. “At the moment,” they continued, “he has the worst worry on his mind. And the cause of it is Durvasa Mahamuni’s forthcoming visit to our capital.” “But what is so disquieting about it?” demanded Kunti. “Should we not rejoice over the great sage’s decision to spend some time in our midst? I fail to understand your panic.”

“We may be looking silly, and ludicrous. Perhaps we are. But you do not have our problems, you see. You do not seem to realize what reputation the great sage has in the Three Worlds. You are very young and you cannot be expected to know everything. But your father thinks you are wisdom personified. He has sent for you in the hope that you will be able to tell us how best to receive the son of Atri.”

“Oh, that is the purpose of your visit!”

With the arrival of Kunti, her foster-father felt greatly relieved. “Father,” she began, “I am surprised that you should be feeling sad and shaky, when you are truly the happiest and proudest man on earth. It is not every city that Durvasa visits and when he desires to be in our midst that is the highest honour he can do us. So let us welcome him enthusiastically.”

“That is all right, my child,” agreed Kuntibhoja. “But we never know when he honours us and when he reduces us to ashes. Even the gods are afraid of his temper. So my problem is, not whether to entertain him at all, but how. If something goes amiss in the courtesies he rightly expects from us, we are all doomed.”

“Please permit me to serve him. I am confident that my sense of duty and dedication will endear me to the Maharshi.”

"As you please, Kunti." Meanwhile he began to conjure up dreadful visions of those who in the past had been the victims of Durvasa's wrath in their very well-meaning attempts to attend on him as best they could. Kunti said cheerfully: "Father, have no fear on my account. I hope he will accept me. I feel I already understand his temperament and I can adjust myself to it."

"God be with you, my precious child!" he blessed her.

Kunti's composure in a crisis was admirable indeed. Her hasty decision to attend on Durvasa without knowing her limitations was just foolhardiness, her friends rebuked her, and she was bound to pay dearly for it.

In the meantime the news that Durvasa was already on the outskirts of the city reached the king, who immediately rushed forth to receive him. Durvasa was alone, contrary to what Kuntibhoja had expected earlier. "O illustrious son of Atri," said the King, welcoming the sage. "We are honoured by your visit."

Kuntibhoja was shivering all the time. He could only mumble a few words to the effect such as: "I hope you will enjoy your stay in my capital. My only child, Kunti, shall be at your service."

Presently Kunti also arrived and prostrated herself before Durvasa. Introducing her to the sage, Kuntibhoja who, in her presence, had regained his self-confidence, observed: "Mahamuni, this is my daughter, Kunti. I hope she will give you no cause for complaint. Though only ten, she is very intelligent, obedient and patient."

"Oh, how vulgar of you," exclaimed Durvasa, "to go on flattering your own daughter shamelessly! I have no patience

with insolent fools like you. So be brief and tell me where I am to stay. And if your kingdom is devoid of persons worthy of serving me, other than a mere child, I shall have no option but to accept her.”

* * *

That was the third day of Durvasa's stay in Kuntibhoja's capital. Kunti had been serving the sage with a devotion the like of which he had never experienced before. He would ask her to wake up with the dawn song and make elaborate arrangements for his morning meditation. After she had done so, he would tell her that he had changed his mind. One day he would inform her that he was going to a neighbouring town and that he might not return for the night. But he would be back almost immediately, not alone but with an army of hungry, naughty urchins and tell her to feed them all sumptuously. On another day, he would insist on her entertaining him with songs. And when she did, he would remind her that it was sacriligious to introduce him to a sensuous pleasure such as music. Now he would announce that he had decided to leave the city for good and make her carry his personal effects on her tender shoulders for miles and miles, now he would suddenly declare that he had changed his mind and that he would like to spend some more days in her father's realm, and they would thus trek back all the way. Durvasa's admiration for little Kunti increased day by day, because she would never fail in her duties. The more exacting his demands, the greater her enthusiasm for meeting them and in an exemplary manner at that. It appeared as though he had been sadistically testing her devotion and dutifulness. But, no, he had been just whimsical as usual, without any consideration for her tender age or royal status. Dur-

vasa had already stayed as Kuntibhoja's guest for nearly a year. But there seemed to be no prospect of his leaving at all, though none dared to discuss the question. But everybody pitied poor Kunti.

