

## CHAPTER 26

### CURSE OR GOD SEND?

**T**he messenger from the hermitage said: “Oh, Emperor, our Preceptor has a son. Though he is of tender years, the splendour of his spiritual attainment is overwhelming. He reveres his father as his God and has as his chief aim in life, his service and the upkeep of his renown. His name is Sringi. You came to that hermitage; propelled by some inscrutable impulse, you placed a dead snake round the neck of the father of this Sringi, who is also my Preceptor. A few children saw it and they ran towards Sringi, who was engaged in games with his comrades, to inform him. He did not believe it at first. He continued with his game. But the children of the hermitage repeated the news often and insistently. They jeered at him for merrily playing on, when his father had been insulted so grossly. Even his playmates

laughed at his callousness. So, he ran as fast as he could towards his cottage, and found that their report was true.

“When he turned back, he saw you moving off from the place, and without any sense of discrimination about what is of lasting significance and what is of temporary interest, urged on by frantic passion and anger, that teenage fellow lost control over himself, pronounced a curse on you. This has caused unending pain to my Preceptor.” The Emperor interrupted him and asked, “Oh son of a hermit, tell me what the curse is.” The youth replied, “Lord, I find it hard to tell you. My tongue refuses to utter it. But yet I have to communicate it since my Preceptor has commissioned me to do so. The son of my Preceptor promptly took the waters of the holy Kowsiki river in his palm, and pronounced, ‘Seven days from this day, may the King be bitten by the snake, Thakshaka,’ a terrible curse, indeed.” The youth stopped, for his grief overpowered him and he broke into tears.

But the Emperor only smiled. He said, “Young hermit, is this a curse? To be bitten by Thakshaka, and that seven days later? This is no curse, this is a signal gift of Grace! This is a blessing from the lips of the son of the Preceptor. Immersed in the affairs of the empire, I had become slothful regarding the affairs of the spirit, and of God, which are the goals of life. As a result, the merciful Lord, Hari, moved the tongue of that Rishi’s son to articulate those words. He has allotted me an interval of seven days! What a great blessing

is this! It must be Divine Will that I should spend every moment of these seven days in the contemplation of God. From this very second I shall dedicate both time and thought, without intermission at the Feet of the Lord. Young friend, what more did your Preceptor command you to inform me? Tell me soon. My heart is yearning to hear it.”

The young messenger continued, “My Preceptor felt that this curse amounted to unpardonable treason for you are well established in Dharma, and you are a great devotee of the Lord. So, he sought for long to discover some means by which the consequences of the curse could be avoided. However, he came to know through his yogic skill, that you are destined to give up your life as a result of snakebite and destined also to reach the Seat of the Lord on death. He felt that this was an end which was worthwhile; and that it was sinful to obstruct such a glorious consummation. So, he sends you, through me, his blessings that you may reach the Presence of God. I have now finished my mission. I can leave, as soon as you permit me.”

Parikshit prostrated before the young disciple and prayed that his reverential gratitude may be communicated to that great saint Sameeka and his son. At this, he left and reaching the hermitage, he informed the hermit all that transpired at the capital.

Meanwhile, the emperor proceeded in great joy to the inner apartments, and standing before the entrance of the zenana, he asked that his son Janamejaya, be brought to

him. Hearing the call, the son wondered why he was summoned so suddenly; and he ran towards the father. Parikshit got an old Brahmin into his room, and placing on the son’s head his own crown lying on the cot, he walked barefoot, with just the clothes he had on at the moment, towards the Ganga, entrusting the new King to the old priest.

