

## CHAPTER 21

### THE DURVASA EPISODE

Vyasa hastened to explain Durvasa's queer laughter. "Durvasa, however, accepted the prayer of Duryodhana! He started towards the forest, saying 'Right! I shall do so.' In this prayer, there was a deep sinister purpose. It was this: One morning at sunrise, when the Pandavas were worshipping the Sun, He took pity on their condition and out of His immeasurable Grace bestowed on them a Vessel, whose contents will remain undiminished, however much they are used up. It was called *Akshayapathra*. Draupadi as the dutiful wife, used to take her food only after the five brothers had taken theirs. Until she finishes her meal, the Vessel will be full of food, however many may partake of it. When she has finished and cleaned the Vessel, it can give no more. Thus once every day, the Vessel was pouring plenty, until she has eaten her meal.

Prior to that, she could feed thousands, even millions, from out of that Vessel. But once she has taken her food out of it, it loses that power for the day. That is to say, there must be some part or particle of food in it so that it could be multiplied a millionfold and used. That was its peculiar glory. Duryodhana requested Durvasa to approach the Pandavas and demand hospitality, *after* Draupadi had taken her food for he had this special handicap in mind.

"When the short-tempered Sage seeks food and the Pandavas are unable to satisfy him and his huge retinue, he was certain to invoke a terrible curse in the throes of hunger. That would destroy the brothers forever. The knotty problem of living with them will be solved and the Kauravas can rule the entire realm in peace. That was the evil intent of Duryodhana. But the Pandavas looked for support, not to something or someone outside them, but to the Lord within them. What can the curse of a sage, however mighty, do to such? When the all-protecting Lord is on their side, how can the wiles of evil-minded men harm them? Their conspiracies will have to fail ignominiously. The wicked Kauravas did not realise that when they plan in one direction, the Lord plans in another.

"Durvasa appeared before the Pandavas with his ten thousand disciples, just when Draupadi was resting after her food and after cleaning the sacred Vessel, conversing with her lords. Dharmaraja saw the sage come towards the leaf-thatched hut where they spent their days. He rose

quickly, welcomed him enthusiastically, washed his feet, offered flowers in worship, and fell prostrate before him. He declared, 'I have realised my highest ambition in life. This is indeed a day of supreme luck.' He shed tears of joy and stood with folded hands. His brothers and Draupadi stood by his side, after their prostrations, with heads bent in reverential homage.

“Durvasa, who was visibly tired by the exhaustion of the long journey, spoke with evident exasperation, ‘We are going to the river for bath and noon rituals. Have food ready for me and my ten thousand followers, when we return.’ They moved, on fast to the river, after this announcement.

“When these words fell on his ears, Dharmaraja felt a shock. His heart very nearly stopped. He consulted Draupadi and discovered that the Vessel had been cleaned nicely and kept aside. They all sank in sorrow, fearing what might happen to them. ‘Ten thousands to be fed! Oh God! What has this day in store for us?’ they lamented, lost in grief. For Draupadi, the ideal housewife, the chance to entertain guests with food was a welcome gift. But at this late hour, when so many had to be fed so soon, in the jungle where no provisions were available, she became desperate. ‘The guest who has landed on us is the celebrated Durvasa, whose attainments and capabilities are known all over the world. By a mere thought, he can turn those who anger him into ashes! Alas, what terrible calamity awaits my lords,’ she wondered and shivered in fear.

“She could not decide on any plan to feed the horde that had descended on her. Who else could help her out than the Lord, the saviour of the good, Krishna. ‘Oh, Gopala! Save my lords; guard us from the destruction threatening us. Show us some means of satisfying these ascetics and this sage.’ She called upon Krishna, with tears streaming from her eyes, and with anguish gnawing at her heart. She pleaded yearningly with the Lord. Whatever may be in store for her, she did not mind; but she prayed that her husbands be saved and her mangalyam ‘married status’ retained intact. She wept aloud, in irrepressible grief. The Pandava brothers heard the wail. Their agony was doubled. They too prayed to Krishna, their only refuge. ‘Oh, Nandanandana, you rescued us from calamity after calamity designed by the Kauravas. You guarded us as the eyelids guard the eye. Why have you plunged us in this awful distress today? Pardon our sins and faults. Save us from this dire peril. Help us to satisfy the sage and his huge retinue.’

“The prayers of the Pandavas and the tears of Draupadi softened the heart of Krishna, at Mathura, and moved Him from there. Footfalls were heard. The Pandavas whose heads were bent with anxiety about Durvasa returning from the river, raised their eyes and saw Krishna entering their hut, scattering brightness with His smile, His yellow robe trailing along the ground. They exclaimed, ‘Krishna! Krishna!’ and ran towards the Lord. Draupadi heard that voice and hurried out of the inner apartment. She surmised it must be some sign of the Grace of God that might be showered on them.