One morning, Durvasa spoke to her tenderly thus : "My child, you have made every minute of my stay in your father's capital most pleasurable and unforgettable. But we sages are not accustomed to a life of ease and enjoyment. So I am afraid I must take leave of you now. Please forgive me for the rigours you had to suffer on my account and, for the sake of your future happiness, please forget all about them. Now I want to grant you whatever boon you will care to ask for." Overwhelmed by joy, Kunti made obeisance to him and said: "Mahamuni, I have no ambition in life. I am, however, flattered by your gracious promise to grant me a boon. I seek none. My opportunity to serve you all these days was a reward in itself, and I shall always cherish my memories of it."

"No, my precious child, you cannot say you do not desire anything. You are only ten and you have a whole lifetime before you. So do not talk like an old recluse. Perhaps you are too shy to share your secret desires with me. But I can fathom them. A woman's true happiness lies among her children. May all the mothers in the world envy you when your future sons become the greatest heroes ever born ! Let me teach you a *mantra* by chanting which you can summon any god you like and ask him to bless you with a son embodying his own divine power, prowess and personality." He beckoned to her to his side and whispered a *Vedic* incantation in her ear. "But do not abuse it," he cautioned her. "It is too precious. I have confidence in your sense of propriety. Of course, you will in-

vite me to your marriage and entertain me sumptuously! I assure you, I shall not tease you on that occasion. God be with you, my child." He stroked her softly on the head as she knelt before him, and disappeared.

* * *

Long after Durvasa's departure, one fine morning, Kunti and her companions were playing in the garden. The general suspicion had been that she was in possession of something very precious which she would hide from everybody—even from her foster-father. Now, therefore, her companions had an opportunity to tease her. "What secret treasure have you landed?" they would ask inquisitively. "Oh," she would pooh-pooh coyly, "there is no secrecy about it. It is the birthright of every woman, you see."

"You mean you have chosen your future lord?"

"I mean nothing of the sort. Let us talk of something else."

"No," they persisted. "What is 'woman's birthright'? You must explain the phrase."

"I will, I will, but not today. You shall know all about it on an auspicious day." "Say, tomorrow," squealed Malati, the simple daughter of the Senani (Commander-in-Chief), while her companions rebuked her severely for her naive credulity.

"Yes, I promise," said Kunti, heaving a sigh of relief. "Who is your favourite god, Malati? Mine is the Sun."

"Sister, why are you fond of him?" asked Malati innocently. "Does he not burn everything that comes his way? At the moment, he is scorching my neck. I like the Moon."

"No god is greater than the Sun. Everything at his touch springs to life. He sets the tone for all Creation! Now you

understand why Death generally strikes by night. I wish I could meet the Sun in the flesh. I am curious to see how he looks." "Who told you that he exists in the flesh?" was the query of Sumati, the pompous niece of the palace priest. "He is just a ball of fire. So, you see, he depends on Agni for his power. For my part, I am fond of Indra because he presides over the firmament. To be precise, it is he who tames the Sun."

"There is," said Anuradha, the flippant sister of the court-jester, "another reason for Sumati's interest in Indra. But I thought she was too young to emulate Ahalya!"

Their gossip was cut short by the arrival of the king's messenger who announced that her father desired to see Kunti immediately. Excusing herself, she rushed back to the palace where she found an august assembly of the elders discussing the question of her *swayamvara*.

* * *

It was Kunti's birthday and the promise of a bright, sunny morning was in evidence everywhere. The sky was clear, the air crisp, and everything on earth, clean and calm. The grey haze of twilight, however, still lingered in the east, but the golden gleam of the dawn might swallow it up any moment.

Kunti had already reached the Ganga where she wanted to bathe and say her prayers to the Sun God. She wanted him to be the first to greet her that day. She was, therefore, in a hurry to have her sacred bath before he looked at her. She removed her clothes and stood in the water bowing to the Ganga, as a gust of wind and a wicked wave conspired to drag her deeper into the river. Now she began to swim about with great gusto. Meanwhile the eastern horizon emitted a faint orange glow which changed the colour of her

