

CHAPTER 38

SERPENT KALIYA

“Listen, Oh King, to this momentous event,” said Suka. “The Divine Boy, Gopala, was but God who had taken human form in sheer sport. He grew up like human children and attained the age of five. One day—no one can know the significance of His movements—He was never in the habit of communicating to others, about His sports or Leelas, either before or after. One has only to observe and obey. No one can guess their nature or plumb their meaning whoever he may be, whatever his attainments. One day, He collected the cattle secretly, so that even the parents did not know anything about it. Every day, the elder brother at least would know and he would also accompany, but that day, even he was not aware of the goings-on. Krishna got together His comrades from the cowherd homes, and proceeded with the cattle to the bank of the Yamuna river. He took

them to a deep pool in the river, which people generally avoided.

“That pool had a sinister history. Pools such as that one will naturally be stagnant and slushy, but this pool was blue in colour and boiling hot. The water was bubbling ceaselessly emitting steam into the upper air. A cloud hung over it, in consequence. Whoever breathed that atmosphere fouled by the fumes breathed his last, to the consternation and amazement of all. Birds that innocently flew over that pool were so fatally poisoned that they flapped their wings violently in despair and rolled down dead into its depths.

“Everyone in Gokul knew all about this mortal trap, this deadly wonder. They were carefully avoiding approaching it. They warned their children against it. They vigilantly prevented their cattle from grazing anywhere near it. Of course, His comrades protested vehemently and pleaded with Krishna that He should not go near that pool. They prayed, long and loud, but it was all in vain. He asserted that He must go to that very pool. That was His predetermined destination that day. The boys drew Him back and did their best to prevent the inevitable ‘disaster.’ He shook them off, and removing His clothes announced that He would delight in swimming, inside that poison pool!

“The boys could not muster enough courage to warn Him aloud against the terrors of that pool. Their mild protestations, He brushed aside. With a certain perverse Will of His own, He got upon a tree on the bank and plunged

into the horrid pool, by the side of the bank. He did not come up for a long time. The cowherd boys, for whom Krishna was the very breath of their lives, were overwhelmed with fear. They gathered round the pool and started calling Him in unbearable agony, sobbing and shedding tears of extreme grief.

“Meanwhile, Gopala appeared above the waters, shaking the pool (as if an earthquake was rocking it) with the strokes of His swimming. Suddenly, they saw a huge serpent following Him, spitting poison and belching fire like a volcano, through its glowing eyes. The boys could not look on at this dreadful scene, without bawling out in uncontrollable anguish, ‘Krishna! Come on to the bank. Come this way. Come to this bank.’ Krishna swam about, as if He did not hear their prayers. He was happy in the pool, thrilled with excitement and joy. At last, the serpent succeeded in pursuing Krishna round the pool through the high tossing waves. It wound itself round His body, gradually tightening the grip. Seeing this, some boys ran as fast as they could to Gokul, and broke the news to Nanda and Yasoda, the father and the mother of Krishna. They wept aloud, while telling them what had happened.

“Immediately, Nanda and Yasoda, with all the gopas and gopis, the entire population of Gokul, ran towards the poison pool, urged on by fear that some dire calamity was about to overtake Krishna. Balarama, the elder brother too, was among them. He knew the strength and skill of Krishna.

So, he calmed the anxiety of the parents. He assured them that no calamity can befall Krishna. He consoled and conferred confidence in many ways. Within a short time, the bank of the river was packed thick with people. On all sides, the cry of despair, ‘Krishna, Krishna!’ was resounding from every throat, steeped in grief. Many fainted and lost consciousness when they cast their looks at Krishna and the serpent. Oh, it was indeed a heartrending sight!

“Many gopis could not bear to see Krishna caught in the coils of that mighty monster, dragged down into the blood-red waters one moment, pulling Himself up the next, struggling valiantly with the serpent which was emitting fiery sparks of poison. Yasoda and many gopis swooned and fell on the sands. They were nursed by others back into consciousness. When they came to, they wept plaintively and called out the name of their beloved Krishna, ‘My dear child, where was this horrible serpent hiding all this while? Why did it emerge now?’ lamented Yasoda, in despair.

