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KRISHNAVATARA

VOLUME I

THE MAGIC FLUTE

By

K. M. MUNSHI



1962

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INTRODUCTION

Who has not heard of Sri Krishna who delivered the message of the *Bhagavad Gita* and whom the *Bhagavat* calls 'God Himself' ?

From the earliest days that my memories can go back to, Sri Krishna has been, in a sense, dominating my imagination. In my childhood, I heard his adventures with breathless amazement. Since then I have read of him, sung of him, admired him, worshipped him in a hundred temples and every year on his birthday at home. And day after day, for years and years, his message has been the strength of my life.

Unfortunately, his fascinating personality, which could be glimpsed in what may be called the original *Mahabharata*, has been overlaid with legends, myths, miracles and adorations for about three thousand years.

Wise and valorous, he was, loving and loved, far-seeing and yet living for the moment, gifted with sage-like detachment and yet intensely human ; the diplomat, the sage and the man of action with a personality as luminous as that of a divinity.

The urge, therefore, came upon me, time and again, to embark upon a reconstruction of his life and adventures by weaving a romance around him.

It was an impossible venture, but like hundreds of authors in all parts of India for centuries, I could not help offering him whatever little of imagination and creative power I possessed, feeble though they were.

I have called the whole work *Krishnavatara, The Descent of the Lord*. This, the First Part, which ends with the death of Kamsa, has been named "The Magic Flute", for

it deals with his boyhood associated with the flute, which hypnotised men, animals and birds alike, sung with such loving tenderness by innumerable poets.

I have named the Second Part, which ends with Rukmini Haran, as "The Wrath of an Emperor", as the central theme is the successful defiance by Sri Krishna of Jarasandha, the Emperor of Magadha.

The Third Part, which is now being serially published in the "Bhavan's Journal", is entitled "The Five Brothers" which, I hope, will end with Draupadi's *swayamvara*.

In portraying Sri Krishna's life and adventures, I had, like many predecessors, to create episodes in order to bring out his character, attitudes and outlook in the perspective which has appeared natural to me. I have also had to give flesh and blood to the various shadowy characters referred to in the *Mahabharata*. I have, therefore, had to take unforgivable liberties with the accepted image which, I trust, the devout would forgive.

K. M. MUNSHI

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan,
Chaupatty Road, Bombay 7.
December 13, 1962.

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KRISHNAVATARA

VOLUME I

THE MAGIC FLUTE

INVOCATION

*I salute Thee, O Vyasa,
With Thy all-embracing intellect and wide-eyed vision,
lighted the torch of knowledge,
Fed by Thy immortal epic, the Mahabharata.*

*I salute Thee, O Krishna, Thou that blessest all,
Thou that givest to those that come to Thee
All that they want.*

*Thou art the giver of all gifts.
Thou art the chastiser of the wicked.
Thou art the source of all knowledge.
Thou art the One who gave us the life-giving Gita.*

*I salute Thee, Thou God among gods,
Thou, the son of Vasudeva,
The destroyer of Kamsa and Chanur—
Thou, the eternal joy of Devaki,
Thou, O Krishna, art the world's supreme Teacher.*

*I salute Thee, Madhava,
Thou alone makest the mute eloquent and the
cripple scale mountains.*

*I seek Thy Grace, Lord,
From Thee alone floweth the stream of Bliss.*

PROLOGUE

Mother Prithvi, Earth, the Mother of us all, bathed in tears, approached Narayana, the Lord, as He swung on Ananta, Endless Time.

The Mother folded Her hands and addressed the Lord thus : 'Thou All-Powerful, Thou Final Refuge of those in distress, I cannot bear the weight of misery any more. In Thy wisdom, Lord, Thou didst command me to raise sons and daughters who, rising from joy to joy, would find everlasting happiness in devotion to Thee. However, Lord, a new race of men and women has sprung up, whose wickedness is great and who have turned their faces away from Thee.

'Those who rule men have grown selfish and their thoughts are evil. In their lust for power, they oppress and persecute my children, and they deny Dharma the Law of Righteousness. They part men from their wives, children from their parents. They sow the seeds of hate where love once reigned supreme.

'Through force or guile men and women are taught by these wicked rulers to debase themselves before their wealth and power. They are seduced into unrighteous ways by dancing, drink and lechery. They are led to reject Thee and take delight in their own might. Homes are broken ; temples are desecrated; saints are derided, stoned or crucified.

'Lord, I am weighed down with grief. Redeem Thy promise, O Merciful One, and save me.'

Then the Lord said to Mother Prithvi in loving accents :

‘ My child, I already knew what Thou hast told me. Do not fear. My word is pledged to thee and shall ever remain so. Whenever Dharma declines, I shall descend to earth to root out wickedness. *Those devoted to me shall never perish.*’

So Mother Prithvi begged the Lord :

‘ Then, I pray Thee, Lord, come and save my children.’

And then the Lord said : ‘*I will.*’

THE MARRIAGE OF VASUDEVA AND DEVAKI

In the great days of the Dvapara Yuga the Yadavas were settled in the fertile valley of the Yamuna which went by the name of Vrajabhumi. It was full of shady trees, flowering creepers and luscious pastures on which the wealth of the Yadavas, vast herds of cattle, were fattening. Mount Govardhan was the pivot of this smiling land, and the Yadavas worshipped it.

Several clans like Kukkura, Andhaka, Vrishni, Satwat, Bhoja, Madhu and Shooru, formed the Yadava confederacy, which was also called Vrishni Samgha. Their constitution was republican. However, the Andhakas were the most powerful of the clans and took pride in calling their chief 'King' as a courtesy title.

The Yadavas were a brave and virile race; they were also proud of their high position among the peoples of the earth, for they claimed descent from Brahma, the Creator Himself.

Brahma had two sons: Atri and Daksha. Daksha begot Aditi, who begot Vivasvat; Vivasvat begot Manu. Ila, the daughter of Manu, was married to Soma and gave birth to Pururavas, who in the prime of his life fell in love with Urvashi, the beloved *apsara* of the gods.

Pururavas had two sons, the elder being Ayusha. Ayusha begot five sons; the mightiest of them was Nahusha, whose first-born was Yayati. Yayati was the first on earth to be a great conqueror; he conquered both the daemons and the gods. Yayati's first wife was Devayani. She was the daughter of the Bhargava Sage, Shukracharya, the High-Priest of the daemons. By virtue of his *tapas* the Sage

abased the pride of gods. Devayani gave birth to two sons: Yadu and Turvasu.

The descendants of Yadu were known as Yadavas. Yadu had a son called Kroshtu. Kroshtu's son, Devamindhush, begot a son, by name Shoora.

In the Treta Yuga which preceded the Dvapara, the daemon Madhu lived in the forests of Vrajabhumi where he became so strong that they were known as Madhuvana. Madhu cleared the forest and founded a settlement on the banks of the Yamuna which came to be known as Mathura.

Great wickedness was caused on earth by the sons of Madhu and men trembled at their very name. Shatrughna, the brother of Sri Ramachandra, in whom God had descended in that age, was angry at the sons of Madhu whose hearts were evil. He invaded Mathura and destroyed that race of sinful men. He also cleared some forest areas in the valley, and under him and his sons of the Ikshvaku dynasty, the former Madhuvana settlements flourished as never before.

Then Shoora achieved power among men. Led by him, the Yadavas invaded Mathura and conquered the descendants of Shatrughna. Then the Yadavas built settlements in the valley. They grew rich in cattle, silver and gold. And Vrajabhumi came to be known as Shoorasena after him.

Vasudeva was descended from Shoora. He was born when the stars were propitious. Then bugles sounded in the heavens and kettledrums resounded on the earth; hence he was known as Anakdundubhi. Flowers were also showered on him by the gods, for he was beautiful like the moon and his fame was to spread till the end of time.

Vasudeva had five sisters, of whom one was Pritha. She was adopted by the King of Kuntibhoja. Later she became the wife of Pandu and the mother of three of the five Pandavas, the conquerors in the Bharata War, whose names were destined to be inscribed in human memory for all time. One of Vasudeva's sisters was married to the King of Chedi's son and gave birth to Sishupala.

Vasudeva was the chief of the Shooras, who had vast herds of cattle. However, as we have said before, the Andhakas, another clan descended from one of the sons of Kroshtu, had become powerful and Vasudeva was a feudatory to their chieftain, Ugrasena, whom people called the 'King.' Ugrasena had five sons and nine daughters. The first-born of his sons was Kamsa.

Devaka, the brother of Ugrasena, had four sons and seven daughters, of whom Devaki was the loveliest.

There was strife between the Shooras and the Andhakas. Their herdsmen often fought with one another. And the elders of the two tribes decided that Devaki should be wedded to Vasudeva, so that they could live in peace ever afterwards. The marriage took place in the Palace of King Ugrasena.

Vasudeva went round the Sacred Fire seven times, leading the girl, whose face was like the moon and who was gifted with incomparable charms. The auspicious event was announced to the world by the joyful sound of conchs and fifes, hand-drums and kettledrums. And the Yadavas were happy, for they had never seen so fine a man and wife matched in such perfect harmony.

KAMSA'S WRATH

Of all the wicked princes of Bharata, the son of King Ugrasena was the most wicked. He was bold and cratty, haughty, revengeful and obstinate. Allied to powerful princes, he was a terror to friends and foes alike; he respected no law, human or divine. He scoffed at the wise, derided the saintly and hated those who had devoted themselves to God.

At the time when Devaki was being united with Vasudeva in wedlock, Narada, the ancient Sage, the incarnate conscience of those who loved God, came to Kamsa. In welcoming the Sage the Prince offered worship and asked for his blessing.

In reply, the Sage exhorted Kamsa to forswear his evil ways. He said, 'None who disregard the law of *dharmā* can ever win the final victory.'

Kamsa laughed and exclaimed: 'Master, law or no law, nothing shall stand in my way. I have no fear of God; He is only a phantom with which to frighten the weak. And I am strong. My will is supreme law; I accept no other. And I will force everyone to obey it.'

Narada, the divine Sage, smiled indulgently as only the wise can.

'The law of *dharmā*, my son, is unalterable. No one, not even you, can escape it. Remember, whenever righteousness declines, God Himself comes down to the earth to re-establish it,' the Sage said.

Kamsa laughed haughtily. 'Sage, neither man nor God dare cross my path.'

'Are you so sure of yourself? If you are, you are doomed. It has been so decreed by the gods,' said the

Sage, for his eyes had seen the rise and fall of wicked men age after age.

‘Who will dare touch me?’, asked Kamsa in scorn.

The Sage meditated in silence for a while. Then he said : ‘Prince, proud though you are of your might, I know that He has willed your destruction. The eighth child of Devaki, the daughter of your uncle, will slay you.’ The Sage vanished before Kamsa could reply.

Though his father Ugrasena was king, Kamsa himself ruled Mathura. The neighbouring kings, as did all his subjects and theirs, trembled at his name, for no one was able to resist him. The prophecy of the divine Sage, therefore, made him furious.

At the very time when his death was foretold by the Sage Narada, Devaki was just being married to Vasudeva. Kamsa was mad with rage. He was going to leave nothing to chance; he would kill Devaki here and now; no child of hers would be there to fulfil the prophecy.

So, fiery-eyed, Kamsa strode towards the palace-gates where the marriage procession was ready to start. The men and women joyfully forming the procession saw Kamsa coming, cruel as the god of Death. They stood terrified. The drums stopped beating. The fifes and the conchs were silent.

Kamsa angrily walked up to the bridal chariot. To the horror of his royal father and the noble kinsmen who stood there, Kamsa seized Devaki by the hair and pulled her out of the chariot.

A moment before, the newly-wedded bride, bedecked with ornaments and glowing with hopes, had been all joy. Now as she was dragged down from the chariot by Kamsa, a scream of horror escaped her lips.

King Ugrasena, who knew the wild temper of his son, was moved to grief at what his son was doing and stood stupefied. Vasudeva, the young Yadava prince, jumped down from the chariot and seized the hand of Kamsa which held an uplifted sword.

'Most noble Prince, scion of Bhoja's glorious line, what are you doing?' he asked in amazement, adding, 'You are killing your sister, a helpless young girl, just married.'

'Stand aside,' Kamsa shouted, as he tried to cast off Vasudeva, and his eyes were wild with fury.

Devaka, brother of King Ugrasena, laid a restraining hand on Kamsa. 'Son, let Devaki go', he said : 'What has she done to you? Let her go.'

Kamsa stamped his foot imperiously. 'I will not let her live. She shall die.'

Vasudeva was wise beyond his years. He had grown up under the shadow of Kamsa's power and knew the futility of resisting the Prince when he was in an angry mood. With folded hands, therefore, he thus besought Kamsa : 'Noblest of Bhojas, listen to me. Why are you so angry with us ?'

'I had a warning from the gods,' said Kamsa, his eyes rolling in brutal ferocity. 'They say that Devaki's eighth child is going to kill me. I am going to see that that does not happen.'

Vasudeva knew that there was no one in that vast assembly who could stand between Kamsa and his fiery will.

'Noblest of men, is that all?' he folded his hands and said, 'The gods never said that there was danger to you from this poor girl. Why kill her? The prophecy, as you say, was that her eighth child would kill you. I am your loyal kinsman, pledged to protect you against all danger. Let Devaki live. I solemnly promise you that I will present you every son of hers the moment he is born. Then you can do as you like with him, and the prophecy will not be fulfilled.'

Kamsa glared at his father, his uncle, at the terrified Devaki and at his kinsmen who stood aghast and grief-stricken. He was shrewd and crafty and saw the unwisdom of turning the Yadavas, who looked resentful, against him. So he decided to let Devaki live.

‘I shall let Devaki live only on one condition,’ he said. ‘Take the wedding procession to the Gajaraja palace. It will be guarded day and night by my trusted men. Vasudeva, I shall hold you to your promise. Every child of Devaki, as soon as it is born, shall be handed over to me. Remember this; make no mistake about it; I will not let a single child of yours live, whatever happens.’

KAMSA MAKES A PLAN

The Shooras as well as their allies, the Satwats and the Kukkuras, felt deeply humiliated at the incarceration of Vasudeva and Devaki, and that too on their wedding day. The Andhakas, the clan of which King Ugrasena was the chief, also felt disturbed by the barbarous conduct of their prince.

And so it came to pass that this dissatisfaction soon led to sullen resentment against Kamsa. A few months after, he heard from his spies that the dissatisfaction was growing. The high-souled Yadavas were discussing among themselves not only what he had done to the Chief of the Shooras, but all his wicked doings. The women also were furious. They felt that the sufferings of Devaki were their own, and that not one of them could escape such a fate, and even worse, should Kamsa decree it.

Kamsa, however, was not frightened by this growing resentment. He felt that the crowd was being presumptuous, and decided to crush all who opposed or criticized him. He would destroy them all, hip-and-thigh, he said to himself, and called his loyal adherents to a secret conclave.

Kamsa's henchmen were a strange group of men. They were drawn not only from the Yadava tribes but also from those whose ways were evil. Most of them respected no law, divine or human. They lived at Kamsa's expense and did whatever he commanded and moved among the people only to keep them in constant dread. In his name, they beat or imprisoned those whom they counted disloyal. They also destroyed families and often stole women to satisfy his or their lust.

Kamsa, with rising fury, heard the reports which they made to him. They said, 'The Yadavas speak of our noble lord's deeds as barbarous and wicked. They have sympathy only for Vasudeva and Devaki. Time and again they have approached King Ugrasena to complain about our lord's misdeeds. The old King is weak and is always ready to listen to complaints against our lord.'

Putana was the wife of the chief of Kamsa's advisers. She made it her business to know what the Yadava women felt and talked about Kamsa. She was a stalwart, ferocious woman, and had an offensive manner, all her own. Kamsa liked her more than his other agents, for he knew that she was the only one among them who, unafraid, reported the naked truth.

'The Yadava women, every one of them, hate you, master,' she said. 'They bear you such ill-will that they encourage their men-folk to conspire against you. Their sympathies are all for Devaki. The more you persecute her and Vasudeva, the more they love them. They have heard of the prophecy and are even looking forward to her eighth child to redeem the Yadava race.'

Kamsa sat pulling at his moustache in suppressed anger. Having heard his agents, he made up his mind to teach the Yadavas a lesson, and a diabolical scheme started brewing in his mind.

A few days later Kamsa went to the forest of Agravan to hunt. Then he paid a visit to Bhauma, the ruler of a little principality on the outskirts of Vrajabhumi. Kamsa and Bhauma had been friends since their boyhood. With Bana, the ruler of another adjoining principality, they had lived as students in the *ashrama* of Galava Rishi and by their wild tricks kept the inmates of the *ashrama* in constant dread. So greatly did they harass the *ashrama* that the Guru had been forced to request King Ugrasena to withdraw his son from it.

Since those days Kamsa had developed a hatred of men devoted to learning who had taken a vow of non-possession, because they attempted to be a law unto them-

selves. The three friends had remained bound in close friendship even after they grew up.

Bhauma and Bana had never outgrown their admiration for their bold and crafty leader. Now they were looking forward to the day when Kamsa, as the head of the Yadavas, would start on a career of conquest; that was their only hope of enlarging their small domains.

During the days on which Kamsa was the guest of Bhauma, Bana joined them. When the three met, they talked about the happenings in Mathura. They were all agreed that the Yadavas who tried to raise their heads must be crushed. Something also had to be done to prevent Ugrasena from being the rallying-point of the malcontents. Kamsa all but hated his father, who by temperament was kind-hearted and by tradition looked upon his subjects as his children. 'The old fool,' said Kamsa, 'always loves to see them come to him and never could deny himself the pleasure of interfering with my affairs.'

Kamsa knew his own mind; he was determined to suppress all Yadava malcontents ruthlessly. This could only be done if he introduced among his people a hostile element completely subservient to him.

Though he was heir to the leadership, the Yadavas were by instinct and tradition republican and peace-loving. Each clan loved its freedom. Naturally, therefore, they looked with distrust upon anyone who gathered power into his own hands; for that certainly meant war. This made Kamsa's position weak. Some day he might be a King, but only in name, never in reality; he could never launch upon a campaign of conquest. Something drastic had, therefore, to be done if he was to enjoy absolute power. He needed powerful friends and, until he found them, he had to be wary and patient.

The most formidable ruler of the day was King Jarasandha of Magadha. He was a great general. His powerful armies had been conquering neighbouring rulers and in war after war he had added other territories to Magadha.

Within a few years he was likely to attain the imperial status of a Chakravarti.

To Kamsa, Jarasandha was a hero whose deeds he wanted to emulate. Now that the time had come, he must take steps to achieve his goal. He would first help Magadha to win wars, if Jarasandha entered into a matrimonial alliance with him. In return Jarasandha was sure to help him acquire power over the Yadavas. And who knows? The King might die and fragments of his empire fall to his share!

The plan so cunningly devised was put into action at once. Bana, a distant cousin of Jarasandha, joyfully went on a mission to win the hand of his daughter for Kamsa. He succeeded beyond their expectations. Kamsa, a few months later, was married to two of the daughters of the King of Magadha.

When, after the wedding, the daughters of Jarasandha came to Mathura, they brought with them several Magadhan warriors, strong and fierce, who were pledged to support Kamsa against his own people. And Kamsa was longing for a war in order to break down the spirit of his people.

AKRURA, THE SAINTLY

When Kamsa was building up his strength, Vasudeva and Devaki were pining away in the solitude of the palace in which they were held captive.

Vasudeva ceaselessly prayed to Lord Vishnu to deliver them from captivity.

Vasudeva prayed for a deliverer, and so did Devaki, invoking God's Grace. She joined him in prayers and offered all the sacred vows which a noble wife should. But she had a desire of her own. She ardently wished to be the mother of the deliverer. Often at midnight she would awaken from her sleep, slip away from Vasudeva's side and, with folded hands, and bowed head, pray, 'Lord, the Refuge of All, make me the mother of the deliverer.' Often when she prayed in the early hours of the morning she would feel that her prayers were answered. And hope and faith buoyed her up during the anguished days and nights on which she was serving Vasudeva and helping him bear everything with courage.

Soon after Kamsa returned to Mathura with the Magadhan princesses, Devaki was delivered of a son. The news spread among the Yadavas and they trembled at the horrible prospect of Vasudeva's son being killed by Kamsa.

Akrura, the young chieftain of the Vrishnis, one of the Yadava clans, was a righteous man who always walked in the path of *Dharma*. He was highly respected by the Yadavas and the leaders implored him to intervene and persuade Kamsa against carrying out his wicked resolution. To kill an innocent babe was the height of barbarity, they urged.

Akrura agreed, and with several other chiefs, accompanied Vasudeva, when, true to his promise, he brought his first-born child to Kamsa.

Kamsa, seated on his throne and surrounded by his trusted followers and a few armed Magadhan warriors, received them without ceremony. Akrura tried to persuade Kamsa not to pursue his brutal course. Vasudeva, with tears in his eyes, also begged him to spare the child.

Akrura with folded hands said, 'Have some mercy, I beg you. What has the child done to you? To kill an innocent baby is unbecoming, un-Aryan, sinful. The danger to you, if any, is from the eighth child of Devaki, not the first.'

'I want to make sure against all danger', replied Kamsa, his brows knit.

'A king should be like Vishnu of the Four Hands, Mercy Incarnate,' said Vasudeva, pressing the child to his bosom.

Kamsa heard them scornfully. Then he laughed a wicked, sinister laugh.

'If your God is merciful, invoke His aid,' retorted Kamsa. 'I am not a God. I don't want to be one. And I am not merciful.'

Akrura and Vasudeva continued to plead for a long time, but in vain. Kamsa went on staring at them scornfully. When they had finished, he stood up, snatched the child from the hands of Vasudeva and dashed its head against the ground. The Yadavas present there burst into groans of horror.

The Yadavas felt as if they had been struck by lightning when they heard the news that Kamsa had killed Vasudeva's child. They did not know what to do or to whom to turn. At last the leaders went to the palace of King Ugrasena. Men wailed in grief, women beat their breasts. It was terrible. Something must be done to stop this savagery.

King Ugrasena heard the recital of his son's gruesome deed and tears fell from his eyes. With tottering steps, he proceeded to the palace of Kamsa to remonstrate with him.

What happened between the father and the son, when they met, no one knew. But the King did not come out of Kamsa's palace, and no one but his wives and chosen attendants could see him any more. He was now his son's captive. The Yadavas were shocked as never before, for, by the law of the Aryans, a father should be a god to his son.

The next day, Kamsa's mercenaries spread terror in Mathura. The saintly Akrura was locked up in the same palace in which Vasudeva and Devaki were. The houses of the chieftains who had accompanied him were set on fire. The guards of the King's palace were massacred. Men locked themselves up in their houses. Those who felt themselves to be singled out for punishment fled the town.

As Kamsa drove through the town, his chariot surrounded by trusted horsemen, celebrating his triumph, he heard the shouts of his henchmen and the screams of their victims. As he thought of his revenge, he pulled at his moustache; the Yadavas were now receiving their due, he thought.

In the palace which was their prison, Vasudeva sat in front of Devaki, as she lay on her bed, sobbing disconsolately. She was dry-eyed, for she had no strength even to shed tears. A cry of anguish arose from her desolate heart. 'Lord, my Beloved, Thou Fountain Source of Mercy, send the deliverer and soon.'

Akrura who was standing there gave them consolation : 'Sufferings are the melting-pot of the Lord. Do not fear, Devaki.'

To Vasudeva he said, 'The deliverer will come, Vasudeva. The ways of the Lord are inscrutable. Glad tidings came to me four days ago. In a few days the venerable Muni Krishna Dvaipayana on his way to Indra-prastha, will be halting here. He is the wisest among the wise and will show us some way.'

Akrura, though young in years, was old in knowledge, and unshaken in his faith in God's wisdom. And he was loved by the people of Mathura, whom he had always helped in their sorrow and distress.

Kamsa's spies brought him the report that the revolt had been suppressed. Many Yadava leaders had migrated to neighbouring territories with their families. Others had submitted to his will, their spirits crushed. But every one, even those who were loyal to him, felt unhappy about the injustice of punishing so saintly a person as Akrura.

Kamsa was quite satisfied with what he had achieved at the first stroke and wanted popular feelings to subside. Therefore it would, he thought, be a good device to set Akrura free. People would forget their resentment in praising his clemency.

Riders came from Bhishma, the great Kuru warrior. He was inviting Vasudeva to come to Indraprastha. Kamsa did not know what to reply. Bhishma was a formidable chief, who presided over the powerful empire of Hastinapura. To ignore his invitation would be to make an enemy of him. Kamsa could not find a way out of the difficulty. But he knew that Akrura was a favourite at Hastinapura, and might find some solution. And so Akrura was released from captivity.

Akrura wanted no favour from the tyrant. He went home and sent away his family to Gokul, but himself stayed in Mathura to bring comfort to the afflicted. He went from house to house and listened with deep sympathy to the reports of the atrocities which had been committed by the emissaries of Kamsa. He helped them in whatever way he could, and he gave them what he had in abundance and what they needed most—faith in the Lord. He said to them, 'Even our sufferings come from the Lord, for they are the furnace through which men must pass to come out as gold. But they will be able to pass, for sages have testified to what He has promised : *'Those devoted to Me shall not perish.'*

And hope entered men's hearts and gave them the courage to suffer and be strong.

KAMSA'S PREDICAMENT

When Akrura, the chief of the Vrishnis, was summoned by Kamsa to his palace, he was surprised to find the Prince crafty and even ingratiating.

Kamsa said, 'Akrura, I learn that this Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa whom they call the Best of Munis is coming to Mathura tomorrow. You must know why he is coming. Tell me all about it. It must be something connected with the message which I received from Bhishma the Terrible. Do you know that he has sent messengers to fetch Vasudeva to Indraprastha ?'

'I know that, mighty Prince,' replied Akrura.

'What does he come here for ?' Kamsa asked impatiently.

Akrura replied with a smile : 'How should I know ?'

'I am sure you do,' said Kamsa. 'Do you know him well ?'

'Yes, I do. I have met him several times,' replied Akrura.

'Is the Muni really the son of that fisher girl and is he the father of the young Kuru Princes ?' sneered Kamsa, his eyes full of malice.

Akrura answered, 'The Master makes no secret of it, nor is he ashamed of it. The venerable Satyavati, the grandmother of the Kuru Princes, is his mother. Though a fisherwoman's daughter, she gave birth to the Master. His father, as you may have heard, was Sage Parashara, the grandson of Sage Vasishtha at whose feet men worshipped.'

'Was the venerable Satyavati as beautiful as the people say when she was young ?' Kamsa asked sarcastically. 'What does she look like now ?'

For a moment Akrura was silent, for he did not want to say hasty words. Then he said, 'Lord, the venerable Satyavati looks exactly as an august empress should look. She is the very image of royal dignity and wisdom.' Akrura felt irritated at the way Kamsa was asking him questions about things he knew so well.

'A strange man, this Bhishma, who is called the Terrible. He remained single all his life to let his old father marry this fisher girl.' Kamsa maliciously wanted to spite Akrura by insulting the woman he held in respect.

Akrura again was silent for a moment trying to maintain self-control. Then he replied, 'I agree, Prince, that it is difficult for you to understand such men, but to the venerable Bhishma, his father King Santanu was a god, not in name, but in fact.'

For a moment Kamsa glared at Akrura. He read in his words a pointed reference to his own treatment of his father. 'But see what happened,' Kamsa pursued. 'Didn't Santanu's two sons die childless and didn't the queen have to call upon the Muni, her son, to come to her aid? And did he not beget Dhritarashtra and Pandu by the widows of his step-brothers?'

'Yes, by the ancestral law of *Niyoga*,'¹ Akrura replied to the insinuation.

Kamsa suddenly became ingratiating, and said, 'Now tell me, Akrura, the honest truth. You have been to Hastinapura a few months ago. Haven't you? Of the two Kuru Princes, Dhritarashtra is blind and cannot succeed to the empire of Bharata. The other one, Pandu, is weak and ailing. Neither has children. What will happen to the empire when they die?'

'What can happen to the Kuru empire while Bhishma stands guard over it? The Kurus flourish by Dharma and not by guile or force,' replied Akrura.

'I see,' said Kamsa. 'But why do they want Vasudeva in Indraprastha? It must be some trick of the old man.'

'I only know this that the venerable Bhishma is above all deceit,' replied Akrura.

'But I am not going to allow Vasudeva to go,' said Kamsa.

'I know you will not, but then you will offend Bhishma, and if his anger is roused, he will be terrible. If you are wise you will not stop Vasudeva from going. But he himself will not go and leave Devaki behind and you, Prince, are not likely to let her go with him.'

'Right, right,' said Kamsa laughing. 'You are a clever man, Akrura. What reply shall I then send to Bhishma? Come, tell me. Shall I send uncle Devaka instead? Tell me what to tell the Muni if he brings the same message.'

'Why not tell the truth?' asked Akrura. 'You will not let Vasudeva and Devaki go because they will not return, and you are afraid that one of their sons will kill you.'

Kamsa growled, 'You are talking foolishly. Why should I trouble about that?'

'Because everyone knows it,' Akrura replied with a smile.

'Look here, Akrura, you are trying to be too clever for me,' said Kamsa. 'I want Vasudeva himself to refuse to go. He won't leave Devaki behind. Also, I want you to go yourself instead. That would keep the terrible old Bhishma contented.'

Akrura was again silent for a little while. Then he said, 'I will consult the Muni tomorrow. If he approves what you say, I shall go.'

'And if he does not?' asked Kamsa angrily.

'Then, I won't go,' Akrura replied quietly.

'You know what will happen to you if you don't go,' said Kamsa, his eyes flashing with anger.

'Life and death are in the hands of the Lord, mighty Prince,' replied Akrura and bowing low with folded hands left the room.

Kamsa got up from his throne and shouted, 'I am going hunting this evening. I don't want to see the Muni. You do as I told you.'

Akrura turned round and smiled in reply.

THE PROPHECY OF VEDA VYASA

Next day the crowd on the Vrishni Ghat stood watching three boats coming down the river. Reports had already gone round that the great sage, Krishna Dvaipayana, was coming to Mathura, and people anxious to have his *darshan* had gathered there.

Three years ago when the Muni had come to Mathura, it was a matter of great rejoicing.

King Ugrasena had himself come to welcome him. Now things had changed. Only Devaka and Akrura stood on the *ghat* waiting for the Master and everyone knew that Kamsa hated them.

As the boats came nearer, Akrura was immediately able to recognise the Master in the first boat. There was no mistaking the massive head, the luminous eyes and the stalwart frame tempered by austerity and covered by a deer skin.

Vivid pictures of the Master's past flashed before Akrura's mind. Being Sage Parashara's son by a fisher girl, he had mastered all learning. He had rescued the Vedas and redacted them and founded schools of learning. They said he knew the past, present and future. Wise men said that he had conquered the limitations of the flesh. He was like the divine sages of old; wherever he went, Dharma was with him.

As the Muni stepped out of the boat, Akrura fell at his feet. When the Sage's smiling eyes fell on him, Akrura felt as if locked in a loving embrace, and a warm glowing emotion swept over him; he felt like a helpless child nestling in the arms of a fond mother. Then he turned to the young man who had climbed out of the boat and went to greet him.

‘Akrura, do you know my son Vidura?’ asked the Sage, in an affectionate tone.

Akrura touched the feet of Vidura. He had heard of him; also of how the Master had begotten him on a most worthy maid-servant when he had performed *niyoga* with the childless Princesses to provide heirs for the throne of Hastinapura.

Muni Krishna Dvaipayana accompanied by Vidura went to the house of Akrura who offered them fruits and milk. Akrura then told the Muni all that had happened to Vasudeva and Devaki and took him to the palace in which they were confined.

Vasudeva and Devaki were overwhelmed with joy when they saw the Sage coming towards them. They prostrated themselves before him, washed his feet and offered him flowers. He blessed them, embracing Vasudeva and breathed in the scent of Devaki’s hair. Then husband and wife, in broken accents, told him the story of their misfortunes, as tears flowed from their eyes.

The Sage heard them with an affectionate smile and deep understanding. Then in loving accents he said, ‘You, Vasudeva, and you, King Devaka’s daughter have both been brutally dealt with, I know. Kamsa was born to wickedness; he cannot be otherwise. But it is only when sin blows sharpest that virtue blooms. I wish you and Devaki could come with me.’

Vasudeva folded his hands and said, ‘Master, I wish I could come with you to Indraprastha. The wishes of the venerable Bhishma have always been commands to me and if he has also summoned you things must be very wrong.’

‘Son, do not let that trouble you,’ replied the Master. ‘Your duty is to be with Devaki. She needs you more than any one else. Kamsa, however, is willing to send Akrura instead of you. Let him come with me. He will do all that you could do, whatever the difficulties. Bhishma is wise and will understand why you could not come.’

‘Venerable Master, Akrura is my dear friend. He is

also wise and will know better what to do than I ever could have done,' said Vasudeva.

Then Devaki intervened and said, in a voice^{*} trembling with emotion, 'Best of Munis, I want your blessing. Your *darshan* itself is an auspicious augury.'

The Sage said, 'The wife who is devoted to her husband is always blessed. Remember, child, patience is the highest offering and the Lord loves to receive it.'

'Master, I am trying my best to be as patient as I can be. You don't know how cheerfully I submit to my fate. But I am afraid of Kamsa. He will kill all my children and the prophecy will remain unfulfilled.' Tears dropped from Devaki's eyes as she spoke, but she found solace in the protective gesture of the Sage.

'Devaki, have no fears about the prophecy. It will come true.'

'But is it a prophecy or only a rumour or the Prince's nightmare? The divine Sage, Narada, does not come to meet men so easily, and certainly not Kamsa,' said Vasudeva.

'Vasudeva, I was glad to hear of the prophecy,' said the Muni. 'There is too much^{*} wickedness on earth and the Deliverer is overdue.'

'But will he come at all? Shall I be the mother of the deliverer? And if he comes, will my cruel cousin allow him to survive?' asked Devaki piteously.

The Sage was silent for a while and then closed his eyes in prayer to Lord Siva, as the others looked on with reverence and awe. Then he opened his eyes, and his look enveloped Devaki with a protective warmth.

'My child, do not lose faith,' he said. 'The deliverer shall come and no one will dare touch him, for he *will* be the Lord Himself.'

The voice of the Sage was that of a prophet, and Devaki swooned in joyful ecstasy.

THE TIME DRAWS NEAR IN HASTINAPURA

The waters of the Ganga shone in the rays of the setting sun, and reflected the temples and houses of Hastinapura.

In the palace of the Kurus situated on the banks of the river, Satyawati, the widow of King Santanu, sat in her prayer room. Her glowing dark face, the colour of which she had inherited from her fisherman father, stood out against her white *sari* and the ashes she had applied to her forehead. Though over sixty, her face and figure bore the traces of the flaming beauty and grace which, half a century before, had captivated the Sage Parashara and had made old King Santanu mad with passion.

A little to her right, on a board covered with golden leaves, sat Gangeya, whom people called Bhishma, her stepson, over twenty years her senior. In spite of his age and white mane and beard, he sat erect. There was not a wrinkle on his brow but for the moment it was knit, and his eyes were sad.

In front of the queen, Muni Krishna Dvaipayana sat on a mat made of sacred grass. He was fairer than his mother, though not as fair as Bhishma. His features, inherited from some distant maternal ancestor, were irregular and plain, though they shone with a light of goodness such as had never been known on any other countenance.

Vidura and Akrura sat on either side of the Sage.

Sage Krishna Dvaipayana had performed the miracle of collecting and putting into a new shape the sacred Vedas which the divine Rishis had received by inspiration in the great days of old, and the homes of learning had as a universal tribute called him Veda Vyasa, out of respect.

‘Krishna, I had to call you from Prayag suddenly, for a catastrophe again threatens the line of the Emperor Bharata. No one can help us but you, my son. Oh, why was I born to trouble people again and again?’ said Satyavati, her voice choked with emotion.

‘Mother, I am glad you sent for me,’ said the Muni in an affectionate voice. ‘It is no trouble for me. Did I not promise you when my venerable father took me away that I would be at your service at all times? I am always yours to command.’

The smile of Vyasa was irresistible and even in her grief Satyavati could not help smiling. Great as her son was, and though he had been living far away from her for a long time over the past years, she had always thought of him as her darling and he had been her main support in all the crises in her very difficult life.

‘It was an evil moment when my father induced the Lord of the Kurus to take a pledge from my Gangeya not to marry,’ Satyavati said in a sorrowful voice, looking at Bhishma, who sat silent, an embodiment of self-restraint. ‘Again and again in the past I begged of him to marry, but, Krishna, you know what manner of man Bhishma is. He would not break his vow. By being faithful to his vow, he has been cruel to me, his father and his ancestors.’

‘Mother, don’t give way to despair. Tell me what the trouble is.’

Satyavati again wiped the tears and replied, ‘Two years ago, we celebrated the marriage of Dhritarashtra and Pandu. We thought that the line of the Kurus would flourish as long as the sun and the moon continue to rise in the sky. But now though they are married,’ the queen could say no more.

‘Mother, what is it? Tell me frankly’.

Satyavati continued, her voice quivering. ‘Dhritarashtra, being blind, cannot be a king. His wife Gandhari is pregnant, but a curse is on her. More than a year has passed since she has conceived, but the child that was to be has withered away in her womb.’

‘What a misfortune !’ said the Sage.

‘Pandu’, Satyavati stopped for a moment, looked at the ground in agitation, summoned up courage and continued in a low voice, ‘He will not have any sons; he cannot; a curse is on him also.’

There was a moment of silence.

Bhishma spoke bitterly, ‘All my life I have worked to enhance the glory of the great Kurus. But now there will be none to offer obsequial offerings to them.’ His voice was low, bitter and sad.

‘And I am the sinner,’ interjected Satyavati. ‘For my sake, Bhishma took the vow never to marry. And the Lord Siva has not yet punished me enough for that sin. Can we not do anything to perpetuate Bharata’s noble race?’ Satyavati sobbed.

‘That is not all,’ said Bhishma in a low, self-controlled voice. ‘If the world knows the calamity which threatens us, the glory of the Kurus will have gone forever.’

‘What new calamity? Tell me, venerable Bhishma,’ asked Muni Veda Vyasa.

‘Kunti, Pandu’s wife, cannot endure being childless. She has therefore decided to plunge into the fire,’ said Bhishma.

‘Oh, I wish I had died!’ exclaimed Satyavati and placed her hands on her forehead in despair.

Vyasa saw his mother’s face clouded with sorrow and spoke in a comforting tone. ‘Mother, don’t give way to despair. All these years, you have fought with fate, and gained the victory and so has the venerable Bhishma.’

‘Krishna, what will happen when Bhishma joins his forefathers?’

‘Mother, I know what troubles you. I am troubled myself. The Kurus are not merely kings. They are the guardians of Arya Dharma. If their empire dissolves, confusion will come and Dharma will disappear.’

‘Sage, you rescued Dharma for us,’ said Bhishma.

‘You must help us now. You alone, among the wise, can show us the way.’

‘Is Kunti here?’

‘Yes, we have brought her here. We do not want Hastinapura to know what we are passing through,’ said Bhishma.

In another part of the palace, Pritha sat leaning against her old nurse, a picture of misery. She was the sister of Vasudeva, but having been adopted by King Kuntibhoja, was known as Kunti. Once she was bright and full of health, but now she was weak and emaciated, shedding tears day and night.

When Kunti saw the Muni coming to her, she rose and flung herself at his feet, sobbing piteously, unable to speak the appropriate words of welcome. The Muni lifted her from the ground affectionately, breathed in the scent of her head and, enveloping her shoulders with his arm, led her to her seat with tender concern. He sat down near her on a grass mat which was spread for him by the old nurse to whom he gave his blessing and then dismissed her with a nod.

‘Kunti, what is this?’

‘Master, I want to die—die—die. I don’t want to live,’ said Kunti in a voice trembling with emotion.

‘My child, I know all about the curse which has fallen on Pandu. But I don’t want you to be miserable.’

‘Oh! I am never going to be happy and I want to die. You know how I love children. I have never seen the face of my child again, but it is before my eyes day and night wanting me and waiting for me. I am a brutal mother who forsook it the moment it was born. And you took him away—and he was so beautiful.... Oh Master, forgive me. I am going mad. I am being disrespectful to you. And, oh Lord, I shall never have any child any more—never, never. And the laughter of my children, waiting to be born, will pursue me till I die. I want to die—die. Master, it is the only way out.’

The Sage gently placed his hand on Kunti. His

constant smile, and understanding and affection slowly began to have a magic influence on her and she was able to overcome her hysterical mood.

Then the Sage spoke in tones of tender affection. 'My child, don't I know how loving you are, how you hunger for children—to love and to fondle, to live for and live in them?'

'Master, I am ashamed of myself for speaking to you like this, but what can I do? I can't help it.'

'Kunti, do not feel ashamed. Every woman should glory in her desire to be a mother. The woman who wants to be childless, who shuns children, who cannot live for them is a she-devil. She is the curse of the family and the destroyer of Dharma.'

Vyasa's words, spoken in a quiet, affectionate voice, reminded Kunti of her lost hopes and she again began to cry convulsively.

The Sage slowly caressed her hair as a loving mother might have done. 'Kunti, your heart's wish will be fulfilled and the line of the Kurus will not fail. Will that suffice?' asked the Sage.

Kunti looked at the Sage with her eyes dim with tears, but full of a new, unbelievable hope.

The Sage was silent for a while. Then he spoke, 'Listen, Kunti, the venerable Ancients have ordained that if Dharma is to be maintained, the family should be preserved at all costs; and the loving mother, who worships her husband and lives for her children, is the foundation of Dharma. *Niyoga* is sanctioned by the ancient Seers. So you can have children if you observe the vows I enjoin,' said Veda Vyasa.

'I will do everything you enjoin,' Kunti said, her heart bursting with wild expectation. 'But I will not be untrue to my lord, the Best of Kurus.'

'You shall remain a *sati*. Pandu will give you the command, and your elders will consent to it. I shall then give you the *mantras* to invoke the gods. Reciting the *mantras* you will meditate on the shining ones; they will

bless you; you will then offer a sacrifice of your body after performing the proper rituals. While doing so, you shall think of no other man than your husband nor offer your affection or lust to any one else. Then the Lord, the God of gods, Mahadeva, will bless you.'

'Master, Master, will what I do be right?' asked Kunti deeply moved.

'It is right, my child. For a young woman to be a noble mother and remain true in duty and worship to her husband is the highest Dharma. Child, you shall have *pranita* sons and you shall live for them . . . and they shall live for Dharma . . . Be happy. I, Satyavati's son, promise it to you,' said the Sage.

And Kunti's heart bounded with a joy which it had not known for many months.

NANDA VISITS MATHURA

Famine consumed the fair land of Vraja. The rivulets had dried up. Even the Yamuna had shrunk.

Gokul, the loveliest village in Vraja, was full of sadness. The water in the wells had sunk low. The cows, for want of sufficient water to drink, were all bones and skin. The Gopas and the Gopis no longer laughed and sang and danced.

Nanda, the head of the Shoora Yadavas of Gokul, was anxiously watching the skies for rain. His three hundred cows had once browsed on luscious pasture lands, majestic like queens. Now they wandered over grassless plains, gaunt and thin, thirsting for water. Some of them even lay dying, pathetically looking at the sky.

Nanda did not care so much for his cows as for the men and women of Gokul, every one of whom he looked after with all the vigilance and affection of a wise father.

Yashoda, his wife, was also like a mother to them. She gathered all the womenfolk together and persuaded them to pool their resources, so that no one would be left hungry or thirsty.

There had never been such a drought in Vrajabhumi before. People, therefore, shook their heads grimly. Such calamities, they knew, overtook people only when the ruler was wicked. There was no doubt that Kamsa's sins were bringing the anger of the gods upon them. This sentiment was common to most people in Vraja.

Even in Mathura, every one was weary of Kamsa, except his parasites. By now, six of Devaki's sons had already been killed by Kamsa, and every time a new-born babe was killed, people were horrified. Yet they took com-

fort in the hope that the prophecy would come true and that these deeds would bring the birth of the deliverer nearer.