face and the Ganga too. She chanted the *mantras* invoking the gods' blessings. Her birthday seemed to be the occasion for universal rejoicing. For the waves roared their homage to her. The birds brought flowers from somewhere, showered them on her, twittered something and flew away. The sky showed its joy through the stars which just twinkled at her and faded in the emerging splendour of the Sun God. And now it was his turn to pay her his tribute. He appeared first like a golden rim, and then gradually developed into something which reminded her of some familiar face. Whose was it? Kuntibhoja's? No, he had been a late riser all his his life and when he woke up, long after sunrise, his face was dull and drowsy like twilight. It was inconceivable that Kuntibhaja could ever be associated with the radiance of the Sun. Then whose face was she thinking of at the moment? Oh, yes, it was Durvas's. And at the thought of him she instinctively repeated, just in jest, the mantra he had taught her. And lo, the Sun had already disappeared into darkness. Presently she saw an irresistible male form rise from the river and approach her. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"You know me, Kunti." He smiled. "You have always dreamt of me. You keep telling your friends that I am your favourite deity."

"My Lord! Are you the Sun God?"

"Yes, the life-giving Sun God. As ordained by the sage Durvasa, you shall bear me a son."

"But I am a *kanya*. Please leave me alone." She cried bitterly.

"You foolish girl! Why did you chant the *mantra* without preparing yourself for the consequences? Do you want

me to destroy you and all those who are dear to you, including Durvasa ? He should have thought twice before sharing his power with a silly, little girl."

"Please do not destroy anyone. The fault is mine and I must pay for it. The price is my honour !"

"No, I am not demanding it. I am here only because you invoked me. Of course, I can understand your childish curiosity to test the efficacy of Durvasa's *mantra*. But you should have taken it for granted. I have no time to lose. The world will be dead without me. So release me soon. Out of pity for your age and respect for your virginity, I grant you one favour and that is : May your honour remain unsullied even after you become a mother by me !" At once the darkness deepened and enveloped them both : nothing was visible.

Soon the sun began to shine again benignly on the world. His rays fell particularly softly on the infant son crying in Kunti's arms. Born with the Sun's own ear-rings and armour on, the baby was impatient to assert his supermacy in the world, as it were. But his embarrassed mother was anxious to hide him. When she looked around, she found a large exquisitely carved wooden case mysteriously floating on the river. She seized it, and piteously sobbing, slipped the child softly into it, and, kissing for the last time, consigned it to the waves again. It drifted along, as she stood staring at it with tearful eyes. As it gradually disappeared from her view, she collapsed on the river-bed and began to cry her heart out.

* * *

After some days, an intriguing report reached Dhritarashtra, the King of Hastinapura. It concerned his charioteer,

Atiratha, who had been childless. The messengers said : “Your Majesty, a little god is now growing up in Atiratha’s house. The charioteer claims that the boy is the gift of the Ganga.”