Within minutes, the news spread all over the place and all through the City. Groups of men and women, brahmins and ministers hurried behind the king and remonstrated piteously; but it was all in vain. They wept aloud. They fell at his feet. They rolled along the road across his path. The king did not notice anything. He vouchsafed no reply. He moved on, with the Name of the Lord in his mind and with the Goal of Realisation in his thought. He was fast moving towards the bank of the Holy Ganga. Finding that the King had left, alone and unattended, to the River, the Royal Elephant, the Royal Horse, the Palanquin were taken in a line behind him, so that he may ascend any one of them as was his wont; but the King did not pay any attention to the importunities. The people were amazed to see their ruler discard food and drink. He was engaged without a moment’s break in the recitation of the Name of the Lord. Since no one knew the reason for this sudden resolution to renounce, all sorts of rumours got afloat based on the imaginative faculty of each individual.

But some people investigated the antecedents of the event of renunciation and discovered that the disciple of a hermit had come with some important news, and following

that cue, it was known that the king had only seven days more to live. The people gathered on the bank of the river and sat sunk in grief around the king, praying for his safety.

The tragic news spread so fast that it reached even the forest. The ascetics and Sadhakas, the sages and saints—they too trekked along to the bank of Ganga, with water pots in their hands. The whole place put on the appearance of a huge festival. The place resounded to the chanting of the Pranava, the recitation of Vedic hymns, and the singing in chorus of the glory of the Lord. Some groups were roundly scolding the son of Sameeka who was the cause of all the tragedy. Thus, in a short time, the bank was filled with human heads, so that not a grain of sand could be seen.

Meanwhile, an aged hermit who was filled with great pity and affection towards the Emperor approached him and, shedding tears of love, he spoke to him thus: “Oh King! people say all kinds of things. There are many versions going round from mouth to mouth. I have come to you to find out the truth, I can walk only with great difficulty. I love you so much that I cannot bear to hear all that people say about you. What exactly did happen? What is the reason for this sudden act of sacrifice? What is the mystery behind the curse that the son of a hermit pronounced on such a highly evolved soul as you? Declare it! Satisfy our craving to know the truth. I cannot look on while the people are suffering like this. You were like a father to them. Now, you pay no heed to their pleadings. You have given up all

attachments and come here. Speak to them at least a few words of solace. With you, sitting silent and hungry on the river bank, engaged in rigorous asceticism, the queens and ministers are like fish thrown out of water. Who was that young man, whose words caused this disastrous storm? Can he be genuinely the son of a hermit? Or, is that only a disguise? It is all a mystery to me.”

The King listened to these words, spoken with such affection and equanimity. He opened his eyes, and fell at the feet of the sage. “Master! Mahatma! What have I to hide from you? It cannot be hidden, even if I want to. I went into the forest a-hunting. Many wild animals were seen but they scattered at our approach. The small band of bow men that was with me was also scattered in the attempt to pursue the animals. I found myself alone on the track of game and I was far away from my retinue. I got no game. I was overcome with hunger and thirst. The scorching heat exhausted me. At last, I discovered a hermitage and entered it. I came to know later that it was the cottage of Rishi Sameeka. I called out repeatedly to discover whether there was anyone in. No answer came, nor did anyone come out. I saw a hermit sitting in deep meditation, lost in his own Dhyana. While coming out from the cottage, I felt something soft under my foot. I lifted it with my fingers and found it was a dead serpent. As soon as my eyes fell on it, my intelligence was poisoned. A foul thought came into me. I placed it round the neck of that hermit engaged in Dhyana. This was somehow cognised by the son of that hermit. He

could not bear the ignominy. He cursed, ‘May this snake round the neck of my father take the form of Thakshaka and end the life of the man who insulted my father thus, on the seventh day from today.’

“News was sent to me from the hermitage, of this curse and its consequence. I am conscious of the sin I have committed. I feel that a king capable of this sin has no place in the kingdom. So, I have given up everything, every attachment. I have decided to use these seven days, for the ceaseless contemplation of the Glory of God. It is great good fortune that this chance has been given to me. That is why I have come here.”

Thus, when the nobles, courtiers, princes, queens, ministers, hermits and others who were around him came to know the true facts, they dropped from their minds the wild guesses they had made so far. They prayed aloud that the curse may lose its fatal sting.