One day, Gargacharya, the family priest of the Shooras, made the long journey to Gokul in order to spend much time in converse with Nanda. Garga's eyes were filled with anxiety, but Nanda's face, though lit with a gay smile, showed firmness.

The next day, as Garga had already warned Nanda, Kamsa's men came riding to Gokul. The Prince had ordered Nanda to present himself at Mathura, they said. Nanda had already made up his mind to obey the summons. So, forthwith, eight carts were yoked, and the chief of Gokul travelled to Mathura, accompanied by ten sturdy Shooras with scythes in their hands.

During the last six years, Kamsa had grown desperate. He knew no peace, for he felt that every man's hand was against him. He knew no rest, for his mind was occupied in devising plans for fighting enemies, both real and imaginary. At night he could scarcely sleep, for he thought of treacherous henchmen plotting to assassinate him and the Yadavas awaiting their deliverer.

Though the deliverer was yet to come, Kamsa saw him day and night before his eyes. As reports reached him of how men and women talked of the coming deliverance in whispers, he felt an invisible net closing in upon him. Often he had nightmares, when he would awake from his sleep, his heart throbbing and his body bathed in perspiration. And then he would see the deliverer coming. Every morning he would rise from his bed, gnash his teeth and swear that he would win his way through, whatever the cost.

Then the drought had come, and on its heels, famine. It had led to general discontent. Kamsa saw resentment in every eye and decided to frighten the Yadavas into submission. His men moved about the countryside, threatening to take away the cattle and confiscate the lands of the farmers and the cattle-owners.

Kamsa, who was keeping a close watch over Devaki, counted the few days that remained before she would be delivered of her seventh child. Or, was it the eighth? — Kamsa wondered sometimes.

Kamsa received reports of how jubilant the Shooras were at this news and how they were openly talking of the coming of a deliverer. Nanda was the most powerful of the Shooras and the father of his tribe. He never spoke openly of the deliverer, but Kamsa knew that he shared the faith of his people.

Even the other Yadava tribes began to acquire and absorb this. To hear his destroyer being awaited even though he was so powerful was galling to him. Something drastic had to be done, and so he summoned Nanda to his presence. Kamsa glared at Nanda angrily when, with due courtesy, the latter placed presents at the Prince's feet. Nanda's young Shooras stood statuesque behind him in respectful silence.

Then Kamsa said to Nanda, 'Nanda, I always thought you were a wise man. But you have not paid me tribute for the last year. What are your reasons for that?'

'Noble Prince, you know there was a drought. Then this famine came. We are starving. Our cattle are dying for want of water. How can we pay the tribute? From where?' replied Nanda with folded hands, his face still clothed in its smile.

'I don't care where you obtain the tribute from. I must have it. I have to direct my kingdom. If you don't pay it, do you know what will happen? I will take away all your plots of land. My men will take them from you, and cultivate them better.'

'You are the overlord, Noble Prince,' said Nanda with a smile. 'But the lands are ours. Of course, you are our master, but the farmer is also the lord of his land, tiny though it may be. For he, his family and his forefathers have given their very lives to it. I am not a learned man. But to take away from him even an inch of his land which is dearer to him than his life, is not *dharma*. A noble

prince like you will, I am sure, not commit such an *adharma*. The gods would never forgive you.'

'I will commit *adharma* a hundred times over if I can obtain more money from your land and if it helps me to grow in power. I want to feed my armies. I want to feed my servants. How can I do so? When are you going to pay your tribute?' So Kamsa lashed out.

'We certainly will, when the gods favour us with rain and our cattle give us milk in plenty,' said Nanda, with a humorous gleam in his eye.

'Very well, Nanda, I shall wait. I will let you and your people go this time. But if you so much as murmur a word against me, I will kill you and all your kinsmen. What is this nonsense about a deliverer? Are you thinking of my death?'

'A deliverer! Who talks about him?' asked Nanda, again with a humorous gleam in his eye and a deep smile on his face.

'Your Shooras do. Tell them to keep silent,' shouted Kamsa.

'As my lord pleases,' said Nanda.

'Now go,' shouted Kamsa again.

'I have a favour to ask, if my lord is pleased to listen.'

'What is it?'

'May I speak?' asked Nanda, his eyes twinkling as if he was making a jest. 'If you want me to talk to my Shooras, let me meet my chief, Vasudeva. Then I can speak to them on his behalf too.'

'Do as you like. But if your behaviour displeases me, you shall lose every inch of your land,' said Kamsa.

'You are the lord of the earth,' said Nanda and withdrew, after prostrating himself before the Prince.

And thus it came to pass that Nanda, accompanied by Akrura, the chief of the Vrishnis and Gargacharya, the family priest of the Shooras, visited Vasudeva and Devaki. Rohini, Vasudeva's elder wife, who was then far advanced in motherhood, was also present.

They conferred long and anxiously. The situation appeared to be hopeless, as they could not think of any possible way to escape from the clutches of Kamsa. Then Rohini spoke, her cheeks flushed, and all listened with respect. She had decided, she said, to find the way.

‘The prophecy shall be fulfilled,’ she said in a solemn voice, tears running down her cheeks.

The next morning Rohini left for Gokul with Nanda. But the carts, which had brought Nanda’s party to Mathura, did not all leave for Gokul. Except the one in which Nanda travelled with Rohini, the others halted at different stages on the way.

That night Kamsa had a dream, from which he awoke with a scream. He rose from his bed breathless, shivering in every limb, surprised to find himself alive.

Kamsa dreamed that, sword in hand, he entered the chamber in which Devaki was confined and there was Devaki who had borne two sons, and they were both kicking lustily. And the eighth one, fine and with a freshness which made him seem like a blue lotus, grew in size moment by moment. Kamsa’s hand, which held his sword, was paralysed, and he could not believe his eyes. The boy, his face flaming in beauty, had a diadem on his head and a *chakra* (discus) in his hand. And he himself stood speechless as the boy threw his discus at him. And there, the *chakra* came flying to sever head from his body....and he himself saw his head rolling on the ground and lying in a pool of blood. And he saw the boy smiling and smiling....

Then Kamsa called Putana, the dread wife of Pradyota, the chief of his guards, whom he had appointed to watch over Devaki. Because she was his confidential adviser, he told her of the dream that he had had.

And Kamsa ordered Putana to ascertain whether Devaki was on the eve of confinement. She went and made the proper inquiries and reported that it would take at least thirty days before a child would be born to Devaki. Then Kamsa breathed freely with a sense of relief.

BALARAMA IS BORN

For ten days Vasudeva and Devaki prayed to the Lord. He had given a promise and he was bound to fulfil it. Devaki, then, knew that the word of Vyasa would come true, and she was happy.

The guards of the palace saw the love and faith with which Vasudeva and Devaki faced their trials day after day. Their hearts melted, and they also grew anxious to see that the Shoora Chief and the Princess should come to no harm. They had heard of Vyasa's prophecy and knew the faith of Akrura that a deliverer was coming and in their heart of hearts they wished that he might come soon.

On the tenth day, after Nanda, the Chief of Gokul, had left Mathura, at dead of night a boat came stealthily to the *ghat* (landing place) of the palace where Vasudeva and Devaki were kept imprisoned. One of the three men in the boat, who had a bundle in his hands, climbed out of it. Akrura, who with Gargacharya generally stayed with Vasudeva, came down the steps of the *ghat*.

'Lord of the Vrishnis, I have come,' said the young man.

Akrura pointed to the bundle in his hands in silent inquiry.

'Yes, a still-born girl.'

Akrura raised his eyes in silent prayer.

Two guards standing there on duty came near them. Akrura said to them in a whisper, 'Gargacharya has called this young Brahman to recite the *mantras* to save Princess Devaki's life. Please go and inform your master, the noble Kamsa, that the Princess is likely to give birth to a son.'

The guards opened their eyes wide in surprise and left hurriedly to discharge their duty.

Gargacharya, with two old women, was waiting for the young man's arrival. For a few minutes they talked in whispers. Vasudeva was sitting by the side of Devaki, who lay in bed with closed eyes, her hand reposing in his. Garga then motioned to Devaki to go with one of the midwives into the inner room.

'Child,' said Garga, placing his hand on Devaki's head. 'May the Lord give you strength!'

'Gurudeva, do not torment yourself. I will go through fire, if need be. Nothing will happen to me,' she said with a smile. 'For two days I have felt as if Ananta, the thousand-hooded god, was here to protect me.' She folded her hands, fell at the feet of the preceptor and Vasudeva, and then left with the old women.

The young man handed over the bundle to one of the women.

For some time everything was quiet. Then Devaki's piteous cries of pain were heard. The cries became more and more piercing. At last, there was an almost savage scream, broken by sobs.

Gargacharya, Akrura, Vasudeva and the young man could hardly even breathe as they waited. Then they heard the shrill cries of a new-born baby, strong and vigorous.

Some time passed. The cries of the baby quietened. One of the old women came to where the men were standing.

'It is a boy and very, very strong,' the old woman said, and her toothless mouth was formed into a queer smile that spoke of her joy. 'Come, come all of you,' she cried.

The men stepped gently towards the room and peeped in through the open door. In the poorly-lit room Devaki was lying in bed, pale and exhausted. By her side lay the baby, fully developed, though he had arrived so early, having as great a feed as he could.

'Let us not lose time,' said Akrura. 'The guards have gone to inform Kamsa and may return any moment.'

Devaki smiled sweetly. 'Yes, I know.' She hugged the child close to her bosom as a precious possession, then motioned to one of the old women to take it away, and wiped a tear.

The woman took away the baby which was again crying lustily, gave it a bath and placed it on the ground. Gargacharya picked it up and tied a black thread round its neck, chanting *mantras* (incantations) all the time.

'What name shall we give him?' Gargacharya asked.

'Devaki, what is your wish?' Vasudeva asked with fondness as he looked with admiration at his little wife and thought of what a heroic mould she was.

'He is very strong. Call him Bala,' she said.

'What would you call him, Gurudeva?' Vasudeva asked the preceptor.

'I would call him Sankarshana.¹ He was not born, but was dragged out,' said Gargacharya with a smile.

Vasudeva took the baby from Garga, pressed it to his heart lovingly and handed it over to the young man, who left the room immediately, accompanied by Akrura.

The guards ran to the palace of Kamsa, for the slightest delay in informing him about Devaki's confinement would mean certain death. The message ran from guard to guard. Princess Devaki is going to give birth to a child.

Pradyota, the captain of the guards, when he heard the news, jumped out of his bed and ran to see Kamsa. 'Princess Devaki is giving birth to a child, lord,' he announced.

Kamsa awoke as if from a nightmare, rubbed his eyes, grasped his sword and ordered his chariot. He also ordered the captain of the guards to bring along his wife, Putana, with him. A deadly ferocity seized him, and also the fear that Devaki might be delivered of twins, for he was not able to shake off the effect of the dream he had had ten days before. A clatter of horses' hooves and the sound of chariot-wheels broke the morning quiet in which the palace, where Vasudeva and Devaki lived, was wrapped.

When Kamsa, followed by Pradyota and Putana, entered the palace, Gargacharya and Vasudeva were standing at the entrance, ready to receive him.

‘Where are the boys?’ shouted Kamsa.

‘Boys? What boys?’ asked Gargacharya.

‘The twins that Devaki gave birth to.’

‘There are no boys, not even one. Only a daughter was born,’ said Vasudeva.

‘You are lying,’ Kamsa burst out, as he tried to go towards the room in which Devaki lay. ‘Putana, go and make sure yourself. Where is the girl?’

‘Here she is,’ said Gargacharya and the old woman lifted the piece of cloth which covered the dead body of the new-born girl whom the young Brahman had brought from Gokul.

Kamsa glared at the dead body, dazed. Then, as if waking from a dream, he shouted to Putana and her husband, the captain of the guards, ‘Search every corner of the house. Some trick has been played on me.’

They searched every nook and corner in the house, but in vain.

Kamsa returned to his palace disappointed. His fury had turned to depression. Things were shaping in a way he had never anticipated. He felt unseen forces closing in upon him.

After a little while, he took some comfort. This was only the seventh child of Devaki. The eighth was still to come. There was enough time to take precautions. He would have liked to kill Devaki straight away. But if he did that, even his father and uncle would starve themselves to death, and the Yadavas would revolt openly. No, he must wait till the eighth child came.

The young Brahman was an able physician. He fed the baby, which appeared to be continually hungry, with a lump of cotton soaked in honey.

Before dawn broke, he reached Gokul, where he gave the boy to Rohini, Vasudeva’s elder wife, who was now a

guest of Nanda. She saw the robust infant, saw the lines of her husband's face drawn in miniature, and was happy beyond words.

She fed the baby, put him in the cradle and went to sleep. When she awoke, she was frozen with fright. A great snake was swinging over the cradle, its hood unfurled. Rohini waited in suspense. It was a moment which seemed to be eternal. She could not scream lest the frightened snake should strike at him with its venomous fangs.

Tense moments passed. The snake went on swinging for a little while, then gathered in its widespread hood and slowly slipped away.

Rohini went to the cradle. The boy was asleep, with the beam of a smile on its tiny lips.

THE EIGHTH CHILD

There was an air of expectancy throughout Vraja. Every heart throbbed with impatience, each in its own way. Devaki, the wife of the Shoora Chief Vasudeva, was expecting her eighth child.

As the fateful day came nearer, she began to bloom like a flower in the spring day after day, and her body and mind glowed with a joy she had never known before. Her eyes shone with devotion for, before her, awake or asleep, she saw the Lord.

At the same time, she was full of anxiety. She found it hard to believe that, weak and helpless and unfortunate as she was, the Lord would be born to *her*. And again, would He really come to deliver the Yadavas from Kamsa? Or, would her next child also be killed by her wicked cousin?

In spite of these doubts, faith never deserted her. Surely, the prophecy of Sage Narada and the promise of Muni Veda Vyasa could not but come true.

As the time for Devaki to give birth to a child drew nearer, Kamsa began to take great precautions. He withdrew all the servants from the palace in which she and her husband were held captive. This time no midwife was to be in attendance as before. Instead, Putana, his trusted cousin and the wife of Pradyota, his equally trusted captain of the guards, had come to live with them. But Devaki hated Putana so much that she would not let her come near her.

Vasudeva, however, never allowed Devaki to feel the want of company or even the absence of a maid-servant. He loved his frail, beautiful wife and was attentive to

every little want of hers. He joined her in her prayers and cheered her whenever she felt troubled. Every evening he would sit by her side as she lay on the balcony watching the turbid waters of the Yamuna, and talk of ancient heroes.

They talked of the Lord and of His Grace and were united by a bond of unwavering faith. Sometimes, as they talked of Him, they felt as if He stood before them, blessing them with His arm extended.

Expectancy filled Mathura as well as the villages and hermitages of Vrajabhumi. Everyone, during those nine years, had looked forward to the day when *adharmā*, which prevailed under Kamsa, would be rooted out. Every time Kamsa killed a child of Devaki's, the people computed the time when the deliverer would be born. Now that the event they had waited for was about to happen, they took vows to propitiate the inimically disposed stars and prayed to the gods to send the deliverer soon. In the hermitages which had sprung up on both sides of the Yamuna, the sages began to offer sacrificial prayers to call on the Lord. The Brahmans in their homes never prayed nor performed a ritual without a fervent supplication to send the deliverer.

This time also Kamsa himself was moved by strange fears. Though time and again he had crushed his enemies, the Yadavas, as a people, had not accepted his sway. Many Yadava Chiefs had left Vrajabhumi. Some, he knew very well, had become soft-spoken hypocrites who lauded him in public but prayed for his downfall in secret. His guards and agents remained loyal to him because he alone stood between them and the wrath of the Yadavas.

As the days passed, Kamsa became seized with panic. The reports which came in every day of how the people were expecting the deliverer to be born soon, strained his nerves. He grew suspicious of everyone. He grew excited over small things. Often, he was absent-minded. He lost his sleep. He dreamt of terrible things.

Under his orders the guards, who kept a watch over Vasudeva and Devaki, were changed every day. Orders

were issued that no one could see them except Gargacharya, the family priest, who attended to the daily rituals which could not be denied to Vasudeva. Putana, who lived with them, sent him messages about Devaki's health day by day. Lest there might be popular outbursts when he killed the eighth child of Devaki, he posted Magadhan soldiers in key positions about the town.

It was the eighth day of the dark half of the month of Sravan. Throughout the day, there was thunder and lightning, and the rains came in showers and the wind lashed the streets. About noontime, in spite of the foul, stormy weather, Gargacharya came to perform the daily rituals at the palace. After they were over, the old priest embraced Vasudeva and whispered a message in his ear.

The rains continued to pour down heavily, and, even before sunset, darkness fell over the town. Putana, who had gone to her house in the morning, could not return to her post as the roads had been flooded. The palace guards, shivering to the bones, shut themselves up in their rooms leaving the gates open for her to come in.

The palace was wrapped in darkness except for the oil lamps which threw a flickering light in the room where Devaki lay, Vasudeva seated by her side. The rains came in torrents and made a terrifying noise on the roof and the rolling thunder reverberated in the empty halls.

The sky was lit up by a lightning flash. A terrific thunderclap shook the foundations of the palace. Devaki, suddenly frightened, sat up. The next moment, she took hold of Vasudeva's hand in her effort to keep down the pain. Her joyful eyes were brimming with tears as she looked at her husband in a mood of worship.

'Lord, He is coming,' she said, quelling the pangs of the moment.

Vasudeva, with great tenderness led her into the adjoining room.

It was midnight. The rains continued to fall and the lightning to flash. Devaki, tingling with ecstasy, gave

birth to a child almost effortlessly when the auspicious constellation of *Abhijit* was on the eastern horizon.

Her tender husband, Vasudeva acted as a careful mid-wife. As he handled the baby on whom their only hope was set, he gasped. The boy was perfectly formed and coloured like a sky-blue lotus. He did not cry as is the wont of new-born babies, but a beatific smile was on his tiny lips.

Vasudeva, as he looked at the child, was dazed. For a moment he saw the Lord standing in all the splendour of His glory before him and holding in His hands the mace, the discus, the conch and the lotus. Sage Veda Vyasa's prophetic words had come true !

Vasudeva shook himself awake; now he had to act his part. He left the baby with Devaki for a while, took two oil-lamps in his hands, walked up to the balcony and waved them as if performing *arti*. From across the river came the response, a torch moving in a circle.

Vasudeva returned to Devaki and washed the baby clean. He gave it a lump of wool soaked in honey to suck and put it in a basket.

'Devaki, I must go now,' he said.

'But how will you go ? It is raining stormily and the Yamuna is in spate.'

'His will be done,' replied Vasudeva and went to discover what the guards were doing. And there were the guards lying asleep behind the closed doors of their rooms, Putana had not returned from her home and the gates of the palace were unlocked !

Vasudeva wrapped the child in a shawl, placed it in a basket, covered it with a small mat and, lifting the basket on his shoulders, stepped out of the palace.

Two furlongs away, the river flowed over a stony ledge, formed in the bed, which provided a natural ford for going across to Gokul. He made his way to that point, with the basket on his head and the new-born babe sleeping quietly with its great toe in its mouth.

And there was a miracle. The rains stopped. A dark

low cloud — like the hood of a cobra — formed a canopy over the basket.

Vasudeva went to the ford and crossed the Yamuna hurriedly, in spite of the waters rushing headlong along their course. On the opposite bank, under a tree, stood Gargacharya and Nanda, the chief of the Gokul Yadavas.

Garga relieved Vasudeva of his burden and handed him another basket.

‘Whose child is it?’ asked Vasudeva.

‘Yashoda gave birth to a daughter this morning.’

Vasudeva, full of joy and gratitude, said to Nanda, ‘Nanda, how can I ever fulfil my obligation to you?’

Nanda touched Vasudeva’s feet. ‘Lord, you are the master. Whatever I have is yours,’ he replied.

Nanda took the basket from Gargacharya’s hands. The mat which covered it slipped away. Lightning flashed. And he beheld the blue, beautiful baby, saw its little eyes open and close, and a giant wave of affection surged in the old cowherd’s heart.

The Deliverer had come.

KAMSA'S STRATEGY

Kamsa was very unhappy. Years of intense anxiety had created a waking nightmare for him. He feared that the prophecy would come true, in spite of all that he had done.

No doubt, he had taken every precaution to ward off the danger. The guards, who kept watch over Vasudeva and Devaki, were trusted men. Putana, his cousin and confidante, was in charge of Devaki. No one had access to the palace, except the family priest, Gargacharya, who, however, came only in the morning to perform the daily rituals, and Putana was present during his visit.

On the night of the eighth day of the dark half of the month Sravan, Kamsa could not sleep even for a moment. He felt terribly afraid. The rumblings of thunder raised frightful echoes in his heart. Whenever lightning flashed across the heavens he was startled. Were these unusual happenings portents of the doom which awaited him ?

Kamsa continued to walk up and down the hall. An unendurable impatience had seized him. For ten long years he had waited for this event. It would now happen any day at any moment. Then he would kill Devaki's eighth child and the prophecy would prove untrue.

Restlessly he walked up to the window and opened it to look at the sky. But he was not able to look, because he was at once drenched by the rain. He closed the window and began pacing the floor, pulling at his moustache.

Kamsa could not shake off the sense of impending danger, which gripped his mind. The long, weary moments of the night crawled on.

He had no one to turn to. His people feared him, and so did his wives. Even his henchmen stood in dread of him. And he was afraid himself. But this was a passing phase, he assured himself. Once Devaki's eighth child was disposed of, there would be an end to this fear.

Then, some light stole into the room. It was day, though the sky was overcast and the rains had not stopped. The fear that oppressed Kamsa grew less.

Now there was light. Soon Putana would come to him to announce that Devaki had not yet given birth to a child. That would be troubling, too; it would mean many more uneasy nights; but it would be a temporary relief.

At last Putana came and bowed low with folded hands before him. 'Mighty Prince, Princess Devaki has given birth to a daughter.'

'Are you sure?' Kamsa inquired anxiously.

Controlling her nervousness, Putana told a bold lie: 'I am absolutely sure. She was born in my presence.'

Kamsa, however, was not so sure. The eighth child was to be a boy, if the prophecy were true. Should he kill the girl as well? Why take chances? — whispered his heart.

'Call for my chariot,' he shouted and took a mace in his hand. Soon he was driven to the palace, far away from the city, where Vasudeva and Devaki were kept in prison.

With firm strides, Kamsa stepped into the room in which Devaki was guarded.

'Where is the child? Give it to me,' he shouted.

'Prince, it is a girl, not a boy. Why do you want to kill her?' asked Vasudeva.

'Boy or girl, it shall not live.' As he spoke, he drew near the cradle in which the child was sleeping.

Devaki, with tears in her eyes, piteously folded her hands. 'My brother, why do you behave so cruelly? At least leave one of my children alive. What can this poor thing do to a mighty prince like you?' She hugged the

child to her bosom, sobbing all the time as if her heart were breaking.

Kamsa took the girl from the cradle and lifted her by the legs, head downward. Suddenly he felt unsure of himself. His hands began to tremble. The hand, which held the child and was raised to dash it to the ground, grew numb, and the child slipped out of his hand. A shriek followed, poignant and terrifying. The child flew out of the window !

The room swam before him. Everything grew dark. Kamsa tottered out of the room as he heard a supernatural voice saying : 'Your destroyer is elsewhere, already born.'

Once Kamsa left the room in which Devaki was guarded, his knees would no longer bear him. The weird, uncanny shriek continued to ring in his ears.

Putana rushed up to him, with a cup of water in her hands. Her husband, Pradyota, came and stood by the side of the Prince.

'Lord, will not Your Highness return to the royal palace ?' he asked.

'Let me leave here,' answered Kamsa. He was seized with a nameless terror.

'What shall we do with Prince Vasudeva and the Princess ? Shall I stay here or go home ?' asked Putana.

Kamsa stared vacantly at her as if he had not understood the question. Then he spoke in an unsteady voice : 'Let them go wherever they like — to their palace, if they so desire. The prophecy was merely Narada jesting at me. Let them go.' He then returned to the palace.

The next day he called a council of the men who were loyal to him, among whom was Pralamba, his chief adviser. Pradyota and his wife Putana were also there and there was Bahuka, the old Magadhan warrior, whom Jarasandha had sent to Mathura to look after the interests of his daughters.

Kamsa told them of what had happened, of the strange shriek, of the flying child, and even of the words

that he had heard : ' Your destroyer is elsewhere, already born.'

Pralamba, Kamsa's principal adviser, respectfully asked: ' Lord, have I your permission to speak the truth ? '

Kamsa nodded assent.

' Mighty Prince, I fear the words you heard were a warning given to you by the gods,' said Pralamba. ' The people fear you and dare not speak out. But they all await the deliverer.'

' Lord, I also heard a voice. I cannot say where it came from, but it did say the words : Your destroyer is elsewhere, already born,' said Putana.

Kamsa thought for a little while. Then he knit his brows and said, ' I cannot leave anything to chance. Kill all the children born during the last ten days. Why, even those born within the past month. What do you say to that, venerable Bahuka ? ' And Kamsa then turned to the old Magadhan warrior.

Then Bahuka, once the minister of Jarasandha, said slowly, ' Mighty Prince, you may kill as many children as you are able, but you will not prevent the people waiting for the deliverer, and so long as they wait for deliverance, you will be in danger.'

' How can we prevent the people waiting for the deliverer ? ' asked Kamsa.

' Lord, people are cowards. They will accept you as the master if you treat them with great hardness. But you will not break their spirit so long as they hope that a deliverer will come,' replied Bahuka.

' How can I avoid their thinking of a deliverer ? '

' My master,' said Bahuka, ' their hopes are kept alive by the sages and ascetics and by the Brahmans who talk of *dharmā*.'

' You are right. Whatever I do, they call *adharma*. Bahuka, you are wise. You have been trained under our glorious father-in-law, Jarasandha. You must have had sufficient experience. Let us know what we can do.'

‘ Lord, the first duty of a powerful ruler is to extinguish the hope of deliverance in his people. This hope, as I said, is kept alive, first, by the ascetics.’

‘ How shall I deal with them ? ’

‘ Mighty Prince, you cannot deal with them easily. They do not covet, nor fear, nor hate. They want nothing for themselves. That is why they are so powerful. But that is not all. There are the Brahmans, the men of self-discipline, who have faith in the Sacred Word — the Vedas — and who invoke the gods and teach *dharma* as something above the might of kings. They will not accept your dictates cheerfully. They judge everyone by the canons of what they call *dharma*.’

‘ I have been trying to win them over by lavish grants,’ said Kamsa.

‘ You cannot bribe the sages; nothing will corrupt them. And if you give grants to the Brahmans, I know, they will fatten on them. But in their hearts the thirst for knowledge will remain and they will only take the advice of those who refuse to live in riches.’

‘ I can kill them surely.’

‘ Mighty Prince, if you kill them, the people will turn in wrath against you. If you drive them away from Mathura, they will raise enemies for you wherever they go.’

Kamsa listened to Bahuka's words in silence and the old minister continued :

‘ Mighty Prince, there is only one way to destroy the sages and the Brahmans. Open your purse-strings to the people; teach them to eat, drink and enjoy themselves; break up their families; teach women that chastity is not worth having at the cost of pleasure; bring up children to look upon their parents as old and useless. Once the people begin to believe in unrestrained pleasures as the goal of life, they will look upon the ascetics as deranged and the Brahmans as selfish; they will laugh at those who talk of duty, *tapas*, love and compassion. When wine flows, self-restraint will disappear; men will be like well-fed cattle at the mercy of their cowherds. Whatever you do they will

bear as patiently as uncomplaining beasts, and obey your lash as if it were a favour from you.'

'That is a long path to follow that you have shown us, Bahuka. We shall try to follow it. In the meantime, Putana, find out how many children were born during the last few days and see that none of them survives.'

AND HE WAS NAMED KRISHNA

Devaki, now free and inhabiting her own palace, lived in a dream-world of her own. The little blue baby was always before her eyes, clinging to her, kicking the air, feeding at her breasts, his lovely lips parted in a smile, his beautiful eyes looking at her joyfully. When she was with Vasudeva and not within ear-shot of anyone else, she loved to talk of nothing but of him. She was never tired of listening to Vasudeva's narration of what happened on that night of miracles — how the child, the moment he took him into his arms, assumed the resplendent form of the four-armed Lord; how a deeply-felt prayer had sprung from the depths of his heart; how the doors were opened by unseen hands; how the guards were asleep; how the rain had stopped when he stepped into the swirling waters of the Yamuna; how a dark cloud, like the giant hood of Sesha, the monarch of the serpent race, shielded the child from rain; how he brought back Yashoda's daughter without anyone noticing it; and how she slipped from Kamsa's hands and flew out of the window, with a shriek which struck terror into the heart of that wicked Prince.

Devaki did not like to meet anyone except Vasudeva or Gargacharya, for to them alone, when by themselves, could she talk of her child who filled her heart and imagination. Often at night her heart would be drawn to Gokul in her anxiety to know how her beloved child was doing. However, she had to be very, very careful, lest anyone should come to know that her son was alive.

In the night, as she slept with her arm on Vasudeva, a deep yearning would seize her to see her child, to hug him to her heart, to kiss him and to see joy beaming out of those little eyes, which always swam before hers.

Every fortnight Gargacharya would go to Gokul to perform sacrificial rituals at the house of Nanda. Then Devaki's heart would be seized with distressing impatience. She would wait for his return as if her life hung on it. And then, when he came, and she saw the meaningful flicker of Garga's eyes, her heart would bound with joyful excitement. 'He is well, he is well, my child, my deliverer, my God,' her heart would whisper.

The longing to see her child sometimes became so poignant that she sang cradle-songs all the time to herself. Her maids were at first surprised at this madness, but they knew that the princess had been cruelly deprived of her eight children and that the loss was preying upon her mind.

One day, Devaki could not suppress the longing any more. With her loving hands, she fashioned a little clay image of a new-born baby and had a cradle made for it. Thereafter it became a daily joy with her to rise up early in the morning, form a little baby out of clay, offer it flowers and red powder and saffron, swing it in the cradle and offer it milk, singing loving songs all the while. Then she sent it to sleep, woke it up with fond hymns, tinkling a bell all the time, and offered it flowers and fruits and milk and honey.

Vasudeva and Gargacharya understood what Devaki was doing. The little clay image was to her that lost but unforgotten child who, she was sure, was God Himself. Others thought she was out of her mind, but honoured her for her sincerity in worshipping the little image of her God.

Yashoda, the wife of Nanda, had been denied children so far for all these years. Her delivery, therefore, had been very difficult and painful, and after the child was born, she had fainted. Rohini, the wife of Vasudeva, was the only lady in attendance.

When Yashoda came to herself in the morning, Rohini handed the child to her. Her heart missed a beat in joyful wonderment. After all hope had been given up, she had now a child, and that too a son, and so lovely and so

unique, for its colour was sky-blue. Overwhelmed with joy, she took the child from Rohini and pressed it to her bosom.

'My darling, my own,' she cried in ecstasy. And the child opened its eyes, and there was a light in its gaze which, she felt, was a thing to marvel at.

The report spread from mouth to mouth. Gokul was astir with wild delight. Their aged chief, Nanda, had a son, and so lovely! No one had seen such a wonderful child before! And the cowherds, *gopas* and *gopis* — cowherds and their wives — of the Shoora clan, went wild with joy. The *gopis*, out of sheer excitement, were busy bedecking themselves as though for a festival. The *gopas* brought out their bulls and cows, washed them clean, painted them red or green and pasted gold and silver leaves on their horns. The children, shouting with delight, danced around Vraja and entered into the full spirit of the holiday. For they all wanted to go to their chief and see Yashoda's child.

Then the gay procession started for Nanda's house, the cows gleaming in gold and silver; the children, noisy and joyful, running here and there; the *gopas*, in multi-coloured turbans, clapping each other encouragingly on the back; the *gopis*, dressed in festive clothes and wearing burnished head-dresses of brass, bringing up the rear.

The procession halted in Nanda's courtyard. It was received by the old chief, who was smiling at everyone and by his exultant kinsmen. And the *gopis*, full of curiosity, tip-toed to the room in which Yashoda was confined, where she proudly exhibited her lovely boy to their admiring eyes. And when they saw the blue-tinted boy, they gasped in unutterable excitement. Never, never had they beheld so lovely a child!

One day Devaki was standing on the balcony of her palace, when she chanced to see a dark cloud moving across the sky. It was dark blue — yes, it was the colour of her beloved child! She went on gazing at the cloud till its shape was transformed into that of a child. She saw the

hands, the feet and the face she had never forgotten and the eyes that had haunted her day and night. She almost swooned with excessive delight. Yes, her Beloved was dark as the cloud — he was *ghana shyam*.

Then Gārgacharya came to her, and Vasudeva joined them. The family-priest had already cast the horoscope of her child, and the wonder was that, according to the law prescribed by the sages, the child's name had to begin with *ka* or *chha* or *gha* — what a miracle ! It could only be 'Ghanashyam' — Dark as the cloud, or Krishna — the Dark One.

And the next day Vasudeva had a toy child made of black marble for Devaki. And from that time on she made it the centre of her daily worship, addressing it as 'Ghanashyam.' None except the three knew that it stood for Krishna; nor was anyone allowed to know it. For they dared not let Kamsa discover the identity of the image she worshipped with its original who was growing up rapidly at Gokul.

It was a great day at Vraja when the ceremony of giving a name to the child was to be performed. The courtyard of Nanda's house was decorated with columns of banana trees with their leaves waving in the air, and the leaves of the mango tree strung from one end to the other fluttered in the air. The ground was sprinkled with sandal paste and musk, and bright, shining brass pots were placed one on the other in its centre.

Then Gargacharya with his pupils came to Vraja, and they were received with a flourish of conchs. Nanda honoured them by making costly presents. Yashoda brought out the child and Gargacharya fed him with rice and ghee, and the boy was named Krishna with appropriate rituals.

Then followed a lavish feast for the Brahmans, in which the *gopas* and the *gopis* joined. The poor from all over the surrounding villages were fed. In the evening, Gargacharya and his pupils returned to Mathura.

And when Vasudeva and Devaki were told of what had happened, they joined hands and worshipped the little dark image which lay in the toy cradle under a heap of flowers. And the faith grew strong in their hearts that the Lord Himself had been born to them !

Twelve months passed, Vraja celebrated the first birthday of Sri Krishna on the banks of Yamuna, where an ancient temple of Gopanath Mahadeva stood. Nanda gave a feast to the Brahmans, to which all the *gopas* and *gopis* were invited. Yashoda, with the little child in her arms, greeted everyone with a smile.

It was noon when the feast began. The child was sleepy, and Yashoda, to move about freely among the diners, placed him in the shade of an empty cart which had been tilted, to screen from the hot sun.

Yashoda went about among the women, receiving greetings and exchanging jests. And suddenly there was a cry. The cart had tumbled over ! With a piercing scream, Yashoda ran back terrified to the place where the child lay. And there the child was, kicking the air and crying lustily — and unhurt !

Nanda also rushed to the spot and wondered at the little baby that had kicked the cart over.

And when Gargacharya brought the news of this miraculous feat, Devaki's eyes were filled with tears. She exclaimed : ' My darling, my loved one, my God ! ' and tears of joy were in her eyes.

PUTANA MASI GOES TO GOKUL

Kamsa was angry with Putana. She had promised to find out all the children who were born in the month of Sravan and to see that they were killed or poisoned. Two years had gone by since she had undertaken the task, and all she had reported was that only nine babies had been born in that month in Mathura and all of them had been either poisoned or stolen and killed.

Kamsa was constantly haunted by the fear that some child might have been overlooked by Putana and might be growing up in some obscure home. He could not believe that only nine boys had been born in one month in his capital.

Again and again Kamsa insisted upon Putana and the guards telling him the story of how Devaki was delivered of a daughter in the very presence of Putana, to assure himself that that was a fact and no fiction. At the same time, he could not get over the weird experience of the new-born girl slipping out of his hands and flying away through the window with that terrible shriek which rang in his ears night after night. He could interpret the meaning of the shriek : his future slayer was born and was elsewhere.

However, Putana was at her wit's end. No one had ever told her, nor could she find out that any boy other than the nine she had disposed of had been born in that month. Now it was impossible for her to do more. Whenever she passed along the streets, people closed their doors against her. None would let her see their children. Many women with small children had left Mathura.

Kamsa thought of massacring all the one-year-old male babies in Mathura. But he knew that some of his trusted

adherents had one-year-old boys. Two of his wives had borne sons during that year. He simply could not embark upon that venture.

Then Kamsa heard that the wife of Nanda, the chief of Gokul, though she was past middle age, had given birth to a boy about two years ago. A few days ago Nanda, with some kinsmen, had come to Mathura to pay tribute. Kamsa's spies had picked up stories of how the birth of the child to their chief had been hailed by the Shooras; how Nanda, in his simplicity, was describing how wonderful his son was; and how the little boy's beauty and exploits were on every Shoora's lips.

Since Kamsa had heard this report, a strange fear had entered his heart. Was this boy, of whom Nanda and his kinsmen talked so much, destined to kill him? Nanda paid tribute regularly and was loved and respected by his people. The Shooras of Gokul were powerful and rich. They were well-connected and people had a high respect for them. They had a very independent spirit and might, if offended, create endless trouble, for Vasudeva, their king, was related by marriage to very high people indeed; his sister was married to Pandu, the ruling prince of Hastinapura. And to wage a war against the Shooras and to kill a two-year-old boy of their chief's would make him a figure of scorn from Magadha to Hastinapura. No, that would not do. The only way was to take the help of Putana. And so she was called to his presence.

Putana stood in Kamsa's presence, a picture of unhappiness. She instinctively felt that she was going to be commissioned to kill some baby. She had come to hate the very idea of it. The dying gasps of the little innocents, whom she had poisoned or killed, had been echoing in her ears all the time.

'Putana, have you heard of the boy born to the wife of Nanda, the Chief of Gokul?'

Putana shook her head, feigning ignorance.

'Nanda's wife gave birth to a boy about the time

Devaki gave birth to that daughter. They say he is a wonderful boy. You must see to it.'

'Lord, I cannot do it. You know that I am the most feared woman in Mathura,' she said bitterly. 'I am Putana *masi* (the aunt) hated by everyone. My very name frightens away children. There is not a woman with a child who does not curse me. Even women of my family, my own sisters, shun me. To look at me is to invite a disaster — That is what everyone thinks of me.'

'Nonsense !'

'Master, I have served you to the best of my power. I cannot do any more. Ask your own consorts. If they even see my face, they go and purify themselves by a ceremonial bath to purge away the sin.'

'Putana, you are mistaken. You know how I prize you. That ought to be enough. Never mind those foolish women. Help me with Nanda's son. Do this for me and I will not trouble you again.'

'Please spare me this, lord. I have lost the power even to carry a baby. Two months ago, my last born died in my arms. In his last dying breath, I heard the death-rattle of the four children whom I had suckled to death. And when he died, I felt the anguish of all the nine mothers whose sons I had poisoned or stifled. Now I know what it is to see one's child dying before one's eyes. No, lord, I cannot do this any more,' she said piteously.

'Do not talk foolishly, Putana. You, of all people, should be strong. I cannot let this boy live. The more I think of it, the more I feel that we cannot let him live.'

Putana looked down, afraid and undecided.

'You won't do it ?' asked Kamsa, and his voice had a ring of menace.

'Forgive me, master. Ask me to do anything else and I will obey. But don't, please, don't ask me to kill a child any more.' Putana was a picture of misery. For the first time in her life, tears sprang to her eyes.

'Putana, don't forget that you, your husband, Baka, Agha and all of you are bound to me for life.' Kamsa was

now cold, incisive and commanding. 'I can dismiss you if you disobey me. But you cannot part from me. Remember, you owe me all that you have been and are today. Your position, wealth, power, your life — will last only as long as I live. If I die, not one of you will be left alive; you will be torn to pieces. You have, therefore, to be under my control — now and always. Do you understand ?'

Putana, as she looked down, was silent.

'You know that I do not like to be disobeyed,' Kamsa continued quietly. 'A word from me and my stalwart men of Magadha will be only too glad to throttle you with their bare hands. Putana, you and Pradyota are mine in life and death.'

'I know, master,' said Putana.

'Don't stand there, then, like a dumb, helpless creature. Go to Gokul and finish your work.'

'As the lord pleases,' said Putana in a husky, trembling voice.

'I give you a fortnight's time to carry out my orders.'

'As the lord pleases,' she repeated, and folding her hands in deep obeisance, left.

And as Putana left the palace by the gate by which women entered and left it, she saw how the maid-servants, seeing her passing, hurriedly closed the door, shutting themselves in. Yes, she was Putana *masi* — the accursed.

At the full-moon of the month of Aswin, after Krishna completed his second year, Gokul as usual held a festival in honour of its guardian deity, Gopanath Mahadeva. On this occasion, the Shooras, undertaking even if they had to undertake two days' journey by bullock cart, would come with their families to join in the festivities.

On this auspicious day, in the morning, everyone would go for a ritual bath in the Yamuna, have a *darshan* of Mahadeva, make an offering of *bilva* leaves and partake of a sumptuous feast.

The moonlit night that followed was the most auspicious and the loveliest in the year; then the god Soma — the Moon — showered nectar on earth from his rays. Every man, woman and child would, as the moon rose that night, go to the sands on the banks of the Yamuna. They would carry with them pots full of milk mixed with parched rice, for, when exposed to the rays of the moon on this night of all nights, that milk and parched rice gave long life and brought luck.

After the Shooras had made a meal of milk and parched rice, thus vitalised by the beams of the autumn moon, festivities would begin. Young women would sing and dance and laugh. Joyful young men would aid the dance beating time with a drum or their palms or two small sticks. Children would run and jump, or race one another.

The festivities would conclude in the early hours of the morning, when all the people would return to the village, intoxicated with joy and the sense of that well-being which the rays of the full-moon of Aswin alone can bring.

This festive day of the full-moon of Aswin came a few days after Putana had received her orders from Kamsa. The Chief of Gokul, with some of his kinsmen, had gone to Mathura and was not expected to return till midnight.

In the afternoon, a runner brought a message to Yashoda, the wife of the Chief, that a great lady, the wife of one of the leading Brahman courtiers of Mathura, was coming to Gokul to visit Gopanath Mahadeva to fulfil a vow that she had made.

Villagers are always hospitable; the Yadavas, even in those days of cordial generosity, were well-known for their effusive welcome to their guests. And it was a point of honour with Nanda that every visitor to Gokul, high and low, rich or poor, was to be his honoured guest.

Yashoda, Rohini and other members of the family were preparing to set out for the sands to watch the rising moon, when the messenger arrived. On hearing of the

arrival of the distinguished visitor, she sent two young men with some servants to make their way to the outskirts of the village in order to receive her. They were asked to invite the guest home and to request her to join them on the sands at the festive meal and take part in the rejoicings that were to follow, after she had taken the ceremonial bathe, worshipped the deity and fulfilled her vow.

Putana, unhappy at the mission on which she had been sent, was received by the kinsmen of Nanda on the outskirts of Gokul. She heard Yashoda's message and decided to send away the chariot in which she had travelled, to Nanda's stables, for the bullocks had to be washed, fed and kept ready for her return journey after midnight. Then, accompanied by her maids and men-servants, she went directly to the sands.

Her distress knew no bounds when she watched the mood of the crowd of fine-looking, joyous *gopis*, of laughing, romping children and of joking *gopas* who were clapping one another on the back. She alone of all this joyous crowd was wicked. She had come like a poisonous snake to kill the sole heir to their chief, to spread anguish among these happy people and to break the heart of the proud mother who, late in life, had seen her life fulfilled and blossoming forth as a lovely son !

Putana went first to the river, to bathe in it, and then to the temple. She saw the red-gold moon rising over the horizon, lighting the crowd with the ethereality of fairy-land, bringing joy to thousands of hearts; but to her it gave a spasm of pain. Those lovely rays were poisonous darts, for they only brought her a poignant sense of being a monster.