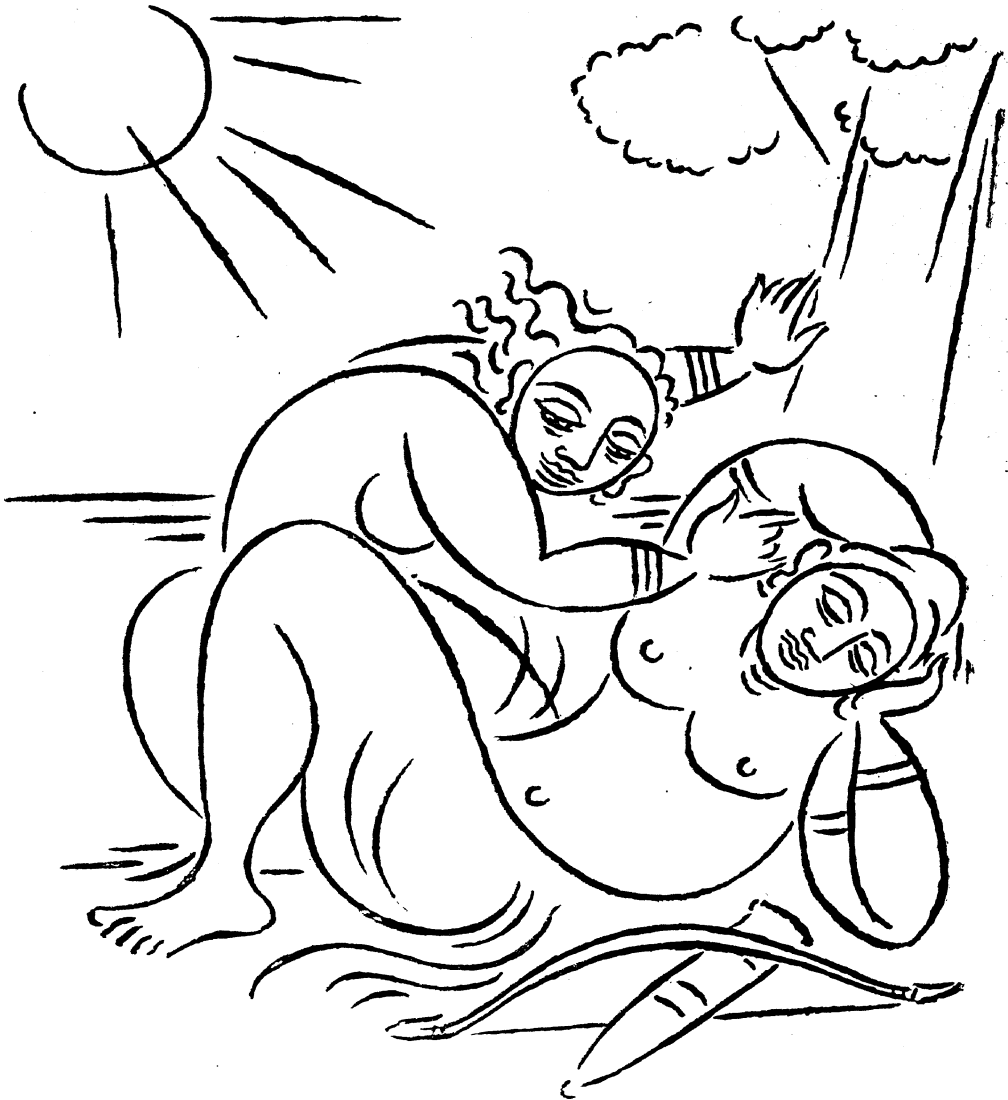
T a p a t i

a n d

S a m v a r a n a

SAMVARANA saw no end of his misery yet. On the contrary, he felt convinced that he must prepare himself resignedly to die in sorrow and solitude. Of course his loyal prime minister, who Samvarana thought had no other merit, had been with him throughout his exile. But Samvarana had no use for decrepit, old companions, however faithful they might be. So he always preferred to be left to himself.

There was something of which God did not deprive Samvarana and that was his matchless beauty. In one of his rare, expansive moods he would flatter himself thus : "Perhaps some goddess will fall in love with me, and with her help I may regain my throne. I see no other prospect of my returning to Hastinapura. Is there any goddess who can resist me ? I shall not be surprised if some day my looks upset the kingdom of the gods. I am waiting for the day. But at the moment, I need, not a goddess, but some beast, any beast. I am hungry." Was it a jungle of the dead ? He had seen no symptoms of life



there. He had had no opportunity of using his bow and arrows at all. He was too tired and hungry to walk any further. So he squatted on a boulder under a giant banyan tree and felt like eating dust and leaves. But out of sheer fatigue he soon fell asleep.

In another part of the jungle, a maiden, by her mere presence, had dispelled gloom and grimness. Everything around her seemed to pay her homage. As she flitted about, the waterfall rambled with the resonance of a Vedic recitation, while the butterfly, the peacock, the rainbow and the flower provided a feast of colour. But who was she? No one knew her, though every leaf, pebble and insect could tell who she was. Not that she had been deliberately avoiding contact with men. She just had never met them. That was all. She never went out of her way to meet them, though her father had been deeply concerned about finding a suitable husband for her. If she herself chose her lord, her father naturally would feel greatly relieved. But she had no faith in her judgment, and her interests were safe in his hands. She was also scared of the pitfalls of youth, and she was determined to avoid them. Being thus extremely cautious and conservative, she placed implicit faith in the sagacity of her father. She, therefore, gave no thought to the question of her marriage.

Her wanderings brought her to the spot where Samvarana lay unconscious. She had thus her first glimpse of man. She did not know what to say to him. But before saying anything, she wanted to make sure that he was alive. She took a tender twig and caressed his face with it. But he did not respond.