But when she saw Krishna, she hastened to fall at His feet and wash them with her tears. ‘Save me, save my mangalyam, satisfy the sage and his followers.’ Krishna, the consummate Director of this Universe drama, appeared unconcerned with their anxieties but immersed only in His own hunger! He said, ‘Draupadi! This is strange, I am hungry. First, appease My hunger and then, you can ask Me what you need. Give Me, immediately, some little food!’ and put out His palm, as if He could not wait.

“Draupadi said, ‘Oh Lord! This is not the occasion for fun. This is testing time for us. Save us, do not laugh at our plight.’ She wiped the flow of tears with the border of her sari. She prayed, both hands extended in supplication. Krishna lifted up her head with His hand, and said in soft assuring tones, ‘Child! Tears collect in the eyes of women at the slightest provocation. But can My hunger be appeased by tears?’ Krishna was in a sarcastic mood, evidently. Draupadi replied, ‘Gopala! You are the second supplicant at our door today. But if we do not give you what you ask, you will not curse us and bring destruction on us. But the other supplicant is waiting with ten thousand followers to appease his hunger by a dinner on all of us! We are all about to be reduced to ashes. Where can we get even a single grain in this forest? How can I appease the hunger of so many people, at such short notice, in this desolate place.’ She explained the reason for the gloom that had overtaken them.

“Gopala laughed aloud. ‘Ten thousand guests have come, you say. But I do not see a single one here! I can

only laugh at your words. You are throwing away the child on your hip to fondle the children who are afar. First, give Me enough for My hunger; you can then think of satisfying people who are far away.’ Krishna was adamant that He should be attended to, first; He acted the part of a hungry person so perfectly. Draupadi had to explain her predicament. ‘Lord, the Vessel had a variety of food. They were all served and finished. I took my food last. I have cleaned the sacred Vessel gifted by the Sun and kept it aside. How can I get food from it now? How can I appease Your hunger? You are our only refuge. If You, who know everything, cause us suffering, what shall we say of others?’ Draupadi wept again.

“Gopala said, ‘Well, bring here the Vessel. Even if I get from it a particle of some eatable, I shall be content.’ So, she went in and brought the Vessel and placed it in the hands of Krishna. Gopala passed His fingers carefully inside the Vessel, seeking some particle that might have escaped the scraping and washing. He found in the ‘neck’ of the Vessel the fraction of a cooked leaf. So, He asked ‘Draupadi! You seem to have had a leafy dish for lunch today!’

“Draupadi was surprised that Krishna was able to discover a fractional leaf in the Vessel she had scrubbed clean. ‘This must be your miracle. Whatever work I do, I do efficiently. I could not have scrubbed it so shabbily,’ she laughed. When she approached Krishna to see the leaf, Krishna showed it to her, saying, ‘Look! I got this from

your Vessel. This thing is enough to appease, not only My hunger, but the hunger of all beings in the Universe.’ Then He put it on His tongue with the end of His finger and swallowing, exclaimed, ‘Ah! How nice! My hunger is gone!’

“At that very moment, Durvasa on the river bank and his ten thousand disciples felt their stomachs overfull with food. Their hunger too was gone; they experienced supreme happiness, free from the pangs of hunger they suffered a minute previously. They communicated their wonder to each other in gestures and then, in words. ‘Our stomachs are too full already, there is no space in them for even an additional grain of rice! Dharmaraja will be waiting for us there with a heavy banquet of extra-delicious dishes and he will insist on our doing full justice to his hospitality. But where have we the space for the feast he has prepared? We are indeed in a terrible fix!’ they said. Someone then remembered the incident when their master, Durvasa cursed Ambarisha and suffered discomfiture at the hands of the very victim of his curse, through the intercession of Krishna.

“They reported their condition and their surmise to Durvasa. The sage who became aware of the Grace that was won by Dharmaraja blessed him profusely; he left the place, with his disciples, by another route avoiding the residence of the Pandava brothers.

“But Krishna had commissioned Bhima to proceed to the river and bring the sage and his retinue quickly for lunch. When Bhima saw them getting away through another route,

he walked quicker and the disciples, afraid of his intentions, ran into the jungle to save themselves. Bhima confronted Durvasa and told him, ‘Master! My elder brother ordered me to meet you and bring you, for lunch is ready for all of you.’ Durvasa pleaded inability. ‘Bhima! We cannot eat even the fraction of a mouthful. We are full to the bursting point. We are not displeased at all with you. I bless you, that you may attain every happiness. I shall come to you when you are ruling the world as undisputed sovereigns and I shall then receive your hospitality. Those who sent me to you with sinful motives, they will meet with total destruction.’ Wishing them the best of luck, Durvasa left, with all his followers.

“Did you notice, Parikshit, the devotion and sense of surrender of your grandfathers had nothing to equal them; so, too, the Grace that Krishna showered upon them was unexcelled.” When Vyasa was revealing these incidents to show Parikshit the speedy faith of the Pandavas and the Grace of Krishna, Parikshit listened intently, with awe and reverence, wonder and anxiety, alternately affecting his mind. When the dilemma of the Pandavas was described, Parikshit was agitated. When some impending calamity was described, he shed tears of sympathy, when success was described, he shed tears of joy.