When she reached the temple, people were going in and out of it, laughing and joking with each other. Some stood near the inner shrine and chanted the praise of Mahadeva — the God who did good to all. She bought some *bilva* leaves, went to the inner shrine and placed them on the *linga* of the deity. She prostrated herself before it and placed her head on the ground. 'God ! God ! You give

happiness to everyone. Why have You denied it to me? Why have You made me the partner of Yama, god of death — yes, even more cruel than Yama, destroying only beautiful, innocent lives?'

Putana raised her head and then again let it fall on the ground. 'This is the last, yes, the last child I shall kill. Forgive me, Lord. I will never walk the path of the wicked again.' She rose, took the holy water, touched her eyes with it and was jostled out of the temple by the surging crowd.

The guide took her to the place where Yashoda and her large family sat in a circle, the milk pots in the centre. As the guide announced the arrival of the distinguished guest, the men stood up to make way; the young women looked at the dress and jewels she wore with evident jealousy, for they had never seen a court lady from Mathura before.

Yashoda was sitting on the sands, Rohini by her side, serving out milk to young children, each of whom held out to her a little clay pot. She gave Putana a fine smile and said, 'You are welcome, sister.' Then she moved a little and made room for Putana by her side.

Putana appreciated the cordial welcome which Yashoda extended to her and again felt how accursed she was. She had come to destroy the life of this smiling, happy-looking and good-natured mother.

Putana looked at Yashoda as she sat down near her. What a fine, sturdy, noble-looking woman she was! And a little boy stood on her right, his head hidden by her sari, sucking for all he was worth. She saw the little, bluish body, the shapely limbs, the golden waist band, and the little silver anklets. This was the boy Kamsa had mentioned — there was no doubt about it. There was no mistaking the light-blue colour.

By the side of this little boy, another one, about three years old, tall and robust for his age, was playing with Rohini's hair. She knew Rohini, the elder wife of Vasudeva. This — the big fellow — was evidently her son.

The blue-coloured boy finished his meal and brought his head out of his mother's sari, and in fun snatched away a clay pot from a boy's hand, drank the milk that was in it and threw it away. Putana gazed at the boy, fascinated. He had lovely curls, dark eyes spilling laughter, a face full of mischievous delight. She had several children of her own, and she had seen hundreds of children, but none so lovely as this one.

This was going to be her victim ! She was inclined to give up her mission. Better to die than to kill this child. But, no, she must fulfil her purpose. If she did not, she would have to die — and Pradyota, her husband, too. All her eight children would be put to death. The wrath of Kamsa would be upon their whole house. No, whatever happened, this boy must die. Anyway, he would be the last of those whom she would be called upon to kill.

Putana looked steadily at the boy and, when she caught his eye, cracked her fingers at him, laughed and whistled. The boy looked up at her and smiled — oh, so sweetly !

Putana opened her arms, and Krishna, unafraid, climbed over the lap of Yashoda and walked into her arms. A sudden rush of maternal instinct surged up in her and she hugged Krishna to her heart. She felt as if she was hugging her own child whom she had lost so recently. No, she had never hugged a child with greater abandon !

However, in spite of her sudden impulse, Putana's mind was active. She had to kill this boy. There was no other way. The lives of her husband and her eight children, besides her own, were at stake.

Putana bent her head to tickle the boy by rubbing her nose against him. The boy laughed in amusement. It was a laugh which sent ripples of ecstasy along her veins. The boy noticed the big *champak* flower which she had placed in her hair when she was returning from the temple and, like a little rogue, snatched it away, with a quick movement. She looked up and the boy laughed at his naughtiness, flinging the flower in her face, his eyes dancing with mischievous amusement.

‘Mother, mother, look what your son is doing,’ Putana said to Yashoda, and her hard, man-like face was transformed by a bright smile. ‘Even at this age he is flirting with me. He snatched away the *champak* from my hair and flung it in my face.’

Yashoda looked at Krishna with maternal pride. ‘You don’t know all the pranks which he can play,’ she said happily.

‘If he is so mischievous now, what will he do when he grows up?’ said Putana.

She found her heart bounding in joy. In a transport of ecstasy, she hugged Krishna again. Her repressed maternal instinct burst out, as if it was a roaring flood. And she felt that her skin had become wet. Milk — in that moment of sudden transport — had oozed out of her generous breasts. Her bodice was drenched.

Her body and mind and soul were now craving for this child. Wild ill-assorted thoughts ran beneath her transport. She must take this lovely boy to her breasts. But, immediately after her bath, she had painted her breasts with an ointment prepared in arsenic, of which she alone knew the secret. She had meant — as she had more than once done in the past — to take this boy to her breast and give him a feed, so that he would lick the ointment and with it the arsenic. ‘That would be the end of the boy. There was no other way. She and her children and her husband must be saved at all costs. Once this boy was dead, they would bask in royal favour — for ever and for ever.’

The insistent promptings of her heart were : ‘Take this lovely boy to your breast. You are a wicked, miserable woman. You have never seen joy before — joy which thrills your whole body and mind with mad delight. This is your moment — the moment for which your life and the lives of your husband and children can be staked. Take this boy to your breast!’

Putana had no command over herself. Torn by ecstatic longing for the boy and forgetful of the poison

which she had applied to her breasts, she took Krishna on her lap. He struggled to wriggle out, laughing all the time. She lost control of herself, untied the ends of her bodice and bared her breasts. Milk was oozing out plentifully. She wiped the milk-wet breasts dry with the end of her sari.

Something whispered in her ears : 'Your breasts are covered with poison. You will kill this darling for whom your heart longs.' But she was herself no longer. She took Krishna to her breast impulsively. He responded, took the teat in his mouth and began to suck greedily.

Putana was elated with a rare joy, and lived a tense moment of inexpressible happiness. 'Boy, boy, enjoy it as much as you like. You have given me what no one else could.'

She felt as if her mind was stopping. Was she swooning with delight? Yes, all she wanted was that Krishna, Yashoda's boy, should suck the milk, her life, her hope and her all, if he so chose. 'Yes, I give you all, my beloved child.' The thought flashed across her mind : 'I am yours.'

Something began to hammer in her brain. Her heart was bounding like a wild horse. Then a spasm shot through her frame, a nameless pain...and the joy of the boy sucking away at her breasts.

Wild cries were heard at the fringe of the crowd. Men were rushing forward, brandishing bamboo poles. Nanda was at their head, charging the crowd like a wild bull. People were taken by fright.

'Putana is here.'

'Where is she? Where is Krishna?'

'Krishna, Krishna' — roared the voice of Nanda in intense alarm. 'Where is he?'

'Putana, Putana, Putana' — the terrible words passed from mouth to mouth.

Yashoda looked at the men rushing towards her in terror. She heard the words 'Putana, Putana, Krishna,' and

she looked at the court lady sitting by her side. She was Putana !

However, before Yashoda could snatch Krishna away from Putana, she saw her sinking slowly to the ground, her eyes wide. She made a last gesture to keep the boy to her breast ! And as she fell back dead, a sweet and motherly smile played on her lips.

Even while Putana had been gasping for breath, Krishna had left her and toddled back to Yashoda, who folded him in her arms.

When Nanda reached the spot where his family, in high excitement, was trying to realize what had happened, he saw and recognized Putana as she lay prostrate on the ground.

‘Where is Krishna ? I heard in Mathura that Putana had left for Gokul and I rushed back,’ he told Yashoda in breathless tones.

‘Kill Putana ! Kill Putana’ — shouted the men who had gathered there with bamboo poles upraised.

‘She is dead already,’ said Yashoda, as she shrank away from the dead body. ‘It was my boy that did it.’

And she hugged Krishna to her heart. He was her life, her soul, her all !

TRINAVRIT

When Kamsa heard of the death of Putana, he flew into an extreme rage and immediately called old Pralamba, his minister, philosopher and guide.

'Pralamba, I cannot tolerate this. When Pradyota returns from Gokul, I want to raid it and raze it to the ground. Putana was most valuable to me. I must avenge her death,' said Kamsa.

'May it please Your Highness,' said old Pralamba with folded hands. 'If that is your wish, I have nothing more to say. But have I your permission, lord, to say what I feel?'

'Why have I called you here, if not to speak the truth? Say what you wish, Pralamba. But I will not listen to any advice not to avenge Putana's death.'

'But, lord,' said Pralamba with a meek smile, 'if you raid Gokul, will not Your Highness declare to the world that she killed little children under your orders?'

'I do not care what the world thinks of me. I am not its slave.'

'You are the master, Your Highness. I am only pointing out what strikes an old man. Your Highness killed Devaki's children. Whatever the people might think about what you did, it was necessary to protect Your Highness's sacred life. But to go about killing innocent children to avenge the death of a woman whom everyone hated is quite different. It would enrage all the Yadavas.'

'I don't care for them. They have been doing their worst. What else can they do?'

'I agree they cannot do anything, Your Highness. But perhaps through Drupad, the mighty king of Panchal,

they might create difficulties. He has always coveted Mathura and many of the Yadavas who have fled from here are powerful in his court.'

Kamsa thought for a moment. 'Well, if Drupad wants to fight me, I am ready. We have been preparing for the war for a long time. The earlier the fight begins the better,' said he, twisting at his moustache.

'Yes, Your Highness. I know you are ready,' said Pralamba in his inimitable persuasive manner. 'But if you raze Gokul to the ground, the Shooras are sure to rise in revolt. Akrura's Vrishnis will again become active. Perhaps, lord, King Kuntibhoj, Vasudeva's relative, will join hands with Drupad. Your Highness will be pleased to remember that King Kuntibhoj has adopted Vasudeva's sister Pritha, married to King Pandu of Hastinapura. If they receive a set-back, perhaps that terrible old man, Bhishma, the Protector of Hastinapura, might join in the war. Then our position would be impossible.'

Kamsa became silent for a while. Then, he slapped his thigh in disgust. 'Old man, you are always right. I will accept your advice. But, some day, I will avenge the death of Putana and be rid of my enemies.'

After Pralamba left, Kamsa sat, his brows knit, pondering over the situation. Nanda's boy was a danger, but how to remove him? Pralamba was right. An open attack on Gokul would lead to serious complications.

He rose from his throne and stood at the window gazing absent-mindedly at the Yamuna. Then a forest-dweller, who was catching birds on the bank of the river, caught his attention. It flashed on his mind that the bird-catchers were expert kidnappers of children too. 'That is right,' he muttered, clapped his hands and sent one of his trusted men to bring the bird-catcher to him.

Yashoda felt very alarmed at Putana's death and Krishna's narrow escape. She could never have imagined that any one, however wicked, could ever dream of poisoning her child and, in that way, destroy her life. Throughout her life she had never harmed any one; on the contrary,

she had helped every one and mothered many an orphan in Gokul. She loved all who came to her, and all of them loved her. That any one could kill her child was beyond her conception. But now she knew all that Putana had done in Mathura, killing or poisoning innocent babies.

Day and night, Yashoda could not help thinking of what would have happened to her had that treacherous she-devil succeeded in her designs. And whenever she thought of how Krishna had escaped poisoning, tears ran down her cheeks. She would then gather Krishna to herself, whispering in loving tones: 'My Krishna, my Krishna.'

At the same time, Yashoda began to look upon her son with an undefinable awe. He was not only a miracle of beauty, but had been performing miracles too. He had clung to Putana, fed himself without being poisoned and sucked her life out. And he was only a little over two years old! It was simply unbelievable.

However, Yashoda resolved not to take any risks. She decided not to be parted from Krishna even for a moment. She also told Nanda, Rohini and all other members of the family to keep a watch over Krishna if he happened to stray away from her. But Krishna was a very difficult child to control. If ever she was busy even for a moment, he would toddle away, often in company with Balarama, Rohini's son. Then her heart would be seized with fear. She would leave everything and try to find him, shouting for him wildly. When he was found, she would take him to her arms as if he had escaped a grave danger. Then, Krishna, with ever so mischievous a smile, would fling his arms round her neck or nestle against her. And he was so loving that it was difficult to scold him.

Nanda was in even greater fear than she was. He knew what Putana's visit meant. The wicked Kamsa appeared to have discovered that Krishna was Devaki's eighth son. And Putana's death would not weaken Kamsa's resolve to put an end to Krishna's life. He, therefore, called his servants and kinsmen and put them on their guard. If any stranger came to Gokul, he was to be

watched and not to be given leave to approach Krishna. If possible, Krishna should not be allowed to go out, even with his mother, without one or two strong men following them at a distance.

However, Krishna was a difficult child to control. He thought that all the attempts to prevent him from straying as he liked were a game of hide-and-seek, and seemed to enjoy it. At every available opportunity, he would escape the vigilance of those who guarded him and hide himself behind a hedge or in the cowshed, under the cot or on the hay-loft. Not seeing him Yashoda would raise a hue and cry. There would be an uproar; every one would go about trying to find him. Ultimately he would be found smiling in a way he alone could, sometimes pushing Balarama in front of him as if Rohini's son was responsible for what he had done. And when he saw the search party, he would dance for joy. It was great fun for him.

But it was no fun for Yashoda, the kinsmen or the servants. After having made a search all around in frantic anxiety, they would feel foolish to discover that Krishna was quite near, making fun of them.

'Where were you, my Krishna? Where were you? I was dying of sheer fright,' Yashoda would cry.

'I was only here,' Krishna would say and, laughing in complete innocence, cling to his mother as if to reward her for her labours.

It was difficult for Nanda's household to keep pace with all Krishna's tricks. He could devise new ones, at a moment's notice, to cause them anxiety.

A few days had passed uneventfully. One morning Yashoda had been to pay a visit to a relative living nearby, who had had a difficult delivery. On her way home she carried Krishna, as usual, on her left side, his knees astride her waist. Suddenly his mood became mischievous and he began to jump up and down vigorously as if he was riding a horse and made it difficult for her to carry him.

'Krishna, what are you doing?' she asked.

'Nothing, mother,' he lisped and jumped all the more vigorously.

'Then, don't jump,' the mother said.

Yashoda found it very difficult to hold Krishna, wriggling more and more vigorously. She grew almost breathless as if his weight had grown unbearable.

'What are you doing? I cannot walk, Krishna. Why don't you sit quietly?'

'Mother, I want to walk,' replied Krishna.

Yashoda felt as if she would stumble and bring the boy down with her. She therefore decided, being out of breath, to put him down on a verandah nearby and wait for a while.

Suddenly, the sun was clouded. A sand-storm came over the village, travelling swiftly, raising clouds of eddying dust. The velocity of the storm made it very difficult for Yashoda to stand. Even her eyes were filled with dust.

She placed Krishna on a verandah and, clinging to a pillar, sat near him, waiting for the storm to blow over. It was impossible to keep her eyes open or to hold the hand of the boy who was trying to pull himself away.

It was some time before the dust-storm blew over. Yashoda opened her eyes and tried to look for Krishna. He was not there.

'Krishna, Krishna, where are you?' she shouted.

There was no reply. She looked around, here, there, and in the by-lanes which ran by the house. There was no trace of him. Yashoda grew into a panic, and, like one gone mad, went on shouting, 'Krishna, Krishna.' When there was no response, she began to cry. 'My Krishna is gone. He is not to be found,' she wailed aloud.

Some *gopis*, who were going that way, joined her. When they were informed of what had happened, they also started searching for the boy. Someone ran and informed Nanda about the loss of Krishna. Gathering the servants and kinsmen who happened to be near he rushed to the spot, made enquiries and went about searching for Krishna.

After a long and impatient search, the party came across a dead body on the outskirts of the village. Some man, in running quickly through the dust-storm, had stumbled and broken his head against a large stone lying by the wayside. One of the villagers recognised him. He was the bird-catcher who had come to Gokul only two days before. His name was Trinavrit. He had come from Mathura.

Nanda uttered a cry of despair. This man must have stolen his Krishna. But where was he? Men ran in different directions, shouting for Krishna.

After a little while, they heard a response. A small beloved voice replied : 'I am here, father.'

And little Krishna emerged from an adjacent mango grove, smiling cheerfully and rushing up to Nanda, who ran forward to envelop the child in his arms.

'How did you come to be here, Krishna?' asked Nanda, his voice choking with emotion.

'He ran away with me,' said Krishna pointing to Trinavrit lying dead on the ground. 'He held me tight and I held him tight too. But he fell and I ran away.' And he laughed with joy.

When Vasudeva and Devaki heard of the attempt made by Putana to poison Krishna, they almost fainted with fear. Kamsa seemed to have discovered where their son was; otherwise Putana would not have gone to Gokul. And if Kamsa had already discovered the whereabouts of Krishna, he was sure to do him harm.

Vasudeva and Devaki eagerly listened to Gargacharya's account of how Putana had come, claiming to be a Brahman woman; how she had joined the family party; and how she had tried to poison Krishna and, in doing so, met her own death.

Devaki's faith in her divine child was soon restored. To have killed Putana was a miracle which her little 'god' alone could have performed. With her eyes moist with tears, she went into her prayer-room and emptied her heart in fervent supplications.

Vasudeva had, however, not the deep faith in his child which his wife had. He had become very nervous : Kamsa was sure to pursue his aim of destroying Krishna. A few days later he consulted Akrura and Gargacharya. Something had to be done to save Krishna, or at any rate throw Kamsa off the scent.

Akrura, however, allayed Vasudeva's anxiety. 'Vasudeva, don't be anxious — at any rate for the moment,' he said. 'I heard only yesterday that the Prince had already consulted Pralamba. He wanted to raze Gokul to the ground.'

'Oh, Lord !' exclaimed Vasudeva.

'Don't forget that the Lord has come to deliver us,' Akrura replied. 'None can injure Him. At the same time, we, being human, have to take precautions, as men do. But there is nothing to fear. Pralamba, I understand, has advised Kamsa not to avenge the death of Putana.'

'But there is one danger,' said old Gargacharya. 'I go every fortnight to Gokul and bring you news. Nanda also sends you messages. You cannot help making enquiries about Krishna. Sometime or the other, Kamsa will surely come to know that we are all anxious about Krishna's safety. This will confirm his suspicion that he is Devaki's child. Then he will do all that he can to Krishna.'

'What do you suggest ?' asked Vasudeva.

'We must not allow Kamsa to suspect that you have anything to do with Krishna. But that means that you and Devaki must leave Mathura and go on a long pilgrimage,' replied Gargacharya.

'Oh, what will happen to my beloved child in our absence ?' asked Vasudeva piteously.

'I will be here. Nobody will suspect an old Brahman going to Gokul to perform religious ceremonies. We can persuade Nanda to hold some sacrifices and I can go and live there for some time,' said Gargacharya.

'Vasudeva, I think Gargacharya is right,' said Akrura thoughtfully. 'If you both leave Mathura, Krishna will be safer than while you are here. Even as it is, staying in

Mathura, you cannot do anything to protect Krishna. And I am here all the time.'

'Akrura, it will break Devaki's heart to go far away from Mathura where she is not likely to hear any news about her beloved child,' said Vasudeva.

'Shall I tell you what I learnt this morning?' said Gargacharya, his voice subdued with awe. 'Four days ago a forester kidnapped Krishna. It was the day we had the storm. The forester died in the storm. And Krishna was safe and smiling. Vasudeva, Devaki is right. He is God.'

'That decides it, Vasudeva. I give you a promise,' said Akrura. 'Even if it costs the life of every Vrishni, we will not let Krishna be harmed. Perhaps if you are away from Mathura, I can look after him much better. It is most important that Kamsa's suspicion that Krishna is your child should be allayed.'

'I dare not make the suggestion to Devaki,' said Vasudeva. 'She is unhappy enough without knowing of this new calamity. She will die. As it is, she is half dead, longing for news of her boy whom she cannot even see for a moment. You don't know. Every moment of her life she lives in Krishna.'

'Lord!' came Devaki's voice trembling with deep emotion.

The three of them turned round, startled. Devaki was standing in the door-way, leaning against the door-post, her lips trembling and yet set firm, her eyes wide open in fear.

'Lord, Acharya is right. We must leave Mathura. I am willing to die if my "God" lives.' And she fainted.

KRISHNA'S MUSINGS

Krishna mused within himself as the dawn broke in Gokul.

Life for me is all joy, even at the age of six.

At the break of dawn, Mother Yashoda will be milking the cows. Yes, I hear the clamorous bellows of impatient calves and the soothing voice of Mother as she calls each one by its name. This is the time to get up, rub one's eyes and smile.

However, Balarama is an idler. I have to tickle him before he will wake up, rubbing his eyes and grunting like a bear. Then all I have to do is to pull him out of bed. In spite of his roughness, he loves me, and I love him. He even prefers to stay with me at Gokul rather than go with his mother to Mathura.

Then both of us have to wash and get ready. Before other cowherds have collected in the village square to drive their cows to Mahavana for grazing, I must be there. That is the way to be their leader. If I am late, they, poor fellows, will feel unhappy.

Both Balarama and I must put on *dhotis*, fold our turbans, take our staffs and slip out. Balarama has no sense of doing things as they should be done. I, however, have to have my little *dhoti* tucked to perfection; I have also to fold my turban scrupulously gay and fix it at a tilt — not in the clumsy way my big brother does. Then a peacock's feather has to be found and put into the turban. Balarama never worries about feathers.

Then, dressed alike, my brother and I have to go where the cows have been gathered, and waving my little staff, I must put myself at the head of the *gopas*. I have

to smile at them, for I am their chief. I have also to make faces at the boys of my own age when they come to accost me. I have to look after them ; they are my companions; without them there is no fun in life.

Once at the head of the procession, I lead them all out to the forest, leave the cows there to graze and return home. On the way home I must go with my friends to the river. But I ought always to remind myself that Balarama is the elder brother and has to be given precedence, though, being a very good brother, he never minds if I leave him behind. But it is wrong to try to master my elder brother. One should be careful not to do it.

To bathe in the river with my friends is great fun. Jump into the waters; swim, sometimes racing with friends; splash water at each other, or hold each other's heads down in the water till you feel choked. In the water you always ride on someone's back. Of course, no one will dare to ride on my back.

Then I return to the village, but not home. I have to know all about the ways of the womenfolk. In the morning they will all be going to the river to fetch water. That is the time I should never miss.

I can descend upon someone's house when all the inmates have gone out of it; then, tiptoeing quietly, open the door at the back or enter through a window which may have been left unlatched; if not, I can climb to the roof, open the tiles and let myself in.

It is so easy for me to do all this; no one can compete with me — I am so agile. Balarama certainly cannot. He is heavy and is not so active. Sometimes some friend helps me. On many occasions, afraid of their parents' wrath, my friends leave me alone. Even Balarama sometimes does not join me and goes away.

However, that does not matter to me. It is great fun going into houses in this fashion. Having entered, I know what I want — the pot of curds or butter hanging by a rope hanger from the roof. Curds and butter — those are the things I like.

Generally the pots are hung too high for me to reach. But there are ways to reach them which I know. I call in a friend and climb on his back. If no one is willing to help, it does not matter. All I have to do is to take a piece of stone and throw it at the mud-pot. Then there will be a big hole in the pot. Sometimes the pot will crack. And curds or butter will drip to the ground or fall in a torrent !

That is the time to have my fill, with both hands — sometimes by just opening my mouth to catch the torrent. But it is no use being selfish. That is wrong. My trusted friends have to be helped to the feast. I have therefore to collect the curds and butter with both my hands and ladle them out to my friends through the back-door or the open window. It is very enjoyable — this feast of stolen butter.

Sometimes I have no friends to share my booty. Then there is no sense in allowing all the curds or butter to go to waste. I have to stand at the window and offer them to the monkeys. The monkeys, with joyful screeches, will jump down from the trees and take the butter from my hands, go up the trees again and lustily swallow what I have given them with chuckles and shrieks. Monkeys are nice things, very likable.

However, there is no time to waste. The menfolk will have gone to the forest or the farm, but the womenfolk have a knack of coming back when they are least wanted. So I have to disappear by the way I came in, go home by the back-door and wash my hands and mouth clean. For, Mother is very clever. She will immediately find out that I have been stealing butter. She will always suspect me of eating butter.

Mother is very difficult sometimes. She is very tidy herself and wants me to be tidy too. She simply does not understand what fun there is in being untidy at times or playing in the streets throwing up dust, or near the cow-sheds handling cow-dung.

Once she even suspected me of eating earth. Then, she brought out her cane and ordered me to open my mouth. Of course I did it. And the mouth was so fine

and clean that she looked dazed as if she had seen all the stars of the sky shining there !

However, sometimes it is difficult to get away. The other day, Balarama and I were in the courtyard playing at being kings. Each of us had made a fort of dried turds of cow-dung lying there. We also flung them at each other; in our hands they were divine weapons given by the great God, Shankar. Then we tried to decide the contest by wrestling. That was, however, not decisive. So both of us took up the fresh cow-dung lying on the ground and tried to smear each other with it. It was great fun. We just enjoyed plastering each other with it.

We had thought that Mother had not returned home. But she had heard our shouts of victory and came out. And she was furious. She held us by the ear and slapped us heartily while we tried to wriggle out of her hands, laughing uproariously. Then she washed us clean, grumbling all the while. The angrier she became, the more fun it was.

Then she brought out her cane. Balarama ran away and hid in a corner — not I. He just did not know Mother; I knew her well. I rubbed my eyes and began to whine — as the wolves in the Mahavana do at night. I knew that that would soften her immediately. She threw away her stick and opened her arms to me. I jumped into them, clung to her neck and whined — for all I was worth. And she forgot her anger, patted me on the back, hugged and kissed me, and wiped my tears, taking me close to her bosom sweetly.

When our peace was made, Balarama emerged from the corner. Mother suddenly remembered that his mother, Aunt Rohini, had gone to Mathura and he had stayed behind for love of me. Mother had also promised to be *his* mother. And I could not do without him — I loved him so. So Mother took him on her lap and hugged and kissed him too. And we were happy — both of us, of course, enveloped in Mother's arms. She was so lovable.

The difficulty is always with the *gopis*, particularly the

elder ones. Whenever their pots of curd or butter are broken, they can think of nobody but me. Then they come to Mother with complaints, making ugly faces. On such occasions I hide myself behind Mother, clinging to her neck from the back and make loving eyes at them. Most of them are nice women. Even while they are complaining they smile at me. Then I protest and very strongly; how could I break their pots? I was at the river side at that time. Then they dissolve into laughter. They call me 'butter thief'. I deny it and shake my curls.

Mother puts on an angry look. 'Kahna, you are a wicked boy! You harass all the *gopis*,' she says with a frown.

I put on an innocent air and in a piteous voice say, 'Mother, they have got into the habit of finding fault only with me. I have been to the forest grazing the cows.'

At this one of the *gopis* probably says, 'I have a son and he told me you were not in the forest.'

'Your son is a malicious boy, though he is a great friend of mine. How do you know that he did not steal the butter himself? I saw him eating it in your back yard,' I say with innocent looks.

They all laugh.

'Very well, my Harischandra,¹ but where were you then, if you saw him eating the butter? Inside the house?' Mother asks, laughing uproariously.

'No,' I say stoutly. 'I was on the tree across the yard. And Balarama was there too.'

'You are a liar.' Mother tries to look angry, though she rarely succeeds in being so.

Then, dissolved in tears, I move away in pretended resentment and whine.

'Mother, you don't love me any more,' I say. 'You behave as if I was not your son.'

The Mother relents immediately. 'No, my Kahna,' she says affectionately and pulls me to herself. 'But you must not steal butter any more.'

'But I haven't,' I stoutly deny and hide my smile by nestling against her.

And Mother forgets all that I have done and the *gopis* shake their heads and say : 'Isn't he lovely ?' And I also smile. They are just praising me. They are nice, lovable things, who always hug me and call me to their places and give me nice butter even without my asking.

However, there are some senseless ones too. They come to Mother and abuse me. Then I have to do something to them. Balarama and I have then to find out the time when they will be away. I have then to climb on the back of Balarama, scale the compound wall of mud, and jump into their compounds. Then I untie the calves, open the door of the courtyard and drive them away into the forest. Then I go back and wait for the return of the people of the house, and see the fun of their struggling to find their lost calves.

Oh ! life is such fun.

HOW WOMEN FEEL ABOUT CLOTHES !

And at the age of six, Krishna thought life was all joy !

The little girls of Gokul were very lovely. They were very nice-looking and had fine hair. They would play with him but not with his friends. On the other hand, Balarama was really afraid of them, though a brave fellow. But Krishna was different. He liked the company of girls and they liked him—oh, so much.

In Gokul, the boys and girls in their different groups went to bathe in the river at different times and at different places. But the girls knew when he would be going to bathe and they would come to the river at the same time. And they would enter the river very near the place where he and his friends were bathing, though their mothers did not like their doing it. The sight of them sent joy all through him. His friends would laugh and whistle at them, but he would stop them doing it. Those lovely little things were not to be treated like that. Gargacharya, the family priest, had told him that he was a Kshatriya and it was his duty to protect the weak. And the girls, poor things, were so weak. They could not run, or climb a tree and cried every time something went wrong. But that made them very lovable.

When he was in the river, the girls would not stop bathing till he came out. He knew they were watching him with sidelong glances.

He also liked to linger behind his friends and exchange looks with them. They would come out of the water to find their clothes, and giggle. He then took his flute out of his waist-band and played on it. He could do it

wonderfully; he was the best boy flute-player in Gokul, everybody knew this. And then they looked at him with adoring eyes. And he would feel so wonderful.

In the evenings, and particularly when there was a moon, the girls would gather in the village squares to play games. They hated the idea of playing with boys. But he was different. They would welcome him with joyous cries, surround him and want him to play on his flute, which he did.

Then they would let him play with them. Why, sometimes they would agree to play the games he taught them. They were boys' games and the girls could not play them well. Lalita and Vishakha were brave girls and would try hard. But they would fall down in some part of the game that was too difficult for them and start crying. And he would just have to go to them, lift them from the ground and say nice things to them.

Anyway, all the girls liked him to speak kindly to them. And he knew how to do it very well. They would stop looking unhappy and smile and giggle and start chattering again.

Balarama was impossible and very obstinate too. He did not like to play with girls, or talk to them. He laughed at Krishna for doing it. But Krishna could not help that; he was not going to miss all the fun. Nor would Balarama join him in breaking the water-pots which the *gopis* carried on their heads, with a stone aimed from the sling at each pot. He thought it was cruel. Krishna, however, knew that it was fun and the *gopis* liked it too.

He had been breaking into too many houses to steal butter and the *gopis* had been complaining too often to Mother. He felt that that was unfair. Life would lose its zest if he did not steal butter. However, something had to be done to stop them complaining.

He was longing for something funny to do to teach those *gopis* a lesson. They would not stop complaining otherwise. But what should it be? As he was thinking of new jokes to play, he came to the bank of the river.

Pretty young *gopis*, and some fairly old ones too, were bathing in the river, enjoying themselves, for it was past midday and no menfolk could be seen on the bank.

His eyes fell on the women's *saris* lying near the *Pipal* tree. What fun! Hiding behind a bush, he went quietly up to the tree, collected all the *saris*, tied them in a bundle and climbed the tree to hide in its thick foliage. He sat there quietly. Then they came out of the water their bodies dripping water and their long hair clinging to them like so many serpents. They came to the tree, found no clothes and shrieked in horror. It was great fun, the way they looked at each other, the way they looked around and the way they tried to hide their bodies with their hands — and they simply could not.

Then they looked up and noticed Krishna in the tree and raised a shout. He just would not look at them; he took his flute and played a sweet tune, and they began to wail. One young woman tried to climb the tree, but could not. Poor thing — she fell down and almost broke her neck. Then they folded their hands: 'Kahna, Kahna, please, please, give us our clothes.'

In reply, he played his flute. And they begged and begged for their clothes. He said to them: 'Ask my forgiveness for making complaints against me.' And they pleaded to be forgiven — in such piteous tones that he could not help relenting. But he threw the *saris* down one by one. There was a scramble for each till the owner was able to identify it. So the fun continued. When everyone was dressed, he climbed down the tree and walked away playing his flute.

'Yashoda's son is terrible,' he heard one of them saying, and he smiled.

'Thank God, he is only seven,' muttered another.

He just couldn't understand what difference it would have made if he had been seventeen.

Women and girls could not keep their mouths shut, even when the talk put them to shame. He would never have thought that women who, if it had not been for him,

would have had to go home without their clothes in broad daylight would go round telling everybody about that act of goodness. He would never have imagined such ingratitude. And naturally he was shocked when they came to Mother and told her about his kindness. Instead of thanks, they got Mother to give him a spanking. It was a strange world.

Yet he never felt any resentment at ungratefulness; they, poor things, found some happiness in being ungrateful. However, all he could do when Mother became very angry was to lie on the ground and cry. Of course, he kept looking quietly at Mother to see whether in her usual way she would forgive him and come to take him into her arms. But not this time !

The ungrateful women left his house, and, the servants being away, Mother began to prepare to churn buttermilk herself. He thought that before she did it she would come and take him in her arms. But no, she wouldn't. He tried sobbing, but she was adamant. This naturally made him angry in his quiet way. Mother had been good all those days, but today she had become really angry. He could not understand it. When his father had heard of his playing the trick with the clothes of the *gopis*, he had laughed, ever so uproariously ! He thought it was great fun. But not Mother. She was red in the face. But women were women, after all.

He was angry, but not in the same way as others. When Balarama, for instance, was angry he fretted and fumed, stamped his feet, shouted at the top of his voice and rolled his eyes. It was sheer waste. It was folly to upset himself when he was angry. Mother must feel that he was angry and change and be as loving as she had always been.

Maybe, women were different from men where clothes were concerned. He must give Mother a chance to be good again. So he stopped crying, slowly stepped up to Mother and tried pulling the border of her *sari*. He was sure she would turn round, and seeing him in tears, would forget her anger and take him in her arms.

However, this time she only turned round, looked at him as if she could eat him alive and pushed him away.

'Mother,' he cried piteously. But the smell of boiling milk was in the air. She sniffed it and ran into the next room to stop the milk boiling over.

He felt angry — again, not like Balarama, but in his quiet, determined way. Mother was still in a bad mood. Something had to be done to bring things to a head.

Then his eyes happened to fall on the pot of butter on the rope hanger. Of course, he knew the trick for breaking it. He had practised it a hundred times, though never in his own home. He just picked up a stone and threw it at the pot with the sure aim of an expert.

Phut ! There was a big crack in the pot and the butter dripped out. He ate as much of it as he could and collected the rest in a brass plate. Then he carried it to the back door, sat down on a big wooden mortar and invited his friends, the monkeys, to the feast. One, two, three, four of them arrived and took the butter from his hand, sat down in front of him on their haunches and gobbled the butter down — of course dropping a lot on the ground. He forgot his anger.

Mother came out and saw her pot broken and the butter all spilt on the ground. She immediately sensed that he had done it; she now had no doubt as to how the other butter pots had been smashed. She came up to him angrily, caught hold of his ear and gave him a slap : 'Kahna, you wicked boy, when will you improve ?'

He felt very hurt. If she had been kind, he would have been good. But she gave him no chance. And it was fun to see her very angry, with her eye-brows knit and nose twitching and a frown spoiling her nice, kindly face. What could he do but laugh ?

'I will teach you a lesson you will never forget,' she shouted. Her anger also was like Balarama's — a lot of wasted energy. In anger, she brought a stick to beat him with. The only thing he could do in that situation was to run. She followed him. But his feet were slippery

with butter and he fell to the ground. She took hold of him and he sat down on the mortar, rubbed his eyes furiously and cried loudly.

Mother stopped for a moment with her stick upraised, and he cried for all he was worth. Perhaps in that way she might become kind, he felt.

However, all that Mother did was to throw away the stick and take down a rope hanging on a peg nearby. She was very angry still, and he waited to see what she would do next.

Mother actually bent down and tried to bind him to the mortar with the rope. He wriggled away as far as he could, but Mother was very strong. She was able to overpower him and he felt helpless, though it made her red in the face. Anyway, in struggling with him her hair became dishevelled and the flowers in it fell to the ground — one, two, three. She tied him to the mortar and went angrily out of the room to do her daily work about the house.

THE MIRACLE OF THE TWIN TREES

If Mother was angry, he was angry too. He had to make her feel that she could not go on being angry all the time. Something had to be done now. But what? His hands and feet were tied to the mortar. When he tried to get up, the heavy mortar came up with him. He made an effort, the rope slipped a little but he could not move his feet. He had to do something to change his Mother's mood. He bent his back and tried to move. And look! The mortar moved with him. It was difficult to move fast, but he could certainly drag it with him.

He moved towards the door, slowly and silently. Mother did not suspect that he was going out — mortar and all. He wanted to go into the courtyard. Step by step, he reached the outer gate, opened it and with an effort dragged himself and the mortar over the threshold.

Now he was in the open. There, in front of him lay the path going to the forest. It would be fun to drag the mortar out to the forest. Mother would have to bring it back before she could pound paddy tomorrow.

The mortar was getting heavier, no doubt, and he was sweating very much. But if Mother were in a bad mood, it would be no use coming back till she was her good-natured, loving self again.

He dragged the mortar along the forest-path, though tired. When he felt like taking a rest, he just sat down on the mortar, looked at the boughs swaying in the breeze, or heard the song of the birds. It was refreshing to see a peacock dancing in front of him, surrounded by fine, admiring peahens and displaying his beautiful feathers. As he came near the spot, the birds flew away, and he collec-

ted the feathers lying on the ground and put one in his hair. Though everyone said that he had the most beautiful curls in all Vraja, he always felt ashamed of his hair unless he had fixed a peacock feather in it.

Now he felt thirsty. He wanted to go along by the river. Perhaps somebody who had gone to the river to fetch water might give him a drink. He therefore dragged himself towards the river and sat down on the mortar to wait for some woman returning from the river.

He, however, felt it tiresome to go on waiting. In the afternoon, every woman in the village he knew would be busy with her household work; he became impatient. He wanted to return home.

Then his eyes fell on a twin pair of trees growing side by side by the road — one was called *Yamal* and the other *Arjun*. He thought for a moment. Yes. If he jumped to one side and tried to pull the mortar through the little gap between the twin trees, it would not go through. The rope would then snap. The mortar would be left behind; he would be free on the other side.

Somehow he was able to scrape through between the trees. The mortar was on the other side. Then he set his face in grim determination and tried tugging at the mortar. He pulled and strained but the rope did not snap. He then took a little rest to gather his strength, clinched his teeth, strained his every fibre and pulled. And instead of the rope snapping, the two trees, *Yamal* and *Arjun*, fell to the ground.

He felt exasperated. The trees had fallen, but the mortar remained tied to him and now he just couldn't move towards the trees. He lay on the ground, tired, sweating and disgusted; for, now, how could he drag that heavy mortar and the trees too? He had to wait. He couldn't help crying. But why should he cry? Had he not been able to pull the trees down? Of course, must be bruised and severely too, but that ought not to matter.

He had to be on the alert now. He heard voices coming nearer and saw some women going to the river.

He must not appear to be crying. He had done what nobody else could — brought the mortar here and dragged down the trees.

Two women appeared to be coming. No, they were just girls. One girl was a small one of his age and the other older and stronger. They had brass pots on their heads and smaller ones in the crooks of their arms. They were laughing. The elder of the two had beautiful hair, with flowers in it, and wonderful eyes — large and bright and mischievous. She walked with an easy grace in her supple limbs as if she were dancing, and her anklets jingled rhythmically.

‘Look, someone is sitting on the ground there.’

‘It looks like a boy,’ said the younger one.

‘Let us see,’ said the elder girl who certainly had a fine voice. It sounded like a bird’s trill.

‘Radha, he is Yashoda’s Kahna,’ said Lalita. Of course, he knew her ; he played with her ; she was no other than Lalita.

‘You mean Chief Nanda’s son Kahna? How strange !’ said the elder one: and her name was Radha; what a sweet name when spoken in a voice with feeling in it, sending waves of joy through your heart !

The girls rushed up to him breathlessly, putting down their empty pots on the ground.

‘What are you doing here, Kahna?’ asked Lalita.

‘Don’t you see? I have been pulling out trees,’ he said, laughing as best he could.

‘But you are tied to the mortar. Who tied you?’ the elder girl, Radha, asked.

‘Oh, Mother tied me to the mortar,’ he said, as if it was the usual thing. He had to put it that way. He couldn’t tell such a lovely girl that he had been punished.

‘How cruel of her!’ Radha exclaimed in a burst of kindness.

Naturally he looked at her closely and saw her small hands and graceful limbs. He had never seen such a beau-

tiful girl, small, shapely and fresh, though she seemed years older than she was. And though a stranger, he began to feel he had known her all his life.

'Oh, Mother is very kind. She loves me so. But she gets angry now and then. All women get angry at times,' he said, just to tease her.

And Radha laughed and, when she did so, he could not help noticing the dimples in her cheeks and he thought they were very wonderful. 'What do you know of women?' she asked.

'I? Oh! I suppose because Mother is a woman.' And he smiled in his inimitable way. 'I know Lalita too, and quite a lot of others.'

'Of course, you do, wicked Kahna. You threw me down on the ground the other day and when I cried, made me smile,' Lalita said. She seemed worried at seeing him tied to the mortar, and the fallen trees too.

'Let us untie the rope, Lalita, and set Kahn free,' Radha said trying to reach the rope. She never said Kahna as the Gokul women did; she just shortened it to Kahn, and the way she said it, made the name so nice and sweet.

'No, please don't. Mother tied me to it and I am waiting for her to untie the knot,' he said. He didn't want to be free; he wanted to win a victory over Mother.

'But she may not come,' Radha said, doubtingly.

'Oh, she is sure to. But unless she unties me herself, her anger will not calm down.'

'Then what can we do for you?' Lalita asked.

'Go and get me some water, if you please. You are such a nice girl, Lalita,' he said, his face flashing out into a smile which he knew could win all hearts for him.

Lalita ran to the river with one of the small pots and Radha sat down near him. He felt a sort of fragrance coming from her, and saw her sweet, rosy little face looking very cool and nice; just to see it made him feel warmer and happier than he had ever felt before.

'Are you Nanda's son, about whom everyone is talking?'

'I am Nanda's son, all right. And they talk about me because they have nothing else to do. You, too, will soon begin talking about me,' he said naughtily.

'How do you know?' Radha asked mischievously, her eyes dancing merrily as she tried to tease him.

'You look so kind and loving — and so nice and cool,' he said. Somehow these words, which he knew he should not say, came easily to him. But somehow he couldn't help it, seeing what this girl was like. 'And where do you come from? I never saw you in Gokul before. I wish I could have another opportunity to meet you,' he said. Again, he couldn't help talking in a way he had never talked before.

Radha's smile was like a flower opening out. And he could see her lovely teeth too; they were like the seeds of a pomegranate, reddish and shapely and small.

'Oh, I belong to Barsana. We are on our way to Vrindavan where my father lives at present. My brother brought me here to fulfil a vow that he had taken to worship at the shrine of the Gopanath Mahadeva. Oh, but you have so many bruises. Let me wipe the dust off them,' she said, laughing ever so sweetly.

Of course, he didn't mind the bruises, particularly when he had such a nice girl to talk to. But he couldn't forgo the pleasure of her wiping the dust off his bruises.

She began adjusting the rope and clearing his body of dust. And it made him tingle. It was a strange sensation which he had never felt before.

'And why did Mother tie you to the mortar, Kahn?' Radha asked, as with a lingering hand she removed the dust clinging to his curls.

'Oh, I broke the pot of butter and gave it to the monkeys.'

'Ah, that is why they call you a butter thief. Is it? I have heard that you harass every woman in Gokul,' she

said.

'If you come and stay in Gokul, I won't harass you, I promise,' he said. He would not have liked to frighten such a lovely *gopi*, whose touch gave such joy to every fibre of his body.

'Oh, if I were here, I would see that you behaved properly.'

'Oh, I have improved already. And if you come and stay in Gokul, I will never break a butter pot — of course, except yours.' It was very difficult to talk to this girl as he talked to others. He felt somehow driven to say mischievous things. And he just had to pinch her. He just couldn't help it.