She brought water from the nearest pond and sprinkled it on his face. He did not stir. She tickled his eyelashes with the edge of her garment. At last his first symptom of life, a smile, flickered on his lips. Now she began to feel uneasy ; for she found herself with a stranger ! Meanwhile he opened his eyes mumbling : "Who are you ? Where am I ?" She would have ignored him and gone her way. But having brought him back to life, she did not like to abandon him in his miserable state. So she softly replied : "I am the daughter of the Sun God. They call me Tapati. Never mind where you are. It is all the same in this jungle. But I can assist you, if you want to escape from here. This is no place for people like you."

"People like me ! What do you mean ? Do you know who I am ?"

"No. Nor have I any intention of gathering information about stranded strangers." She added, smiling : "However handsome they may be. But before we part, I want to make sure that there is nothing that I can do for you. You must be hungry. Let me fetch some food."

"No. I am all right. Your mere presence is enough for me."

"But I cannot be with you for long ! It is already late and I must go, lest my father see us together. You do not know his wrath."

"I wish you had left me alone. Some wild animal perhaps would have eaten me up. But my pain would have been less acute than what awaits me during your absence."

She vanished suddenly, as he was still talking to her. He continued thus : "Do not abandon me, Tapati, I need you. I am worthy of you. O Daughter of the all-seeing Tapanas, your father knows me. For I am to the earth what he is to the fir-

mament. He will be proud of you if you choose me as your lord. So stay with me, Tapati. Oh, she is gone !” Again he felt fatigued and forlorn. But he was determined to invoke Tapati. He drew a likeness of her with an arrow on the trunk of a tree and lavished all his love and affection on it. By then there was an abundance of flowers and fruits all round, and the forest resounded with the joyous cries of birds and beasts which seemed to have suddenly awakened from a stupor. But he knew no hunger and thirst now and behaved like a mad man. He would implore the stars and the clouds to persuade Tapati to accept him. But they seemed indifferent as though they demanded from him greater proof of his love than mere madness.

* * *

Many days passed and there seemed to be no prospect of his seeing Tapati again. His devotion to her, however, became all the more intense. He raved for her no longer ; he now invoked her silently with confidence and composure. He was prepared to wait for her indefinitely. His prime minister showed great solicitude for him. But Samvarana rebuked him thus : “*Amatya*, I often ask myself what you would have been doing if the prime ministership had not been hereditary. You can only clumsily climb trees crying at the sight of the smallest and mildest animal. Please stay on in your shelter on tree tops. The duty of feeding you and looking after you is mine, provided you leave me alone.”

“Your Majesty ! I realise you do not think much of me. But may I offer you a suggestion ? With the help of your

family priest, Vasishtha, you may succeed in winning the heart of Tapati."

"I have won her heart. It is her hand that I am trying to win. And it would be easier for me to invoke Tapati than the sage Vasishtha. He does not seem to care for me these days. Otherwise he would have enabled me to regain my throne."

"Your Majesty ! I may be wrong. But I feel the great *rishi* is still on our side. It is we who do not seem to care for him. Arranging Tapati's marriage to you would be child's play for him. I may be a fool, but a fool need not necessarily be foolish all the time. There are moments in his life when he talks not only sense but the essence of it. So Your Majesty must condescend to give a chance even to fools."

"*Amatya*, let us part for the present. I shall see you again with fish and fruit. In the mean time, take a rest in your nest."

"Yes, Your Majesty has correctly described my present condition. I am old and senile and all that I need is a little rest in my nest. Old men, it is said, are like children. And the words of children are the words of Brahma." Samvarana did not bother to reply. The prime minister bowed to the king and went his way pottering about.

All of a sudden, Samvarana saw a dazzling glow in the skies. Even the Sun looked comparatively anaemic and seemed to envy its brilliance which momentarily blinded Samvarana's eyes. But when he opened them, lo ! he found Tapati seated beside him. Pointing to the picture of her on the tree amusedly, she asked : "Who is she supposed to be ?"

"Whoever she may be," observed Samvarana, "she is alive, as far as I am concerned. No one in the world is dearer to me than she."

"But who is she ? Where is she ?"

"She is the daughter of the Sun. At the moment, she is by my side." Samvarana pressed Tapati to his side amorously and stroked her gently on the cheeks. "So you love me, Tapati ! I knew you would."

"I have come back to you without knowing anything about you. For I am convinced of your love for me. But you have drawn a caricature of me ! You say it is alive. That is all you deserve." She was about to rise. Holding fast to her, he said : "No, Tapati, you cannot go, except with me. Never mind the caricature. My hand, I agree, has not been able to reproduce the image created by my heart. You must pardon me for its clumsiness."

