

CHAPTER 17

RECALLING THE BYGONE DAYS

Emperor Parikshit journeyed in state over the entire Indian continent, acquainting himself with the administrative excellence of the rule of his grandfathers, with the unique relationship which they had established between themselves and Lord Krishna who had then come down on earth as Man, listening to the experiences of many a saint and scholar who lived in those halcyon days, and reflecting on those cheering memories, as he travelled along. Often he was overcome with remorse at the thought that he was not alive during those days when the grandparents were in such heavenly bliss.

While thus immersed in the joy of recollecting the annals of his forefathers and the glory of those bygone days with Krishna, Vyasa, the great sage, appeared before him quite

unexpectedly. He welcomed him with great honour and seated him on an elevated seat. The sage praised the rule of Parikshit and said that he was reminded of the reign of the Pandavas. The young King listened reverentially to his talk. After some time, Vyasa said, “Son, I must be going now.” But Parikshit said, “It is like placing a dish of delicacies before a starving man and just when he is about to stretch his hand towards it, dragging it away from his grasp. Your accounts of the adventures of my grandfathers and of the splendour of Sri Krishna are like the most precious gems spread out before me, but you cause the most painful disappointment to me by refusing to let me have them. Your leaving me just now makes me feel desperately sorry.”

He pleaded with the sage to stay a little longer. “Tell me on what mission you have come. Be with me for some more time and assuage the hunger that is gnawing me. I missed the great good fortune that my grandparents had to spend their lives with the Lord Himself. I shall save myself from decline, at least by listening to their exploits and their devotion which drew upon them His Grace. Seeing the King who prayed in great earnestness and humility, Vyasa said, “Son do not feel that you are in any way inferior or less endowed with good fortune. I declare that no one else had such good fortune as you earned. For, you drew upon yourself the Grace of the Lord, the moment you were born. The Lord, Vaasudeva, gave you the breath of life. He raised you in His arms and played with you, while you were yet a baby. You too stuck to Him so close that you scarce kept

aloof. Your youngest grandfather, Sahadeva, had to pluck you by force from Krishna and hand you over to the women in the inner halls. You were named ceremonially by Vaasudeva Himself. What a memorable scene it was! You showed us that you were a wonderful child. You followed, with your eyes, the Lord wherever He moved, whichever side He turned. You were intent on “*pariksha*” (finding out) where He was, as no one else was in that hall that day. Krishna hid Himself very cleverly behind pillars and tried various means of diverting your attention away from Him, but you proved too clever even for Him! Your eyes were searching for Him alone. They saw only Him and His splendid Form. All of us who were then present were wonder struck at your devotion and concentration. It appeared as if you were examining each face and trying to find out whether it was Krishna’s. Your face fell when you saw it was not, it blossomed when your eyes saw Him and Him only. Scholars and simple folks, ryots and rajahs, realised that you were a remarkable child. That is the reason why, when your grandfather, Dharmaraja prayed to Him to give you an appropriate name, He named you after your strange behaviour, Parikshit (he who examines, he who tries to find out).

“When the Lord announced this name to Dharmaraja, in the hearing of that vast gathering of courtiers and scholars and sages, they all applauded, saying, ‘Very apt, excellent, fine.’ Being so richly favoured by fortune it is not meet that you should condemn yourself as unlucky. You were fondled by the Lord. He played with you and watched your gambols.

He gave you your name. How few earn this fortune. Do not consider these just common gifts of Grace.”

Tears of joy welled from the eyes of Parikshit at these words. He had a question rising up from his throat, but Vyasa saw him swallowing it and so he patted him on the shoulder and encouraged him to ask it. “Son, it looks as if you desire to put some query to me. Ask without hesitation; do not quail.” Taking courage from this prompting, Parikshit said, “Worthy master! Man cannot know the value of either joy or grief, unless he is aware of them. The joyful contacts of which you spoke now were awarded me when I was scarcely aware of the bliss inherent in them. Real joy can be tasted only when one is conscious of its value. If a child is given a billion-rupee diamond, it will only deal with it as a lump of glass. The happiness of being with the Lord, which you say I had in my childhood, is as ineffective as the joy experienced in past births. I did not know then what precious moments they were. Had I known it, were I capable of knowing it, I could have treasured that joy forever. Now it is all mere inference. I have no ocular proof of the Grace of the Lord which I received then. So, I depend now on auricular proof only. So please tell me of the greatness and glory of Krishna. Let my ears drink the nectar of those stories.”