'If you break my pot, I will tie you like this,' Radha answered, threatening him in jest. And he couldn't help touching her hair, and tickling her a little.

'Now behave yourself properly,' she said, pouting her red lips, 'or I shall . . . ,' she said mischievously and raised her hand to slap him.

'Do what you like,' he said and just raised his face to be slapped.

However, she seemed a strange girl. She just looked into his very eyes intensely, and he felt like drinking in her soul and beauty. Then she put her hands softly on his cheeks and pressed them. And he tousled her hair, laughing all the time.

Suddenly some women could be heard coming, and Radha moved away. He wished those women had not left their homes. As they came, Radha went up to them and told them about him, how cruel Mother had tied him to a mortar, how he had come to the forest with the mortar and how he had brought down those two trees with his strength. The *gopis* came rushing up with sweet words, hugged him and looked at the way he had pulled up the trees. And they made a great fuss over him.

They sent a man, who happened to pass by, running off to the village to inform Mother about what he had done and bring her there.

They told the villager what Kahna had said: 'It is my mother who tied me to the mortar and none but my mother shall untie me.' And they added, 'Please beg her to come at once. The poor darling is tired.'

And the villager went running with his message. And the *gopis* sat down and listened to what Radha had to tell them of his heroism, eyeing him all the time as if he had worked a miracle.

Then Lalita returned from the river and gave him water. They disapproved of everything Mother had done and told him how dearly they loved him. And Radha told them how wonderfully heroic he had been when she saw him, and indeed she talked as if he belonged to her.

In the meantime, more villagers going along that way gathered round him. Mother came running, quite out of breath. Father also came striding after her.

Mother rushed to him breathlessly, untied the rope, set him free and lifted him up endearingly, hugging him all the while and saying sweet things. He clung to her as he had never done before. He loved Mother above everyone else and he very well knew he was her darling. And there was never going to be anyone whom he would love more.

Father walked all round the fallen trees, amazed that they could have been pulled up by a little boy. And he looked up to Heaven, almost wondering whether he was a god. And Radha went on talking in her sweet way all about him.

That night he couldn't get any sleep, though dead tired. He knew that Radha was leaving the village in the morning and he just couldn't stop thinking of her. He got up in the morning; he didn't wake up Balarama as he did every other day; when he was ready he stole out of the house. He knew the *gopa's* house where Radha and her brother were staying and he reached there, just when they were coming out of the house to get into the bullock-cart.

Radha rushed up to him and lifted him. She was very

strong though she looked so small and delicate and she took him to her brother.

‘Brother, this is Nanda’s son, Kahn, who was tied to the mortar. He brought down two large trees,’ she said, laughing all the while.

Her brother, a big, good-natured fellow, lifted him up and patted him on the back. Krishna didn’t like this patting, but he had to put up with it. This was after all Radha’s brother.

When they climbed up into the cart, he also jumped in. ‘I will come to the outskirts of Gokul. Radha was so kind to me yesterday,’ he said and just sat by her side.

As the bullocks went fast and the cart jostled along, he was thrown against Radha — or rather, he let himself be thrown, and she also did the same. It was great fun, and he felt happy. Once, when the cart received a severe jolt and he was thrown harder than ever against her, she put out her hand, reached his and pressed it.

Reaching the outskirts of Gokul, he took leave of Radha and her brother. And he then jumped down from the cart.

‘How old are you?’ Radha asked in her melting voice, which gave him such a curious feeling.

‘Seven. And you?’ He couldn’t help asking.

‘Twelve,’ she said and laughed.

‘Come to Vrindavan some time.’

‘Oh, I am coming, of course,’ he said.

He said goodbye to her, and as the cart moved on, he stood still until the dust raised by the cart settled down. And he went home, thinking what a nice playmate he had won and lost.

VASUDEVA AND DEVAKI RETURN TO MATHURA

Five years had elapsed since Vasudeva and Devaki decided to leave Mathura.

During this period, they travelled far and wide, from Prabhas on the sea of Saurashtra where the Sun-god dwelt, to sacred Varanasi on the banks of the divine Ganga where Shankar, the God of all the gods had his habitation. On their way, they visited shrines and took purifying baths in sacred rivers.

At last, on their way to Badrikashram, the most sacred of all sacred places, they crossed the mountain of flashing gems. On the banks of the river Alaknanda which sings by night, they also visited King Pandu, and his queens, Kunti, Vasudeva's sister, and Madri, the Madra princess.

On the way, they also climbed the sweet-scented peak of Gandhamadan where beautiful flowers grew, the like of which could not be found in any other land, or even in the songs of any poet.

Finally, they reached Badrikashram, where they paid homage to the *rishis* who dwelt in mountain caves pursuing knowledge and the laws of discipline, immersed in the quest of the Supreme. They also visited the *ashram* of Muni Krishna Dwaipayana Veda Vyasa, but he was not there; he was at Kurukshetra at that time.

With uplifted hearts, they admired the beauty of the snowy peaks and bathed in the fast swirling waters of the Alaknanda. Then they offered worship at holy Badrikashram where the Lord Vishnu Himself had descended in the form of Narayana to teach man to merge himself in the Supreme with unwavering devotion.

While they were at Badrikashram, they heard the news of King Pandu's death and hastened back to bereaved Kunti.

It was a sad tale that she had to tell. It was spring time. The flowers were in bloom. The birds in their flaming colours were full of the joy of the mating season. King Pandu, in spite of living under a curse, was tempted by the joys of the season. His long-repressed ardour burst forth, driving him to enjoy long-forgotten delights in the arms of his younger queen, Madri. But the curse was inexorable. He died even as he lay in the arms of his queen.

At first, both Kunti and Madri wanted to join their lord on the funeral pyre, for that was the highest destiny for a devoted wife. But Madri would not hear of Kunti's accompanying her. Kunti's three sons and two of hers were very young; one of the two at least had to look after them. Ultimately, Madri joined the King to share with him the joys of the life to come, entrusting to the elder, Kunti, the care of all five sons. Kunti, the mother of three sons, thus became the mother of five.

When Vasudeva and Devaki reached Pandukeshwar where Kunti lived, they found that the *rishis* had made arrangements to go with her and her sons to Hastinapura, the capital of the kingdom of the mighty Kurus. They had also sent a message in advance to Bhishma, respectfully styled Pitamaha (Grandfather) that they were bringing Kunti and her sons.

Vasudeva had already made arrangements to return to the plains though before going home he intended to pay his respects to Muni Veda Vyasa at Kurukshetra. Kunti therefore decided to accompany them first to Kurukshetra to obtain the blessings of the Sage before going to Hastinapura.

When Devaki saw Kunti, her heart went out to her husband's bereaved sister. They wept in each other's arms, shedding tears over the misfortunes which had overtaken each of them.

Kunti envied the lot of Madri. 'Devaki, I am very unfortunate. The gods would not give me even the privilege of going to the other world with my lord,' she said, crying all the time.

‘But Madri was right,’ replied Devaki. ‘You are the elder of the two and you can look after the sons very much better.’

Kunti nodded her head. ‘You are right. That is why I consented. She was too young a girl. I must do my duty by our sons. But I do not know what tricks Queen Gandhari may be preparing to play. She would, if she could, deny my sons their father’s inheritance.’

Though Devaki had every sympathy for Kunti, she envied her. She saw the happiness which Kunti felt whenever one of her sons climbed on to her lap or all five sons surrounded her, clamouring for her love. She, Devaki, was the unlucky one; she had had eight sons, six of whom had been killed; the other two sons were far away in strange homes, as the children of mothers that were not theirs. She could not have even a glimpse of them.

Kunti’s sons were very fine, all handsome and affectionate. Would her sons ever be so fine and have such an affection for her? Devaki wondered.

The eldest, Yudhisthir, now eight years old, looked serious beyond his years; there was transparent honesty in his eyes. The second son, Bhima, a year younger, was tall and robust with an open smile and a hearty manner. Perhaps, her Balarama would be like that. The third son, Arjun, just a year younger than her Krishna, was lithe, energetic and quick-witted. He was fair of face and had a lovable temperament. Possibly, her Krishna would grow up like this: ‘Would he?’ she asked herself. The other two sons, born of Madri, were small but shapely and were intelligent far beyond their years. All five made a perfect group; they never quarrelled and never gave any trouble to Kunti.

Travelling on foot by slow stages, they reached the plains near sacred Rishikesh. From there they went on across the plains, women and children by bullock-carts, the men on foot or horseback, with the party which was there waiting for the return of Vasudeva. All the time Kunti was troubled about the kind of reception she and her sons would get in Hastinapura.

A day's journey was left when the two parties halted for the night under a huge banyan tree. Another party of five horsemen had already camped under a tree nearby. Vasudeva's curiosity was aroused. On enquiry he found that the party of horsemen was led by Prince Shakuni, a son of the King of Gandhara. He was the brother of Gandhari, the queen of blind King Dhritarashtra, Pandu's brother.

'Sister, why should this young man come to Kurukshetra at this time? I sense some danger,' Vasudeva inquired of Kunti.

'How do I know, brother? The Best of Kauravas (Pandu)¹ always said that he was a wicked youth.'

'Would Shakuni want to create difficulties for you at Hastinapura?' asked Vasudeva.

'I should not be surprised,' replied Kunti. 'Gandhari is jealous of me. I do not know why; she has a hundred sons of her own. Brother, I commend my sons to the care of Mahadeva, God of gods, and the Best of Munis.'

Early next morning, the horsemen rode away to Kurukshetra and the other party proceeded on its way slowly in carts and on foot. About midday, Kurukshetra came in sight, a vast camp of huts on the banks of the five lakes formed out of the drying course of the sacred Saraswati. Devaki caught her breath as she saw the sacred smoke from a hundred sacrificial fires circling its way to heaven like so many prayers. By some of the lakes, sages and their disciples were offering their prayers to the midday sun. By others, women dressed in bark cloth, were giving a bath to their children or filling their pots with water; and on all sides Vedic hymns were being chanted, those hymns which Veda Vyasa himself had taught the people to sing.

Directed by a young anchorite, Vasudeva, Devaki, the *rishis*, Kunti and her sons, went to the *ashram* of the Sage in the centre of the settlement. Learned Brahmans were discussing abstruse problems of Existence with him. Kunti, Vasudeva and Devaki immediately recognized Muni Veda Vyasa sitting in the centre of the gathering on a platform

built round a tree. There was no mistaking the dark skin, the massive head, the long flowing hair, the rather uneven features and the eyes with their deep tenderness.

As soon as the Muni saw Kunti, Vasudeva and Devaki, he stopped talking and his face relaxed into a broad smile of welcome. With a gesture, he asked the audience to make room for the guests. Led by the *rishis* who had come with them, Kunti, her sons, Vasudeva and Devaki, came and prostrated themselves before him.

As the Sage blessed them, his eyes were lit with deep affection on seeing Pandu's five sons, his grandsons, prostrating themselves before him, with the easy grace of children brought up in a well-bred family. When he made a sign, the five brothers came up to him, standing respectfully with folded hands. Then he took the youngest, Sahadev, on his lap and laid his hand lovingly on the shoulder of Bhima, who was tall for his age. The ladies and Vasudeva sat to his right, the *rishis* in front.

'Now, my sons, we shall meet tomorrow,' the Sage said, addressing his disciples. 'You must go and make proper arrangements for our guests.'

When the disciples had gone, the Sage said to Kunti in a soothing tone. 'Pritha, my child, your messenger told me all about your misfortunes. Madri was a gem among women. I know you will make no distinction between your sons and Madri's.'

'My Master, you know what Madri was like. She was a young girl to the last. Even when she was alive, I brought up Nakul and Sahadev as my own sons.'

'Your nature is indeed a blessed one,' the Sage said with a fond smile. 'You have loved children since you were a small girl. You also know how to command their love. Only one among a thousand mothers is like you.'

The second son, the tall Bhima, could not restrain himself and burst out in a loud voice: 'She loves Nakul and Sahadev more than us, I know.' Everyone laughed and Bhima also joined in the laughter.

The Sage turned affectionately to him. 'And don't

you love them ? They are very small brothers. You are so strong. It is for you to look after them,' he said.

'Oh ! I look after them all right,' said Bhima proudly, again joining in the laughter uproariously. 'But when we play together, I throw them to the ground first.'

Young Yudhisthir interrupted in a serious and almost paternal voice : 'Gurudev, Bhima is talking nonsense. We love each other very much.'

Arjun's bright eyes nodded agreement and Kunti's heart was filled with gratitude to the gods who had given her such wonderful sons.

'That is very good,' said Vyasa the Sage and turned to Vasudeva and Devaki. 'When we are left to ourselves, I will tell you things that concern you alone. Meanwhile, Vasudeva, do you know what has been happening lately in Hastinapura ?'

'No, Gurudev,' said Vasudeva.

'Shakuni, the prince of Gandhara, came to me this morning. He left a little before you arrived.'

'Yes. He was camping at the same place as we did last night.'

'He brought a message for me from Queen Gandhari. Perhaps, a message of his own inspiration,' said the Muni with a smile. 'The message was that Kunti's sons should remain with me here and not go to live in Hastinapura. Gandhari is very unhappy about Pandu's sons living as royal princes at the capital with the same rank as her sons. Shakuni also said that if you and your sons went to live at Hastinapura, possibly there would be a struggle between brothers in the future.'

Kunti's fears had been realized and her eyes were full of tears. 'Gurudev, what will happen to my sons ?'

'Nothing that is not good for them,' said the Muni. 'I have already sent word to Mother and to the Venerable Bhishma that I myself am bringing Pandu's sons and that they must be received with due ceremony.'

'What will Shakuni do, Master ?' asked Vasudeva.

The Sage smiled. 'He will stay in Hastinapura to look

after his nephews. But the Venerable Bhishma is Dharma himself ; he will look after them all equally. They also are as much my children as these sons of Pandu and as beloved. Vasudeva, you must come with us to Hastinapura.'

When Vasudeva and Devaki were left alone with the Sage, he told them that Akrura had come to the *ashram* and was waiting for them. Akrura was sent for, and when he came, he prostrated himself before the Sage, wiped the dust off his feet and embraced Vasudeva.

Akrura then told them of Kamsa's wicked designs ; of how Krishna had escaped all danger, and of how he was growing up. He also told them of the tricks that he had been playing and how everyone, old and young, loved him.

'But, before I came, something terrible happened, gracious Master,' Akrura added.

'What was it ?'

'Gokul was infested by wolves. Night after night, they came in their hundreds from the Mahavana and began to devour little children. It was a terrible calamity. Nanda and Yashoda and all the *gopas* and *gopis* of Gokul decided to migrate to Vrindavan.'

'Is Krishna safe ?' asked Devaki, in a choking voice.

With a smile of deep affection, the Muni turned his kindly eyes towards Devaki. 'Devaki, don't trouble yourself. You are a mother ; your maternal affection does not allow you to see the truth. You think that Krishna, your son, needs protection. It is the other way round. The world needs his protection.'

'But, who will look after his education ?' interrupted Vasudeva. 'He will grow up as a cowherd.'

'I have already talked to young Sandipa,' said the Sage. 'He knows the arts of war and also the wisdom of the ancients. I have settled with Akrura that he will take him to Vrindavan where he will set up an *ashram*.'

'Now, Akrura, Devaki is anxious to hear all about Krishna. I will go for my midday *sandhya*. It will be the best time for you to go for your meals,' said the Sage and

rose from his seat. All the others rose and prostrated themselves before him.

As the Sage walked away, they looked very reverently at his sinewy, lean figure, erect as a staff. No one came into his presence without feeling that the Sage had a particular message for himself and that there could be no higher purpose in life than to listen to his advice.

Then Devaki turned impatiently to Akrura : 'Eldest,² now tell me all about my beloved,' and she sat down in front of Akrura, Vasudeva by her side.

'Devaki, Krishna has fulfilled all our hopes. He is healthy, active and intelligent. He is full of tricks, but it has become an essential part of the life of everyone in Gokul that he should play them.' Then Akrura told Devaki all about Krishna. He added : 'Only a month ago, the fearful thing I have just been speaking of happened. For some reasons, the wolves of Mahavana in their hundreds invaded Gokul. They carried away children, calves, dogs and even one or two men.'

'Oh, my mother !' exclaimed Devaki.

'This was repeated day after day and the Yadavas were in a panic. Night after night, they watched for the invading beasts. No one could sleep, for their howls struck terror into every heart.'

'What happened then ?' asked Vasudeva.

'Nanda sent me a message and we decided that Gokul ought to be evacuated and all the Yadavas should migrate to Vrindavan.'

'Did they do it ? What about Krishna ?'

'He is a wonderful boy. He led the exodus at the head of all the children, his little staff in his hand and Balarama by his side,' said Akrura.

'Did they have a happy journey ?' asked Vasudeva.

'Oh yes,' said Akrura. 'They halted at Mathura on their way. I went to the outskirts to receive them. And when I saw Krishna, my eyes were full of tears of joy.'

'How did you meet Krishna ?'

'He was the leader though he kept Balarama always in

front of him. He led all the children. He would not sit in the cart, and seeing him walking, no child of his age or older would sit in a cart.'

'What was he like?'

'He was glorious, with his little staff, his turban of cloth of gold, with a peacock's feather and his little nose-ring swinging bravely. Nanda was very proud and very happy.'

'How is Balarama?' asked Vasudeva.

'He is a tall, fine-looking, robust boy. And the two boys love each other. But Krishna is cleverer and has inherited the perfect grace of manners which characterise you, Vasudeva. Still, he never lets Balarama or any one feel that he is everyone's one and only darling. Yet all know that Krishna does not keep the great love he receives for himself, but shares it out equally among those around him.'

'Oh, God of gods, when shall I see my beloved again?' asked Devaki.

'What happened to the Yadavas after that?'

'Oh, they have settled down in Vrindavan happily. They are cutting down the forests and building up a new settlement. The Vrishnis have helped them.'

'When is Kamsa returning from the wars?' asked Vasudeva.

'His father-in-law Jarasandha has pledged himself to perform an Ashvamedha and Kamsa is now leading the sacred horse to Kalinga.'

'The God of gods is very merciful. Now we can return to Mathura,' said Vasudeva.

And thus it came to pass that the five sons of Pandu were received with the honours due to royal princes at Hastinapura. The Venerable Bhishma, guardian of Kuru's empire, blessed them. Dhritarashtra, the king, embraced them with affection and tears fell from his blind eyes for he deeply loved his brother Pandu. And the old great-grandmother, Satyawati, embraced them and breathed in the scent of their hair. She was happy that the gods had now willed that the line of her lord, the great king Santanu, should not come to an end.

RADHA

[Radha is the problem-child of our national imagination. Her origin is shrouded in mystery. She is not mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, *Harivamsa* or the *Bhagavata* which was probably composed in the 8th century A.D. On the other hand, she is mentioned in the *Silappadikaram*, an ancient Tamil work, as Nappinnai, wife of Krishna, and in the *Gatha-Saptasati* of Hala (about the second century A.D.).

However, from the second century, the name of Radha seems to be familiar to Prakrit authors. From the 8th century onwards, she is mentioned by various Prakrit poets mostly in erotic verses. In those times, *gopis* were worshipped along with Sri Krishna, but Radha was not included amongst them.

In Sanskrit literature, Radha figures for the first time in a benedictory verse found in three inscriptions of the Paramara Emperor Vakpati Munja of Malva (c. A.D. 973-994). This is in keeping with the character of that happy king. However, she only became famous all over India as the *raseshvari*, the central figure in the Rasa episodes, when Jayadeva, the court-poet of King Lakshmanasena (c. A.D. 1179-1203) made her the heroine of *Gitagovinda*.

The lilting, sensuous charm of this erotic work caught the imagination of the whole of India within a century or two. No poet has ever been rated so high or become so popular on the basis of a single work, and few have retained their popularity for more than seven hundred years.

Gitagovinda soon began to be accepted as a religious work and the Buddhist Sahjiyas, who had then become outcasts in Bengal, accepted it as a religious work. Later, Chandidasa in Bengal and Vidyapati in Mithila, made Radha immensely popular among the masses because of their songs. In later Puranas we find various stories of her divine origin, explaining her relations with Krishna. The stories are different, but the motive is clear. As beloved friend of Sri Krishna's childhood, she was given a place in the pantheon.

Chaitanya accepted her as a goddess. So did the Radhapanthis, Vishnuswamins and Nimbarkkas. According to the general tradition in India accepted by Nimbarkka, she is the divine spouse of Sri Krishna.

In the eastern religious tradition, which lays emphasis on *parakiya-prema*, she is, however, accepted as a beloved of Sri Krishna but the wife of another, sometimes mentioned by name as Aiyyan.

Anyway, Krishna without Radha is unthinkable, and I consider the view accepted by general tradition as appropriate.]

It is a happy thing to be twelve years old, particularly if you have happened to meet so wonderful a boy as Kahn—thought Radha, as the bullocks, with their bells jingling, took her away from Gokul.

Kahn was wonderful ; there was no doubt about it. She thought his eyes, which continued to swim before her, were pools of joy. His voice was fascinating. And the impertinent — or, rather the overwhelming — way in which he looked at her was unforgettable.

Radha was going to Vrindavan for the first time to join her father Vrishbhanu. He and her brothers were among the first settlers in what was described by her brother, Damodar, as paradise.

At the age of six, she had lost her mother. Then, her father, with his other wives, had left Barsana, leaving her in charge of her maternal grandmother. She had grown up, laughing, romping, dancing, making fun of the boys and girls of her own age — the darling not only of her mother's family, but of the whole village.

Her father, Vrishbhanu, had her betrothed to Aiyyan, the son of a friendly settler in Vrindavan, several years older than herself. But Aiyyan, in his teens, had hated the farm, the cows and the forest, and drifted to Mathura to take service with Kamsa.

Now that her maternal grandmother was dead, Vrishbhanu had sent for Radha. She knew that she had been betrothed to Aiyyan. But, to her, he was something distant and intangible, just a name. The talk of marriage, which would have stirred the heart of any other maiden of her years, left her indifferent. Flowers, fruits, the song of the birds, lowing cows and strutting peacocks, filled her heart, and kept her laughing, singing and for ever trying to be everyone's darling.

Radha had played with the boys and girls of Barsana and dominated them with her exuberant vitality. When she left the village, she only felt a momentary pang at part-

ing from them. But she had forgotten them all when she came across new people, new villages and new scenes.

Gokul, however, was different. When she was born, her mother, who happened to be at Gokul, had taken a vow to offer ceremonial worship at the shrine of Gopanath, Gokul's guardian deity. Now, after twelve years she had fulfilled this. She and her brother had stayed a few days with a distant cousin of her father's and she had been attracted to its happy people, sleek cows and tame peacocks. But she had liked Kahn most of all. She could never forget the way he had smiled at her, even when he lay tied to the mortar. The way he had tousled her hair, his eyes dancing mischievously all the while, was still fresh in her mind. Whenever she closed her eyes, she could almost feel the touch of his hand.

And on the way home from the forest, he had played the flute. There were flutes everywhere in the villages — played by old men and young, and children too. But the flute's melodious tones had never been so haunting as when they issued from his flute. They still echoed in her ears.

After some days, Radha reached Vrindavan, which captured her heart at first sight in that virgin forest. Vrishbhanu and about fifty others had cleared enough space to set up a small settlement and built huts for themselves.

The forest, with its shady trees and swinging creepers laden with flowers of many hues, was at every door-step. The river Yamuna flowed by it with its swift current. Rich, lush pastures spread in all directions and the cows and bulls browsed on them unrestrained. Earth and sky were full of beauty and every sunrise brought fresh joy to the hardy settlers and their families.

On her arrival, Radha learnt from one of her step-mothers that Aiyyan had gone to the wars with Kamsa's army and her marriage with him had been postponed. However, she felt no interest in it; Aiyyan had no place in her world. Day and night, she only heard a sweet little voice saying 'I will come to Vrindavan,' and felt that it was a solemn promise. She always felt a sense of waiting

— for that promise to be redeemed. Somehow she knew that it would.

A year passed. Spring came. Vrindavan became gorgeous with leaf and flower. *Kadamba* flowers bloomed everywhere, the birds sang on every bough, the *tulsi* grove spread its aroma in every house. But, in spite of her gay spirit, Radha felt unhappy, for the promise had remained unredeemed.

Then messengers came from Nanda, the Chief of the Gokul Yadavas. Wolves were all over Gokul; children, heifers and dogs were being taken away by the beasts every night. The Chief had, therefore, decided to migrate to Vrindavan with all the residents of Gokul. In fact, they would be starting immediately. Radha's heart leapt with joy. The promise was redeemed! Now he would come, the smiling boy, with his flute in his hand and his eyes dancing mischievously.

The small settlement was busy clearing space for the newcomers and the womenfolk were engrossed in prepared hospitality. Radha went about among the boys and girls of her age, talking about Gokul and above all, of Kahn, who had killed the demons, Putana and Trinavrit, and pulled out trees by the magic of his strength.

And the day came when Vrishbhanu, with all the settlers and their families, went out to welcome Nanda and his Yadavas. And Radha was there too, leaping with joy like a child.

The immigrants came. There in front were the children, laughing and romping, led by Kahn, his little staff in his hand, his flute in his waist-band and peacock feathers in his neatly folded and gold-embroidered turban. And the boys and girls did as he told them.

An endless procession followed. Cows and bulls, for which Gokul was so famed. Women with brass pots on their heads, singing happy songs. Old men and women and infants in hundreds of gaily decorated carts. Young and middle-aged Yadavas with bows and arrows, swords and even ploughshares, guarding them all, keeping the

cattle in order or bringing up the rear — with the old Chief Nanda at their head, his long staff in his hand.

But Radha had eyes only for one person — the dark blue boy who moved in front of them all, wielding his little staff. Forgetting the proprieties, she ran forward, shouting 'Kahn, Kahn', and exerting the sinuous strength of her small, supple body, lifted him up. Kahn was full of joy too. He kept hitting her affectionately on the back till she was red in the face. And the children, very pleased, joined hands and went round and round them merrily.

The older people embraced each other. The women from the settlement joined those from Vrindavan, and began to laugh and talk. Soon the carts were arranged in a crescent to make a temporary fort. The cattle were taken to the river to be washed. A thousand hearths were lighted and the housewives were busy cooking the evening meal.

As evening came, bonfires were lighted to keep the forest beasts away. Watchmen were posted all around. The cattle were brought within the crescent, each family tying up its animals to its carts.

That night, at Vrishbhanu's house, Yashoda and Rohini, who had also come with the migrating Yadavas, slept with Krishna and Balarama by their sides. And in the next room, with her stepmothers, was Radha, vainly trying to sleep, her heart in a flutter. One refrain kept on going through her mind all the time : 'Kahn has come; he has redeemed his promise.'

The next morning Radha walked quietly into the room where Krishna was sleeping. Yashoda and Rohini had already left the house and were busy milking the cows.

For some moments Radha looked at little Krishna as he slept, his head cradled in the crook of his arm. There was a sweet smile on his lips — as if he was moving happily through the land of dreams. Then, as though he felt that she was near, he opened his eyes and looked at her. A sweeping breeze of joy enveloped Radha.

'Kahn', she said in a voice almost choking with emotion.

'Radha !' His voice was full of tenderness. 'Pull me out of bed,' he said and stretched out his hands.

Radha caught hold of them and pulled him out of bed with a jerk. Laughing, he allowed himself to be brought out of bed, almost falling into her arms.

'Where has Balarama gone?' he asked.

'Oh, he left with Mother.' She had already adopted Yashoda as Mother and called her by that name. 'She told him not to wake you up. You were so tired yesterday, she said, that you should not be disturbed in the morning.' And she asked me to look after you when you got up.'

'Nonsense. Where has Balarama gone? And Shridama and Uddhava ought to be waiting for me to go with them to the river for a bathe.'

Radha's face fell. Krishna felt sorry; he had hurt this girl who was so nice to him.

'I don't know where to have my bathe,' he said.

'Can I show you a lovely spot where we can bathe?' she asked Krishna hesitatingly, apologetically, almost afraid of a blow.

Krishna did not like to hurt the girl again. 'Of course, you know a place; you can show it to me. But how can we go bathing together? You are a girl.'

'No, I am very much older than you. You bathe with grown-up women, don't you?' she asked plaintively. 'And we will return before the others arrive,' she added mischievously.

Krishna also laughed. It would be fun going with Radha and having a bathe together.

And so, hand locked in hand, they ran along a neglected forest path to the bank of the river. There, under a grove of *Kadamba* trees, where the river ran as shallow as a pool, there was a sequestered spot. Laughing, they ran into the water, sending the swans fluttering to the margin.

Radha was not a shy girl like Lalita and Chandravali, Krishna thought: she was more like a boy, swimming, racing and splashing water.

They dried hastily and ran back to her house. None of the older people had yet returned. They were busy looking after the new arrivals.

Krishna was in a mischievous mood. He climbed into a large wooden swing and asked Radha to swing him; and so she did. But he would not sit quietly; he stood up, holding both the ropes by which the swing was suspended.

'Swing fast,' he said.

'Yes,' she said and ran around pushing the swing.

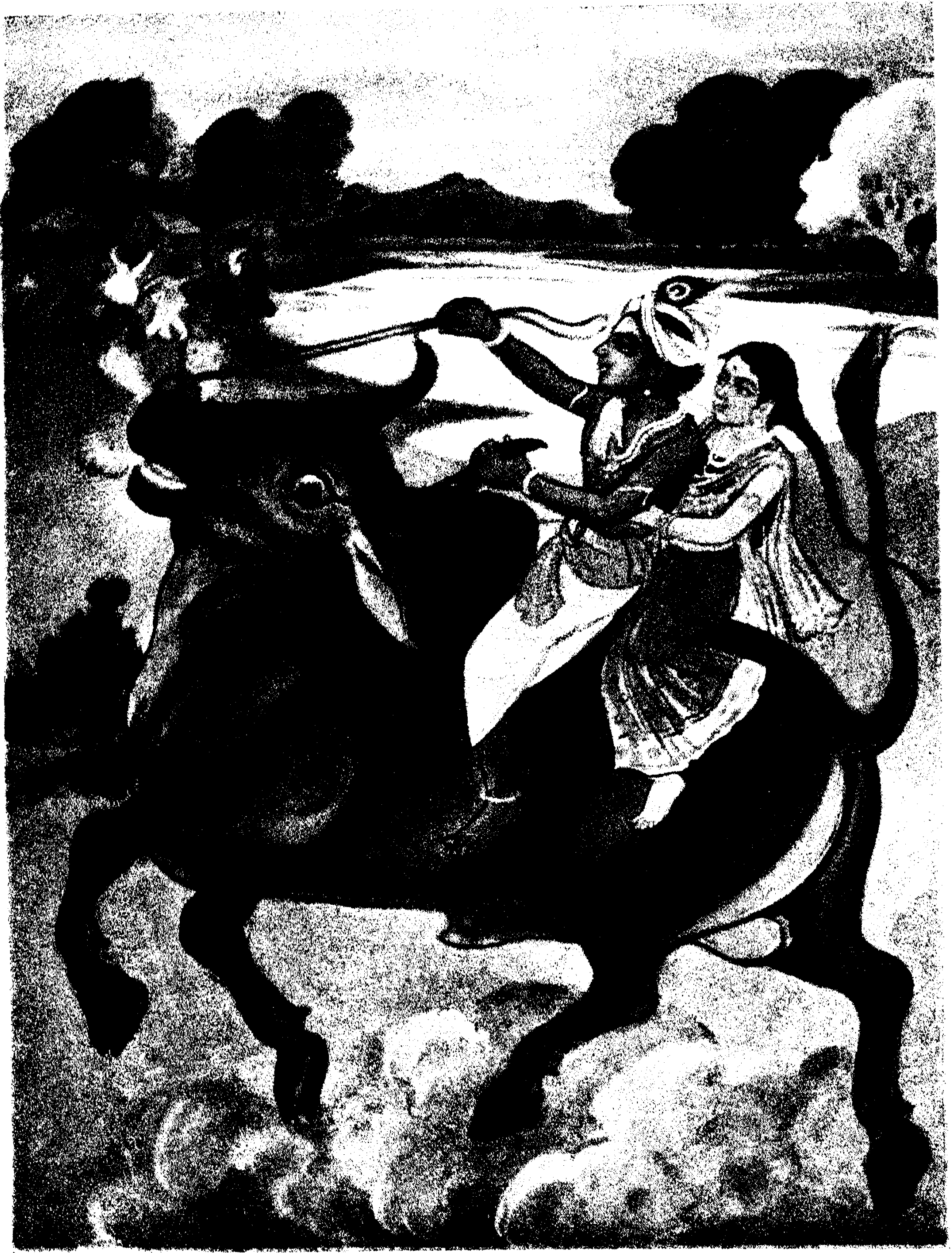
Krishna took the flute from his waist-band and began to play.

'Now it is my turn to swing you,' said Krishna and jumped off the swing.

She climbed on to the wooden plank and caught hold of the two ropes, standing all the time. And Krishna pushed the board, swinging backwards and forwards

Radha was laughing and her face beamed with joy as she burst into an impromptu song:

My Kahn, my Kahn,
 I came to thee in the forest where thou didst lie.
 Tied to the mortar, the trees thou hadst felled
 by thy side.
 Thou didst smile and come to live in my eyes.
 And I was thy bond-slave for ever and for ever,
 My Kahn, my Kahn.
 I wiped the dust off thy face,
 Thou didst pull my hair.
 I gave thee water, as thou didst touch my hands
 I felt the joy which I never had had before.
 Thou didst smile and come to live in my eyes.
 I was thy bond-slave for ever and ever,
 My Kahn, my Kahn.



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Krishna stopped pushing the swing, took out his flute and applied it to his lips. He wanted to play an accompaniment to Radha's song.

The swinging plank was a nuisance, so Radha jumped down from it and began to beat time with her hands, moving with rhythmic steps round Krishna.

Thou didst smile and come to live in my eyes,
And I became thy bond-slave for ever and for ever,
My Kahn, my Kahn.

Krishna stood, his feet crossed gracefully, and played the flute with tenderness and yearning, Radha going round him.

Suddenly, Lalita, Vishakha, Chandravali and other girls, attracted by the flute, came and stood in the doorway. Radha sang on, dancing as if in a frenzy, keeping time with feet and hands.

You met me in Gokul,
Where the lovely cows have their home,
Where the peacocks dance with gay abandon,
And dance to the notes of thy flute.

The others joined Radha in a joyful chorus and formed a circle which moved round and round in a happy dance, clapping their hands rhythmically in time to their steps.

Radha sang and the refrain was taken up by all.

Thou didst smile and come to live in my eyes.
And I became thy bond-slave for ever and ever,
My Kahn, oh, Kahn mine.

Radha, as if pouring forth her very soul, burst into spontaneous song, singing each line while the *gopis* went round repeating it after her.

Vrindavan is the land of flowers,

Where the Yamuna flows in swift delight,
There I waited for thee with sleepless eyes,
Till thou didst keep thy promise and come to me.

On and on they sang and went round and round Krishna, dancing as if they were goddesses of the forest, their voices rising high in unison. The flute played the tune of their song in wistful notes of tenderness and yearning.

As the *gopis* moved faster and faster, Krishna replaced the flute in his waist-band and joined them in the dance, marking the time with his feet and by clapping, moving from the side of one *gopi* after another. It was a maddening *rasa*, its pace getting swifter and swifter.

Suddenly, there was loud laughter and they all stopped. Mother Yashoda, Rohini and the womenfolk of Vrishbhanu's house stood at the door. And behind them was old Nanda laughing loudly as he tried to echo the refrain.

AS THE YEARS PASSED

Plenty and beauty made Vrindavan a real paradise for the Yadavas.

In its healthy climate, the cattle grew fat and sleek, and multiplied rapidly. The days were given up to hard work and the nights to peace.

The spring was over. The *sheemal* trees were all blossom and no leaves. The new settlers in Vrindavan were busy felling trees, building houses and constructing new carts. Then came Holi, and they took a few days' holiday to celebrate the festival with bonfires, dances and songs, accompanied by noisy horse-play.

During this colourful festival, the boys and girls romped about free of cares, swinging, playing and even shouting abuse at each other. Parties of boys, led by Krishna and Balarama, met the opposing hosts of girls led by Radha and Lalita. There were attacks and counter-attacks with mud and flowers, coloured water and powders accompanied by pretended insults. The boys invariably got the worst of it for, by the rules of the game, they were barred from using their hands.

However, victory or no victory, little Krishna was the real winner, for, at the end of the game, the girls carried him on their shoulders, as he played his flute, entirely at peace with himself. The processions ended at Nanda's house, where Yashoda and Rohini were waiting to welcome them all with sweets.

Radha, after that eventful day, had also found her soul; she sang songs in which she poured out her love for little Krishna, and young and old found joy in singing them, because they loved Krishna.

Radha had brought the care-free habits of Barsana to Vrindavan. In that village, where she had been brought up, she had been the idol of the village and had been given a freedom to do what she liked, enjoyed by no other girl in the village. She also set the fashion for such freedom in Vrindavan.

Even after the *Holi* festival was over, the milk-maids, led by Radha, continued to make the life of the boys difficult. They often stood holding hands all across the road, barring the way of the boys returning to the village.

The moonlit nights brought unending joy. The girls, led by Radha, would collect on the sandy bank of the Yamuna and spend half the nights in song and dance. Round and round they would go dancing to their own songs and rhythmic clapping. Then they would divide into pairs, each pair joining hands crosswise, to whirl each other round and round till, bursting with laughter, they tumbled to the ground, giddy and tired out.

The boys, led by Krishna, would be there too; first as spectators, then as partners. But the climax of their *rasa* was reached when the clumsy ones dropped out and Krishna stood alone playing his flute in the centre, and the girls, falling under the spell of his flute, swayed to the rhythm of their own jingling feet going round and round, till they broke off for laughter and carried him away as a living trophy.

Krishna and Balarama were generally inseparable. Now they dressed alike, though one was tall, lithe and graceful, and the other already a bulky giant. Krishna put on a silk *pitambar* of Balarama's colour and Balarama put on a blue silk dhoti to match Krishna's colour. The two brothers — for their mothers treated them as such — got up early every morning and led the young *gopas* when they accompanied their elders to the forest to graze the cattle. Often, leaving their elders, they would follow unbeaten paths to find fresh pastures.

Under their leadership, the boys of Vrindavan enjoyed themselves. As they went through the forest, they

plucked flowers to make garlands, ear-rings and bracelets of them. They raced against each other, played all kinds of jokes and games, told funny stories till they split with laughter, rode on each others' backs or wrestled.

When the young *gopas* followed the herds of cattle, they carried their slings with them. They would compete with each other in slinging stones farther and farther. Krishna was the most agile and sure-footed of them all. He had the supplest of muscles and his aim was unerring. He could wrestle with the biggest of the boys and could sling a stone farther than any of the strongest. He could laugh, sing and dance. He was the cleverest at any game of skill. And his flute spread a magic charm as its sweet notes echoed through avenues of giant trees on paths so far untrodden by men or cattle.

The boys loved Krishna above every one, for each felt that he was loved by Krishna for his own sake.

This was true not only of the boys and the young *gopas*, but of every one in Vrindavan. Krishna was now no longer inclined to steal butter, but never missed an occasion to call on his neighbours. Whenever he visited them, the elderly *gopis* never failed to offer him the precious butter they had, reminding him of some of his old pranks, or singing him a snatch or two of the latest song people sang about him. Every one of the women in Vrindavan loved him; if he ever neglected any, she would seize an early opportunity to take him to task. Then he would be penitent in such a sweet way that not only would he be forgiven, but the person offended would look forward to another occasion of seeing him penitent again.

A community which has been uprooted from its home has a strange sense of what is the proper way to live. So that, while these people were trying to settle down in new surroundings, the old restraints were all gone. The little *gopis* flitted to and fro through the new settlement. They raced with the boys, defied all conventions and went to the river for bath at the same time as the boys and joined them in the water. The boys and girls would splash water at each other till the vanquished party left the river first.

Yashoda's love for her son knew no bounds; even more so because he was loved by every one else. Krishna never let her forget that he was her darling and that she was uppermost in his mind.

Altogether, the love and devotion which little Krishna inspired had no limits. He was friendly with most of the cows and calves whom he led to pasture every morning. He knew many of them by name, and whenever he appeared, they would go to him to get a pat from his small hands. Whenever he rode on the back of a cow, she would lift her head proudly. Even peacocks forgot their timidity when he called them. When he played the flute, the cows stood still as if listening with rapt attention and the peacocks would dance in ecstasy. Petted but unspoiled, he was the darling of them all, men and beasts. Whatever Krishna did was done with effortless perfection. Though he was the most adventurous of all the young boys in the village, he was never conscious that he was doing anything out of the way.

Krishna and Balarama grew rapidly in age and strength ; and their adventurous spirit also grew. Once a hefty calf came to be possessed by a demon. It simply went mad, running about as it liked. It kept inflicting injury on the cattle and even attacked some *gopas*. Every one was in despair what to do with it. Attempts were made even by expert cowherds to tie it up, but with no success.

Once, while the boys were playing, the mad calf, in one of its worst moods, came rushing along and gored a cow to death. To the horrified amazement of every one, Krishna left his playmates and stood in front of the calf, brandishing his staff. The calf snorted angrily and rushed at him with lowered head. Krishna sprang aside. The other *gopa* boys, aware of the danger, begged him to come away. But he would not. He shouted, teasing the calf by standing in front of it. Then, with wild eyes and bursting nostrils, it would measure the distance between it and him, and lowering its head, make a rush at him. And

every time he would jump away from the path of its career with sure-footed swiftness.

Once the calf paused for breath, getting ready for another of its vicious charges. Krishna slipped away and tied the end of a rope to a stout tree. He crept along from behind, and before the calf found out what was being done, the loose end of the rope had been flung round its hind feet.

Sensing Krishna to be somewhere behind, the calf suddenly turned round. Its feet however got caught in the noose, and the more it tugged at the rope, the firmer the knot grew.

In spite of the protests of his friends, Krishna again sprang in front of the calf, and worked it up into a mood of fury by shouting defiance at it. In spite of its hind legs being tied, it tried to charge him, to find each time that he had slipped away. Cunningly, Krishna lured it towards the tree. The calf, blind with rage, made a dash as Krishna sprang behind the tree. The charging calf ran straight into the tree, crashing its skull.

And Krishna, as if it was merely sport, joined his companions who had been dazed with fear and admiration.

The report of such adventures, magnified a hundred-fold in the imagination of the people of Vrindavan, invested him with a halo of miraculous power. Krishna, however, remained unconcerned; he just walked in and out of adventures in the most natural way, always smiling and self-possessed, never afraid and never elated.

A MAD ADVENTURE

Years passed by. Krishna grew tall and handsome, with his muscles so supple that they could never mar the grace of any limb. Balarama was now heavy of build and of giant strength.

Vrindavan continued to prosper. The cattle multiplied. Men and women, old and young, were busy at their appointed tasks. The young *gopas* and *gopis* found endless ways of amusing themselves in their spare time.

It was on one of the *rasa* days that, leaving the banks of Yamuna, the four friends — Krishna, Balarama, Shridama and Uddhava — walked a little away from the crowd and began to whisper to each other.

‘Tomorrow is your last day,’ said Balarama to his brother. ‘If you don’t ride Hastin tomorrow morning you will lose your bet, Krishna.’

‘And who says I am going to lose my bet? Tomorrow morning, before dawn, I will ride Hastin and win the bet.’

‘Don’t take the risk, Krishna,’ said Uddhava. ‘Don’t ask him to ride Hastin, Balarama. It was only a joke. Let us call it off.’

‘Yes, yes. We can’t let you ride Hastin. Nanda, our father, has forbidden us to play tricks with the big bulls,’ said Shridama.

‘But I want to ride Hastin. I promised you that I would do it, and I will do it tomorrow morning,’ said Krishna with quiet emphasis.