"All right. Now tell me about yourself."

"Tapati, why do you insist on my talking about myself ? Is it not enough that I love you ? Believe me, I am worthy of you."

"How should I address you, then ? I must at least satisfy myself that you are not an *asura* in disguise."

"I am not. Do not bother to address me in a conventional manner. Where there is love, nothing else matters. So we must ensure that it is love that binds us both together."

"It is. But love is not all. Marriage is more important. It is wedlock that enshrines love. So I must know whether you merely love me or wish to marry me. Which means that our respective elders take the ultimate decision on our behalf. That is why we must know each other thoroughly. We cannot behave in an irresponsible manner. At least I cannot."

"Tapati, I am prepared to sacrifice anything for your sake. Please do not reject me."

"I do not know why you cannot see my point. There is nothing that you can sacrifice for me. I want you to overcome your present infatuation for me and determine the nature of our future relationship."

"No, Tapati. I cannot disclose my identity to you, simply because I want you to accept me as you find me. You choose your husband not because he is respectable but because you love him. I therefore ask you a simple question and I expect a simple answer : Do you love me?"

"I do, I do, I do. Are you satisfied? But I cannot tell my father that I have met someone on earth I do not know, that I am madly in love with him and that I must be given away in marriage to him. Do you realise how absurd it all sounds? If you do not want to arm me with information about yourself, I suggest you do penance invoking my father, and if he reveals himself to you, you may beg of him to agree to our marriage. Meanwhile you and I must be prepared for wearisome waiting. But, believe me, I shall consider myself yours wherever I am."

She vanished, leaving him baffled and bewildered.

He decided to invoke the Sun God as suggested by Tapati. He summoned his prime minister and told him to stay there till he returned after his penance. "Your Majesty," pleaded the price minister, "I cannot see you suffer. Permit me to be near you so that you can have my services whenever you need them. I hope your struggle will not be futile."

"If you accompany me, you will be only a hindrance to me. So I suggest you do not stir from here. I am sorry for having to abandon you in your old age. I am sure God will look after you. In fact it is people such as you, not those like me, who are His favourites. We are sinners, and you are the

sinned against. So let me retire to a quiet corner and atone for my sins, as it were. And please do not dog my steps. I shall not be able to attend on you in the midst of my austerities.”

“I can never bring myself to interrupt anything that you do. You are my king, and your word is law. I dare not defy it. But I must impress on you one thing. Penance is potentially a very dangerous weapon which, in the hands of kshatriyas, is almost suicidal. So please be careful. I wish the sage Vasishtha were with you at this moment to guide you in your austerities. The Sun is an irascible and unpredictable god and you are a naive novice where asceticism is concerned. But I am not competent to sit in judgment over your decisions. You are a law unto yourself. Forgive me for what I have had to say to you out of my fatherly solicitude for you. May your oblations bear fruit !” The old man prostrated himself before his master and bade him farewell.

Samvarana trekked miles and miles and at last selected a quiet site on the top of a mountain beside a spring. He fainted there out of fatigue. As he lay unconscious, vultures whirled over him, and jackals whined wildly in the distance. But they knew he was alive. And the moment he woke up, they would be the first targets of his fierce, formidable arrows. So they dared not touch him. The flowers showered their petals on him and the fountain sprayed its cool water. But the Sun shone somewhat severely on Samvarana’s temples as if to rebuke the royal exile that his enthusiasm for the rigours of an anchorite was childish. After a little while, Samvarana woke up, and saluted the Sun. Then he bathed in the spring, sat on its bank and found himself unable to decide with what prayer he should preface his penance. He discovered that he did not know how