Vyasa was moved by his entreaty, he agreed. “Son, do you consider His leelas to be just one or two? How can I relate to you His leelas which are beyond one’s capacity

to enumerate. So ask about what He did in connection with some particular person, or during some particular incident or situation. I shall gladly tell you all the details.” Parikshit was elated at this. He begged him with folded hands, “Master! Tell me how this great attachment between my grandparents and Lord Krishna was born.”

Vyasa burst into laughter. “Son, your earnestness surprises me much. For, only such earnest individuals can get Jnana. I am delighted that you have this deep yearning. So, I shall tell you what you have asked for. Listen!” Saying this, Vyasa made himself comfortable in his seat. Parikshit, too, got ready to hear, with a heart that was blossoming with joy and ears that widened in the ambition to learn.

“Son! King Drupada grew anxious to give his only daughter in marriage to a suitable groom but could not succeed in securing one, in spite of the most diligent search. So, he announced a *Swayamvara* (festival for choice of Bridegroom). Kings of great might and majesty assembled in his capital, along with scholars endowed with charming personality, all eager to wed the princess whose beauty was unexcelled in the three worlds. They were all proud of their wealth and valour, for they felt they could win her by those attainments.

“In that assembly hall, the king had fixed a contrivance on a pillar. It was a wheel revolving fast, a wheel that was reflected in a sheet of water, below the pillar on which it turned. The wheel had a ‘fish’ tied on it. The competitors

for the hand of the princess were asked, one by one, to come forward and drawing the bow while looking at the reflection, shoot at the fish target up above. Drupada announced his intention to give away his daughter in marriage to whomsoever hit the target, so prepared. The city was full of princes and kings who had arrived to try their hands at this unique festival of bowmanship.

“News of this festival reached the ears of your grandparents who had then assumed the role of Brahmins, in order to mislead the wily Kauravas. They felt at first that they should not come out in the open on that occasion; but Arjuna, your grandfather, was able to persuade his brothers to attend the festival of valour, for as he said, no Kshatriya should stay away when bowmen compete for a worthy prize.

“Thus it happened that the five brothers sat among the assembly in the garb of Brahmins, like a group of lions, casting a halo of heroism around. All eyes were drawn towards the place where they sat. People commented on their presence, many in admiration, some in derision. Some praised them as champions, some laughed at them as prize fighters or guards. The whispers aroused by them spread all round.

“Lord Krishna had come for that Festival. His eyes were fixed on Arjuna all the time. This was noticed by his brother, Balarama, who spoke something to his brother. At last, the *Swayamvara* contest began. One by one, the candidates proceeded to the shadow seen in the water and

aimed the arrow at the ‘fish’ rotating above. They failed and returned pale with humiliation. They walked back to their seats, heavy with disappointment and shame, and sat sunk in sorrow.

“Krishna had no intention to rise and have a try at the target, for He sat quiet in His own place. If He had that intention, He could have quite easily hit the ‘fish’ and won. But who can gauge the depths of His mind?”

“Just then, Arjuna rose and proceeded towards the ‘contrivance,’ casting a lightning flash of brilliance over the assembly by the heroic aura of his personality. Draupadi, the princess, lifted her head and watched him in admiration. Her mind merged in that flash of light. In an instant, Arjuna’s arrow split the ‘fish’; he won. The applause of the gathering rose to the skies. The princess came forward and wedded him, placing a garland of flowers around his neck and holding his hand.

“When Arjuna emerged from the Hall holding the hand of the bride, the horde of defeated kings and princes yelled that the rules of the contest were broken, since a Brahmin who had no right to compete in bowmanship was allowed to participate and declared the winner. They fell on your grandfather, in an angry clump. But Bhima pulled out a huge tree by its roots and whirled it at the crowd of foiled kings.”

“Observing the fight between the disappointed groups of suitors and the Pandava brothers, Krishna and Balarama

were smiling within themselves in appreciation of the successful feat of Arjuna. Your grandfathers had no knowledge who they were. They had not seen them any time previously.