‘Please, Balarama,’ pleaded Uddhava, ‘don’t carry the joke too far. Hastin is always dangerous and at times mad. And Krishna may come to harm.’

‘I am going to ride Hastin tomorrow, joke or no joke,

even if you are not there to see me do it,' said Krishna. And he went to join the crowd of boys and girls returning to the village.

'Balarama, what are you doing? What will happen?' asked Shridama anxiously.

'Don't worry, Shridama. I want to teach Krishna a lesson. Then he won't make boastful promises.'

'But suppose he takes the risk,' said Uddhava.

'Riding Hastin is no joke. He might as well ride a mad elephant. I will see to it that he does not,' said Balarama.

'Oh, Big Brother, he will, if he has decided upon it,' Uddhava pleaded.

'Then Hastin will throw him down to the ground. A few bruises will do him no harm,' said Balarama, and he strode away.

Shridama and Uddhava had a hurried consultation.

'What is the way out?' asked Shridama.

'Why not ask Radha to persuade him to give up the idea?' said Uddhava. 'I was just thinking of taking her into our confidence.'

Hastin was Vrindavan's king of stud bulls. He was a royal beast, massive and sturdy, and sinuous in every limb. His horns were sharp and strong. His neck was a mighty knot of irresistible muscles. His hump, dark and majestic, rose like the *lingam* of Mahadeva. His skin was soft and sleek, and his generous loins had furnished Vrindavan with a breed of sturdy bulls and matchless cows.

To see him as he stood tied to a giant tree, was to adore the very image of strength. All day long he pawed the ground impatiently. He eyed every one who approached him with sullen ferocity and snorted angrily all the time. And if ever a cow came within sight, rope or no rope, tree or no tree, he would grow restless, bellowing with fierce passion, impatient to enlarge the number of his progeny.

Once the boys had been to see Hastin and Balarama had expressed a hope that one day he would grow so

strong that he would kill even Hastin if necessary with a blow.

‘I don’t know whether you can kill him with a blow or not, but you can’t ride him,’ said Krishna just to tease his Big Brother.

‘You can’t ride him either,’ retorted Balarama.

Krishna was silent for a while. Then he said quietly, ‘I can’.

‘You can’t,’ said Balarama.

‘I will show you that I can’, repeated Krishna.

‘But Father Nanda has forbidden us to ride stud bulls,’ said Uddhava. ‘And whoever tries to ride Hastin will be gored to death on the spot.’

‘I will ride him,’ said Krishna.

‘Will you make a bet on that?’ asked Balarama.

‘If I don’t ride him, I promise to carry you on my back in open daylight through the village.’

‘Is that agreed?’

‘Yes. Agreed.’

‘Well, then, a month hence, the day after the next full-moon, I will ride him,’ replied Krishna.

Next day, Krishna stole time to go to the shed where Hastin was stabled away from the other bulls, more in their interests than his. For the slightest provocation was enough to make him angry with them.

With some difficulty, Krishna induced the keepers to take him to the great bull who was champing grass as lustily as he was kicking it with his hooves. All the three keepers, however, trembled. What would the Chief say if they allowed his beloved only son to approach the murderous beast?

One of the keepers carried a basket of cotton-seed meal for Hastin; the others stood near enough to intervene if the bull became nasty. Krishna, however, his face smiling, accompanied the keepers to within a few yards of where the bull stood.

Suddenly Hastin noticed that a new person had come and turned his massive face towards him and snorted viciously. The keeper, with the basket of cotton-seeds, stepped across in front of Krishna.

Hastin snorted viciously and began to tug at the rope which bound him to the old banian tree. His eyes went red and his hoof pawed the ground, as he turned to face the newcomer, lowering his head.

Krishna took his flute and began to play upon it. At first Hastin went on snorting. He was angry at this unfamiliar sound. Then his angry eyes grew soft and he looked at Krishna with curiosity. The keeper went near and placed the basket near the bull. Hastin, however, ignored it ; he was interested in the music which that stranger was making. He thought it was nice, and when Krishna came a step further, he eyed him in a friendly way.

In a few moments Krishna stopped playing the flute and came near the bull to push the basket nearer up to his mouth.

Then, day after day, Krishna came and played the flute and the majestic bull almost looked as if he was enjoying the treat. And every time Krishna came with a bundle of fresh tasty grass and sweets rich with ghee and offered them to Hastin, he ate them and seemed to like them very much indeed.

A few days later, Krishna, as he played the flute, came almost within touching distance and beat time with his feet. Hastin liked it and let him pat him.

The keepers were amazed ; the fiery bull had become a friend of Krishna's.

On the morning of the appointed day when Krishna and Balarama came to Hastin's shed, the bull, who was seated on the ground, looked up fiercely and snorted.

'Are you going to ride Hastin ?' asked Balarama.

'Of course,' replied Krishna.

'Don't be a fool. I was only joking,' said Balarama. Then he added in a surprised tone when he saw some new

arrivals, addressing Shridama and Uddhava, 'Whom have you brought with you?'

'Radha has come with us,' said Shridama.

'What is this, Kahn?' asked the angry milk-maid. 'Why did you accept such a bet? And why did you not tell me about it?' She stood in front of Krishna, her arms akimbo, frowning at him and asserting her intimate claims on him. 'And, Big Brother, why do you want Kahn to ride Hastin? Have you gone mad?'

'I have not gone mad, he has,' said Balarama pointing to Krishna. 'I was only joking. I don't want him to ride. I release him from his bet. I never thought he would take it so seriously.'

'You see, Kahn, you need not be foolhardy,' said Radha.

Krishna smiled. 'Radha, you look very lovely when you get angry. Then your eyes are wonderful.'

'Don't tease me,' said Radha. 'You are not going to ride Hastin.'

'Who says I am not going to ride?' asked Krishna with a smile.

Hastin, disturbed in his rest, was furious. He rose to his feet, eyed the group collected in his shed suspiciously and bellowed angrily.

The dawn was breaking and Radha shuddered to see the mighty beast being roused to anger.

'Kahn, I won't let you ride. Give up your obstinacy,' Radha pleaded in fright.

'I am not obstinate and I am going to ride.'

'No, no, my brother,' said Balarama, placing a hand on Krishna's shoulder affectionately.

'Balarama, don't worry. I am going to ride Hastin not because of the bet, I am going to ride him because I want to,' he said firmly. 'I am not going to change my mind. You are only making my task difficult by standing here. Go behind that wall and let me deal with Hastin,' Krishna said with quiet authority.

'Oh, what will happen?' said Uddhava.

'Nothing. I will ride him, that is all. Now go. Don't get angry, Radha. Go with them and look on quietly.'

Radha was still angry. 'No, I am not going away. If you are riding the bull, I am riding with you. If you are determined to get killed I will die with you,' she said stamping her foot in anger.

'But you can't join me in the ride,' said Krishna.

'Then you can only ride after I am dead.'

She stood, her hands trembling, her beautiful eyes blazing in fiery determination.

Krishna was silent for a moment, gazing with tenderness and longing into the eyes of Radha. He was now fourteen and she nineteen, but she looked so small and sweet, and yet so irrepressible.

'All right, I will let you ride with me. But, Brother, don't talk any more. Go and wait there,' he said. As Balarama, Shridama and Uddhava began to walk away hesitatingly, he turned to Radha. 'Wait here for a moment and I will take you for a ride when I am ready.'

Krishna left Radha, went to a corner where cotton-seeds and cakes of ground-nuts were kept, collected them in a basket and proceeded towards Hastin. The bull, already impatient, was grunting and eyeing Radha viciously as she stood there waiting to see what would happen.

Krishna placed the basket on the ground and played the flute. For a few moments, Hastin's impatience continued. Then the charm of the flute was on him and he became quiet. Krishna took the basket to him and placed it before his mouth. The bull snorted cheerfully.

Krishna went near and patted his neck and tickled his dewlap. The bull went on feeding as Krishna leaned on him with easy familiarity, playing the flute all the time.

While the bull was busy having his meal, Krishna went to Radha and told her, 'I am taking Hastin to the trough. While he is drinking water, I will play the flute. Then you come and cling to me. Keep clinging to me; if

you stand away from me, you will be gored to death. Have you the courage ?'

'I will have courage so long as you are with me,' she said with an ardent flash in her eyes.

One of the keepers appeared at the door. 'Gopal, I have fed Hastin,' Krishna told him. 'I am going to water him at the trough. You must not go there. If you do, and if anything happens to me, you will be responsible for it,' he said sternly.

Krishna went back and continued to play the flute till Hastin had finished his meal. Then he untied him and took him to the trough nearby. As the bull drank, Krishna again began to play the flute, and Radha came creeping up to him and stood behind him.

When the bull had had his fill of water, Krishna patted his neck and clung to him so that he could not see Radha climbing on to a wall, ready to jump on his back. Krishna continued to speak to Hastin with affection. No sooner had he finished drinking water than Krishna jumped on his back with the bull's nose-rope in his hand and helped Radha to climb up behind him.

Hastin looked up, snorted, looked back at Krishna and put his mouth again into the trough to have his final draught. He was now in a happy mood.

'Hastin, my son, we are now going into the forest for a run,' said Krishna in an affectionate tone.

The bull looked as if he understood, raised his head, sniffed the fresh morning air and began to trot towards the forest path.

'Come, boy, run fast,' said Krishna to the bull.

The birds had started singing overhead in the trees which lined and covered the forest path. And the golden disc of the sun could be seen right at the end of the path which stretched out to an immense distance before them.

As Krishna prodded Hastin forward, Radha tightened her arms round his waist. He pressed his elbows to his sides, holding her arms in closer still. The bull began moving fast as they clung to each other.



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Krishna kicked the bull, speaking words of endearment, and away the beast plunged into the forest, Radha clinging tightly to Krishna. Now they were on a straight path ; soon they were riding down a steep hill.

Radha was thrilled with excitement. The bull tore across an open plain. Krishna gripped the bull with all the strength of his knees ; Radha crouched behind him, often wrenching him away from his hold.

After a while, the bull came to a stop. He had enjoyed the run so far, but now he was out of breath. Radha slid off his back and Krishna stood beside her. Hastin looked at them as if he was enjoying it all and turned to graze on the side of the path.

Radha sat down near Krishna, and he wiped the drops of perspiration from her face. Krishna then played his flute.

When the sun had risen high, Balarama, Shridama and Uddhava came up, accompanied by the keepers who had followed the trail. Radha and Krishna joined them, Krishna leading the mighty beast and all three on the friendliest terms.

The boys and even the keepers were glowing with pride, though they all felt that Father would never forgive them for letting Krishna ride Hastin if ever he came to know of this mad adventure.

KALIYA OF THE POISONOUS POOL

In search of new pastures, Krishna and Balarama now took the herd to graze near Mount Govardhan where the grass was rich and luxuriant and the shade of the trees spread wide. It was during those wanderings in the forest that Krishna developed a new sense of exaltation.

From the first, he had fallen in love with the *tulsi* or *vrinda* plants which grew there in abundance and which gave their name to the village. Their fresh pungent aroma filled him with new vigour. Now he also grew fond of resting open-eyed under the *kadamba* trees and gazing at their lovely flowers as if they were so many twinkling stars. He had always been fond of other flowers such as the *champak*, *ketki* and *kunti*. Their shape, their colour and their smell satisfied his longing for the beautiful. And he loved to stick them in his head-dress or above his ears, or use them as garlands.

He loved trees as if they were his dear friends. Sometimes, drifting away from the other *gopas*, he would wander by himself along the shady avenues of ancient trees. Then the spirit of peace and silence would enter his soul, and sometimes, he would talk to them endlessly. Sometimes he would play his flute so that its notes mingled mysteriously with the breeze as it blew through their waving leaves.

Above all, he loved Mount Govardhan, which was a thing of beauty. Its sides were covered with trees, whose ample foliage danced in the breeze. Flowers of every variety and hue studded them. Little streamlets gurgled by. All over the hill, friendly peacocks strutted with their mates and treated him as one of themselves. In the lake, the swans, swimming with unperturbed majesty in insepa-

nable pairs, would listen to his call and sail towards him as towards a friend. Wild birds often flew overhead while he climbed the Mount, and rabbits shyly peeped out of their little holes while waiting for him to play his flute.

Krishna wandered over this beloved hill, often with his friends, sometimes alone. And when alone, he loved to climb to the top and stand gazing at the luxuriant view below or at the distant horizon. And then he would feel a strange kinship with men and cattle, with beasts and birds, with trees and flowers, with the running streams, and above all, with the Mount, and a sense of unity, his consciousness widening so as to encompass them all.

It was impossible to instil fear into little Krishna. He could always see the danger and with undisturbed foresight meet it.

Once, grazing the cattle in a sequestered part of the forest which he had never visited before, he came across a heron guarding her eggs. The disturbed mother began to squawk frantically, and when the boys laughed and clapped because of the funny noise she made, she rushed at them with her beak open and pecked at Shridama fiercely. The boys ran away in fright. Krishna alone stood his ground. With cool self-possession, he caught hold of the two halves of the beak and tore the heron's mouth open. Bleeding and squeaking piteously, she tried to flee, but within a few yards fell to the ground.

On another occasion, when he met a giant boa constrictor, which had already swallowed a cow, waiting for more victims with its jaws open, Krishna's presence of mind did not desert him. The cows and calves ran away for fear. Not he. In spite of protests from his friends, he approached the python uninfluenced by the spell of its wide open jaws and unwinking eyes. Escaping its attempt to snap at him, he approached its awesome open mouth and thrust stones and blocks of wood into it, one after another. It closed its mouth in sheer disgust and slipped away with some difficulty. The next day it was found dead in the forest.

Balarama, though less adventurous, was growing into a giant. Slow to be roused to a decision he would, if moved to anger, fell his victims at a blow. Once, while he was leading the cattle along a new forest track, he stood for a moment under a tree and was attacked by the leader of a herd of wild donkeys with furious kicks which would have knocked a full-grown man to the ground. But Balarama was unflinching. He faced the donkey and brought it to the earth with a powerful blow delivered straight at its mouth.

Balarama's fist was like a hammer; it could break almost anything. Once, while they were at play, he leading one party and Krishna leading the other, his party won. By the rules of the game, each member of the defeated party had to carry a member of the victorious party to a pre-appointed place. Krishna himself carried Shridama, his dear friend. Burly Balarama, however, rode on the back of Pralamba, a dark-skinned, huge uncouth boy, who had joined them that day from some settlement in the heart of the forest. He was a wicked-looking youth, who, instead of carrying Balarama to the appointed place, carried him through the thickest part of the forest, with which he alone was familiar. Balarama found it impossible to get off the back of this boy who, holding his legs in a firm grip, was running very fast. In anger, Balarama brought down his fist on the boy's head, and his skull was crushed.

Exploits like these spread awe and amazement among the people of Vrindavan. They had no doubt that the boys were gods and that those who attacked them were demons. But, while they loved and admired them for these adventures, they were in fear all the time, that, in their next adventure, they would fall victims to their own recklessness.

This fear reached its height when Shridama came running to Vrindavan with the news that Krishna had jumped into the Poisonous Pool in order to subdue Kaliya, the venomous snake which lived there.

The Poisonous Pool, a short distance from Vrindavan,

was situated in an unfrequented part of the forest. It was only during the monsoon that the waters of the river flowed into it; during the rest of the year, it was stagnant and weedy. It gave off a foul smell, and a sickening vapour hung over its waters.

A huge, fierce snake, Kaliya, with its brood lived in the Pool, which was on that account shunned by men and beasts. Its slimy greenish water was supposed to be charged with poison. Cattle, constrained to drink at the Pool, were known to have died.

On this occasion, some heifers had drunk of its poisonous water and immediately fallen dead. The boys, frightened, ran away in swift retreat. Not so Krishna. He quietly looked at the waters, his eyes fixed on the snake as it glided in and out of the water in the middle of the Pool. Then, before the others could realise what he was up to, he had tucked up his *dhoti*, taken a rope in his hand, climbed on to the bough of a tree and jumped into the Pool.

Everyone down by the Pool screamed with terror; some fainted. Shridama and Uddhava, the most devoted of his friends, ran breathlessly to Vrindavan to inform Nanda and Yashoda that Krishna had jumped into the Poisonous Pool to fight Kaliya.

The waters of the Pool were slimy with tangled weeds and Krishna found it difficult to swim across and reach the place where Kaliya could be seen moving among the weeds. However, he was as cool as ever, confident in his own strength and skill.

The snake, awakened to fury at this unusual trespass into its domain, raised its hood in rage and began to approach Krishna. But, as he swam, Krishna straightened himself, made a lasso in the rope and trapped the snake's neck in the noose.

The snake was taken by surprise by the flying rope. Before it knew what this was, its hood was in the noose. It made a frantic struggle to get away, but there was no escape. It lashed out furiously, twisted its snaky coils and

splashed water all around. The frightened crowd on the side of the Pool watched its furious struggle in breathless agony and suspense.

The mighty snake struggled, but struggled in vain. The noose grew tighter with every attempt it made to get away from it. And Krishna, swimming swiftly, remained at a distance, the other end of the rope tied round his waist.

For some time the snake tugged at the rope; every time it did so, Krishna pulled at it with all the strength he possessed. The snake turned and twisted round and round and tried to lash at its captor with its tail, but in vain.

This struggle went on for a long time. Ultimately the snake's strength was spent. Krishna swam back to the side, pulling the frightened snake behind him. It was strange how Kaliya's mates followed him, their lord and master, with meek submissiveness.

Radha was one of the first to learn of Krishna's suicidal plunge into the Poisonous Pool. When she heard of it, her heart seemed to faint inside her. Ahead of others, she ran towards the Pool like a frightened deer and saw the snake lashing its tail and her Kahn bobbing up and down in the waters. She swooned with a piercing shriek.

Lalita, Vishakha and others reached the spot and nursed her round as Krishna was coming out of the Pool. With wide-eyed fright, she saw Krishna dripping with water and ran to him, her dishevelled hair flying in the air. She fell at his feet, placed her head on them and sobbed wildly. 'Kahn, why did you do it?' she cried piteously, and fainted again.

The good cowherds who had arrived there with their wives, and Nanda and Yashoda felt that this was not the proper way for a young girl to behave. They had already been scandalised more than once by this girl of twenty who was still unmarried and who was giving a bad ex-

ample to their daughters by the uncontrolled way in which she behaved. And now she had gone beyond all limits.

No one was more shocked at the way Radha had behaved before the elders of the village than her eldest stepmother Kapila. She had always protested against the way her husband, Vrishbhanu, pampered her. For years she had wanted Radha to be given in marriage; she saw no point in letting the girl grow up wild waiting for a bridegroom who had been away to the wars. Her sense of decency had been, time and again, outraged at her boyish ways and at the way she sang and danced and idolised Nanda's son. And now the situation had become more complicated. Kamsa was back in Mathura from the wars and Aiyyan was expected to return to his people soon.

When Radha's brothers brought her back to the house in a half-demented state, Kapila could not suppress her anger. She went up to Radha and slapped her. Radha, with tearless eyes, looked at her dazed and sank to the ground, a picture of helplessness. Vrishbhanu, who followed them close behind into the house, also exploded with rage. Radha had behaved disgracefully. She had now to be kept under strict control. Within a few weeks, Aiyyan was going to return to Vrindavan. And a few months later, when *uttarayan* came and the Night of the gods was over, she would be married. Though she was small and childlike, she had no business to forget that she was now twenty. She had no right to go about with little girls and herd with young *gopas*. There were to be no more games, dances and songs. And she was not to meet Krishna any more. He was now fifteen. He was the son of Nanda, the Chief, who would never forgive poor people like them for letting their girl go about in the company of their only boy. Now she was not to be allowed to go out. She must be kept locked up in the house.

All this time, Radha, her face swollen with tears, continued to sob. When Vrishbhanu and Kapila had exhausted their fury, she broke down, hid her face between her knees and piteously cried 'No, no, no'.

‘What do you mean by no, no, no? You shall be locked up in the house. You shall not be given anything to eat. You are not going to be a disgrace to my family,’ said Vrishbhanu and walked out angrily.

After they had locked Radha up, she continued to cry her heart out for a long time. When she recovered, her mind went back to her Kahn. Fresh, vivid pictures came to her mind; of how she had found the little boy dragging the mortar after having brought down the twin trees; of how he had come to her at Vrindavan redeeming the promise he had given; of the time when they had played and sung and danced and joined hands crosswise whirling round till they fell over each other out of sheer giddiness and of how he had smiled at her — as he smiled at no one else — with that understanding glint in his eyes; and, whenever she thought of him, lilting songs, from somewhere in her heart, would mix with her vision of him and give her a sense of ineffable joy. And she could never forget that, when she was near him, his flute played only for her.

Now this Aiyyan was coming — who was a complete stranger to her because she had never seen him. He would now claim her as his wife. ‘No, no, no — never, never,’ she cried.

Kahn was the Chief’s son. In course of time he would be the chief of the Shooras. It was certain she could not marry him; her father was just a plain cowherd; she was so much older than he was. Mother Yashoda, though she was fond of her as her son’s playmate, would never accept her as his wife. She would therefore lose him. Then life would not be worth living. ‘No, no, no,’ she cried.

That night she had no sleep. The next day she remained locked up, only a little food being brought to her by her stepmother. But all day long she thought only of her Kahn. Nothing should part her from him.

A thought stabbed her. Today was the night of the full moon. At night Kahn would go with his friends to

the sands. The other girls would join him. They would sing and dance, and she — his elect — would not be there! She would remain locked up in this room.

Radha looked through some chinks in the blocked-up window. Bright moonlight flooded the earth. The village and the forests surrounding it were covered with silvery beauty. But all this beauty was not for her. She would not meet her Kahn tonight! Oh, the misery of it!

The village slept in peace. She could hear the waters of the Yamuna as they flowed fast, but their music, so dear to her, brought only pain and anguish.

Suddenly, out of the silence of the night came the notes of the flute — *his* flute! Her blood began to course swiftly in her veins. She could hear the hammer-strokes of her heart in her ears. It was *his* call. He was there on the sands, as on every, every night when there was a full moon, inviting her—and all his friends—but her more than anyone else. She knew that she was his joy and he was her life, her lord, her god. But today they were parted.

The melody floating over the village brought delicious, painful yearning to her. She wished she could fly and join him. She thought for some time about the possibility of climbing through the window. But her father had seen to that; her mother slept in the ante-room, her brothers on the adjoining veranda.

Radha felt she could almost have dashed her head against the wall. 'Oh, Kahn! How can I meet you? How can I live and not be near you?' she whispered and cried and cried till she felt choked.

Then the flute was silent. Why so suddenly? Was he waiting for her? Was the *rasa* given up? He always said that she was the soul of the *rasa*. Would Kahn — her Kahn — join in the *rasa* without her?

She was tired — utterly tired. She could not keep her eyes open. How she went to sleep and how long she slept, she could not say. But something like a passing breath awakened her. She sat up, startled. Someone was in the

room. 'Radha, keep quiet. Get ready,' said a dearly loved voice. She rubbed her eyes. Was she awake or dreaming? She clung to him — yes, it was he! She looked at the roof. Someone was dangling half way from the roof.

'Get up. Dress. We are all waiting for you,' her Kahn said. His voice vibrated through her being and she became as buoyant as ever. Enveloped in darkness, she took her *rasa* dress from the peg and put it on.

'Now I will help you to get on my shoulders. Then Shridama will pull you up,' he pointed at Shridama also dangling down, but higher up towards the roof. 'And Balarama is on the roof. He is holding Shridama's hands and will pull us all up.'

She did not speak a word, but made ready to climb on to his shoulders.

'And Radha, you won't be frightened half way and drop down?' asked Krishna in a whisper.

'I am never afraid when you are with me,' she said and allowed herself to be pulled up by Shridama.

Once Radha had been pulled up to the roof, Krishna caught hold of Shridama's legs and Balarama pulled up both of them.

Within a few moments all four were on the roof. They stepped stealthily over the tiles and walked to the end of the roof. Then Balarama jumped down on to the ground, Shridama on his shoulders; then Krishna, lifting Radha, descended on to Shridama's shoulders. 'Oh, how strong he is!' she murmured. Then they all jumped to the ground and were off to the bank of the river.

The crowd of boys and girls, who were awaiting them, received them with joy. Krishna played his flute again, with Radha by his side. The enchantment was upon them all. And they danced to the rhythm of clapping hands and jingling feet.

In the morning Kapila opened the door to see how Radha was. She was sleeping soundly, a smile on her lips.

THE BETROTHAL OF RADHA

'Krishna, what shall we do now? Radha has to be saved from her parents,' asked Balarama angrily. 'Her father is a wicked man. Shall I go and punish him for what he has done?'

'No, Brother. Please leave it to me,' said Krishna. Things had reached a point at which they could not be allowed to continue as they were.

Krishna went to Yashoda. 'Mother, I want you to send a message to Radha's mother,' he said with a smile.

'What message?' Yashoda asked in surprise.

'I want you to make an offer for Radha's hand,' said Krishna quietly.

'Offer for her hand! She is already plighted in troth to Aiyyan, and now he has returned from the wars,' she said with an indulgent smile.

'I don't want her to marry Aiyyan,' said Krishna.

Yashoda felt that Krishna was up to one of his tricks and laughed outright. 'Who is the bridegroom you have selected?'

'I have selected myself.'

'What?' shouted Yashoda. For a moment she was too shocked to say anything. Then she added, 'You have gone mad. How can you marry Radha?'

'Because I want to,' said Krishna with a smile which showed quiet confidence.

'My son marrying that Vrishbhanu's daughter! Never, never! And she is older than you.' Yashoda could not believe that her son was serious in what he was saying.

‘What does that matter? Many men have married wives older than themselves,’ Krishna replied.

‘Not my son, anyway. I should hate to have a daughter-in-law who was years older than my son.’

‘But Radha looks upon you as a mother.’

‘Don’t talk nonsense. You have always been an obstinate boy, and I have all along yielded to your wishes. But I won’t yield on this point. Radha’s family is low-born. You are the chief; we have to find a chief’s daughter for you. You can’t marry Radha,’ said Yashoda vehemently, in anger and exasperation.

‘Mother, you will lose a fine daughter-in-law,’ said Krishna, trying to tease Yashoda.

‘She would not make a fine daughter-in-law! She is a forward, daring girl. The whole village talks about her forwardness. Such a daughter-in-law is worth losing.’

‘And suppose you also lose your son? What then?’ Krishna asked her in a quizzical way, but there was just the suspicion of a threat in his voice.

Yashoda was upset and looked at her son uncertainly. ‘Krishna, why do you behave like this? Go and ask your father. I am tired of you.’

‘Oh, Mother, don’t say that. You never get tired of me — nor will you be tired of my wife when she comes. I am sure Vrishbhanu’s daughter would kneel for your blessing morning and evening.’

‘Don’t be impertinent,’ said Yashoda with a laugh. It was difficult to be angry with Krishna for long, she knew. ‘Go to your father.’

So Krishna went to his father and told him about the talk he had had with his mother. Nanda laughed uproariously. He thought that the whole thing was a huge joke.

‘You have been after the girls for so long that I am not surprised that you want one of them to be your wife.’

‘Then you agree to ask Mother to make the offer?’ Krishna asked.

'No, my boy. You cannot marry that low-bred girl. You are to marry a princess,' said Nanda with a laugh.

'Can any princess be better than Vrishbhanu's daughter?'

'How many princesses have you met?'

'All the little *gopis* are princesses, perhaps better.'

'Ah, you don't know,' said Nanda with a wink.

'We are all cowherds. Why should not the daughter of a cowherd be good enough for me?'

'What about Aiyyan? Whom will he marry?' Nanda tried to change the subject.

'I leave him all the other girls in Vraja and even all in Mathura if he likes. Do listen, Father. Please ask Mother to broach the proposal for Vrishbhanu's daughter.'

'I can't, I can't, I can't,' repeated Nanda, becoming serious.

'Why can't you, Father?' asked Krishna submissively.

'You are a clever boy. I cannot match my cleverness with yours. And you know I don't like to deny you anything. But I cannot agree to your marrying Radha, or for that matter, any *gopi*. Ask Gargacharya when he comes.'

'And if he agrees to our marriage?'

'He will not,' said Nanda decidedly.

'Suppose he does?'

'Then I will withdraw my opposition. But I know he won't, he can't.'

'I will talk to the Acharya when he comes to Vrindavan tomorrow for grandfather's anniversary,' said Krishna.

On the appointed day, as expected, Gargacharya came for the ceremony. There were three of his pupils with him and an honoured guest who was introduced as Acharya Sandipani together with four young men — two sons and two pupils. Sandipani was of middle age, a thin, tall, muscular man with bright eyes and a long, black beard.

After they had been duly received by Nanda and his family, the Acharyas and their pupils went to the river for

their bathe. When they returned, they performed the ceremonies. Then the anniversary feast was held and lasted till night.

The next day when Nanda was with Garga and Sandipani, he called Krishna. Krishna fell at their feet and wiped the dust off their feet on to his head as a sign of reverence.

‘Krishna, Acharya Sandipani is going to stay here with us. He will teach you how to read and write.’

‘As the venerable Father wishes,’ replied Krishna, with folded hands.

‘Acharya is also an adept in arms. Would you like to learn how to wield arms?’

‘Why should I? I am not going to the wars.’

‘Who knows?’ asked Nanda slyly, winking at Gargacharya. ‘Some day you might be a king.’

‘I would prefer to be with you, Father and with Mother, and with our cows. And I would not like to leave the peace and beauty of Vrindavan.’

‘Son of Nanda, the Best of Munis wants you to bring peace and beauty wherever you are,’ said Gargacharya.

‘Who is the Best of Munis?’ asked Krishna.

‘Haven’t you heard of him, of the great Veda Vyasa?’ asked Sandipani.

‘I have heard very many things about him from the venerable Gargacharya. Some day, I will go to Kurukshetra and pay my respects to him.’

‘Now, my boy, out with your request. Here is Gargacharya. And here you are, too. You settle the matter between yourselves. I don’t want to be troubled with your strange request,’ said Nanda. He loved Krishna so much that he had no heart to deny him anything that he wanted.

‘What is Krishna’s request?’ asked Gargacharya.

‘He wants to marry Radha, the daughter of Vrishbhanu. You know him well. He comes of a low family. The girl is five years older than Krishna. And she is

pledged to Aiyyan, who is in Kamsa's army. And you know, Acharya, he cannot marry her.'

'Why can't I, venerable Guru?'

'Because it is impossible,' said Garga.

'That is what Father says. But if I may be pardoned for saying it, she wants to marry me and I want to marry her.'

'Marriage, my son, is not a matter of mere desire. That is a wicked way of mating,' said Gargacharya. 'Men, who do not know the laws of *dharma*, follow in that way. But looks and temperaments, age and family, upbringing and the future, all have to be taken into account. Marriage is a solemn act, in which man and wife become one and pledge themselves to *dharma*.'

'Many people who marry do not take *dharma* into account. And what is *adharma* in my marrying Vrishbhanu's daughter?' asked Krishna. 'We *gopas* do things in that way.'

Gargacharya looked at Nanda meaningfully and then said slowly and with emphasis: 'Krishna, nothing but the highest *dharma* is good enough for you.'

Krishna looked at the old Acharya in surprise.

'My son, I have watched over you with care from the moment of your birth. You were born to be the protector of *dharma*—as the Best of Munis has said,' said Gargacharya and looked towards Sandipani for his approval. 'And that is what the gods have ordained.'

Sandipani nodded. 'That is why I am here,' he said.

Krishna fixed an earnest look on Sandipani. 'What do you want me to do?' asked Krishna. He had had no idea that his fate could be the concern of such venerable people.

'We want you to be ready for your high destiny,' said Gargacharya.

Krishna looked at his father and found him again winking slyly at the Acharya.

'My son, listen to me. Kamsa has returned from the

wars. Now he is wickeder than he ever was before. Your miraculous exploits will not remain long unknown to him. We look upon you as our redeemer,' said Gargacharya slowly, almost in a whisper. 'Listen, Krishna. You are not Nanda's son. You are the son of Prince Vasudeva and Devaki, Prince Devaka's noble daughter, and so is Balarama. We have hidden you here, under Nanda's roof, to see that you grow up strong and wise till the appointed day comes. Sage Narada has prophesied Kamsa's death at your hands. So has the venerable Veda Vyasa. We have lived only in that hope. Now Acharya Sandipani will prepare you for the new life that you will have to lead.'

For some moments Krishna gazed at the sunlight which streamed in from the door. Evidently he was trying to grasp the significance of the revelation made by Gargacharya. Then he spoke with frankness.

'If you, venerable Sir, will forgive me, let me live here as I have been living. I am a cowherd boy. I love Father and Mother. I love my cows and the woods and the glades in which I wander and I worship Mount Govardhan. And I will remain as I am so long as I am not called away to be the deliverer.'

'Will you always love me, my boy, when you are away?'

'Always, Father, whatever happens to me. No one could have had a better father than I had. I shall always remain at your feet, your son.'

'You may soon be called to Mathura,' said Gargacharya. 'You have to deliver us all from the bondage of Kamsa. The Yadavas have been awaiting this deliverance these twenty-five years.'

Gargacharya told Krishna about the events of the last twenty-five years. Krishna listened with absorbed interest, and a new light was in his eyes.

'Tell my honoured father Vasudeva and my mother Devaki that I shall not fail them, and I shall not fail the venerable Acharya,' said Krishna. He then turned to Sandipani. 'I shall always seek your blessing. But whilst

I am here, please don't let the people of Vrindavan know that I am not one of them. It would be very painful for them and me not to belong to each other any more.'

Sandipani smiled assent.

'You now know, my son, why you cannot marry Vrishbhanu's daughter,' said Nanda.

Krishna was lost in thought. Then his brow cleared, and he looked Gargacharya in the face. 'Venerable Sir, you want me to deliver the Yadavas from *adharma* ?'

'Yes, my boy.'

'Then is it right for me to start by forsaking *dharma* now ?' asked Krishna.

'We don't ask you to.'

'You do,' said Krishna with a smile. 'It was eight years ago when Vrishbhanu's daughter came to me as I lay helpless in the forest tied to the mortar. Since that time there has not been a day when she had not waited for me ; there has never been a moment when the thought of me has not been in her mind. During these eight years she has never drawn a breath but to live in me. She has smiled only for me ; she has sung songs only to offer them to me ; she is happy only when she talks of me ; she feels transported when she hears the notes of my flute.'

'Are you not exaggerating ?' asked Garga.

'No,' replied Krishna. 'When I was struggling with Kaliya, she cried out in agony ; she fell almost dead. If I had died, other hearts would have been broken, it is true ; but she would have died that very moment.'

Krishna paused and the two Acharyas were struck by the sincerity and eloquence with which he spoke. Then he continued : 'And you want me to start becoming a protector of *dharma* by forsaking and killing — for she is sure to die if I reject her — Vrishbhanu's daughter who has given me her all ?'

Gargacharya opened his eyes wide. Tears of affection sprang into Nanda's eyes.

'Son of Vasudeva, listen,' said Sandipani. 'If you are snatched away from here — into power, strength and

splendour — will this village girl be the same to you ? Search your heart and speak the truth.'

'Venerable Sir, I need not search for an answer,' replied Krishna without a moment's hesitation. 'I live for all those who love me — Father, Mother, my *gopas* and *gopis*, my cows and bulls. More so in the case of Vrishbhanu's daughter. She lives in me. I live in her — and I will do so always — wherever I may be. Without her, my flute will be silent. She is and will always be to me the spirit of joy — unchangingly ethereal and inspiring.'

Gargacharya sat almost dazed at this flow of amazing eloquence. It seemed a pity to plan to educate this boy to make him fit to play the part of deliverer. His mind went back to the Muni's prophetic words.

'Son of Vasudeva, let us think this matter over. Let me also consult the noble Vasudeva and Devaki, who have lived in you also these fifteen years.'

'Venerable Sir, please do not do that,' said Krishna as he folded his hands. 'Here is my father. My mother is in the next room churning milk. I want your blessing, Gurudeva, and theirs. I am only a cowherd boy, no more.'

'But what will they say ?'

'Tell them : If you want your son to protect *dharma* in the world, he can only do so if you let him perform the *dharma* which is nearest him — to belong to a helpless milkmaid who has given him her all.'

The others were silent. Then Krishna prostrated himself before Nanda. 'Father, Father, give me your blessing. Let me be married to Vrishbhanu's daughter,' he entreated with humility.

And old Nanda forgot his age and dignity and clung to his son, sobbing like a little child.

AIYYAN RETURNS FROM THE WARS

Vrindavan was getting ready for Indrotsava, the festival in honour of Indra, the rain god. Gargacharya, aided by thirty disciples and several other learned Brahmans, was preparing 108 sacrificial altars on which maunds of butter, ghee and grain had to be offered.

It was an ancient festival which the Shoora Yadavas of Vraja observed every year before the rains began. Indra was the presiding deity of rain, the giver of plenty, the king of gods. As the Vedas said he could withhold rain and starve men. He could flood the rivers and plains and sweep away villages in torrential rains. He was, therefore, to be propitiated by this annual sacrifice. Offence must not be given to him.

Since the day when Krishna had won the hearts of Gargacharya and Sandipani, he had acquired a new confidence in himself. He moved among the cowherds with the sole intent of serving them. He tended the cattle as before, but his identity with them was now complete, though he often wandered away from his friends into the depth of the solitary forests, feeling kinship with each tree and creeper and perceiving an expanding personality.

The learned Brahmans held consultations as to who was to officiate as *yajamana*, the sacrificer. Whoever was selected had to go through a purificatory fast of three days and, after that, perform the essential rituals for seven days. Last year Balarama had officiated. Now Krishna was no more a child, and the choice fell upon him. He was to be the sacrificer this year, decided Gargacharya, with the consent of all the village elders.

However, Krishna had never shown much interest at

any time in the Festival of Indra, though ordinarily the heart and soul of all festivities. When the village was astir with the sacrificial ceremonies, he would often take his flute and with a few favourite cows withdraw into the shadow of Mount Govardhan. However, he showed such a regard for the rituals of the festival that it was difficult to find fault with him for not joining in it.

The consultations among the learned and the pious were over. Gargacharya announced their decision, when Krishna, as his custom was, came to pay his respects after his return with the cattle from the pastures.

‘My son, we have decided that this year you shall be the *yajamana* (sacrificer) at the festival. As soon as the preparations are complete, you must undertake the purificatory fast.’

‘You should ask Balarama to perform the sacrifice and preside over the festival,’ Krishna said with folded hands.

‘He was the sacrificer last year,’ said Gargacharya. ‘It is your turn now.’

‘Then it will be more appropriate to select Shridama. Let him be the sacrificer,’ said Krishna.

‘But not you! Why?’

‘I would like others to have the honour,’ said Krishna.

Gargacharya smiled. ‘Krishna, what is in your mind? The whole of Vrindavan wants you to be the sacrificer this year. Why do you decline the honour?’

‘I am not fit for it,’ said Krishna, frankly.

‘Not fit! You! If any one is fit, you are. There must be some good reason behind what you say. What is your reason? Tell it to me, clearly,’ asked Gargacharya, for he had come to find that behind whatever Krishna said and did, there was a sound reason and a clear vision.

‘Will you forgive me if I tell you the truth and not be offended?’ asked Krishna.

‘I will never be offended with you. And you will

never give me offence. You know how I value what you say.'

'I don't like Indrotsava,' Krishna said.

'Why? Why? What is wrong with it? It is enjoined by ancient custom,' said Gargacharya.

'Why do we lavish so much milk and honey and butter and grain and fuel? Because we are afraid of Indra; we fear he will be angry and destroy us but for the festival.'

'And so he would. Even the great Rishis made sacrificial offerings to him.'

'The great Maharshi Chyavan did not make those offerings and yet he was victorious. I do not like festivals prompted by fear. I don't find any joy in them. I only want to rejoice in those I love.'

'This is blasphemy, my son.'

'It is not. I should like to join in festivals to the gods who love and bless us,' said Krishna with a loving gleam in his eyes. 'I would be happy if a festival was held in honour of our *gopas* and *gopis* — our cows which bless us with milk, butter and ghee and dung too for our fires and fields — our trees too which give us shade, fruit, fuel and the framework of our homes.'

Gargacharya smiled in an understanding manner.

'—— and I should like to worship Govardhan, the home of luxuriant grass and shady trees, with its birds of lovely plumage and its streamlets of clear water,' said Krishna.

'What would you do for your new gods, son?' asked Sandipani.

'I would hold a festival in their honour every year — every day, if I could. They are not ours — we are theirs. With them we are godlike and fearless; without them we should be nowhere.'

'That is true,' said an elder. 'But for them we would be nowhere.'

'Cows are our wealth,' said a ninety-year-old elder.

‘Venerable sir, cows are divine mothers. But for them we could never understand what it is to be gentle, noble and generous,’ said Krishna.

‘But Indra will be angry. He is an angry god,’ said the elder.

‘Is it not our *dharma* to resist the angry?’ Krishna replied, adding, ‘and then, if they cease to inspire fear, to forgive them?’

Old Nanda was completely in ecstasy. He had come to surrender to his son’s judgment in all things for every time Krishna could see a fresh point of view. ‘My son, you are quite right. The cows, the trees and Govardhan give us everything,’ he said.

‘——and we do not even give them our love — that is what Krishna says. Isn’t it?’ said Sandipani. ‘If you all agree, we should have a Gopotsava — a festival of the *gopas* and worship Govardhan. The sacrificial ceremonies will be a mere incident in it and the offerings only symbolical.’

‘Then I shall be willing to be the *yajamana*,’ said Krishna. ‘And the milk and butter and curd, which we would have offered to Indra on a sacrificial fire, will provide such enjoyment for days and days as we have never known before.’

‘Yes, the *Vedas* say, “curds are vigour; ghee is life”,’ quoted the learned Gargacharya.

The proposal of celebrating Gopotsava came to Vrindavan as a surprise. Some were shocked; it was a departure from ancient tradition. To others it was a welcome innovation; instead of the seven days of sacrificial ceremonies there had been before, there would now be three days of song and dance, high festivities, putting on clothes and meeting to rejoice together. And most people loved Krishna; if he was going to be the presiding genius, they were all for it. The younger boys and girls hailed the news with free and unmixed delight.

As it happened, the next day Aiyyan returned to his

parents after ten years away. He was a brave lad, twenty years old. He had just returned from the *Asvamedha* (the Horse Sacrifice) to which he had gone as one of Kamsa's contingent of chosen warriors. The Horse Sacrifice had been performed by the Emperor Jarasandha, Kamsa's father-in-law, as the highest ritual by which he could declare his world emperorship.

While at Rajagriha, Jarasandha had given his son-in-law, Kamsa, the distinguished privilege of leading his armies for world conquest in the wake of the roaming sacrificial horse. It was his task to give battle and overcome any ruler who barred the way and exact tribute in recognition of Jarasandha's imperial status. In his absence, Mathura was to be governed by the old minister Pralamba and Pradyota, Putana's husband, the chief of the Palace guards.

Every now and then, though only when the sacrificial horse, in his unrestricted wanderings, happened to roam through some region near Mathura, Kamsa would pay a visit to his capital for a few days' stay.

Now the sacrificial horse had returned home to Rajagriha after all the ancient rituals had been performed with imperial pomp. Kamsa had come back to his capital with his dominions considerably enlarged and accompanied by such of his men as had had the good fortune to survive, all battle-scarred but flushed with victory. The brave Aiyyan was amongst them.

The news which awaited him on his arrival, amazed Aiyyan. His bride had been taken away from him and promised to the son of Nanda the Chief, who had some years ago migrated to Vrindavan. He felt this was a wanton insult to the fair name of his family and a blot on his brave career. True, he had not seen his wife-to-be; true, with his position in the Court, he could find a better wife any day, but this personal affront had to be avenged.

Aiyyan therefore returned to his village in a fury. This upstart Krishna — maybe the son of the Chief — had to be properly dealt with. Vrishbhanu's daughter had to

be re-pledged to him. He was after all an officer in Kamsa's army — a man who had proved his mettle on several battle-fields.

