

and glory of my grandfathers! I have yet to fathom completely the depth of their devotion and sense of duty,” he lamented.

He rotated in his mind the incidents he had heard and tasted their uniqueness. He was so filled with exaltation that he could not turn to the affairs of the kingdom. In fact, he avoided entangling himself in them and sought to be alone. He decided to go into the forest hunting, as an alternative. He instructed that arrangements be made for an expedition into the jungle.

Very soon, the men at the door brought the news that everything was ready, and the huntsmen and others had gathered in full strength. With a heavy heart, he dragged his body towards the chariot and placed himself in it. The attendants, with their equipment, moved on, both before the royal chariot and after, as was their wont. The king felt, for some reason or other, that so many need not accompany him; so, he asked some to return. When they advanced, a few herds were noticed moving about. That sight stirred the king to activity. He got down from the chariot, and with the bow kept in readiness, he stalked the animals with a few men following him. The herds scattered in fear, with the huntsmen in hot pursuit. The king had his aim fixed on one group of fleeing animals and he sped behind it, unaware that he was alone, cut off from his attendants who had gone on different trails.

He had trekked a long distance and could not bag any beast; a fierce thirst began tormenting him. He was exhausted

CHAPTER 24

PARIKSHIT IS CURSED

Parikshit heard from the sage, Vyasa, his description of the deep devotion and steady faith of the Pandavas. He was thrilled when he heard of the unbounded Grace of Lord Krishna, which was showered on them. The king was so immersed in joy that he scarce realised whether it was night or day! Suddenly, he was awakened by the sweet chirping of birds and the loud crow of the cock. He heard the songs with which his subjects daily welcomed the Gods at dawn. The temple bells were ringing around the palace.

Vyasa too realised it was the beginning of another day. He said, “Son! I must be going now,” and taking the water pot which he carried while journeying, he rose and blessed the king, who fell at his feet, in great sorrow. “Alas, that the dawn broke so soon! I have yet to grasp fully the grandeur

beyond endurance. Frantically, he searched for water. Luckily, he espied a hermitage, a cottage thatched with grass. Highly expectant, he hurried towards it. There was no one in view! The place appeared empty. He called out very distressingly, as loudly as he could manage. With his feeble throat He shouted, “Thirst, thirst,” plaintively. There was no reply from the cottage. When he entered he found therein, an ascetic engaged in meditation. He went near him and addressed him pathetically, “Sir, Sir.” But he was so lost in the depths of meditation that there was no response at all.

At this, the king was overcome by resentment and a fierce gust of anger. Having come to a hermitage and seen the hermit, he was still helpless with hunger and thirst; this wounded his pride, for, he was the Ruler of the realm and the hermit had dared to dwell within himself, when he had come before him and called out for him. He became blind to the rules of propriety, for, he could hardly control his anger. His feet trod on some rope on the floor. He discovered it was a dead snake. That put a wicked idea into his head, quite by a twist of fate. He threw it round the neck of the hermit, sitting like a statue, heedless of other’s distress; and then he left the hermitage and walked away fast, to seek some other place to slake his thirst and get some food.

Some boys saw him emerge from the cottage. They entered the place to find out why he had gone in and what had happened there, for he looked a stranger and he was gorgeously dressed. They saw round the neck of the sage

Sameeka, a snake! They went closer and examined it, to discover that it was dead. They wondered who could have done this atrocity. They surmised it must be the handiwork of the man who had just left the hermitage. So, they ran out and informed Sringi, the son of Sameeka, who was engaged in games with his comrades. He did not lend his ear to their story, for he thought that no one would insult his father so. He busied himself with the game. The boys repeated the tale and insisted on his verifying its veracity, seeing the plight of his father with his own eyes.

Sringi was amazed at their insistence and he got afraid that the incident might actually have happened. He ran into the cottage and found that the unbelievable had happened! He sought to find out the culprit who had perpetrated this atrocity against his revered father. He came to know that a person in royal robes had gone in and come out, and that there had been no one else around, since morning. The boys concluded that it must be his handiwork. At this, he ran in the direction pointed by them to catch him. Before long, he saw the person in regal clothing and his anger knew no bounds. He threw a handful of water at the king, slowly walking before him and pronounced the curse: “May he who threw the dead snake round the neck of my father be bitten by a snake on the seventh day and may he die that day of that poison.” The boys around him appealed to him not to, but he threw the curse at the king, nevertheless. Then, he went back into the cottage and slumped on the floor, in a corner with his head aflame with anger.

“Alas, that my father had to suffer this ignominy, when I am alive and about; I could well have been dead. Of what use is a son alive, if he cannot prevent someone insulting his father?” he condemned himself thus and bewailed his fate, most pitiably. His companions sat around him and tried to pacify him. They abused the wrongdoer roundly, they tried to console the disconsolate boy.

Meanwhile, the sage Sameeka emerged from his inner bliss and entered the realm of consciousness. His eyes opened. He unwound the dead snake from his neck and placed it beside him. He saw the son weeping in a corner and beckoned to him to come near. He asked the reason for his grief and got from him the tale of the stranger and the dead snake. Sameeka smiled and said, “Poor fellow! He did it out of ignorance and you reveal *your* ignorance, weeping for it. I am not concerned with honour or dishonour. The knowledge of the Atma enables a man to keep himself on an even keel, neither rising when praised nor falling when blamed. Some boor must have played this silly prank. Since you are yet boys, you are exaggerating it into a big crime. You are undergoing a mountain of grief over a molehill. Get up and go to the playground,” he said. He made his son sit on his lap and gently stroked his head, so that his grief might abate a little.

Sringi told his father, “This is no prank played by a boor. This is a terrible sacrilege committed by an ego-intoxicated fellow, in the garb of a king.” At this, Sameeka

asked, “What do you say? A person in the garb of a king? Did you see him? Did the king commit this stupid misdemeanour? This silly thing can never enter a king’s head.” The comrades of Sringi joined their voices and testified that they too saw the person responsible for this sacrilege. “Master! We saw the dead snake and we ran to where Sringi was and brought him here. Sringi got so angry that he took the water of the Kausika river in his hand and threw it at that person who was walking very fast, pronouncing at the same time, with appropriate ritual formulae the curse: let the person who placed the dead snake die of snakebite, the seventh day from today.”

Sameeka was shocked at this news. He was astonished at the behaviour of his son. He pushed him out of his lap onto the floor. “What! Did you throw a curse like that? Alas, that the son of a sage should have behaved like this? What a calamitous curse for this trivial offence! Yours is a wrong which can never be atoned. You are a disgrace to the group of comrades around you, for you cannot bear with fortitude such a silly, insignificant prank! I am ashamed to say that such a boy is my son. You have no strength of mind to bear such little affronts. Oh, what a pity! Alas, that your childishness should plunge all sages and ascetics into ill-fame. People will say they have not got even elementary patience and fortitude! Do not show me your face; to see it is a sacrilege. To punish people for wrongs done is the duty of the king; not that of the recluse in the forest. The recluse who pronounces curses is no recluse at all.

“Moved by the yearning to achieve the Vision and the Presence of the Guide and Guardian of all the Worlds, the recluse has given up all attachment. He has established himself in the forest; he lives on fruits and roots. He denounces all catering to the senses as detrimental to spiritual progress. That such horrid curses born of impatience and egoism should come on the tongue of a recluse is a sign of impending doom. It marks the dawn of the Iron Age of Untruth,” Sameeka said.

“Alas! What a great sin you have added to your burden today,” he remarked. He described to his son and his comrades the heinousness of the act that Sringi had done.