

Chapter 26. Curse or Godsend

Parikshith is informed of his impending death by snakebite

The messenger from the hermitage replied, “O, 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 his service and the upkeep of his renown as his chief aim in life. His name is Sringi. You came to the hermitage. Propelled by some inscrutable impulse, you placed a dead snake around the neck of Sringi’s father, who is also my preceptor. A few children saw it and ran to inform Sringi, who was engaged in games with his comrades. He didn’t believe it at first and continued with his game. But the children repeated the news often and insistently and 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 to the cottage as fast as he could and found that their report was true.

“When he turned back, he saw you moving off from the place. 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 and pronounced a curse on you. This has caused unending pain to my preceptor.”

The emperor interrupted him and asked, “O 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 I have to communicate it since my preceptor ordered me to do so. My preceptor’s son promptly took the waters of the holy Kausiki river in his palm and pronounced, ‘Seven days from this day, may the king be bitten by the snake, Takshaka.’ This is indeed a terrible curse.” The youth stopped, for his grief overpowered him, and he broke into tears.

Parikshith, in repentance, welcomes death

But the emperor only smiled. “Young hermit, is this a curse? To be bitten by Takshaka, 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 God, which are the goals of life. As a result, the merciful Lord, Hari, moved the tongue of that sages son to articulate those words. He has given me seven days! What a great blessing! 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’ll dedicate both time and thought, without intermission, at the Lord’s feet. Young friend, what more did your preceptor tell you to inform me? Tell me soon. My heart yearns 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 are a great devotee of the Lord. So he sought for long to discover some means to avoid the consequences of the curse. However, he came to know through his *yogic* skill that you are destined to give up your life as a result of snake bite and destined also to reach the seat of the Lord on death. He felt that this was a worthwhile end 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. My mission is finished; I can leave as soon as you permit me.”

Parikshith gives up his throne

Parikshith prostrated before the young disciple and asked him to communicate his reverential gratitude to the great saint Samika and his son. The messenger left and, reaching the hermitage, informed the hermit all that transpired at the capital.

Meanwhile, the emperor went in great joy to the inner apartments. Standing before the entrance of the women's quarters, he asked for his son, Janamejaya. Hearing the call, the son wondered why he was summoned so suddenly, and he ran toward the father. Parikshith got an old *brahmin* into his room. He placed his own crown on his son's head, entrusted the new king to the old priest, and walked barefoot toward the Ganga, with just the clothes he had on at the moment.

Within minutes, the news spread throughout 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 didn't 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 moving fast toward the bank of the holy Ganga.

Finding that the king had left alone and unattended, the royal elephant, the royal horse, and the palanquin were taken in a line behind him so that he could ascend any one of them as was his wont. But the king didn't pay any attention. 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 started based on the imaginative faculty of each individual.

But some people investigated and discovered that the disciple of a hermit had come with some important news. They learned 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 far that it even reached the forest. The ascetics and spiritual seekers (*sadhakas*), the sages and saints—they too trekked to the bank of Ganga, with water pots in their hands. The whole place put on the appearance of a huge festival. It resounded to the chanting of the *Om* (primal sacred sound), the recitation of *Vedic* hymns, and the singing in chorus of the glory of the Lord. Some groups were roundly scolding Samika's son, who was the cause of all the tragedy. Thus, in a short time, the bank was so filled with human heads that not a grain of sand could be seen.

Parikshith confesses and tells about the curse of death

Meanwhile, an aged hermit who was filled with great pity and affection toward the emperor approached him and, shedding tears of love, spoke to him. "O king! People are saying 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 can't bear to hear all that people say about you. What exactly did happen? Why this sudden act of sacrifice? What's the mystery behind the curse that a hermit's son pronounced on such a highly evolved soul as you? Tell us! Satisfy our craving to know the truth.

"I can't look on while the people are suffering like this. You were like a father to them, and now you pay no heed to their pleading. You have given up all attachments and have come here. Speak at least a few words of solace to them. 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 sage’s feet. “Master! Great soul! What have I to hide from you? It can’t be hidden, even if I want to. I went into the forest hunting. Many wild animals were seen, but they scattered at our approach. The small band of bowmen that was with me was also scattered in pursuing the animals. I found myself alone on the track of game, but far away from my retinue. I got no game. The scorching heat exhausted me, and I was overcome with hunger and thirst. At last, I discovered a hermitage and entered it. I came to know later that it was the cottage of Sage Samika. I called out repeatedly to discover whether someone was home. There was no answer, and no one came out. I saw a hermit sitting, lost in his deep meditation. 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, and a foul thought came into me. I placed it around the neck of that hermit engaged. This was somehow cognised by the hermit’s son, and he could not bear the ignominy. He cursed me: ‘May this snake around my father’s neck take the form of Takshaka and end the life of the man who insulted my father thus, on the seventh day from today.’

“The sage sent me news of this curse and its consequence. I’m conscious of the sin I 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 for me to receive this chance. That’s why I have come here.”

When the nobles, courtiers, princes, queens, ministers, hermits, and others who were around him learned the facts, they dropped the wild guesses they had made so far from their minds and prayed aloud for the curse to lose its fatal sting.