Moreover, when he arrived in Vrindavan, he heard that, at the instance of this Krishna, most of the villagers wanted to do away with the Festival of Indra — Indra, the god of rain and storm and war, to whom he had offered worship every day he had been in the army.

Aiyyan decided that the Festival of Indra should be held, Krishna or no Krishna.

THE LIFTING OF GOVARDHAN

Vrindavan was split into two groups. One group began preparations for the Festival of Govardhan, and the other continued to prepare for the Festival of Indra.

Gargacharya and Sandipani were for Krishna — and so were Nanda and a great number of the *gopas*. The other group, led by Aiyyan's father Stokakrishna, though small, was bitter and aggressive. For want of an Acharya to officiate, they brought one of the learned Brahmans from Mathura.

The *gopas* and *gopis*, who followed Nanda's lead, just ignored the hostile group. Then the day of the festival came. Many people gathered on the outskirts of the village to join the procession to Mount Govardhan. All the cattle were washed clean and fed well. Most of them had bells tied to their necks; some favourites even had jingling anklets on their feet. Most of the cows had been decked with shells and plastered with many-coloured powders. The fiery, tempestuous stud bulls had their horns pasted with silver leaves. Elderly women, in gay-coloured dresses and ornaments, were riding in carts, singing festive songs. The bullocks drawing the carts, had been covered with multi-coloured trappings.

Some high-spirited boys raced on fiery bulls. Most of the men wore gay head-dresses and scarves of many colours. Most of the boys and girls went on foot, racing, jumping and playing around. Radha was, among the girls, radiant in her new dress and the lovely ornaments which Mother Yashoda had presented her with on the day of her betrothal.

Krishna and Balarama walked at the head of the gay

procession. Balarama, taller than any of the others by half a cubit, carried a small plough on his broad shoulders; he was not content with carrying anything lighter. Krishna was with him, in yellow silk, *pitambar*, garland and flower wristlets and crown of peacock feathers and with his inseparable flute in his waistband. He talked with friends he came up to and made jokes at the girls. He had a smile or a graceful compliment for every elder and a pat for every cow that he came across. He was the life of the festivity.

The wise eyes of Gargacharya and Sandipani saw what change the festivities had made in Krishna, and their hearts beat with a high expectation of great events to come.

At noon the procession reached Giri Govardhan, and under the shade of the ancient trees, each family sat down to the meal it had brought, though sharing its special delicacies with its neighbours.

In the evening the songs and dances began. Mimics copied the neighing of horses, the roars of tigers, the bellowing of bulls and the bark of dogs.

Morning came. The birds sang. The cows were milked. The cattle were cleansed, watered and bedecked once again. Adults and children gathered round the milch cows to drink their potful of fresh milk.

When all the people in that crowd had ornamented themselves with flowers and red powder, they climbed to the top of Govardhan. Everyone felt a new joy as Gargacharya and Sandipani prepared to worship the Mount. For, hereafter, Govardhan would not only be the lord of hills, but a god.

The *arti*, the offering of the flames, was ready, when Krishna saw Aiyyan and two of his friends whom he had brought from Mathura climbing up the hill by a path at the back. His keen eyes perceived their furtive looks and the way they were coming stealthily towards the group of girls in which Radha was standing. A quiet smile played on his handsome lips. His eyes were as loving as before.

The crowd of men and women gathered there also saw Aiyyan and his friends and were angry or suspicious.

'Shridama, Aiyyan and his friends have come to join the Festival. Invite them here,' Krishna said loud enough to be heard by them. 'Aiyyan, please join me in worship.'

Shridama started off towards where they were standing, but Aiyyan and his friends ran down the path by which they had come up.

Gargacharya not only worshipped Govardhan, the cows and the trees, but ended by offering worship to Krishna himself. And Jaya Jaya (Victory, Victory) issued from every mouth.

It was the last day of the festival and the gayest. In the evening, the *gopas* and *gopis* had a hearty meal. Songs were sung, many of them describing the exploits of Krishna when he was a child.

The stars were shining quietly and there was a light reviving breeze. As darkness fell, each family went to sleep near its carts and bullocks and cows. Everything was quiet. It was after midnight that one dark cloud after another rose in the sky. The wind grew chilly and people, even in their sleep, became uneasy. Then lightning flashed, the bullocks and the cows were restive and the cowherds woke up. The sky was overcast.

A great fear entered every heart. The God Indra, ruler of rains and storms, had been offended and was going to punish them. They had failed their god and listened to the boy Krishna's foolish advice, and worshipped cows and trees and Mount Govardhan.

The rain god was angry, no doubt, for the sky grew darker as dawn came nearer. Every cowherd, without speaking a word, began to harness the bullocks to his cart. It was best to hasten back to Vrindavan before the rains overtook them.

The lightning came in flashes and the thunder sounded. Though the sun had risen, darkness was over the earth. And the rains came in torrents. The streamlets began to

overflow and the ground turned to slush. Men and women had to creep under the shelter of the uptilted carts.

The God Indra was angry. They were all trapped. It was impossible to return to Vrindavan by forest paths submerged in water and with the sky pouring down rain in cascades.

Men and women began to pray to the God Indra to forgive their sins and vowed to perform the Indrotsava without fail, if the god would only rescue them from the storm.

As soon as the first cloud appeared on the horizon and the chill wind began to blow, Krishna was up. He measured the sky with an eagle's eye and called his friends together. The God Indra had to be fought.

With the first faint glimmer of light, Krishna led his friends towards some hollows which the rain and wind had carved out in the belly of Mount Govardhan. On his earlier visits he had known them well, for they always gave echoes to the voice of men and the footsteps of cattle.

'Balarama, Indra is out to fight us. We will now have to fight him,' said Krishna, as he tried to roll a boulder away to open up a big cave.

They stepped into it and Balarama, aided by others, succeeded in removing other boulders.

Shouts of victory came from the excited boys; the girls heard them and, forgetting all difficulties, ran towards the spot from which the shouts came. They had faith in Krishna, and if there were shouts of victory, they knew he must have worked a miracle.

They were all filled with the sense of a mighty struggle. They were fighting against the god Indra and for their beloved Krishna. Boulders, stones, *kankar* (concrete) and sand were quickly and joyfully removed from the hollows.

'Bring the children here,' Krishna said with authority, and the grown-up girls ran back to their families to bring the children to the shelter.

Nanda and several cowherds, anxious to know what was happening, came to the spot. And yet others came after them.

Krishna made a gigantic effort to push away a rock which separated them from a huge cavern in the belly of the hill, and the hand of every adult and child added whatever strength it had to help him.

Suddenly as the storm grew in strength there was a clap of thunder which shook the hill. Terrifying echoes reverberated in the hollow. Lightning flashed down somewhere.

The thunder-storm broke over their heads. There was a sharp earthquake. Even Govardhan, they felt, was tottering. The rock, which Krishna was trying to remove, became detached from the hill and would have fallen on them had not Krishna, aided by numberless hands, held it back.

Again a mighty roar of thunder rolled overhead. A tremendous quake shook the earth, throwing everyone off his balance. And then a miracle happened. Giri Govardhan, the god among hills, rose higher by a couple of cubits.

The rock rolled out. A huge cavern was disclosed which, due to the rising of the hill, was high enough for men to stand upright in it.

Shouts of joy came from a hundred throats. The *gopas* and *gopis*, with their children and cattle, rushed to find the shelter which Krishna had provided by lifting Govardhan.

Protected by the hill, the *gopas* and *gopis* began their festivities again. They began to laugh at Indra. He could now do his worst ! There Krishna was with them — their darling and their god.

As Krishna stood in the midst of them all, he saw the devotion in their eyes and smiled with love. They all felt that he was their own and they were his and that they were all part of him.

The *gopas* and *gopis* continued to defy the anger of Indra till it was exhausted. At last the rain stopped. The sun came out, shining fiercely.

And the *gopis*, who felt proud of having helped Krishna to raise Govardhan, came to him as they were leaving.

‘Govind, (for that was the new name which they gave him on that day) you are our god now. We shall never have you for our *rasa*.

‘Why not? Do I not belong to you? The next month is *Aswin*, the autumn moon is at her fullest. We shall have our *rasa* at that time, I promise you.’ Then he added quietly, ‘Now we are not afraid of Indra any longer. We shall join the Indrotsava.’

THE DYING MINISTER

Kamsa returned to Mathura proud of his glorious deeds and added dominions.

When his father-in-law, Jarasandha, began *Asvamedha*, the Horse Sacrifice, so as to declare his imperial status, Kamsa was chosen to lead the army which followed the sacrificial horse. According to the ritual of the sacrifice prescribed by the ancient Shastras, the horse which was worshipped day after day as a god had to be allowed to roam wherever it liked; and the king of every country it passed through had to pay tribute or fight the army which followed it.

Kamsa had discharged his warlike mission with credit. The horse, after wandering for twelve years, had returned to Rajagriha. It was sacrificed with imperial honours in the presence of a vast gathering of tributaries and of learned Brahmans invited from adjoining countries. On that occasion Kamsa was honoured as a mighty Prince and awarded large areas of the conquered territories.

Thus, for a period of over twelve years, Kamsa had only been able to pay hurried visits to Mathura, whenever the horse happened to stray into the adjoining territories of friendly kings. He had, therefore, left his kingdom in the charge of his Prime Minister, Pralamba and General Pradyota.

When he returned to Mathura, he was displeased to find that the thirty-one Yadava clans, the Shooras, Andhakas, Vrishnis, and even his own clan Bhoja, had become practically independent. His earlier efforts to reduce the Yadava federation of proud, free clans to a court of helpless vassals—which had succeeded by cunning treachery

and persecution before he had left for the wars — counted for nothing. His return did not arouse enthusiasm in them; on the contrary, they were sullen and distrustful.

After his return he felt unhappy for a few days. The zest of battle was over and he did not have the satisfaction of returning to a welcoming people. Even his old father, Ugrasena, though still confined to the palace, was not the old, dispirited man he had left behind; there was ill-concealed contempt in the way he received his son. Somehow Kamsa felt that his unquestioned mastery over the Yadavas, which he had enjoyed before he went to the wars, had slipped from his hands.

All this was very galling to Kamsa's pride. But he was as cunning as he was ambitious, and did not want to take any hasty steps to regain his power.

Pralamba, the Minister, had been struck down by paralysis. He was almost dying. However, the Prince obtained from Pradyota, his favourite general, all the information he needed about what had happened in his absence; how the Minister had taken the line of least resistance, since the best of the mercenary forces which Kamsa had raised had gone with him.

The Chiefs of the Yadava clans had soon reverted to their old ways and become strong and independent. In spite of the way Kamsa had treated his father, they had continued to regard Ugrasena with the affection and respect due to a beloved king, and though the old man never interfered with the Minister's administration, he came to acquire in the people's eyes, the same privileged position which he had enjoyed before Kamsa imprisoned him.

Kamsa's cunning brain was now busy devising a plan to bring back the old state of affairs. He stationed the warriors who had returned with him to Mathura in different parts of the city. He also had it announced that his victorious return would be celebrated by *Dhanuryajna*, the 'Bow-Sacrifice.' It was going to be an exhibition of his might and also an occasion to levy tribute on the clans and reduce them to vassalage.

One day Pradyota came to the King at night with strange news he had learned from one of his own men, Aiyyan, who had, as the Prince knew, acquitted himself creditably in the wars.

Kamsa, when he heard the news, turned pale and began to bite his moustache. His hands trembled. When Aiyyan had finished his account, the Prince stood up in a fury and roughly ordered him and Pradyota out of the room. Then he walked up to the terrace room of his palace and paced it for a long time, his fists clenched and his eyes clouded with fear.

During these years, bent on military glory, he had forgotten Sage Narada's prophecy, or at any rate, disregarded it as not likely to come true since the eighth child of his cousin, Devaki, was not a son but a daughter. But here was this boy, of the same age as Devaki's eighth son would have been if she had had one, and he showed great promise and possessed a miraculous power.

Though he was now past fifty, Kamsa feared death more than ever. The old dread of Devaki's eighth son killing him returned with redoubled force and roused him to savage fury. He was not afraid of death in battle, but the prospect of dying at the hands of a young Yadava, a blood relation, galled him very greatly. He still had great ambitions — to crush the defiant Yadava Chiefs, to consolidate his newly acquired territories and to become a Chakravarti some day. Yes, he must solve this mystery, whatever it might cost, and, if this boy was Devaki's son, he must destroy him.

In the morning, haggard after a sleepless night, he went with Pradyota to the old Minister's house where he lay dying. The old man, shrunk and partially paralysed, was half unconscious when the Prince told his people to leave the room and set Pradyota to stand guard at the entrance.

The Prince was so agitated with suppressed fury that he roughly shook the semi-unconscious man in bed to

awake him. Pralamba opened his eyes and lifted his unparalysed hand in token of respect for his master.

'Pralamba, can you hear me? Can you understand what I am saying?' Pralamba let him know that he did by a flicker of his eyelash, and a low sound.

'Have you heard of Krishna, the son of the cowherd Nanda, of Vrindavan? And Rohini's son Balarama?'

'Yes,' replied the Minister with the same sign.

'You know that Krishna killed Putana and Trinavrit, whom I sent to kill him.'

'Yes.'

'Do you know that he has grown strong and handsome?'

'Yes.'

'Have you heard that when he was a little boy he is said to have killed the demons that lived in the calf and the heron?'

'Yes.'

'That all the *gopas* and *gopis* of Vrindavan love him?'

'Yes.'

'That he overcame the fearful cobra Kaliya who lived in the Poisonous Pool and set a noose round his fangs?'

'Yes.'

'And you, old fool, you allowed him to grow so powerful! Why?' asked Kamsa in impatient anger. He would have liked to kill the Minister then and there, though he lay helpless in bed.

The old man raised his normal left hand in a gesture of helpless query: 'What could I do?' and closed his eyes in sheer exhaustion.

Kamsa shook Pralamba pitilessly again. The Minister opened his eyes, fastened his helpless gaze on his angry master, and tried in vain to fold his hands as if asking forgiveness.

'Tell me. Have you received reports about this boy

during your illness?' Pralamba tried to show by raising his hand that he had.

'This boy made Vrindavan give up the worship of God Indra and set himself up as a god. Is that true?'

'No,' the Minister replied by a gesture.

'Anyway, did he set up the worship of cows and trees and Giri Govardhan, and hold a festival in their honour? Is that true?' Kamsa shouted.

'Yes.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

The old man pointed to the door to indicate Pradyota.

'Pradyota knew this. Is that what you want to say?'

'Yes,' the Minister indicated by a sign.

'And Krishna was also worshipped on that occasion?'

The old man was silent.

'And do you know that he killed the mad bull Arishta and the wild horse Keshi whom Pradyota had let loose in Vrindavan?'

The old man showed that he knew nothing of these happenings.

'Now, Pralamba, listen. If you had not served me well these thirty-five years, I would have killed you here and now with my bare hands. I left you in charge of my kingdom and you have all but ruined me. You were so feeble that you let my kinsmen grow strong and defiant — chiefs, whom I had almost crushed. You allowed this Krishna to grow to such strength that even in Mathura many people look upon him as their coming saviour.'

The old man tried to fold his hands, but failed to do so.

'Don't fold your hands, you old hypocrite. But if you have any loyalty left, tell me one thing — the last thing that I want to hear from you.'

The old man made an inquiry with his hand.

Kamsa knit his brow and in a whisper like a threat, asked, 'Is this boy Devaki's eighth son?'

The old man made no reply.

‘Come, speak. Otherwise I won’t be able to restrain myself from killing a Brahman. Do you hear? Is he Devaki’s son?’

The old man made an effort with his lips and was able to articulate a feeble affirmative.

‘You old traitor! Why did you keep this fact back from me?’ hissed Kamsa venomously, and shook Pralamba by his feeble shoulder.

‘Why didn’t you tell me, ungrateful wretch?’

The old man made a supreme effort. His eyes widened and a strange look crept into them.

‘Tell me. Why did you not tell me of it before?’

With sudden energy, Pralamba raised his head and his lips trembled. ‘Because the venerable Vyasa spoke the truth. He is the Lord Himself,’ he muttered.

Suddenly his head fell back. The effort was too much for the dying man; his eyes grew wider still. And the rattle of death was in his throat, as Kamsa, terror-struck, fled from the room.

KAMSA'S SUMMONS

Kamsa's summons was sent out. All the Yadava Chiefs were to attend the secret session of his Court.

For three days and nights after Pralamba died, Kamsa sat alone and mute, his mind working furiously at the problem. Vasudeva's son had to be destroyed, together if necessary, with all the Yadava Chiefs.

And so the proclamation went forth on the fourth day that a fortnight hence Kamsa, the overlord of the Yadavas, was going to celebrate his triumph by holding a *Dhanuryajna* — the Sacrifice of the Bow. It was to be a week of festivities, of displays of warlike feats, elephant fights and wrestling, feasts and rejoicing.

Pradyota, Kamsa's trusted commander, however, was inwardly mortified, though he moved about briskly carrying out his master's order. Ostensibly he was honoured by being placed in charge of the Bow-Sacrifice. In fact, he was superseded. Vritrighna, a cousin of Kamsa's favourite wife, the Magadhan princess, the Emperor Jarasandha's daughter, was placed in sole charge of the palace, and this new officer replaced Pradyota's men by Magadhans. Pradyota knew what this meant. Hereafter Kamsa would not entrust his safety into his commander's hands. He, Pradyota, would no longer enjoy his master's full confidence.

Pradyota was bitter. He had spent his whole life in his master's service; sacrificed his wife and children; he had never withdrawn from any course, however sinful, which would further his interests. Now Kamsa had cast him aside for a foreign hireling!

He could never shake off the impression which the Minister Pralamba's dying moments had made on him. He

had stood at the door as a watchman, it was true; but his ears were intent on what happened between Kamsa and the Minister. And the Minister's last words had dealt him a shattering blow. All these years Pralamba had not taken any steps to dispose of Nanda's son, nor had he allowed Pradyota to take any; now he knew why. The wise old man understood that Nanda's son was really Vasudeva's, in fact that he was the eighth son of Devaki—and the saviour.

Pradyota began to think of his wife. If Krishna was really Vasudeva's son, why did Putana swear that she saw Devaki give birth to a daughter? And why had the daughter slipped from his master's grasp with a cry in which his master read a warning? And why did Putana accept the mission of poisoning Krishna? Perhaps she knew that Krishna was God, and decided to save Him. Perhaps to save her husband and children, she sacrificed herself rather than try to kill the saviour. It was all very mysterious.

Pralamba had appeared convinced that Krishna was God—that was his dying confession. Putana had known that also. And now Kamsa was bent on carrying out some plan which would dispose of Krishna and crush all the Yadava chiefs. What should he do? Should he be a party to Kamsa's sinful attempt? Should he be an instrument for destroying the Yadava chieftains, his blood relations? If they were wiped out, what would become of him? He was a Yadava chief himself; his value to Kamsa, apart from his loyalty, was in his standing. So long as he was by the Prince's side, he could always claim that he had the support of the clansmen.

His chain of thoughts was broken by a message from his master that he was wanted. In his present mood he hated to meet Kamsa; he felt the utter humiliation of a man who is used as a cat's-paw and knows it.

Pradyota found that the Prince had overcome his nervous tension of the last few weeks. He was now affa-

ble, even ingratiating — a mood which Pradyota knew his master could always work himself into when he wanted something sinister to be done.

‘My friend, I want you to go to Akrura, the chief of Vrishnis, and to tell him I wish to invite all the Yadava chiefs tomorrow afternoon.’

‘All the chiefs?’

‘Yes, all of them. I want to talk to them and make peace with them. Tell him that all must come — all, do you see? I am inviting my venerable father to attend also.’

‘Yes, lord,’ said Pradyota. ‘You want me too?’

‘Of course, of course. How can I meet them without your being present?’

Pradyota hated his master for the hypocritical softness with which he said this.

‘As you please, my lord,’ said Pradyota. ‘Do you want me to make arrangements to guard the palace at the time?’

‘Why take the trouble?’ asked Kamsa. ‘Prince Vritrighna is already in charge.’

‘As you please, my lord,’ said Pradyota.

‘And let me know what Akrura says,’ said Kamsa.

Pradyota tried to fathom the secret of this strange overture of the Prince’s, whose hatred of the Yadava Chiefs he knew to be implacable. He brought his spies together, collected as much information about the palace as he could, and sent a messenger to inform Akrura that he was coming.

Akrura, the Vrishni chief, was now advanced in age. His noble head was crowned by long white hair and his eyes were, if anything, milder and more loving.

Akrura was surprised at Pradyota’s visit, but received him with a gentle cordial welcome. The general gave him the Prince’s message.

‘Pradyota, why this summons? And so unexpectedly?’ asked Akrura.

'It took me by surprise too. I learnt of the decision only a short while ago,' replied Pradyota.

'Is it true that you have been placed in charge of the Bow-Sacrifice, and Vritrighna, the Magadhan, guards the palace?' asked Akrura.

Pradyota nodded assent. He was unhappy at the idea of this noble, generous man becoming the victim of his cruel master and had no courage to deceive him.

'He is very angry with us, the Yadava chiefs, since his return. Is he not?' asked Akrura.

'He is very angry with you all, but today he appears to be in a very friendly mood,' replied Pradyota.

'Why this sudden change?'

'I do not know,' said Pradyota hesitatingly. Akrura's honest eyes penetrated into his. He could see that this noble Yadava knew that he was telling a lie and felt ashamed of himself.

'What do you think is the reason? You know the Prince better than any one,' said Akrura. 'Does he really mean to be friendly to us? Or, is this a trick to have us all massacred at one time? The Prince is not likely to be scrupulous about that.'

Pradyota looked nervously at this saintly relative of his, who was so universally respected. He found it difficult to look at Akrura and tell a lie in the light of what Pralamba had said.

'The Prince is a strange man. He may have a plan,' said Pradyota.

'You suspect that this is a plan to do something wicked, do you?'

Pradyota nodded.

Suddenly a sad sweet voice came from the door. 'Most venerable, are you coming? Gargacharya....'

Pradyota opened his eyes in amazement. A small shapely woman stood at the door. She was past thirty, but her hair was white and her face bore the traces of a

sorrow that was greater than words. She came in but, seeing Pradyota, cut her sentence short; a sudden fright crept into her eyes.

'Devaki, welcome,' said Akrura. 'You know Pradyota, our Andhaka chief?'

Devaki fixed her eyes on Pradyota and for a moment could not recognise him. Then she went pale and her lips quivered. She mutely nodded and placed her hand on the door-post for support. It appeared as if she would faint any moment.

Pradyota felt like fainting too. This was the Princess, whom his master, as he stood by his side, had pulled out of her wedding chariot. It was her newborn sons, one after the other, whom the Prince had killed, he again standing by his side. Now it was Devaki's son again whom his master wanted to kill with his aid. An overpowering sense of shame seized him. His voice was choked and his eyes were moist as he saw those of Devaki clouded in horror, for she, as if fascinated by a python, could not remove her gaze from him.

With an effort he folded his hands and bowed his head to the ground.

'Devaki, I shall come to you as soon as I finish talking to Pradyota,' said Akrura.

'Yes,' Devaki said in an undertone, and wiping the tears that sprang to her eyes, left.

Pradyota sat there, unable to speak or even to look at Akrura. He had heard of Devaki's strange madness; how she worshipped a gold image of a little boy day and night; how she bathed it, fed it and clothed it; how she sang songs of love to the tiny image. A new light flashed into his mind. She was not singing songs to the gold image — she was singing them to the baby who was torn from her sixteen years ago and who was now Nanda's son and whom he, wicked Pradyota, was helping Kamsa to kill. A pang shot through his heart.

Akrura understood the crisis through which Pradyota was passing.

‘Would you like to come to Vasudeva and give him the invitation yourself?’ said Akrura with deep understanding.

‘No, no, I cannot. I dare not meet him,’ replied Pradyota.

‘Perhaps you would like to have the *darshan* of the deity whom Devaki worships day after day,’ said Akrura with the indulgent smile of a physician treating a patient.

‘No, no, no, please. I cannot face her again,’ said Pradyota, folding his hands in humility. ‘I have sinned against her.’

‘She has a noble heart. She will forgive you. Why, she must have forgiven you already. She only felt a passing fear on seeing you here,’ said Akrura, patting him affectionately on the back.

‘You are very kind, Chief. Now let me go,’ said Pradyota.

‘Wait. Calm yourself and then go, if you wish,’ said Akrura. ‘A time comes to every one when the Grace of the Lord descends on him. It has come to you now.’

Pradyota rose, bowed low and stepped towards the door.

‘When the Grace descends, don’t try to shut it out. Welcome it. This is the only way we mortals can know Him,’ said Akrura in a soft, persuasive voice, as he walked towards the door with Pradyota.

Suddenly Pradyota halted and turned round. ‘Akrura, Grace will never come to me. I am utterly unworthy.’ Then he stopped and looked strangely at Akrura and asked in a whisper, ‘Vasudeva’s eighth son is alive and is in Vrindavan, is he not?’

Akrura looked at him with fear in his eyes. Was the secret out? ‘Who told you?’ he asked recapturing his calm.

‘Pralamba, when he was dying, told the Prince about it.’

'Oh !' exclaimed Akrura. His heart almost stopped beating.

With a frightened look, Pradyota looked around to see that no one was within hearing distance. 'Do not trouble yourself. No one can harm him. Pralamba said he was God who has come to save us,' said Pradyota under his breath, and with hasty steps left the house.

SUMMONED TO MATHURA

Kamsa had been ruling Mathura for over twenty-five years but he had never once called a gathering of the Chiefs, though his father Ugrasena had invariably consulted them on important occasions. The Chiefs were, therefore, very surprised and mistrustful at the invitation and took counsel with their elders and leaders such as Vasudeva and Akrura. They knew that during Kamsa's long absence they had regained most of their lost power. Naturally, now that he had returned, they feared a recurrence of the old threats, persecution and even massacres to deprive them of it.

The Bow-Sacrifice, of the kind which the Prince had decided to hold, invariably involved bloodshed. Soldiers and wrestlers, flushed with victory and feted with food and drink during the contests, had been known to grow unruly or to stage massacres at the orders of their master. The appointment of Vritrighna, the Magadhan Prince, a hated alien, to guard the palace in place of Pradyota — a Yadava Chief, however wicked his ways might be — was also a portent of evil. Something was being planned, thought the Yadava Chiefs, and they, in secret conclave, decided to go to any lengths to fight Kamsa; they only wanted him to take the offensive.

At the appointed time, they all came, chiefs and elders, fifty in all, all armed and sullen with resentment. When they saw that the whole palace was full of Magadhan warriors, with Vritrighna at their head, they knew what was in store for them.

King Ugrasena felt unsure of himself at the assembly. Detained in an adjoining palace — in fact a luxurious prison-house — he had lost the habit of meeting people.

Hesitatingly, therefore, he sat down on the *gadi* next to his son. His gaze, however, was vacant. His hands trembled as he sought the support of the pillow to rest his weak frame.

Next to King Ugrasena sat the venerable Bahuka of the Andhaka clan, over 90 years old, the uncle of King Ugrasena and the grandfather of Pradyota, the general. When unexpectedly he had entered the hall, many Chiefs had gasped with amazement. For several years now, he had withdrawn from all company, worshipping Lord Shiva in the solitude of his palace. And here he had come, all wrinkled but smiling, straight as a rod, eyeing the younger men with humorous eyes undimmed by age. Something was about to happen, thought the Chiefs, for old Bahuka would not have joined them if there had been no purpose behind.

Next to Bahuka sat Vasudeva, the Chief of the Shoora Yadavas. A keen sense of unhappiness, which such an honest, good man could not control successfully, had left its mark on his face, his eyes and his body. All could see that he felt very uneasy at the possible outcome of this unexpected gathering.

On the other side of the Prince sat Devaka, Ugrasena's brother, and the saintly Akrura, gentle, open-hearted and yet unafraid. Akrura bore himself with natural dignity. The Chiefs looked upon him with respect, for their anxious hearts saw their only hope in his wisdom.

Pradyota sat next to him with a silent, set look on his face. His eyes moved from chief to chief with uneasy watchfulness. He knew that they all hated him and that his master distrusted him. Two of his brothers sat by his side, and two other younger brothers stood behind Kamsa, for it was their duty to wait upon the Prince whenever he was in public.

Others were armed with swords and shields, yet they too expected some catastrophe. They were sure that the gathering was going to end in strife. However, they found Kamsa smiling warmly as he welcomed them, greeting

each one separately and enquiring after some of their families.

Then, to the surprise of all of them, Kamsa folded his hands and turned to his father and old Andhaka. 'Worshipful father, venerable grand-uncle, my brothers, I have invited you to join me in celebrating the Bow-Sacrifice,' he said. 'I have, by the power of my arms, extended the Yadava domains. Mathura is now a mighty kingdom. You all know our ancient ways. And I want you to help me to make these sacrificial sessions a success.'

No one spoke. They could not understand the motive for this ostentatiously gentle beginning.

'We will have seven days of celebrations', Kamsa continued. 'We shall have lights and music and dancing. Moreover, we shall have feats of military skill, and wrestling bouts, in which wrestlers from other countries will participate. I have given instructions to prepare the sacred bow with the proper ritual, and whoever at the end of the contests shoots the farthest with it will receive all the honour which I can confer.'

The Chiefs responded only by polite bowing. No one broke the silence.

'The bow I am going to have prepared for these festivities will be one that few men can lift and none can bend,' Kamsa continued. 'When the celebrations start, I want the young Yadavas to be ready for a trial of strength and skill. We Yadavas are also famous for wrestling. Chanura and Mushtika are unchallenged masters of the art. I want you, young men, to enter into wrestling bouts with them and to show that the Yadavas have not lost the vigour for which their forefathers were famed.'

'Your Highness, I am indeed glad that you have invited us and you can rest assured that the Yadava Chiefs will not fail in their *dharmā*,' said Akrura, breaking the Chiefs' silence.

'Best of Vrishnis, I know that you will not falter in your *dharmā*. You all know our ancient ways,' said Kamsa.

Akrura folded his hands politely. 'Lord, you also know the ways of our ancestors. And if I may speak what all of us feel, we want the noble, worshipful King himself to come out of the palace and preside over the festivities.' Akrura turned to Ugrasena and asked, 'Will you come, Your Majesty?'

Ugrasena looked at his son helplessly. He tried to foresee what calamity this strange request of Akrura's might bring upon him.

'Of course, my worshipful father will come too,' Kamsa replied after a little hesitation. 'He is our lord and master', he added in a sarcastic tone which he could not suppress. The remark was received in stony silence by the assembly.

Kamsa looked at the door, and the Magadhan Prince, who was standing near it, left the room. Immediately, through the several doors of the hall, about fifty Magadhan warriors, armed with bows, arrows, swords and shields, came in. Most of the Yadava Chiefs looked at them angrily. The Magadhan Prince returned to his place and stood behind Kamsa, next Pradyota's two younger brothers.

'Why are these foreigners brought to our gathering?' asked Bahuka indignantly, and his eyes were stern.

Kamsa laughed a little insolently. 'These are the brave warriors who helped me to win my victories. They are here to help us in the sacrificial sessions and join in the celebrations. Please sit down,' he told them, and turning to the Chiefs, said: 'Brothers, I want you to meet them. Vritrighna is a very able man, a brave warrior. He has been with me for twelve years. He is one of us.'

'What more does Your Highness want of us?' asked Akrura.

'Nothing much else, Akrura', said Kamsa. 'However, to be frank with you all, I want to tell you something about Prince Vasudeva.'

'About me?' asked Vasudeva in amazement.

'Yes, about you, Best of Shooras', said Kamsa with biting sarcasm. 'You had promised me that you would

hand over to me every new-born son of Devaki's, and thinking you to be a truthful man, I relied upon you and let Devaki live. Then you committed a breach of faith. You had the eighth son of Devaki stolen away. I know that son of yours is in Vrindavan; he is passed off as the son of Nanda, the cowherd Chief. Is this the *dharma* of a Kshatriya ?' asked Kamsa, looking sternly at Vasudeva.

There was a stir among the Chiefs. Devaki's eighth son alive ! Was Narada's prophecy going to be fulfilled, each one asked himself.

Vasudeva's brows were knit and he was going to reply in anger. But the venerable Andhaka raised his hand and stopped him. 'Vasudeva, wait,' said the old man sternly, and continued : 'Son of Ugrasena, you, of all persons, invoking *Kshatra dharma* !'

Kamsa was surprised. He had not expected the old man to come, much less to take a leading part in the assembly. He knew that when the venerable Bahuka spoke, it would be disrespectful for any younger man to interrupt him. 'Why not ?' the Prince asked him.

'Why not — you ask. Listen, son of Ugrasena,' said Andhaka. 'Was it righteous for the descendant of a noble Kshatriya family such as you to impress your father ? Was it *dharma* for a Kshatriya to have imprisoned Devaki and Vasudeva on the day of their marriage ? To kill eight sons of one mother — who was also his own cousin ? Was it *dharma* to try to destroy the child when he was an infant ?' The old man's voice rang out clearly. 'I have few years to live. Even when young, I was not afraid even of the god of death. Let me tell you what I have been wanting to tell you all these years. No one has ever heard of such wicked deeds as you have done. You have disgraced the name of the Yadavas.'

Bahuka paused for breath and then continued : 'Why are you so concerned about Vasudeva's son, wherever he is or whatever he is ? Vasudeva has suffered enough at your hands. I will not allow you to persecute him further.'

Kamsa for a moment lost his self-possession. His

hand unconsciously went to the hilt of his sword and he flashed a glance at Pradyota and Vritrighna standing behind him.

Akrura saw the situation. He also exchanged a glance with Pradyota and spoke in his quiet gentle way. 'Prince, don't let your anger override your wisdom. Anger is madness. You want to know about Vasudeva's eighth child?'

'Yes.'

'Devaki's eighth child was a son. Do you want to know whether he is in Vrindavan? I will tell you: Yes, he is. If anyone has deceived you, it is I. I arranged for the exchange of Devaki's son for Nanda's daughter.'

'You did it? And why?' asked Kamsa, exercising great self-control over his rising anger.

'To save you from the wickedness of killing all the sons of Devaki,' said Akrura with a smile. 'I wanted to rescue you from yourself.'

'Then is it true that Nanda's son Krishna is Devaki's eighth child?' asked Kamsa.

'Yes,' replied Akrura.

For a moment, a shudder ran through Kamsa's frame. His destroyer had arisen after all! However, he maintained his control over himself and turned to Akrura with a smile. 'Am I so wicked, Akrura? That is a story of the past. I have forgotten it; you should forget it also. Now that I know that Devaki's son is alive, I want him to be here.'

'Why do you want him to be here?' asked Akrura.

'I want him to attend the Bow-Sacrifice. I have heard about his exploits. I want him to try his hand at my sacrificial bow. I want him to take part in the wrestling. If he is so wonderful as people describe him to be, he will be able to win the bow and win the wrestling match too.'

'Is that a trick, young man?' asked the venerable Bahuka.

'Where is the trick?' asked Kamsa.

‘I am very happy. Are you not happy, worshipful father?’ asked Kamsa again, turning to King Ugrasena.

The Chiefs listened to this soft talk with deep distrust, but they had confidence in Akrura’s way of dealing with the situation.

‘Whatever the Lord Siva does is for the best,’ said the old King.

‘Now, Akrura, you must do me one favour. Bring Krishna here — and also Rohini’s son, who I understand is with him,’ said Kamsa. ‘I want to be satisfied that they are growing up as they should. I want them to attend the Bow-Sacrifice and to take part in the celebrations. Also ask Nanda to come and bring his annual tribute. What do you say, Vasudeva?’

Akrura interrupted him, saying, ‘Prince, I shall go and bring them here from Vrindavan.’

THE GODDESS OF JOY AND BEAUTY

It was past the time for Vrindavan to go to rest, yet men and women sat on their verandas or in the open squares of the village under the wondrous light of the full moon, talking of only one thing : Kamsa had sent Akrura, the Chief of the Vrishnis, to invite Nanda, with Krishna and Balarama and all his kinsmen to come to Mathura, bringing with them, of course, their annual tribute. There was going to be a *Dhanuryajna* — a Bow-Sacrifice — to celebrate Kamsa's victorious return, and they were all to join in the festivities.

Festivities in Mathura had always had a great attraction for the village folk. But a special invitation from the hated prince was a surprise especially when it came for their two boys whom they loved so well. They were also invited to take part in the feats of strength and skill; Kamsa wanted them to. There was something more to it, they felt, than could be seen on the surface.

Rumour also had it that Akrura, on his arrival, had sat alone with Nanda, Krishna and Balarama, and when Nanda came out of the room, his face was clouded by anxiety and his eyes by a strange fear. Cheerlessly the Chief had ordered the carts to be ready before dawn, and had issued instructions to collect the grain and kine for the tribute to be paid to the Prince. And Mother Yashoda was found in tears. All the instructions had been promptly carried out, but every heart was heavy with anxiety and no one could sleep, though it was nearing midnight.

Suddenly the moonlit night was filled with a sound — the sound of the flute, so familiar, so sweet, and so well loved. Yes, Krishna was summoning the girls to a *rasa*.

Vrindavan sprang to its feet. Their beloved was calling. Every heart quivered to the melody of his flute. The womenfolk — not only the young, but this time even the middle-aged and the old — rushed towards the bank of the Yamuna. There was no time for putting on ornaments or dressing up. They came out, some with their hair dishevelled, some without the *kumkum* mark, some trying to adjust their saris, and hurried to the spot from which Krishna was calling them.

Yes, he *was* calling — and he was going tomorrow morning before the dawn broke.

Radha had heard of Krishna's intended departure and was eating her heart out on her lonely bed, when she heard the flute. The next moment she sprang up, snatched her anklets from the corner where they lay, and with flying hair rushed out of the house. Her Kahn was calling — calling to her.

They came, young and old, running, their bosoms heaving as the flute continued to draw them with its melodious enchantment. The menfolk, usually indifferent to the *rasa*, rose bewildered and followed their womenfolk. And when they saw him standing on the bank, in his familiar pose, one leg crossed over the other, they clapped their hands and started shouting '*thai, thai, thai, thai.*'

Ankleted feet jingled, drums throbbed, hands joined hands. And the young boys and girls formed a big circle and a smaller one within it, to go round Krishna. Radha left the crowd and stood by his side, her little breasts heaving with pride and joy, her lips parted in a blissful smile, her eyes fixed on her Kahn's face in rapturous devotion.

Then Krishna put the flute into his waistband and, with Radha, joined the *rasa*. They sang and they danced. The crowd in excitement shouted *thai, thai, thai*, clapping their hands to the rhythm of the dancing feet.

The dancers whirled fast in circles, each one changing places with the other. They took out little sticks from

their waistbands, one in each hand, and beat time with them, first striking the two sticks together and then striking one of them against their neighbour's in rapid alternation. And the crowd in ever-increasing excitement clapped hands and shouted '*thai, thai,*' '*thai, thai, thai, thai.*'

The sky and the earth whirled round. The moon stood still in the sky smiling lovingly. The River Yamuna sang its clear melody. And the gods looked down with joy, showering flowery moon-beams.

In a frenzy of excitement several *gopis* swooned and others broke away from the circle utterly tired. The charm of the *rasa* was broken. All of them lay down to rest, out of breath and laughing.

Before they could open their eyes they heard the sound of the flute coming not from where they lay, but from a spot a little further away where a path led off into the forest. A black shadow sprang up from among them, and they saw it running to the spot. And two forms disappeared into the forest.

Every one felt what it meant. Some hearts were shot through by jealous pangs. But no one moved, nor even appeared to take notice of the lovers. The beauty of a wonderful love kept them mutely reverential.

'Radha, I know you are tired. You can't walk. Let me carry you,' said Krishna.

Blood rushed to Radha's cheeks in exquisite anticipation. Yet modesty restrained her from accepting. 'I can walk.'

'No, You can't. I want to take you a long way,' said Krishna, and lifted her, in his arms.

Radha felt a glowing sensation all over her body. Her heart fluttered and ached with joy. She nestled in his arms, her tousled head resting on his shoulders.

The waving leaves of the trees overhead formed varied patterns of light and shade on the path as with firm steps Krishna went into the forest, and in that flickering light she saw his flaming eyes as they looked into her own.

She was thrilled in every fibre, and felt a similar thrill in the arms which held her.

‘Radha,’ said Krishna.

‘Kahn,’ replied Radha.

‘Today’s is the night of nights,’ said Krishna.

‘Yes, it was a wonderful *rasa*,’ replied Radha.

‘And you, too, are wonderful, Radha — yet more wonderful.’ He bent his head, and his lips closed on hers. Shutting her eyes in ecstasy, she clung to him with a sense of delicious surrender.

Silently she clung to him. She heard her heart beating against his. He strode on, the dry leaves of the trees crunching beneath his steady feet.

‘Kahn, will you always be like this?’ asked Radha.

‘Like this — always — for ever, while the sun and the moon endure,’ replied Krishna.

‘You won’t forget me?’ asked Radha.

‘How can I? You are my goddess of joy,’ replied Krishna.

Now they were in the open, far away from their friends, the moon lighting up the heavens, the river shimmering in the bright moonlight.

He laid her on the soft, mossy ground under the shade of a *peepal* tree and sat down by her side. She lay still clinging to his neck, unable to let him go, feeling a mighty ache in her body and heart, in all her being.

With irrepressible ardour he leaned on her and closed his lips on hers. The lips would not part till soul mingled with soul and they were one.

He felt her cheeks. His hand moved on her breasts. It slid down softly with tender passion, discovering every curve of her graceful fresh body.

And a great wave raised them to seek unity which for a moment was inexpressible bliss.

A few moments later, Radha sat up, tying her dishevelled hair.

'Kahn, when shall we be married? I can't bear to stay away from you.'

Krishna smiled into her eyes. 'We shall always be with each other. And we have been married today by *gandharva* rites — bone of each other's bone, breath of each other's breath.'

'Don't talk nonsense. How can we marry by *gandharva* rites?' asked Radha.

'We were married a few moments ago, weren't we?' asked Krishna.

'But you are not of royal blood,' said Radha.

Krishna laughed and kissed her on the eyelids. 'Radha! Suppose I was of royal blood?' he asked mockingly.

'You are always my prince, my Kahn. You are my Govind — the prince of cowherds and I want you to remain so for ever.'

'Radha, listen. I am not a cowherd. I am a prince — and you are a princess,' he said seriously.

She was taken aback and searched his face to discover if what he had said was the truth.

'Don't stare at me like that, Radha. You know I am going to Mathura tomorrow and I may not come back — for some days,' said Krishna.

'No no. You will come back, come back to me,' said Radha.

'Radha, I brought you here to tell you a secret which few know. However, the world will know it soon enough. Yadu's race has been in bondage for years and years. And Sage Narada has foretold that mine shall be the hand to break it.' His voice was now low and solemn.

Radha looked at him almost in fright, and clung to him. 'Kahn, what do you say? Tell me what you mean.'

'Listen. It was prophesied by Sage Narada that Princess Devaki's eighth son, born of Prince Vasudeva, would redeem Yadu's race and destroy the wicked Kamsa.'

‘Yes. I have heard something about it.’

‘I am that eighth son of Devaki’s,’ said Krishna.

‘You..... you.....’ she moved away, as if terrified.

‘Yes. My Father Vasudeva brought me to Gokul the day I was born and left me with my other Father Nanda. Balarama is also the son of the Best of Shooras by my mother Devaki; he is not Rohini’s son.’

‘Vasudeva — our noble Prince !’ muttered Radha, her eyes opening wide in surprise, ‘You.....’

‘Yes. I am his son; so is Balarama. It seems we were brought here so that we might escape Kamsa’s wrath.’

Radha looked as if dazed, unable to grasp the full meaning of what she was being told.

‘Now he.....’ said Krishna.

‘Kamsa ?’ asked Radha.

‘Yes. He is holding a Bow-Sacrifice and wants us to attend it. Possibly he means to have us killed,’ said Krishna quietly.