“But when the Pandavas reached their residence, the humble home of a potter, with the newly-won bride, the daughter of Drupada, and when Dharmaraja the eldest brother, was describing with great exultation the events of the day, Balarama and Krishna, dressed in yellow silk and magnificent to behold, entered that lowly cottage. They fell at the feet of aged Kunthi, mother of your grandfathers. ‘Auntie, we are your nephews,’ they said. ‘We are the children of Nanda and Yasoda,’ they introduced themselves. Then they touched the feet of Dharmaraja, prostrating themselves before him. Krishna approached Arjuna and drew him aside, with a sweet simple expression of affection. ‘I know you, but you do not know me. I am seeing you now for the very first time. I am the son of Vasudeva. My name is Sri Krishna. I am younger than you are. Still, when you achieved that victory in the Royal Palace, I recognised that you are the Pandava brothers and so, I understood that you had escaped from the palace of *lac* (wax) wherein you were when it was set on fire. From the moment my eyes fell on you at the gathering of suitors there, I somehow felt that you are Arjuna. I told my brother so. This is my brother, Balarama. I was very happy that I recognised you and my brother too shared the joy. At last, I am able to meet you. The bride is the embodiment of virtue and intelligence.’

“Speaking thus, Krishna called Arjuna to a distance and whispered in his ear, ‘Cousin! It is not advisable that you come out in the open so soon. Stay on, in disguise, for short periods, in one place or another, for some more time.’ Then, He took leave of His aunt and others and left with His elder brother Balarama.

“From that day, the affection between Krishna and Arjuna grew more and more intense. It grew into a huge tree and yielded fruits rich with sweetness, which they shared. In that sweetness, their minds merged and became one. Mark the first time your grandfather met the Lord Sri Krishna, He was at the wedding hall of Draupadi, the *Kalyana Mantapa* (festival hall). The significance of this lies in the fact that they too were bound throughout the years in bonds of love and affection of unfailing friendship. To consummate that friendship, Krishna taught him the Highest Wisdom. ‘Did you note how chummy that Consummate Trickster was with your grandfather?’ With that question, Vyasa rose and collected his things, in an attempt to depart.

Observing this, Parikshit pleaded piteously, wiping the tears of joy that filled his eyes. “Master, you have made the Lord stand clear before me, with your description of His leela and His Grace. Please tell me more of the many occasions on which the Lord showered His Mercy on my grandfathers, how He moved close with them and rescued them from calamity. Sleep is deserting my eyes and prompting me to listen to the stories of God. Make this

night holy by relating to me the glory of the Lord. That alone can give me satisfaction. Let me spend the night in His thoughts.... Your silence is causing me great agony.”

Vyasa saw the steadfastness and devotion of Parikshit and changed his decision. He said, “Son, were the mighty miracles of Krishna one or two in number, I could have described them to you. If one had a billion tongues, and the whole of eternity before him, description of His Majesty can never be exhausted. All the Gods bowed before Him with folded hands. Sometimes He would raise His Bhakthas to the skies, very soon He will drag them down into the depths. He treated the world as a puppet show. He was always radiant with His smile. He never knew anxiety, disappointment or distress. He behaved sometimes like a common man, sometimes as an innocent child, at other times as a near kinsman, or as an intimate friend, or as a masterful monarch. Sometimes He behaved as a playful cowherd boy. He had the capacity and cleverness to play all roles with unique distinction. He loved your grandfather, Arjuna, with special fervour. He used to take him with Him, whatever the occasion or place. Why, Arjuna could move about freely even in the inner apartments of the residence of the Lord. The Lord used to play with your grandfather in the waters of the Yamuna, diving at one place and rising at a distant spot to surprise him, calling on him to do likewise if he could, competing with him in various games, games which defy description and identification. All of a sudden, He would take Arjuna to a solitary place and converse with him

there on some mysteries. He used often to discard the smooth silken bed and sleep with His head on Arjuna's lap instead.

“Your grandfather too, reciprocated that love to the full. Though sometimes they were found angry against each other, talking as if they were enraged, they made up very soon and resumed friendly conversation quickly. My dear son, it can be said that they were Nara and Narayana, like the body and the breath. There was no Arjuna without Krishna and no Krishna without Arjuna. There was no secret which your grandfather did not share with Krishna or which Krishna did not share with your grandfather, which particular episode in their relationship am I to tell you now? Ask me any one which you would like to hear and I shall gladly relate it to you.”