“A few of His comrades sobbed, ‘Cannot the serpent strike its fangs on us instead of wounding Krishna? Can it not release Gopala?’ Some cowherd maidens, prepared themselves to plunge into the pool so that the serpents may give up Krishna and attack them, instead. ‘We shall give up our lives, so that Krishna may be saved,’ they declared. But Balarama stood in their way. He assured them that Krishna will come out unscathed, that no harm can approach him. He called out to Krishna to come to them soon after triumphing over the monster.

“Many gopis prayed ardently for victory to Krishna, for, ‘The safety of Krishna is the safety of the worlds. Our Krishna is the sole Sovereign of all the Worlds. Therefore, may Krishna be released quickly from the stranglehold of the serpent.’ Their prayers were addressed to the very Krishna whom they wished to save, by means of the prayer! They opened their eyes even while praying, to find out whether He had released Himself already. The huge gathering on the riverbank was awaiting, with eyes that did not even wink, the release of Krishna, that may happen any moment. They were overpowered by fear and anxiety, hope and faith.

“At that moment, Oh, how can I contemplate and describe that scene, to you, King?”—Suka could not proceed, He could not suppress the flow of Ananda, grief, wonder and adoration that rose from his heart. He was so overcome that he covered his face behind his clasped palms in a vain effort to suppress his tears.

Parikshit saw this and he exclaimed, “Master! Master! What wonder is this? What happened later? What calamity intervened that you are grieving thus? Please tell me quick.”

Suka recovered his composure, wiping the flow of tears with the end of his ochre robe. He said, “Maharaja. no calamity took place, yet this wonder happened. Krishna grew so fast, so big and so tall every moment that the serpent had to uncoil from around Him, ring by ring. When the gopas and gopis saw the little child growing before their very eyes, they were struck with amazement and joy. At

last, the serpent had to release its hold. It was too exhausted to do any harm. Still, its anger was unabated. So, it vomited poison into the waters and the air. It lifted its hoods every few moments, and fixed its glare on Krishna as if its desire to finish Him was still unquenched.

“Meanwhile, Krishna caught it by its tail and whirled the serpent pretty fast. He beat the surface of the water with its body. This forced the serpent to hang down its heads, but with great effort it struggled to keep them erect over the waters. Then, Krishna jumped upon it and holding the tail in one hand, He decided to dance upon the line of hoods! The serpent could not bear the weight of the Lord, stepping merrily from hood to hood. It was bleeding profusely from nose and mouth. It whined piteously through pain and shame. It could scarcely breathe. It was about to die.

“Seeing this, the people who were gathered on the bank shouted, in their joy and confidence, ‘Krishna, come over to the bank now. You have saved us all from this monster. The crisis is over. You have won the victory; our prayers have been answered. We have won the fruit of our good deeds.’ While the cowherds were thus exulting over the amazing turn of events, the serpentesses, who were the consorts of the monster; rose from the depths of the pool, sobbing aloud, and in great anguish. They fell at the feet of Krishna and prayed, ‘Lord! You have incarnated with the avowed object of punishing the wicked and the vicious. So, your trampling on this monster and curbing his pride is right and proper. It is but just. You have merely carried out

Your Task and Mission. But however cruel our husband was, we are sure that his nature has been transformed when Your Feet were planted on his heads. Pardon him, Oh Lord and give us back our husband, with your gracious blessings. Save him and bless him that he no longer cause any living thing any harm.'

“The Lord condescended to grant their prayers. He pardoned the monster, Kaliya. He released him, with the admonition: ‘Henceforth, do not inflict injury on anyone, without provocation, be Sathwic in nature. I bless you that no one will harm you and provoke you into vengeance. You carry on your heads My Footprints and so, even your natural enemy the Garuda eagle, will not harm you any more. Go and live in peace.’”