‘He is evil. He will be certain to want to kill you,’ exclaimed Radha.

‘I am sure he wants to do so. But I know no harm will come to me.’

‘Oh, what will you do if he tries to kill you ?’

‘He cannot. They all say that I have come to save *Dharma*; and within me there is the faith that that is why I was born. And I shall defend *Dharma* and redeem Yadu’s race from this wicked bondage.’

She opened her mouth, then closed it, clung to Krishna with a heart-breaking sob and asked in a whisper : ‘Is there nothing which can stop you from going ?’

For a moment Krishna was silent. Then he said : ‘Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I have to go to Mathura; it is my *Dharma*. I have often asked myself : Why can’t I destroy wickedness, and tyranny, and fear ? But all this

time I pushed the yearning aside. And I now know I have to do it.'

'Then what about me?' she sobbed, hiding her face, all covered with tears, on his breast. 'What shall I do, with you gone? No, no, Kahn, don't go. Something is sure to happen to you. Kamsa is very blood-thirsty.'

'Radha! Don't have any fears for me. Kamsa will be destroyed, and our people walk in freedom and in *Dharma*. And you will never be alone. My duty done, I will return — or rather I will call you to Mathura. You shall continue to be the joy of my life, as you always have been.' And he pressed her to his heart.

Both lapsed into silence. Then Radha looked up and, as if speaking to herself, began: 'Kahn! You will go to Mathura and will win — I know. I always thought you were a god. And they will make you a king. You will be mighty — I know. People will fall at your feet and worship you. You will move among princes as a conqueror and saviour,' said Radha.

'And you shall be my queen — my life's inseparable companion.'

Radha looked at the ground thoughtfully for a few moments and then shook her head. 'No, Kahn. I am a poor cowherd girl. I am not fit to be a princess. In the crowd of princesses worshipping you and ready to die for you, I would be just a crude, foolish village girl.'

'No, no,' said Krishna, 'you would be their crowning jewel.'

'No,' Radha shook her head and said, looking wistfully at the river. 'Then you would no longer be *my* Kahn. You would be a mighty Prince. You would wear a diadem on your head, wield arms, go to wars move among mighty heroes, who are cruel, harsh and blood-thirsty. No, no. I should be a burden — I should no longer be the joy of your heart — no longer your twin self — no longer your partner in the *rasa*.'

Krishna was silent.

'Kahn..... forgive me if I give you pain,' she continued, her voice now becoming quiet and firm. 'I cannot come with you to Mathura. My Kahn, who lives in my eyes, has wild flowers in his ears, and a bamboo staff in his hands. He leads the cows to pasture. He plays the flute. He is joyous and bold — with an eternal smile on his lips. I can't bear to see you a prince..... I can't come to Mathura.'

She sobbed and clung to Krishna almost convulsively.

'Kahn, listen to me,' continued Radha as if speaking the truth. 'I know you will never return to Vrindavan; even if you do, you will not be the Kahn I have loved and lived for. Let me continue to live here and serve Father and Mother.' She suppressed a sob and then continued as if speaking in a dream.

'Day after day, I shall wander, as I do now, on the banks of our beloved Yamuna, and wait for your footfall in patient agony. I will pass by the groves in which we spent such happy times; they will always talk to me of you and give me the flowers for you to wear.'

She again paused a little and then added : 'If I ever come to Mathura, I will never find *you* in the Yadava prince Krishna. Living here I will always be with you. I will see you among the trees and creepers which you loved so well. I will hear your voice in the notes of the birds. The dust over which you have trodden so far will tell me of your springing steps and the breezes whistling in the trees will bring me your message — maybe, they will sing to me of you as you are now, Kahn,' said Radha.

Both were silent for a while. Then Krishna, with far-off eyes, looked at the sky. He saw what a life was in store for him, and his throat was clear as he spoke. 'Radha, you are right. I very much wanted you to come to Mathura, but I can see that I would no longer be what I am now. And you, the joy of my heart, would never be the lovely flower that you are. You were born to be kissed by the rising sun and to spread the fragrance of joy.'

Krishna paused for a while and continued : ' And if you come away, Radha, Vrindavan will no longer be what it is. With you here, it will be a shrine; you will be its goddess of joy and love. Thinking of you here, I will always find new life and so will men and women, so long as the world endures.'

Krishna lifted Radha in his arms again, and she clung to him like a child, sobbing all the while.

' And, my Kahn, I have given you everything. But do me one last favour. When you go, leave your flute with me. You are a prince. I am a cowherd girl. No one must point a finger of shame at me.,' said Radha.

'I understand. Let us go to Guru Sandipani. We will marry before the sacred fire,' said Krishna. ' And the flute and you are one — it shall stay with you.'

KRISHNA LEAVES FOR MATHURA

Before dawn broke, Nanda and the cowherds accompanying him were on their way to Mathura with carts laden with tribute. Akrura had washed and watered his horses and, yoking them to the chariot, was waiting on the outskirts of Vrindavan.

Krishna and Balarama were busy paying farewell visits to the villagers. But, for the people who loved them, that was not enough. They turned out — men, women and children — to bid him good-bye and brought with them such of their cows and heifers as were beloved of Krishna.

Akrura, standing by the chariot, saw the village — or the inhabitants of it who had not gone to Mathura — coming, with Krishna in their midst, easily recognizable by the peacock feather he wore in his turban, and Balarama distinguished by his gigantic size.

The boys prostrated themselves before Akrura, who blessed them. Then Krishna turned to his mother, Yashoda, who stood in front of the crowd, sobbing.

Krishna fell at his mother's feet and applied the dust of her feet over his eyes. She raised him and, loath to part, clung to him as if he were her very life. Then she embraced Balarama.

Radha was also by her side in her new bridal dress, her face covered by her sari in the modest way befitting a newly wedded wife. Like a ray of sun flashing through the clouds, her eyes cast an ardent, longing look at Krishna from time to time; each look was an ecstatic pledge of eternal devotion. Each time Krishna replied with a swift glance and a faint smile which conveyed a farewell and which only the two of them understood. In

the presence of older people, any other exchange was out of the question.

A farewell — a final folding of hands — a pat on the head of a heifer rubbing itself against him, and Krishna turned away. All eyes were moist and there was longing in every heart as the people gazed at him, drawing Balarama away and climbing into the chariot.

Akrura cracked his whip. The impatient horses sped away. Krishna and Balarama, from the running chariot, returned the loving farewell of the people, and for a moment, in their tender hearts, the light of life was extinguished.

Radha continued to look at the fast disappearing chariot and when it was hidden by the turn of the road, she tried to catch hold of Mother's hand, uttered a cry of agony such as had never been heard before and swooned.

When Akrura saw this loving farewell, his faith was shaken. Was this handsome boy with dancing curls and peacock feather and a body of incomparable grace the dread redeemer, for whom he had been waiting for the last seventeen years? From time to time, hearing of Krishna's miraculous exploits, he had felt that the mission for which he lived would be fulfilled. But was this the boy who had actually performed them or was it his brother, so tall and broad-shouldered even at eighteen? Or was the whole thing just village gossip?

Krishna was said to be the darling of the girls at Vrindavan — a gay lover who went about playing the flute and dancing the *rasa*. The way he suddenly insisted on wedding a village maid in the middle of the night showed a weakness for women, which scarcely foretold a conqueror's strength. Gargacharya, who always spoke of him in ecstatic terms, was certainly mistaken in his estimate of his pupil. How could he have the strength and the will to fulfil Narada's prophecy and to redeem Vyasa's promise? How could he be God Himself? There was nothing god-like about him except the faultless lines of his youthful body.

Krishna was smiling at Akrura. The boy, the older man thought, had a winning smile, for he smiled with lips, eyes and glowing cheeks — as if his whole body was lit up with affection. Akrura could not help smiling in reply.

‘Uncle, when will Father reach Mathura? Before us or after us?’ asked Krishna.

‘They should arrive in the afternoon. We ought to reach there in about eight *ghatikas*. Our horses are fine,’ replied Akrura.

‘I like horses when they gallop fast,’ said Balarama, who with great discomfort had somehow squeezed his huge frame into the chariot, keeping his long legs dangling from it. ‘We can reach Mathura in four *ghatikas* if we hasten. Uncle, you are not driving the horses fast enough.’

Akrura smiled in reply a little indulgently. What a difference between the elder brother who was just an overgrown boy, thoroughly enjoying a ride in a chariot for the first time in his life, and the younger brother so self-possessed and so attractive, accepting new experience as if he had been accustomed to it all his life!

‘But, Uncle, would it be right to arrive before Father and our party?’ asked Krishna. ‘I came with you because you wanted me to; otherwise, I would have loved to go with them in the bullock carts or on foot.’

Akrura was a very kind-hearted man, and the way Krishna referred to Nanda went straight to his heart.

‘The whole of Mathura is waiting for you impatiently, Krishna,’ said Akrura. ‘Vasudeva and Devaki are longing to see you.’

‘They have waited for sixteen years; they can wait for a few *ghatikas* more,’ said Krishna. ‘But I could never ride into Mathura in a chariot whilst Father is trudging there on foot.’

‘My boy, forget Vrindavan,’ said Akrura. ‘You are now a prince — Vaasudeva, the son of Prince Vasudeva.’

Krishna laughed with fascinating shyness. 'No, Uncle, I am one of Vrindavan's cowherds. I do not want to forget it — ever.'

Again a doubt entered Akrura's mind. Could this boy, Krishna, redeem Yadu's noble race?

'Let us stop on the way and catch up with Father when he is about to reach the city,' said Krishna.

Balarama made a sour face. 'Krishna, you were always like that. It would be great fun to reach the city at once. I want to see it — its palaces and markets.' Though Balarama showed a desire to arrive at Mathura before every one else, his look of confidence in Krishna was eloquent; he would always accept the law from his younger brother.

'Yes, if you like,' said Akrura. 'But you know what is in store for us. I have invited the Yadavas to walk into Kamsa's trap and am leading you into it.'

'Why did you allow Uncle Kamsa to lay this trap for you all?' asked Balarama.

'We have been foolish for years,' said Akrura. 'Kamsa was crafty. His minister Pralamba was more far-sighted than we were. And most of the Andhakas were behind them. You know that one of their powerful chiefs, Pradyota, is a loyal follower of Kamsa.'

'It is always a mistake to let a tyrant grow in strength. What do you expect to happen today?' asked Krishna.

'Today or tomorrow, when the anointed Bow is worshipped, he will take the final step; he will try to stage a massacre of most of us,' said Akrura.

'Then why has he invited us?' asked Balarama. 'To put us to death?'

Akrura was silent for a little while. Then, weighing his words, he spoke. 'He wants to kill Krishna, first. He is afraid that, if he is left alive, the prophecy will be fulfilled.'

Krishna laughed. It was the laugh of a god who knew that the fate of men was in his hands. For the first time Akrura saw an imperturbable self-confidence in the well-

formed eyes, and a mysterious stream of faith issuing from Krishna enveloped him.

‘He will be dead and then he cannot kill me,’ said Krishna in a reassuring tone.

‘How do you know?’ asked Akrura.

‘I learned it from the revered Gargacharya and Acharya Sandipani,’ said Krishna.

‘Did they tell you of our sorrows? Of what we have suffered all these years?’ asked Akrura.

‘They told me all about Uncle Kamsa’s wickedness,’ replied Krishna.

‘My boy, you have no idea of what we have suffered all these years,’ said Akrura. ‘And sometimes I wonder how I have lived so long under this load of suffering. The venerable Ugrasena is in prison. Your father and mother have lived in a veritable hell. Your brothers were killed before my eyes the moment they were born. And I hid Balarama and you in Gokul only because I believed in Narada’s prophecy and the venerable Veda Vyasa’s promise.’ A tear fell from Akrura’s eyes.

‘Uncle, do not think of the past,’ said Krishna. His young voice acquired a consoling tone which was almost paternal. ‘I know how Uncle Kamsa has broken the pride and strength of the mighty Yadavas; how he has deprived them of land; how he has driven many of them out of Mathura; how he has robbed the mothers of their new-born babes and the Chiefs’ daughters of their honour.’

‘Yes, Krishna,’ said Akrura. ‘Murder, plunder and rapine have been his sport. He holds himself answerable to none. He has scoffed at the gods; silenced the voice of the Brahmans from whom wisdom flows; departed from the ways of our venerable ancestors.’

‘He is the enemy of *dharma*,’ said Krishna.

Akrura heard this boy of sixteen speaking with the authority of an ancient seer and his faith in him, which had faltered, began to grow greater.

‘Then you know what your mission in life is?’ asked Akrura.

‘Yes,’ replied Krishna.

‘When did you learn it?’ asked Akrura.

‘Often I felt something stirring in me, but I did not know what it was. But the next day after they told me who I was and what Uncle Kamsa had done, I went and stood on the highest point of Mount Govardhan, looking towards the rising sun. And when the sun rose and its rays lit the earth, I felt’ Krishna hesitated and asked: ‘Shall I tell you? You won’t laugh at me?’

‘My boy, I am longing to hear you tell me what you felt. I have lived only to hear it from your lips,’ said Akrura.

‘I felt wickedness rolling away from the earth; I saw men walking in *dharmā*—their head raised high in god-like freedom. I felt *dharmā* enveloping the heavens, the earth and the lower region,’ said Krishna and paused.

‘And then?’ asked Akrura breathlessly.

‘It was no longer a law; it was life itself. And ,’ said Krishna.

‘Yes, and?’ asked Akrura.

‘I felt Yes, I felt that as if all entered into me. I was not Vaasudeva, the son of Vasudeva, but VAASUDEVA That-is-All,’ said Krishna.

‘Then?’ asked Akrura in a reverential whisper.

‘I returned to the village. And I felt myself changed. My people were not mine; they were in me and I was in them I could not understand this change. Was Gargacharya right when he told me that I had the mission of redeeming mankind, I wondered. Then I waited for a sign a sign to prove that what I felt was true. I fought against the fear of Indra which held my people in its grip. And I received the sign. At my touch Govardhan rose two cubits in height.’ Krishna paused.

Akrura looked at Krishna in awe. He saw the sun, the moon and the seven stars whirling round this strange young boy, whose voice sounded as if it was the voice of the Eternal. He had never felt so humble or so insignificant, and devotion sprang in torrents from his saintly heart. He saw Krishna transfigured into VAASUDEVA—the God of all gods, enveloped in the radiance of a thousand suns.

Akrura felt blinded and dazed. He bowed his head right down and was going to place it on Krishna's feet. But he felt as if he had been awakened from a stupor; he felt Krishna's hands with a gracefully unobtrusive movement, preventing him from offering homage.

The word 'VAASUDEVA That-is-All' sounded in his ears as if down a distant corridor. Its echo died away feebly. And he heard the charming laugh of the boy who sat before him—a very loving laugh and yet respectful, the unaffected kindness of a loving being.

Akrura rubbed his eyes. Was he asleep or awake?

'VAASUDEVA That-is-All'—had he heard it in a dream?

'Uncle, there is a shady place here on the bank of the Yamuna. Shall we halt here? Shall we go and bathe?' asked Krishna.

'Yes, Krishna, if that is your wish,' said Akrura, as he reined in the horses abruptly.

'Now you two go and take your bathe,' said Balarama sleepily. 'I will sleep awhile. I must get ready to fight Uncle Kamsa and all his men.'

'Brother, you will require all the strength you have before we have done with Kamsa,' said Krishna.

And as Akrura dived into the waters of the Yamuna, he had a vision of his young nephew transformed into VAASUDEVA.

ANDHAKA'S WARNING

A creeping uneasiness had seized on Kamsa's heart. From one point of view he had never been stronger. He had a mightier kingdom than ever before; he was feared by the neighbouring kings; his father-in-law was now an emperor ruling over a vast dominion. In Mathura, he had three thousand Magadhan soldiers to obey his slightest wish. The Andhaka clan, except for a few dissatisfied Chiefs, was loyal to him and led by Pradyota who, in spite of his foolish behaviour during Kamsa's absence, was still a trusty lieutenant.

The Yadavas, though moody and restive, were divided and leaderless. The Brahmans, once so powerful, were silenced by his lavish generosity or stern disapproval. All that was left now was to crush the spirit of the defiant Yadavas by one swift blow.

However, in spite of these factors which he told himself of again and again, Kamsa was uneasy at heart.

Devaki's eighth son was alive; one part of Narada's prophecy had proved correct. And *he* was coming.

True, Krishna was a cowherd boy. His famous exploits were the ordinary doings of a brave village lad which had been magnified out of all recognition. But—but—Vasudeva and Devaki and quite a few of the Yadavas thought of him as the coming saviour. Popular gossip supported this faith. Gargacharya, the wily Brahman, spoke little and did nothing to proclaim the saviour; but, somehow people thought he knew all about him. He, Kamsa, had tried to counter these rumours fast spreading among the people, that the son of cowherd Nanda was Devaki's eighth son. But, after his outburst at the gathering of the Yadava

chiefs, it was difficult to prevent the news from passing from mouth to mouth.

Sometimes Kamsa felt as if a net had been drawn around him. When he thought of everything dispassionately, he felt that his fears were nothing but a figment of his imagination. Yet, the feeling was irrepressible.

Tonight Kamsa was more uneasy than ever before. Akrura must have reached Vrindavan by now. The boys must be getting ready to come to Mathura. They would reach the city tomorrow. What would they be like? Why worry? They were just boys—Kamsa thought; the fear he entertained about them was simply imaginary.

Still, Kamsa could not sit still. He could not think clearly. And he wanted, above everything else, to get rid of this oppressive uneasiness. He remembered Varada; she was a young courtesan whom he had brought back with him when he returned from the wars. She was all that one could wish for, beautiful, charming, gay, and high-spirited; but, engrossed in affairs of State, he had neglected her for several days. If he went to her, she would raise his spirits. Her embraces would restore his self-confidence. He would then feel happy and forget the imaginary danger from the two village boys which almost stifled him.

Kamsa sent a message to Varada, who lived in a separate house in the palace compound. Soon he himself followed the messenger. Varada received him with a joyful welcome. She had bewitching eyes which danced at every word she said. She laughed—it was a silvery laugh—as she placed refreshment before the Prince and fanned him with her delicate hands.

Kamsa felt relieved. The air here rippled with Varada's joyous, care-free laughter. Statecraft, intrigues and fears did not exist here. Then Varada sang a lilting song, danced a few steps and flung herself, like a garland of flowers, into the arms of Kamsa. She smiled into his troubled eyes as she lay on his knees with one arm around his neck.

'Varada, you are wonderful,' said Kamsa.

'And so are you,' said Varada, as she put both her arms around his neck and pulled herself towards him to bury her face on his breast. 'Are you happy, my Prince?' she asked in a delicious whisper. As a courtesan, she was a great artist and knew the ways of enslaving men.

'Oh, I am so happy when I am with you,' replied Kamsa with a sigh of relief, as he gave her an ardent kiss. 'I would give my kingdom to be with you always,' he added in a fever of love which was approaching the finest of consummations.

'Then, will you answer one question?' she lovingly whispered into his ear.

'Not one, but a hundred, dear', replied Kamsa as he hugged her to his heart.

'Tell me one thing,' she again whispered into his ear. 'I won't tell any one'.

'What is it?' asked Kamsa, patting her cheeks.

'Tell me, my Prince, my master, is it true that Devaki's eighth son is coming here tomorrow?' she asked.

Kamsa's body became taut. He felt as if a snake had bitten him. With wide eyes he looked at Varada, almost terrified, love's fever suddenly chilled.

'Who told you?' he thundered.

Varada, ignorant of all that her question implied, could not understand this sudden change. She nestled herself into his arms and murmured softly. 'The whole palace talks about it. I would like to see him. They say he is a god.'

'You want to see him?' shouted Kamsa, as he rose from the couch on which he was sitting. 'You want to see Devaki's eighth son, you harlot!' His eyes became bloodshot and his hands twitched as he flung Varada away from him to the ground.

'Harlot!' he hissed and left the house in extreme rage.

Devaki's eighth son! Yes, he was coming. Every one

thought he was going to kill him — him, Kamsa, of the hundred victories. Well, he would see about it.

Kamsa sent for Pradyota, the general, and Vritrighna, the Magadhan prince. They came and found him in an ungovernable fury, his face twisted with cruelty.

‘Vritrighna, Pradyota, what is this?’ Kamsa asked, ‘Every one has come to know that Devaki’s eighth son is arriving tomorrow.’

‘Master, if you will be pleased to forgive me, I would like to remind you that many chiefs heard from your own lips that Akrura was going to fetch him. How can the fact be kept a secret?’ said Pradyota, humbly folding his hands.

‘No matter what has happened,’ said Kamsa. ‘But I charge you one thing. The boy must not be allowed to come to the palace or to enter my presence. He must be disposed of before the day after tomorrow — when the festivities begin in my presence. He is to be given no chance to be present when the sacred Bow is strung and the arrow shot. He may be a perfect bow-man, for all I know.’

‘As you please, my lord,’ said Pradyota.

‘Pradyota, you are not your old self. What is the matter with you?’ asked Kamsa.

‘I am quite well, my lord,’ said Pradyota. ‘Perhaps the strain of the work is too heavy. I am also growing old,’ he added with a feeble smile.

‘Put a spy on every chief. Pradyota, see that your brothers are loyal. And Vritrighna, let your men watch the movements of every chief. They are all disloyal. They would like to see me dead,’ Kamsa said in an excited tone. ‘But I am hale and hearty. I will survive them all,’ he added.

A courtier came and announced that Bahuka Andhaka, the ninety-year-old grand-uncle of Pradyota, had come to see him on an urgent matter.

Kamsa frowned. Why was this impertinent old man here at this hour? But he was one of the elders of his own

clan, a highly respected chief, and could not be denied admittance. The Prince, with a hard effort, became self-composed, stepped down from his throne and came forward to welcome the ancient Andhaka.

The old man, still straight as a rod, entered, holding his son's shoulder.

'Uncle, why have you taken the trouble to come at this time of the night?' Kamsa asked.

'Who are these?' asked Andhaka, shading his eyes with his hands. 'Oh, Pradyota and Prince Vritrighna.'

'Be seated please', said Kamsa. Andhaka sat down in front of the Prince.

'What are your commands, Uncle?' asked Kamsa, trying to be as polite as he could.

'I have come to give you a last piece of advice. As the oldest Yadava alive, it is my duty to do so,' Andhaka stated.

'Yes, Uncle,' said Kamsa.

'Akrura has gone to bring Vasudeva's sons. They will arrive tomorrow morning,' said Andhaka.

'Yes!' said Kamsa.

'I know you from your birth. You would like to be rid of them,' said Andhaka.

'Why should I? What can the two boys do to me?' asked Kamsa.

'Don't tell me you are not afraid of Narada's prophecy being fulfilled. You are. Don't try to deceive me. But I want you to falsify the prophecy.' Andhaka pleaded.

'I don't believe in that foolishness. But how can a prophecy, if true, be falsified?' asked Kamsa.

'Repentance is the death and rebirth of a man. If you now repent of what you have done, you will have been reborn and the prophecy will have been fulfilled,' said Andhaka.

'How can I be sure of that? I have seen people who have repented and been killed all the same in spite of it,' said Kamsa.

‘ Maybe it was not an honest repentance. If Vasudeva’s son is not the god in the prophecy, repentance will bring you the love of your people. If he is God as some believe, His Grace will make you happier and more powerful than before,’ said Andhaka.

‘ And how am I to repent, Uncle ? ’ asked Kamsa in a mocking tone.

‘ I see that you don’t believe what I say. But I am here to show you the right way and I must do so fearlessly. You have persecuted Vasudeva and Devaki. You have reduced the Yadavas almost to slavery. You have denied to Mathura the presence of the learned Brahmans. Mathura is nothing but a hell,’ said Andhaka.

‘ Yes. Anything else ? ’ asked Kamsa.

The old man raised his voice prophetically. His old eyes were lit with a new fire. In a voice strong with faith, he said : ‘ Prince, as the oldest Yadava, I ask you to give us back our freedom and the lands you have confiscated. Let Vasudeva and Devaki, with their sons, live without fear. Let the Yadavas who have fled from your Mathura be invited to return with honour. Let the chant of the Vedas rise from the homes of the Brahmans as before. Rid yourself of this foreigner whom you keep as an instrument of terror. And restore freedom to your father and let him rule as he did before — with you by his side. And above all, let your people be free from fear,’ said Andhaka.

‘ You want me to purify myself by this repentance, do you ? ’ asked Kamsa. ‘ You think I am wickedness itself, and yet you want me to purge myself ? What then ? ’

‘ Then ? Then the gods will bless you. You will have saved yourself, the Yadavas and Mathura. Then Krishna, if he is a god, will give you whatever you want. Are you prepared for that ? ’ said Andhaka.

‘ Uncle, give me time to think. I can’t give you a promise straightaway, though I think your advice is sound. Let me think,’ replied Kamsa sarcastically.

‘ I know, my boy, that you think me an old fool,’ said Andhaka. As Kamsa laughed, cynically and mockingly, at

the old man, he lifted his shaggy head proudly, his eyes suddenly burning like live coals, the ashes of age having disappeared for the moment. 'I know that it will be hard for you to take sound advice,' said he. 'But I give you one last warning.' The old man paused, his eyes blazing with wild fire. 'You have been the scourge of the Yadavas and you want to destroy their saviour. Listen. Krishna will not die — not so long as a single Yadava is alive. He is their last hope, and your last hope too, if you had the sense to know it.'

'Don't try to frighten me, Uncle,' said Kamsa, 'I will do what I think best.'

'Lord Shankar's wrath will descend upon you if you do not change your ways,' said Andhaka.

'I am not afraid of God,' said Kamsa.

'Woe to the man who is so arrogant as not to fear God,' said Andhaka. 'And woe to the people who have been given such a ruler.'

'Wait a moment, Uncle,' said Kamsa with a smile. Then he turned to Vritrighna and whispered something in his ear. The prince nodded and left the room.

'Uncle, you are right,' said Kamsa with a sneer. 'I shall not harm Krishna. Pradyota, see to it.'

'As you please, my lord,' said Pradyota grimly. He well understood the significance of his master's smile.

'I shall see that you keep your word, my son,' said Andhaka and left the room.

Pradyota was going to leave the room with the old man, when Kamsa called the general back.

'Pradyota, remember my pledge,' said Kamsa, 'I will not harm Krishna. But that does not mean that you are not to carry out my orders, which were that he should not be allowed to come into my presence,' added Kamsa with a sinister laugh.

'As you please, my lord,' said Pradyota, his voice hoarse with suppressed fury.

Pradyota bowed to the Prince and went out of the room. As he was passing along the corridor, he saw signs of a struggle — a sword lying on the ground, a bloody scarf flung away. He followed the sound of retreating steps down the dark corridor. He could see Magadhan warriors carrying away two bodies.

To prevent himself swooning with horror, Pradyota closed his eyes and leaned against a pillar. Then, recovering himself, he bit his lips till the blood came, and walked away.

TRIVAKRA, THE THRICE CROOKED

Trivakra was one of the attendants in Kamsa's palace. Her duties were to attend to the perfumes which were daily needed for the Prince and all his consorts. She had a large staff with whose assistance she grew all sorts of herbs, supervised the preparation of scents and oils, and saw that all kinds of fragrant things were always ready for the royal family. With the aid of the herbs she grew, she had also found the secrets of some kinds of herbal drugs.

Her mother had attended to the same duties when she was alive. Before she died she had extracted a promise from General Pradyota, who was then the final authority on all palace matters, that her deformed only daughter should succeed to her place.

When Trivakra was but twelve years old, she fell seriously ill ; even her life was despaired of. When she recovered, her joints became entangled and she was now a deformed, hunch-backed young woman.

Before she fell ill, Trivakra had been married to Angaraka, the son of Kamsa's chief royal mahout, an officer who, like the royal charioteer, occupied a high position at Court. But after her recovery, her husband, shocked at the strange caricature of a woman that she had become, would not accept her. Denied the opportunities in life open to a good-looking, intelligent young woman, she felt frustrated and angry with the world, with herself and with the gods. But she had a loving and genial nature, which soon asserted itself again.

Trivakra was on the move all day, dragging her knock-kneed legs from one royal chamber to another, with a hearty joke on her lips and a silver box of scents in her hands. Everyone laughed — often offensively — at her

shape ; some made vulgar remarks to her face about her deformity ; children often followed her with abuse and shouts of derision ; but nothing affected Trivakra's geniality.

At birth she had been named Malini, but after her illness, as everyone called her Trivakra — ' thrice crooked ' — she quietly adopted that name for herself. She laughed at her own deformity. She joined others in laughing at herself ; often she spoke about herself more contemptuously than others could ; so everybody liked her. She was a favourite mascot of the women's apartments in Kamsa's palace. Even Kamsa, who rarely laughed or enjoyed a joke, laughed when Trivakra made fun of herself.

However, behind this apparent joviality lay a secret known only to herself. She knew that but for the twist in her neck, she would have had a lovely face; but for the stoop, she would have had a graceful body; but for the stiff knee, she would have walked with grace. In her heart of hearts, she knew she was more shapely than the most graceful of princesses; this was her secret, and she did not want to share the secret with anyone.

She also did not want to be shaken out of this belief. So, whenever she passed a mirror, she would keep her eyes closed lest her belief in her own gracefulness should be shattered. When she retired to her room at night, she would lie awake for a long time in her bed, dreaming of her own beauty. Then she would pray to her guardian god, Lord Shankar, Who was always generous to those who prayed to Him faithfully, to let others see her as she really was, shapely in every limb.

For years and years, night after night, Trivakra had prayed and had almost come to believe that the great God, who had denied to others the privilege of seeing her as she really was, would accord them that privilege. Now, three days ago, she had heard a rumour that Devaki's eighth son, the promised Saviour, was alive. This made her wild with hope. Perhaps the Saviour would some day come to Mathura and let others see how beautiful she was. With

this new-born hope, her prayers acquired a new intensity. 'Lord, greatest of gods, send Devaki's son to Mathura soon. He will make these blind people see me as I really am—and not as thrice crooked.' And she offered this prayer with tears in her eyes.

Then she heard the news from the princesses that Nanda's son was coming to Mathura! She was shocked to find that the princesses were glad that he was coming, just because they were sure that Prince Kamsa would give him short shrift. She, however, was transported with joy, knowing that her Saviour was coming.

The news of Krishna's expected arrival in Mathura was hailed with delight by everyone. Men who were loyal to Kamsa felt certain that this arch enemy would soon be destroyed and the nightmare which hung over their fortunes would be lifted. On the other hand, the Yadavas and the people as a whole, who hated and feared Kamsa, and who had already heard about Krishna's miraculous exploits, awaited him with eager joy.

From the time when she had heard that Nanda's son was coming to Mathura, Trivakra kept her ears wide open for the slightest news about him. The palace was alive with strange rumours. Nanda's son was no other than Devaki's eighth son. He had killed demons, defied the god Indra and even raised Mt. Govardhan high on the tip of his little finger. Many said that, according to Narada's prophecy, he was going to kill Kamsa. If all this were true, thought Trivakra, Nanda's son was a god such as she had only dreamed of.

Though for three days Trivakra could not sleep at all, her step was buoyant and her laugh more jovial than ever. Every moment of the day she was dreaming of the god who was coming to answer her prayer. Yes, He was coming—He for whom she had been waiting.

She made ready for the great event of her life. She brought out her rich clothes which she had never worn for fear of exciting ridicule. She collected the best scents available and polished the silver box in which she kept them till it shone like a mirror.

One evening Trivakra heard that Nanda's two sons had already arrived in Mathura and were staying with the Vrishni chief, Akrura. That night there were strange things happening in the palace. People came and went. Akrura, Pradyota, Vritrighna and Agha, Kamsa's trusted henchmen, were closeted one after the other in secret discussions with Kamsa. She had her likes and dislikes. She had a great regard for Pradyota, but she disliked Akrura, for he had refused to accept her scents; she hated the Magadhan prince, for he always quarrelled with her about the scents and unguents that she offered him, though he did not know the difference between one scent and another.

That night she learnt that arms were being freely distributed to some people in the town. The princesses also were very excited. There was a tense atmosphere in the quarters where the Yadava leaders lived. A disquieting rumour that old Bahuka Andhaka and his son had disappeared—possibly murdered—in the palace itself was heard on all sides. All these things, she concluded, had something to do with Nanda's son.

The next morning Trivakra got up very early, offered scents and unguents to Kamsa and his queens, and leaving her other duties to be discharged by her subordinates, left the palace. With her silver box of scents shining brightly, she took the road to Akrura's mansion.

On the way, she met crowds which were moving in the direction of the main business centre. Young Yadava men in large numbers were hurrying there faster than anyone. People who never missed an opportunity to laugh at her, simply ignored her as she passed by them. Naturally she was curious to know what was happening and joined the stream of people.

A large crowd was standing in front of the shop of the palace dyer. He was a favoured person, for it was his duty as well as privilege to see that the clothes of Kamsa, his consorts and other important persons in the palace, were dyed afresh from time to time. Trivakra pushed her way

through the crowd. People who were pushed aside had some harsh things to say to the hunch-backed woman, but she did not mind it.

When she was near the shop, she heard some altercation between the dyer and two boys who were evidently trying to borrow some freshly-dyed clothes.

The dyer was abusing them in furious terms. 'You village idiots,' shouted the dyer, raising his hand as if to strike the younger of the two boys — the one with the dark blue skin. But the boy stepped aside, dodged the blow and hit the burly palace dyer with unexpected vigour. The blow was well aimed. The dyer fell down in a dead faint and lay sprawling on the ground.

The people gathered there thoroughly enjoyed the bully's discomfiture. Some youngsters even kicked him as he lay unconscious on the ground. Trivakra also joined in cursing the dyer; it was wicked of him, this hefty fellow, to have started a quarrel with these young boys.

The boys quietly entered the shop, selected the clothes they liked and changed into them, to the enjoyment of the crowd.

'Who are these boys?' asked Trivakra of her neighbour.

'Don't you know? They are the sons of Nanda, the cowherd chief of Vrindavan,' said a by-stander.

Trivakra's heart leapt with joy. 'Why did the dyer abuse them?' she asked.

'The boys wanted him to give them nice clothes to wear. They said they were invited by Kamsa to the *Dhanuryajna* and could not attend it unless they were well dressed,' replied another.

'They are nice boys,' Trivakra commented.

'How handsome! With what dignity the cowherds bear themselves!' said the first by-stander.

'Oh, it was a neat blow which felled that blackguard,' said another by-stander. 'He always thought that he was Prince Kamsa himself.'

'The Prince will be very angry,' said Trivakra.

'The boys are very brave. They don't care who gets angry,' said another by-stander.

The boys came out of the dyer's shop dressed like gods. The elder one was dressed in blue, the younger one with the lovely curls in yellow. They had also put on scarves and head-dresses that matched their colours. The younger of the two boys was evidently fastidious about his dress, for he had taken the peacock feather from his old head-dress and fixed it on the golden one which he wore now.

When the boys came out of the shop, the people cheered them. A flower-seller, who had his shop opposite, came forward with garlands of rare flowers. The boys accepted them gratefully, the younger boy giving the flower-seller an affectionate pat on the back.

Trivakra was already fascinated by the younger boy. The way he looked at everyone standing there with a merry twinkle in his eyes was very friendly. His lips were half-parted in a smile which she felt was intended only for her. Pushing aside one or two by-standers, she stepped forward, her heart throbbing with intense excitement. Was her long-deferred hope going to be fulfilled?

'Nanda's son, Krishna, I have come to you, Lord. I have been waiting for you — oh, for so long,' she said and her voice was choked by overpowering emotion.

People tittered as the hunch-backed woman, with an awkward effort, tried to prostrate herself before Krishna.

'Were you waiting for us?' asked Krishna. 'How nice! How did you know that we were coming?'

'I knew you were coming, Lord—oh, night after night for years and years. And I have brought scents and unguents for you,' she said.

'Who are you, sister?' asked Krishna.

'I am Trivakra. I am in charge of the scents and unguents at the palace. But the best of what I have are for you alone, Lord,' she replied.

Trivakra's heart bounded with joy as she saw the smile

on those beautiful lips. Yes, the smile was for her, for it was a smile of hope and promise. He was the loved one of whom she had been dreaming.

She took the scents and applied them to Krishna's hands and cheeks, and the sandalwood paste to his forehead. Then she also anointed Balarama, who enjoyed the unfamiliar smell, sniffing it with childish pleasure.

Then Trivakra, with an effort, fell at Krishna's feet, buried her head again in his feet and cried piteously : 'Lord, Lord, I am so ugly.' That was all that she could murmur. Her pent-up hopes burst out into heart-breaking sobs.

'You are not ugly,' said Krishna in the tone of a loving mother. He bent down and lifted Trivakra from the ground. 'Sister, who says that you are not beautiful? You are,' he spoke with authority.

Trivakra rose from the ground and tried to stand up in the way she was accustomed to. But she felt something strange coming over her, a sudden influx of energy. She tried to stand. She could do so. She drew her legs together and they were straight. She tried to raise herself to her full height and she stayed erect. Almost with a shock, she realised what had happened to her. She forgot how a well-born woman ought to behave herself and jumped for joy. The people gathered there stood looking at her, awe-struck.

'Lord, Lord, you have made me shapely and straight,' she muttered and flung herself at Krishna's feet, trailing her long hair over his feet in ineffable gratitude.

THE SACRED BOW

As the people gathered in front of the dyer's shop stood awe-struck at Trivakra's miraculous recovery, shouts were heard from the outer edge of the crowd. The clatter of horse's hoofs was heard and also the sound of lashes and the shrieks of the injured. Evidently a horseman was making his way through the crowd, cracking his whip across the shoulders of whoever came in his way or pushing his horse through everyone.

By temperament, Balarama was slow to move and slower still to speak, but when his anger was roused, he was carried away by it. He stepped forward in front of the horseman and catching hold of the bit, tried to halt the rushing animal. The rider in a temper lashed out at Balarama, but before he could use his whip again, it was wrested from him and he was pulled down to the ground. The crowd, which had never seen resistance to those in power, was in a mood to applaud whatever the boys did and cheered Balarama enthusiastically.

Even Balarama's gigantic size gave little indication of the super-human strength he possessed. He not only halted the horse, but pushed it back. It tried to rear; it tried to resist by throwing its weight on to its haunches; all resistance was useless. Step by step Balarama pushed it right back against the bullocks of the chariot which was following.

The bullocks, frightened by the backing horse and the shouts of the crowd, turned aside, almost overturning the chariot. The two ladies who were riding in the chariot — one, a fine young woman of about twenty-five and the other, a lovely girl of sixteen — shrieked in terror. The princely rider, though badly bruised, rose from the ground

and shouted to two riders who were following the chariot, but they could not come up to him, for the chariot and the bullocks which were now standing across the road proved a formidable barricade. He turned to pursue Balarama, but Krishna caught hold of him by the neck.

The prince turned to him angrily : ' Fool, don't you know who I am ? I am Rukmi, the Prince of Vidarbha, and the guest of your master Prince Kamsa.'

' Now that you say it, I know who you are,' replied Krishna coolly. ' You had better go back to your women-folk and stop molesting the people.'

' You scoundrel!' shouted Rukmi and tried to unsheath his sword. But before he could do so, Krishna twisted his hand with expert skill and threw the Prince off his balance. Then he pushed him up to the chariot, lifted him before he could offer resistance and threw him into it as if he was a sack of corn. Both the women seated in it began to shout at Krishna in high excitement. ' Let go my brother, you wicked fellow,' said the beautiful girl.

Krishna smiled in his characteristic way which always won hearts. ' Is this your brother ? As a princess, you should try to teach him the manners of a prince,' he said.

' Oh, what have you done to my brother?' cried the girl.

Krishna's eyes showed signs of mischief. ' Don't worry, young lady. Your brother has lost nothing except his conceit. I am sure he will behave better hereafter — even to you,' he said with a laugh. There was no resisting Krishna and, in spite of her tears, the princess of Vidarbha could not help smiling in return.

Krishna then walked up to the frightened bullocks which were trying to find an escape from the shouting crowd. He knew the ways of cattle as of men and, approaching them fearlessly, talked to them in a friendly voice. A few pats, some cheering words, and the bullocks became quiet. Then as he began to stroke their dewlaps in an affectionate manner, the bullocks forgot their fear and became friendly. After a little while, he led them

back to the place where they had stood before and the chariot was ready to start on its way.

Krishna gave a parting pat to the bullocks, which rubbed their noses against him as if they had found a long-lost friend. Then he threw the reins on to the lap of the driver. 'Look after the bullocks well. They are very fine,' he said, smiling mischievously at the girl. Soon the chariot departed followed by Rukmi, now highly chastened, on his horse.

A very large crowd, which by then had gathered round the brothers, was lost in admiration, not unmixed with respect. A hunch-backed woman had been made straight; a horse had been pushed aside as if it was a mere toy; one of Kamsa's royal guests was pulled down from his horse and carried like a sack; frightened bullocks were tamed by a pat.

Trivakra, now walking erect, was exultant; her life's dream had been fulfilled. She was so full of joy and gratitude that she could not keep the secret any more and whispered it in the ears of a by-stander. 'He is Devaki's eighth son. As Narada prophesied, he has come.'

Krishna and Balarama, responding to the affectionate greetings of the crowd, went their way. A part of the crowd followed them, Trivakra at their head. The streets they passed through were thronged by the nobility and the villagers who had come from far and near to join in the festivities and who were unconscious of the terrible conflict which was developing. Nothing delighted Trivakra more than to walk with the two handsome boys, particularly with Krishna whom she looked upon as a beloved god, and to point out to them the famous sights of the rich city.

The news of what had happened to the dyer and Rukmi travelled fast and reached the authorities. General Pradyota himself, with a small retinue, rushed to the place where the incidents had taken place and, after making inquiries, overtook Krishna and Balarama who were walking about the city in a leisurely way. On seeing them, the general dismounted from his horse and went up to the boys.

‘You are the sons of Nanda — aren’t you ? — who have been invited by my lord ?’ he asked. ‘I have been trying to find you since the morning. I am sorry I could not do it earlier.’

Pradyota could not help admiring the two boys and immediately fell under the charm of the younger one.

‘Who are you ?’ asked Balarama.

‘Oh, I am Pradyota, the Andhaka chief. I am Prince Kamsa’s general,’ replied Pradyota.

‘You have collected a lot of unmannerly people in the city,’ said Balarama bluntly. ‘We had no sooner been to the city than one man wanted to hit Krishna and another tried to whip me,’ Balarama pointed to the mark which Rukmi’s whip had left on him. ‘You people seem to be very hospitable,’ he added and laughed uproariously.

Krishna folded his hands. ‘We are happy to meet you, Best among Andhakas. We have heard much about you.’ The way he said it combined dignity with respect. ‘You are a great warrior.’

‘Uncle Pradyota, the dyer was very rude to Nanda’s sons,’ interrupted Trivakra. ‘And the Prince of Vidarbha lashed out at Balarama.’

Pradyota turned to the good-looking and shapely woman standing by his side and his eyes widened in surprise. ‘Who are you, lady ?’ he asked.

‘Have you forgotten me so soon, Uncle ?’ Trivakra asked with a melodious laugh. ‘I gave you scents and unguents only this morning. You are becoming forgetful,’ she added with the easy familiarity of one whose mother was a favourite attendant of the general’s.

Pradyota could not believe his eyes. ‘Trivakra, what has happened to you ? Where has your hump gone ? You are now almost a beauty.’ Pradyota looked bewildered; he could not imagine for the life of him how the ‘thrice crooked’ woman, who had applied scents and unguents to him this morning, could now have become so different a being.

'That is by the grace of my Lord here,' she said, folding her hands and bowing to Krishna.

Pradyota looked at Krishna with a new understanding. This was Devaki's eighth son whom he was under a commission to kill. Yet, if he had cured Trivakra's hump, he was a god and Narada's prophecy was being fulfilled. His mind went back to the scene in the dark corridor which he had witnessed the night before, and bitterness welled up in his heart at what he had seen and the commission he was charged with.