to address himself to the gods. After all, the old man, his prime minister, was right. "What is penance?" Samvarana asked himself. "Does it not consist in one's concentration on the god one believes in. Where is the need for ritual?" Being proud and young, he had an answer for every problem and that was the only answer he would recognise. Beneath his seeming arrogance and assertiveness, however, lay a charming simplicity, common sense and a readiness to compromise. He knew that his prayer to the Sun God was destined to end as a cry in the wilderness. Was it not really silly and pretentious? Supposing the Sun God revealed himself, what would Samvarana say to him? "I love your daughter and she loves me, too. We have decided to marry, and therefore, O Sun God, please do not stand in our way ! Please, please clear out." What more would occur to Samvarana's secular mind? And what would be the Sun God's reply? Would he care to reply at all? Yes, not in words, but in deeds, and dreadful ones at that. Which girl's father would not punish a fool who proposed to his daughter so crudely and clumsily? Perhaps Tapati was not serious when she suggested that Samvarana should invoke her father through penance. Was she pulling the credulous Samvarana's leg? One should never trust the goddesses and the nymphs. After all, why should they accept mortals, their inferiors, as their husbands? Should Samvarana then forget all about Tapati and go back to his own dreamland?

He thus mused and mused, till, feeling exhausted, he fell asleep.

Samvarana's austerities continued for twelve days. But there was no prospect of his inarticulate, imperfect prayers to the Sun God being answered. One morning, as he was about

to begin the day's oblations, his family priest, the sage Vasishtha, revealed himself to him and said : "Samvarana, I have been watching you all these days. I am convinced of your devotion to Tapati, and her fondness for you. But you will never succeed in invoking her father. So I have decided to intervene. I am on my way to the *Adityamandala*. I shall try and persuade him to approve of his daughter's worthy choice." He disappeared.

* * *

The moment Vasishtha arrived in the *Adityamandala* (the Sun's realm), great rejoicing followed. Seated in the Sun's personal carriage, drawn by seven ruddy horses with the god himself as the charioteer, Vasishtha drove to the divine palace where he was received with a veneration that even the Trimurti would have envied. All the minor *devas* and *rishis*, accompanied by their consorts and children, followed one after another and prostrated themselves before him. He blessed them all suitably. Now it was Tapati's turn. When she was about to kneel before him, he stared at her searchingly as though she were trying to hide something from him. The Sun looked on nervously. Turning to him the great sage observed : "Have you received any proposals for Tapati?" "O *rishi* of *rishis*," replied the Sun God, "not without your knowledge."

"I have brought one, and I hope you will accept it."

"If it has your approval, it has mine too."

"It is from Samvarana, the King of Hastinapura, now in exile. I am his family priest. I do not think I need add anything more."

"Perhaps Tapati would like to see him, before we consider his proposal." Her father looked at Tapati expecting her to

say something. She seemed greatly intrigued, but remained silent.

* * *

"I suggest," observed Vasishtha discreetly, "you permit me to take your daughter with me to Samvarana."

"Must you seek my permission? She is your child and, by all means, she may, under your guidance, marry Samvarana if she approves of him. Of course, my presence would not be necessary there because of yours. O *guru* of *gurus*, I am honoured by your gracious solicitude for the future of my daughter."

On an auspicious day, Vasishtha and Tapati set out for earth in the Sun's own chariot blazing across the firmament. When they landed, they found Samvarana furiously shooting arrows at the Sun. Vasishtha smiled, and removed the bow from Samvarana's hands, observed : "This is not yours now. You must preserve it for your future son, Kuru, whom Tapati shall bear you. And he shall use it, not against imaginary enemies as you have been doing, but against real ones and wrest your throne from them." Tapati blushed but yielded, as Vasishtha offered her hand to Samavarna who clasped it. They both bowed to the great sage who showered his choicest blessings on them. Presently arrived Samvarana's prime minister with two garlands. He made obeisance to Vasishtha, and, in great ecstasy, placed the garlands round the necks of Tapati and Samvarana. "Am I a fool," asked he with an impish twinkle in the eye, "or a foreteller?"

* * *

Even after his marriage to Tapati, Samvarana had to spend twelve years in the wilderness. But they passed like twelve

days. At last Vasishtha's prophecy was fulfilled when little Kuru, the son of Samvarana and Tapti, used his father's bow in the manner ordained by the venerable sage, and regained the throne of Hastinapura.

OPINIONS

**"I enjoyed reading every
one of the 'Tales from Indian
Mythology' and it is a little difficult
to say which was better than the
other."**

K. M. Munshi

●

**"Your command of English is
amazing in one not born to the
language."**

Herbert Read

C. RAJAGOPALACHARI

60 BAZLULLAH ROAD
THYAGAROVANAGAR
MADRAS 17

6. 9. 55

Dear Mr Raman

I have put my maha-
bhārata into the shade

C Rajagopalachari