'I should like to show you our city,' said Pradyota. 'Would you like to see some of the sights?' he asked.

'Yes, everything,' said Krishna.

'We would like to see the great Bow,' said Balarama. 'We have heard so much about it.'

'Come with me. I will take you to the *mandap* where it is being worshipped,' said Pradyota.

They all proceeded to the *mandap*, Trivakra happily chattering about the sights which they passed on the way. When they were near it, Pradyota turned to the brothers. 'Has either of you drawn the long bow?' he asked them.

'We have, but not of your kind. We select our own bamboo or wood, make our own bows out of them and shoot at wild animals.'

On the banks of the Yamuna, next to the inner fort in the middle of which the palace was situated, a large *pandal* had been constructed. Quite a few people, including several eminent notabilities, who had arrived during these three days, had been visiting it to see the anointed Bow.

In the middle of the *mandap* was a platform on which the great Bow was lying. On three sides, Brahmans were sitting, worshipping it with the proper ritual. Several guests were walking round it, admiring its strength. Some who were likely to take part in the final ritual of shooting the arrow from the Bow, were trying to feel what it was like; for according to the ritual prescribed for the *Dhanuryajna*, the man who could lift it and discharge an

arrow furthest from it on the last day of the festival, would be proclaimed the hero of the festivities and rewarded as such.

As they neared the place where the Bow was lying, Pradyota whispered something into the ear of Trivakra, who immediately threw a meaningful glance at Krishna. Immediately Krishna felt that he had sensed what had been said. Whether any man could shoot an arrow from this bow or not the next day was a matter of no consequence. But it was the symbol of Kamsa's power which held his people in fear and if that fear had to be rooted out, the magic of the symbol had to be broken. As he stood gazing at the Bow, he felt a mysterious thrill passing through him.

He heard Trivakra telling him : 'Lord, why don't you try to lift the Bow now ? It is a marvel prepared by Uncle Pradyota's experts.'

Was there any significance in what Trivakra was saying, Krishna asked himself. Whether there was or not, this symbol had to be destroyed, if he had a mission to fulfil.

He made up his mind and turned to Pradyota. 'I am not an expert bowman. I am just a cowherd. But I hope to shoot an arrow on the last day,' he said. 'May I try to lift the bow now to see how heavy it is ?'

'Yes, that you may, Nanda's son,' said Pradyota, exchanging a glance with Trivakra. 'But you will not be able to do it. Even expert bow-men cannot do it.'

A thought flashed across Pradyota's mind. Was he really the Saviour ? Or would he fail his people ?

'Try it, then,' said Pradyota.

Krishna looked at the Bow for some time very carefully, apparently calculating its weight. Some looked on sceptically, some derisively. Then he suddenly bent down and lifted the Bow with a sharp jerk. The spectators crowding round him were dumbfounded.

'Is this the bow which we are to handle the day after tomorrow ?' asked Krishna.

'Yes,' said Pradyota, his voice full of a new respect.

‘ Is it difficult to handle it ? ’ asked Krishna innocently. Krishna scrutinised the Bow closely to find whether there was anything exceptional about it. Then he saw one of the joints. Yes, it was a sign; his mission would be fulfilled.

To the horror of all present, instead of placing the Bow back on its pedestal, Krishna placed his foot on one end of the Bow and bent the other end abruptly, concentrating all the strength of his arms on it. The Bow cracked and broke. Krishna threw away the pieces and laughed.

It was a feat unheard of — an insult to Kamsa — a sacrilege !

Afterwards, those who saw the brothers walking away in complete indifference, stood in silent awe. And Pradyota’s heart was full of repentance and of joy as well.

MASTER OF THE ELEPHANTS

Pradyota reported Krishna's sacrilegious act to his master. He was a seasoned courtier, and though there was exultation in his heart, his face was as grim as death. When Kamsa heard the report, an icy coldness gripped him.

He had been receiving disquieting news the whole day. Crowds of people had all but come to adore the two boys. Trivakra had lost her hump by a miracle. King Bhishmaka's son, Rukmi, his guest and friend, had been humiliated, insulted and almost thrashed in a public thoroughfare. And now this ominous catastrophe had come. The anointed Bow, which even a seasoned bowman could hardly lift, had been broken to pieces by Devaki's eighth son. Was death closing in on him?

'How was Krishna able to break it?' he asked. 'The Bow was strong and tough.'

'All the experts said it was perfect. You even saw it yourself, my lord,' Pradyota replied respectfully.

'Why did you let the boys handle it?' asked Kamsa.

'What could I do?' replied Pradyota with folded hands. 'The rules of the *Dhanuryajna* permit those who intend to enter the contest to find out for themselves what the bow is like.'

'What shall we do about the festival?' asked Kamsa ill-humouredly. 'There cannot be a *Dhanuryajna* without the bow.'

'This is very unfortunate,' said Pradyota. 'But what is there to do about it? I have already consulted the learned Brahmans. They say that another should be prepared immediately and ritually anointed.'

'Do it immediately,' ordered Kamsa. 'We will

complete the sacrificial session, if not tomorrow, the day after. Tomorrow we shall only have the wrestling matches. Pradyota, what are Nanda's sons like ?'

'The elder one is a big and powerfully built young man,' replied Pradyota. 'He pushed Prince Rukmi's spirited horse back on its haunches almost without an effort. The younger one, Krishna, is a fine boy. I would never have imagined that such a lithe, smooth body as his could possess such strength.'

'Where are they now ?' asked Kamsa.

'They are with Nanda and the cowherds in their camp outside the city,' replied Pradyota.

For a while Kamsa sat grimly in thought, pulling at his moustaches as was his habit at such times, and fixing his gaze on the ground. Then he spoke, 'Pradyota, can I rely upon you ?'

Pradyota asked in turn, 'My lord, have I given you any reason to doubt my loyalty over these twenty years ? If you feel that I have, please relieve me of my duty. I will withdraw from the city forthwith.'

Kamsa made no reply. He was thinking furiously. Even if Pradyota was playing him false, this was scarcely the time when he could afford to lose him. Then he looked up. 'Pradyota, I have complete confidence in you. You have stood by me loyally and I shall never forget what you have done. You can go now.'

Then, after a few minutes, Kamsa added : 'But, don't fail to carry out my orders. Krishna must not be allowed to come into my presence.'

'All the people are coming to the wrestling match. How can I prevent him being with Nanda's party ?' asked Pradyota.

'You are right. It cannot be helped,' said Kamsa, assuming a friendly air. 'Now, go and have it announced that *Dhanuryajna* will be completed the day after tomorrow. Only the wrestling matches will be held tomorrow.'

When Pradyota had left, Kamsa clapped his hands. A trusted attendant came

‘Has Trivakra returned?’ asked Kamsa.

‘Yes, my lord, she is with the Princesses.’

‘Ask Prince Vritrighna to come immediately,’ commanded Kamsa.

Vritrighna was in fact waiting for an audience and came immediately.

‘Vritrighna, did Pradyota tell you of the change in the order of the festivities?’ asked Kamsa. ‘What is the general feeling?’

‘Not very good,’ said Vritrighna. ‘There is excitement all over the city. Nanda’s sons have created a great impression on the people.’

‘I will see to it. I cannot wait any longer. Keep your men ready. Take no chances. There will be many Yadava chiefs present. At the appropriate moment, I will give the signal. And send for Angaraka,’ said Kamsa.

‘As you please, my lord,’ said the Magadhan Prince and he left Kamsa’s presence.

Trivakra was wild with joy. In the Princesses’ quarters, she gave vent to her pent-up feelings. She laughed, made jokes and spoke about her dark-coloured saviour and his deeds in ecstatic terms.

The Princesses of Mathura and their guests, the Princesses who had arrived to attend the festival, heard Trivakra with differing feelings. Kamsa’s queens were frightened. The stranger Princesses were amazed and could ill suppress their curiosity to know more about Krishna. There were two of them in particular who were moved by contradictory feelings.

The wife of Rukmi, King Bhishmaka’s son, could not overcome her indignation at her husband having been manhandled by a cowherd and no one punishing the offender. If such a thing had happened in their own country, the offender’s head would have been struck off immediately.

The other princess, who heard Trivakra with a suppressed enthusiasm that disgusted many of the other princesses, was Rukmini, Rukmi's sixteen-year-old sister, who even at that age was growing into a flaming and statuesque beauty. She had always thought her brother a bully and was delighted at his receiving well deserved punishment. Moreover, she was struck by the handsome young man, with the peacock feather in his turban, who had brought her brother back to her all limp and helpless like a scolded infant. She had been lost in admiration of his graceful body, almost maidenly, in spite of his great strength, and his eyes had continued to haunt her.

Trivakra had hardly left the Princesses' quarters to go to her own in the palace, when she heard someone running to catch up with her. She halted in the dark corridor. Rukmini came up to her and caught hold of her hand.

'Trivakra, save that cowherd boy — the dark one. They are going to kill him,' said Rukmini.

'They cannot kill him, my Princess. He is a god. What has happened to you is that you have become madly concerned with him. I have seen it in your eyes,' replied Trivakra.

'Don't talk. Listen. Is there a wicked man here called Kuvalayapida? He is going to kill that boy tomorrow. I heard your princesses laughing over the idea,' said Rukmini.

'Tell me more about their talk,' said Trivakra.

'Let me go back. My brother will kill me if he comes to know that I have told you this,' said Rukmini and ran back, leaving Trivakra in anxious thought.

Kuvalayapida was not a man, but the most powerful elephant in the palace. How could he kill Nanda's son tomorrow? But she would take no chances. Her husband, Angaraka, who had forsaken her for being a hunch-backed girl years ago, was the Master of the Elephants and in charge of Kuvalayapida. He would know.

For a moment, she hesitated. She had been forsaken, neglected and jeered at by Angaraka, who had married two

more wives. It hurt her pride to go to him now, but she was doing it to serve her 'god'.

Angaraka, the Master of the Elephants of the royal house of the Mathura Yadavas, was a very high and responsible officer. It was his duty to look after the elephants, to train them for use in war or on ceremonial occasions, and to supervise their upkeep and welfare.

Though it was approaching midnight, Angaraka, now about fifty, lay awake in bed in his quarters. One of his wives was bathing his feet, the other was fanning him. He was not happy. He had been commanded to do a thing which he hated doing, and these women were talking in glowing terms of someone the mention of whom made him hate himself. He wished he could kick these women until they were silent, but he never liked to have unhappy wives about him.

There was a knock at the door. Angaraka sat up almost in fear. What was this summons about now? He had had enough of his master already.

The elder wife looked into her husband's face, and sensing that he gave her leave to do so, opened the door. Trivakra came in, straight and well-knit, graceful in every limb. Angaraka opened his eyes wide in amazement as if a ghost had entered. Both his plump, well-cared-for wives shrieked in alarm.

'Who are you?' Angaraka asked, unable to believe his own eyes.

'Have you forgotten me, Aryaputra?' asked Trivakra with a mischievous laugh which rippled through the room.

'Sister, you have been cured!' exclaimed the elder of the wives, shooting a jealous look at the tall, straight Trivakra, her own shape having lost all reasonable proportions on account of the seven little Angarakas which she had presented to her lord and master.

'My god made me what I am,' said Trivakra happily. 'I came to tell you so, Aryaputra, though we have not spoken to each other for years and years.'

‘What has happened to you, Trivakra? Sit down and tell me all about it,’ said Angaraka, suddenly forgetting that for over twenty years he had felt mortified and ridiculed because of the name by which his first wife — long abandoned — was known throughout the palace.

Trivakra sat down with a winsome smile which fascinated Angaraka, and asked for water. The younger of the wives went to fetch it.

‘These people were talking about the miracle worked by Nanda’s son. Tell me all about it,’ repeated Angaraka. He could not help gazing intently at the charming woman his misshapen wife had been transformed into.

‘What is Nanda’s son like?’ asked the elder of the favourite wives.

The younger wife brought some water, which Trivakra took. ‘Nanda’s son! He is not Nanda’s son, Aryaputra. I will tell you something if you can keep a secret,’ said Trivakra and looked at these other wives of her husband’s.

‘Go in to your apartments,’ said Angaraka to his favourite wives.

Dying though they were to satisfy their curiosity, they could not disobey their husband’s command, and left the room casting angry glances at Trivakra.

‘Tell me about Nanda’s son, Trivakra. All these days I have been hearing about him. And now! You are almost an *apsara*,’ said Angaraka.

‘He is not Nanda’s son. He is Devaki’s eighth son. He has come to deliver us from your master,’ she said in a low whisper. Angaraka heard her words, casting his eyes about anxiously to see if the walls had ears.

‘Oh, God of gods,’ wailed Angaraka in evident distress.

‘Why are you so miserable, Aryaputra? A new day is dawning for us all. Are you not sick of this tyranny — this slavery to one wicked man?’ she asked.

‘Don’t say all that to me. Someone will hear,’ said Angaraka.

‘How many times have you been insulted? How many times subjected to the whims of the tyrant? The day which Sage Narada foretold has come. He has come,’ said Trivakra.

‘Has He really come?’ asked Angaraka.

‘Look at me. Could anyone but a god make me so straight and graceful? And could a mortal break the Sacrificial Bow? You will see tomorrow how the cursed tyrant will go to the land of his forbears,’ said Trivakra with firm faith.

‘Oh, woman, you don’t know how unfortunate I am. I am most unhappy,’ said Angaraka.

‘What is the matter? Let me know. I can get Devaki’s son to do you any favour you like. He is very, very kind to me,’ said Trivakra with pride.

‘No one can help me. I am finished. I shall be dead tomorrow,’ Angaraka said in despair.

‘What is it? Let me know. Let me at least do you some service. Is it something concerning Devaki’s son and Kuvalayapida?’ asked Trivakra.

Angaraka opened his eyes wide. ‘How do you know?’ he asked her.

‘No one can kill Devaki’s son,’ said Trivakra.

‘But I have been commanded to do so,’ said Angaraka in a choking voice.

‘It is a sin to obey a tyrant’s command,’ said Trivakra.

‘What shall I do?’ asked Angaraka.

‘Pray to Devaki’s son and listen to me,’ said Trivakra.

And the husband, who had forsaken Trivakra for twenty-five years, heard her with gratitude.

After some talk, Trivakra went to her quarters and returned with an armful of herbs.

The whole night Angaraka and Trivakra were busy feeding Kuvalayapida, the most uncontrollable of the elephants in the royal stables.

KUVALAYAPIDA : THE ANGRY ELEPHANT

The Yadava leaders, young and old, were very much disturbed at the happenings of the last two days. The disappearance of the old Bahuka Andhaka, held in the highest respect by the Yadava tribes; the rumour of orders from Kamsa that they were to be placed at the mercy of the Magadhan Prince; the arrival of Devaki's sons in Mathura after a summons from Kamsa; Trivakra's miraculous recovery and the breaking of the sacred Bow—all were calculated to create a sense of catastrophe. They knew that they were marked men and that Devaki's sons were doomed unless there was a miraculous intervention. And so they came—these leaders—in the dead of night to Vasudeva's palace.

There were low-voiced whispers and discussions, full of hesitation, doubts and fears. Some suggested an exodus; some suggested a fight to the finish. Akrura's advice was sought, but he was a man of faith and had no plan. The prophecy was going to be fulfilled for Devaki's eighth son had come to save them, he said.

One young Yadava leader spoke out respectfully : ' Venerable Sir, are you so sure of Narada's prophecy being fulfilled? '

' Yes, I have met Devaki's son. I know he is the saviour, ' replied Akrura.

' Suppose he is not? ' asked a doubter.

' Then we must assume that the Lord has decided to destroy us for our cowardice. But I know that He will not, ' said Akrura with deep sincerity.

' I wish we had your faith. '

What more do you need for your faith to be restored ?

He has come. He has made Trivakra a healthy woman. He has humbled Rukmi. He has shattered the anointed Bow,' said Akrura.

While Akrura was speaking, two persons entered the room. In the dim light of a single oil lamp wavering fitfully, the leaders could not at first recognise them.

There was a hush and Gargacharya's voice was heard. 'The noble daughter of Prince Devaka wants to tell you, Sirs, of her solemn decision.'

The assembly looked up in awe. Devaki's tragic fate and her saintly character had given her the halo of divinity, and her presence in their midst moved the hearts of all the Yadava chiefs.

Devaki stood beneath the oil lamp, her pale, shrunken face lit up by a glow of martyrdom. Her large, sad eyes were fixed on the leaders. She made an effort to speak, but for a moment could not. Then she clasped her throat with a sense of helplessness and spoke in a low voice: 'Venerable elders, please forgive my coming to speak to you.' She stopped. Every one strained his attention to catch her words. 'I have decided—decided'—and her voice quivered with emotion—'if my boys are killed, I will enter the fire.'

The words had an overwhelming effect as if a violent earthquake had made the earth gape at the feet of the Yadava chiefs.

Akrura was the only person who had the presence of mind to speak in a self-composed voice. 'Devaka's noble daughter, we will all die rather than that your sons should be harmed, I pledge my solemn word.'

Devaki withdrew as quietly as she entered. The decision was taken. The assembly dispersed, grim and determined.

No less grim and determined was Kamsa, as he paced up and down the terrace of his palace. He had been weak so far; he had not dealt firmly enough with the Yadavas. He should have massacred them before he went to the wars, or at least soon after he returned at the head of a victorious

army. He should have then sent someone or other to dispose of Vasudeva's sons in Vrindavan.

All this was true. Yet it was never too late to take firm action. Tonight it would have been possible to dispose of the Yadava leaders, but there were too many royal guests and visitors in the city to permit of a general massacre of his clan. It was also not possible to deal with Vasudeva's sons tonight. They were in the villagers' camp, and streams of people hearing of the miracles wrought by Nanda's son, were flowing to the camp to have his *darshan*. Somehow the impression had been created on the popular mind that Krishna was a god. Any attempt to kill him, therefore, would perhaps lead to a general uprising and necessitate large-scale fighting in which the Magadhan warriors — his only completely reliable body of men — might be overwhelmed.

However, Kamsa had thought of a way out of this difficulty. Angaraka was a trusted officer of high rank and would see that Kuvalayapida, the angry elephant, did not miss his victim. It was a fine idea of his; it would dispose of Krishna without anyone blaming him for the mishap. Yes, before the crowds collected, a few *ghatikas* after sunrise, Angaraka would have obeyed his orders and the faith of the crowds in their saviour would have been shattered. He would then come down to the royal gallery and the wrestling matches would be held to the delight of those present, who would by then have lost their faith in Narada's prophecy.

Hope rose high in Kamsa's heart as he fell asleep. His dreams were happy; in them he saw his arch-enemy crushed under the feet of Kuvalayapida. He could almost hear the crushing of Krishna's bones as the mighty elephant pressed his heavy foot on his body.

Kamsa rose with the dawn and made his ablutions with the aid of his trusted men. Trivakra was there too with her silver box of scents and unguents. Kamsa opened his eyes wide. Was this Trivakra, who had appeared before him day after day for years, hunch-backed, deformed, knock-

kneed, and whom it had delighted him to chafe mercilessly on account of her deformity? This woman with a charming smile on her lips was straight and graceful and the miracle had been performed by Devaki's son.

'Trivakra, what has happened to you?' asked Kamsa.

'Lord, I have been cured. I am well now,' she said as she laughed joyously, looking proudly at her body, and offered her box for Kamsa's use.

Doubt re-entered Kamsa's mind: Was the prophecy of Narada going to be fulfilled? And he lost the courage to ask Trivakra who had worked the miracle.

Kamsa took the scents and unguents, applied them to his body hurriedly, and dismissed the servants. He was now full of impatience and wanted to see Krishna crushed to death under Kuvalayapida's foot. So, just as the people began streaming into the court, he put on his diadem and ornaments, girded on his sword and went and stood by the window to take a look at the main gate by which Kuvalayapida was to be led in.

The moments passed slowly and Kamsa had to summon all his patience to stand and look through the window. He saw the people pouring in. The Brahmans, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Shudras came into the court and took their places in their respective enclosures. Prince Vritrighna's men were posted at strategic points around the main enclosure, which was gradually being filled by the Yadava chiefs. The enclosures reserved for women were crowded too — women in multi-coloured clothes, all straining their eyes to see Nanda's sons.

Then the conchs sounded. The royal athletes entered the arena, slapping their biceps and their thighs; they went round the arena, inviting those who wanted to take part in the wrestling matches to come forward.

Kamsa was proud of his athletes, whose leaders, Chanur and Musthika, moved about jubilantly, as the occasion required — the former a man-mountain with a huge belly and a jovial face, the latter tall and muscular, with an almost ugly and sinister look.

At last, Kuvalayapida entered the courtyard, Angaraka riding it in the gold-embroidered robes in which, as the Master of the Elephants, it was his privilege to appear on formal occasions. This Kuvalayapida was a mighty elephant, with mighty tusks and large flapping ears. Magnificently caparisoned in gold, the elephant proudly came to a spot near his quarters, raised its trunk as a salute and trumpeted cheerfully.

Kamsa was surprised: Kuvalayapida, who always walked in heavy but sharp strides, was moving in a leisurely manner today. His eyes, usually angry and impatient, looked wily. What was the meaning of this change? Or was it imagination?

No, it was not his imagination. Kuvalayapida was lumbering along, waving his trunk playfully as he had never seen him do before. The mighty beast eyed the crowds in a friendly way, an unexpected thing for him.

Kuvalayapida then ambled across the wide court as if he felt in a jolly mood, most people who knew his vicious habits looking on in surprise. Angaraka halted him near the main entrance, and he began to throw his weight first on to one leg and then on to the other as if he was trying to dance.

As Kamsa watched the incoming crowds, he saw a strange sight, a large crowd of people, villagers and townsmen, armed and unarmed, following in the wake of two young men, whose feet men and women rushed forward to touch, wiping the dust from them and laying it on their own eyes.

There was no mistaking these two young men. He had heard them described. One was dark blue in colour, dressed in yellow clothes. The other was fair and stalwart, dressed in blue. The dark blue young man was handsome beyond words, almost maidenly in shape. As Kamsa saw Devaki's eighth son, his wrath rose, wave on wave, like a surging flood. This was his enemy who, as the prophecy had declared, was to destroy him, but whom Kuvalayapida would now destroy.

The young men approached the elephant. Now was the moment of moments, Kamsa thought. The elephant would rush at the boys, pick them up and break their bones under his feet.

But Kamsa opened his eyes wide; strange things were happening. As the young men came up to Kuvalayapida, he swayed his trunk to bar their way, but Krishna said something to him. And the elephant raised his trunk and trumpeted—not angrily as he usually did—but in a pleasant way.

Krishna stepped to one side to pass him. The elephant playfully waved his trunk that way too. Krishna moved to the other side. That way also his path was barred by the swaying of the trunk. Some people in the crowd were alarmed. Men with lances came forward to protect Krishna and shouted to frighten the elephant. Krishna, with a laugh, waved the terrified people aside, fearlessly approached the elephant and spoke to him in a gentle, friendly voice. He knew how to enter into the hearts of animals as well as the hearts of men and women. Kuvalayapida looked at Krishna as if he was his long-lost friend, rolled his body in a funny way and performed some grotesque antics at which people laughed.

Kamsa could not believe his eyes. The mighty elephant was behaving in an extraordinary way. He had a jolly glint in his eyes and—horror of all horrors—he held out his trunk to Krishna for a friendly pat.

In spite of the warnings of those around him, Krishna stepped forward, all the while talking to the elephant in the affectionate way which had so endeared him to the stud-bulls of Vrindavan. The elephant extended his trunk and lifted Krishna on it. People began to run away. There were shrieks of fright. Some women fainted. Slowly the elephant raised Krishna, enveloping him in his trunk ever so gently, and then lowered him, depositing him on the ground again.

The crowd was wild with joy. There were shouts of 'Victory, Victory'. Krishna continued to rub the trunk very fondly. The elephant, who had continued to look at

Krishna in a friendly confiding way, soon began to blink as if he was overcome by sleep. Then he began to sway himself first on one leg and then on the other, bent his mighty legs, slid to the ground with a cumbersome effort, and stretching out his trunk, closed his eyes.

The crowd was in ecstasy. Some thought that Kuvalayapida had surrendered himself to Krishna as to a god. Others thought that he had been killed. And so did Kamsa as he saw the mighty beast lying stretched on the ground and a jubilant crowd surging through the main gate.

Kamsa sought the support of the wall.

CHANUR, THE CHAMPION

With a considerable effort Kamsa regained his mastery over himself. Devaki's sons had now entered the court, both gaily dressed, surrounded by an admiring crowd which joyfully shouted 'Jaya Jaya Nandanandan' (Victory to the son of Nanda). He could easily distinguish the younger of the two brothers—the dark-coloured young lad who modestly followed the older one.

This was the young man who was going to destroy him! A giant wave of indignation swept over him. He, the indomitable conqueror, would die an ignoble death at the hands of this boy! He gnashed his teeth. No! He would defy the gods who foredoomed him to such an end. He would fight to the bitter end. He would, if necessary, strangle Devaki's son with his bare hands.

Kamsa clapped his hands. An attendant appeared in response and was ordered to call Agha, his confidential adviser.

Agha was an insignificant-looking, old man, with an obsequious smile. His wrinkled face scarcely betrayed the ruthlessness with which he had woven endless intrigues to further his master's interest for years.

'Agha, Nanda's son has entered the courtyard. What has happened to Kuvalayapida?' asked Kamsa.

'They say the elephant was killed by him, my lord. Some say that he tamed him by a touch. I have sent a man to make inquiries of Angaraka,' replied Agha.

'There is no time to think of Angaraka now. The drums are already announcing the arrival of the champion wrestlers, and in a few moments I must go into the courtyard with my guests,' said Kamsa.

'As you please, my lord,' said Agha, waiting for orders.

'Before the athletes' parade begins, send word to Chanur that he must make an end of Nanda's son,' said Kamsa.

'How can he?' asked Agha, the wrinkles on his face multiplying as he assumed an air of excessive humility. 'Chanur cannot challenge a boy to a bout. The *shastras* forbid it, lord.'

Kamsa heard the approaching footsteps of the royal guests, who were to accompany him to the royal enclosure. He stamped his foot in angry impatience. 'I don't care how he does it. These are my commands—they have to be obeyed—or...' Kamsa glanced malignantly at the old man.

As the royal guests came in sight, Kamsa controlled himself, dismissed Agha with a wave of his hand and turned to welcome the new arrivals.

The large quadrangular court was surrounded by the palace buildings. On one side of the quadrangle, on a little higher ground, the royal enclosure had been constructed for Kamsa, his guests, the chiefs of the different clans and officers of high rank. On the other sides there were decorated enclosures reserved for different groups of people, the Brahmans, the different Yadava tribes, the guilds of craftsmen, the villagers and the common people. In the middle of the court a circular arena had been made covered with a soft, sifted mixture of earth and sand and reserved for the wrestling tournament.

All the enclosures were full of men. And from the windows, attics and terraces fluttered the multi-coloured saris and scarves of the women of different ranks who had thronged to witness the event.

The centre of attraction was the villagers' enclosure, where Krishna and Balarama sat in front of the cowherds of Vrindavan, headed by Nanda. Small crowds stood near it, looking at the prodigies whose names were on everyone's lips.

A blast of conchs announced the arrival of Kamsa and

his guests in the royal enclosure. A sudden silence followed. There were none of the usual shouts of welcome.

Kamsa looked around with a forced smile and took his seat. His guests took their seats to his right; on his left Vasudeva and Akrura were surrounded by the Yadava chiefs. Pradyota was seated behind Kamsa, and next to him and just behind Vasudeva sat Prince Vritrighna, with some of his lieutenants who were in command of the Magadhan contingent.

No one in the royal enclosure, except some royal guests who had not sensed the crisis so far, was in a festive mood.

In the wrestling arena in front of the royal enclosure stood Chanur, Musthika and Toshala, the three masters of wrestling, acknowledging the presence of their master with folded hands. On either side of them, a few steps behind, stood their twelve principal pupils, who now blew the conchs to announce that the events of the day were to commence. Behind the champions and their pupils, the selected wrestlers were ranged—about two hundred in number.

All those in the arena were dressed in tight-strung thongs (*langota*), their bodies for the moment draped in shawls. Musthika and Toshala had silver-embroidered shawls on, by virtue of being royal champions. Chanur had covered himself with a gold-embroidered shawl, because he enjoyed the high office of the Master of *Bahu-yuddha*—Combat by Hand—as wrestling was called.

Those were the glorious days of *Bahu-yuddha*, bodily contest, which was the ultimate arbiter in private feuds as well as in the battle-field. Bodily contest is nature's way of settling feuds between men, and men from the earliest times have made of it an art, if not a science.

Weapons were to be used : for the ordinary man, the staff, the club, the scythe and the spear; for the man of rank, the sword and the javelin; for the high-born warrior, the mace, the battle-axe, the discus and the bow. The battle-axe, the devastating weapon favoured by Parashurama, the great master of the art of war, could be wielded only by

the most powerful; the discus requiring deftness of hand and a sure eye was an uncertain weapon; the bow and arrow required long training to be used in war. Besides, all these weapons could easily fall or be wrested from the combatants' hands, leaving their feet and body as their only means of survival.

Everyone, high and low, therefore, equipped himself for *Bahu-yuddha*. Skilful wrestlers were honoured in society. Royal courts maintained large schools of athletes, and no king, if he valued his life in battle, could survive if he was not an adept in bodily contest. And no festivity could be held without wrestling tournaments, which provided the greatest attraction for the public.

Bodily contests, outside the battle-field, were regulated according to strict rules laid down by the *shastras*. At such entertainments, the combatant who was held firmly on his back for a few moments was considered vanquished, and no combatant who admitted defeat could be challenged again. Above all, the rules prohibited a combatant from killing his antagonist.

The drums sounded. Conchs were blown. At a signal from Chanur, the hundred pairs of combatants handed their shawls to the attendants and stood ready for the contest. A wave of the hand from Chanur and every combatant went for his opponent.

Immediately the atmosphere became both tense and festive. Wrestlers, locked in each other's arms in balanced resistance, showed their practised skill, using every trick which their training had taught them. And the spectators, again and again, became excited or amused, whenever some equally-matched pair, body locked to body, rolled over one another on the ground, then rose, then fell again, slipping from each other's grasp and renewing the struggle.

It was not long before the victorious combatants were separated from those who had acknowledged defeat. The victors stood on one side, the vanquished on the other. Chanur, Musthika and Toshala, each preceded and followed

by two pupils who kept on blowing conchs, walked round the arena in a parade.

Chanur was a very heavy man with a clean-shaven bullet head and an enormous paunch. His powerful muscles were enveloped in huge masses of flesh. His biceps and thighs were so thick with muscle and flesh that when he lumbered along, his arms and legs stuck right out from his body.

With a jovial face, Chanur moved round the enclosures, inviting people to join in the next match which was reserved for special guests. When he came up to the enclosure in which the cowherds from Vrindavan sat, he stopped and laughed aloud in a friendly way at Krishna and Balarama sitting in front, dressed in the gorgeous clothes which they had taken from the royal dyer's shop.

'Nanda raj, are these your boys?' Chanur asked Nanda. 'They look like princes. Why don't they join in the tournament?'

'No, they are not going to,' replied Nanda. 'They don't wrestle as well as you experts do. After all, we are village folks.'

As Chanur stopped in front of the pair of lads, every neck was craned to see what would happen. The common people, with their new-born admiration for Nanda's sons, wanted them to exhibit their skill. On the other hand, the Yadava chiefs, who were on their guard against treachery, sensed danger.

On a terrace behind the villagers' enclosure stood the ladies of the families of the Yadava chiefs. Among them was Devaki, who grew pale as soon as she saw Chanur talking to her sons. She went to the parapet and closed her eyes for a moment. 'My god, my beloved, my Krishna,' she murmured to herself as she steadied herself, then she opened her eyes and gazed intently at what was happening below.

'Why do you listen to your old father?' Chanur asked the boys. 'I have heard that both of you are expert

wrestlers. People talk a lot about your wonderful exploits,' mocked Chanur.

Krishna and Balarama made no reply.

'Come into the arena and show your might, my boys,' Chanur added and slapped his thigh loudly. One of his pupils blew a long blast on his conch.

To hear the conch being blown and Chanur slapping his thigh made every Yadava's heart beat faster. Kamsa alone knew what was coming, and a faint smile played on his lips as his hand twisted his moustache.

Balarama could not bear the athlete's mocking attitude and looked at Nanda, expecting permission. But the old man appeared alarmed.

'Why are you looking at your father in fright?' asked Chanur loud enough to be heard by the whole enclosure. 'Don't you wrestle?' Chanur asked Krishna with a sneer.

'With you?' asked Krishna in return in an equally mocking tone. 'I am far too young.'

To take up the challenge was always a matter of honour, but Krishna had already guessed Chanur's motive and was not prepared to accept it unless forced to.

'Come along, son of Nanda,' said Chanur. 'An old man can teach you a few tricks which you will never forget.' He again slapped his biceps by way of challenge. Krishna shook his head.

Chanur stepped up to Krishna to pull him into the arena.

'No, no, no,' shouted Akrura, standing up in the royal enclosure. 'Chanur must not wrestle with a boy.'

The cry was taken up by the Yadava chiefs. Vasudeva looked on in silence, his heart throbbing with hope and fear.

They all knew Chanur's murderous tricks. Whenever he joined in a bout in all seriousness, he never actually broke the rules of the game, but he had been known on many such occasions to have suffocated his antagonist or

cracked his ribs by the sheer weight of his heavy body, without ostensibly breaking them.

The Yadava ladies also echoed the shouts of 'No, no, no.' The villagers who sat in the enclosure took up the shout which had been given that morning 'Jaya Krishna,' 'Victory to the son of Nanda !' They thought they had good cause for being proud because Chanur had singled out Krishna for the honour of wrestling with him, the Master of *Bahu-yuddha*. It would be fine sport.

Krishna fearlessly looked into Chanur's rolling eyes and shook his head with a smile.

'Are you afraid to wrestle with me, my gay friend ?' jeered Chanur.

Akrura looked at Kamsa and saw how glad he was at the way that Chanur was behaving.

'Lord of Andhakas, this is unfair; it is against the ancient canons of *Bahu-yuddha*,' remonstrated Akrura. Kamsa made no reply.

'No, no, no,' came the shouts of the Yadavas again.

'Ah, ah, afraid ?' repeated Chanur in an insulting way.

'My father forbids it,' Krishna replied quickly.

'He would, naturally,' jeered Chanur. 'He knows that you can only dance with milk-maids, doesn't he ?'

'Yes, I can dance the *rasa* all right,' Krishna replied. He stood up and folded his hands before Nanda. His voice rang out : 'Father, do not withhold your permission.'

With a defiant gesture, he took off his head-dress, *dhoti* and scarf, and handed them to his friend Uddhava. He stood only in his tight-strung thongs like the God of Love, lithe and graceful in every limb, ready for the combat.

'Chanur, I am ready,' he said. And the spectators ignorant of Chanur's murderous intentions shouted 'Jaya Jaya.'

THE PROPHECY COMES TRUE

Balarama's anger was at white heat; he would have answered the challenge in his own characteristic way when first Chanur gave it. But, when it was a matter of knowing the right time and occasion, he always waited for a lead from his younger brother and would not take the initiative unless he had his tacit approval. Once Krishna had accepted Chanur's challenge, Musthika, the tall athlete with the whipcord muscles, leered at Balarama.

'And you ! Why do *you* hesitate ? Are you a girl too ?' he asked as he stepped up to Balarama.

Balarama's eyes flashed with terrific anger. Krishna's willingness to wrestle with Chanur was enough for him. He could not wait to take off his head-dress, or his scarf, or his *dhoti*. He stood up; his powerful right arm shot out; the unwary champion, hit in the face, reeled, tottered and narrowly saved himself from falling.

In a moment Balarama stepped into the arena, and Musthika, recovering his balance, jumped upon him like a tiger. And the two giants were locked in a fierce embrace, rocking each other. Soon, body locked with body, they were rolling on the ground.

The spectators watched the two athletes breathlessly. Many stood up in excitement. And whenever Musthika was worsted, cries of '*sadhu, sadhu*' (well done, well done) came from thousands of throats.

Krishna had also stepped into the arena, coolly eyeing the man-mountain's huge hands and rolling eyes. Then he slapped his biceps and thighs in defiance, and when Chanur tried to engage him, began to step back little by little towards the royal enclosure.

Krishna warily observed the champion athlete's body and steps. Chanur's eyes and movements had the same fascination as those of a hungry python; they invariably paralysed his antagonist. But Krishna saw that this was no more than a trick. The athlete's greatest asset was his heavy body and his powerful muscles enveloped in rolls of flesh; they always gave him a tremendous crushing power; but, Krishna saw they could be turned to his advantage also. He also saw something that few others had ever noticed: the champion's left leg trod the ground softly and unevenly, some accident had made it less reliable than the other.

Step by step Krishna led Chanur in front of the royal enclosure, moving deftly and quickly, apparently responding to Chanur's attempts to lock his arms with his, but in fact evading blows all the time.

Now they were in front of Kamsa, but keeping pace with Krishna's swift movements for some distance had already had some effect on Chanur. He began to breathe a little harder. He was also annoyed that Krishna, whom he thought only a beginner in the art, should be so active in eluding his grasp. He set his lips hard, came near and swung his arms together to lock Krishna in them.

With a swift dive, Krishna escaped the athlete's grasp, darted around him, and in passing, gave a hard kick at his left leg. Krishna was right; it was the weaker of the two legs; its foothold was shaky. Taken unawares, the champion lost his balance, and his heavy body tottered almost to the ground. Only with the help of his powerful arms could he save himself from falling.

Loud laughter shook the vast crowd as the much-feared champion, with an evident effort, rose to his feet. This unchallenged master of *Babu-yuddha* realised that he had looked ridiculous and he lost his temper. On the other hand, his nimble antagonist, springing on well-balanced feet, was awaiting him as calm and fresh as ever.

Both the combatants halted, each eyeing the other, when their attention was drawn by loud shouts of '*sadhu*,

sadhu.' Applause sounded everywhere; children jumped for joy; their elders looked on with eager excitement. Balarama had thrown Musthika to the ground with such terrific violence that the champion's skull had been broken. He lay on the arena unconscious, blood trickling from his nose.

Chanur was wild; Krishna as cool as ever. They approached each other. Their arms were locked in each other's. A grim struggle followed. Each one tried his favourite trick, only to be outwitted by the other. Chanur had the advantage of his weight and long practice, but Krishna had had experience of all possible tricks when wrestling in the forest of Vrindavan, and so he knew how to deal with whatever move the other made. If that other had long arms, he had a lithe body and superhuman agility. Chanur was impatient to assert his superiority; his antagonist was patient and cool.

Chanur soon realised that he was almost out of breath, while Krishna so far had shown no signs of being tired. He therefore decided to use his fist, which had never failed. When faced with a doubtful issue he would do so. He would use his long and powerful arms to catch hold of his antagonist suddenly and gathering his heavy weight into one effective effort of his muscles, throw him on to the ground. Once the antagonist had fallen to the ground, he would leap upon him with such terrific force as to crush his ribs or choke him into unconsciousness by the sheer weight of his body. The trick had invariably proved irresistible and had often been fatal to the antagonist. Apparently death would appear to be accidental; the rules of the game would remain unbroken according to the letter.

Chanur, in an attempt to play this trick, bore hard upon Krishna with all his strength. Krishna tottered. He was on the point of falling to the ground. But with rare presence of mind, he brought the steely strength of his muscles to bear on the champion's arm and twisted it. Both fell to the ground at the same time, but Chanur was not able to fall upon Krishna with his crushing weight, as he

had expected to do. By a side movement, his antagonist had evaded the full and direct impact of the champion's weight and, though still locked in his arms, had saved himself.

Chanur, frustrated, was mad with fury. His favourite trick had failed. He was out of breath. He had made himself ridiculous. His murderous instincts were therefore roused as he saw Krishna slipping out of his grasp; he remembered his master's orders; and his hands sought Krishna's throat.

Krishna had anticipated the move. Before his neck could come within the champion's fatal grasp, he had twisted himself free from his side and sprung away. '*Dhik, dhik*, Chanur' (I defy you, Chanur), he said.

The spectators who had by now fully entered into the spirit of this combat, also shouted '*Dhik, dhik*' at Chanur.

Chanur fumbled in the air; then with the aid of his arm, rose from the ground. He stared at Krishna with blood-shot eyes and went for him. Krishna sprang from side to side, backwards and forwards. He would just touch the opponent's arm, elude his grasp and jump aside.

Chanur was coming to the end of his strength; he could not keep up this struggle against this cunning antagonist. His vision also was failing.

Then before Chanur realised, Krishna jumped on the athlete with the agility of a panther and pressed him down to the ground. The champion fell like a mighty tree struck by lightning. Krishna continued his hold of his antagonist, and sat astride his chest. Unruffled by the thunderous applause which greeted his ears, Krishna looked at the champion's blood-shot eyes.

'Chanur, admit defeat,' Krishna said. 'Save yourself.' The only response was a sudden movement on his part to try to throw Krishna off. But Krishna held on to Chanur's head and kept it firmly pressed to the ground. Though the champion's attempts to throw Krishna off him were useless, he kept on trying to wriggle free. But his strength was failing. The muscles of his neck were swollen

because of his vain effort to raise his head. But he was helpless. Krishna continued to keep his head firmly pressed to the ground.

Chanur made yet another frantic effort. He tried to reach Krishna's throat. His fingers clawed at it.

Krishna could see what the champion was at, and decided to show him no mercy. He suddenly stopped pressing the champion's head to the ground, smashed Chanur's nose with his fist and then hammered at his eyes, mouth and ears.

Chanur's nose was broken. His teeth were smashed. His eyes were all but blinded. Blood flowed copiously from his nose and mouth and the champion fell back unconscious, his face a blood-stained lump.

Thunderous shouts of '*sadhu, sadhu*' rent the air. In rapturous enthusiasm, the Yadavas rushed out of their respective enclosures and ran forward to hail Krishna.

Things moved fast, as if in an instant. Krishna cast a glance at Kamsa. He saw that no sooner had Chanur become unconscious than the Prince growled like a wild beast; rose from his seat, sword in hand; and rushed out of the royal enclosure — only to be intercepted by Akrura.

At that moment, he also saw an armed warrior, apparently a Magadhan, pointing a sword at his father, Vasudeva, who had risen at the same time as Akrura. But, before the stranger's sword could pierce him, the Magadhan was struck down by General Pradyota. The royal guests had stood up, each in his place with his bare weapon in his hand, ready to defend his life if necessary.

The next moment, Krishna heard a sudden uproar from the royal enclosure where the Yadava chiefs could be seen, grasping their weapons. The Magadhan chiefs had fallen upon them.

Though all this happened almost simultaneously, Krishna understood its full significance. He rose from kneeling on the dying champion, and took a step forward to where Akrura had intercepted Kamsa.

Akrura tried to stop Kamsa. 'No, no,' he shouted. Krishna also saw the grim murderous look with which Kamsa turned towards the saintly chief of the Vrishnis and gave him a blow hard enough to send him full length to the ground.

Kamsa, having felled Akrura to the ground, turned to Krishna. As he did so, his diadem fell from his head; his long hair was within easy grasp. Krishna jumped behind him, caught hold of his hair and pulled him to the ground. Kamsa was dazed. His sword fell from his hands. He knew that he was being dragged to the ground by his enemy. In a momentary flash, the memory of the prophecy and of his efforts to escape from it came back to him. He saw his arch-enemy triumphant as a god, and the fear of God whom he had always repudiated entered his heart.

In the meantime, Balarama had sensed the danger which threatened Vasudeva, and, snatching a mace from a Magadhan warrior, rushed to the help of the Yadavas who were fighting to protect his father.

Utter confusion prevailed. Unarmed people were fleeing. Women were shrieking. Arms clashed; the Yadavas and the Magadhans closed on one another.

Krishna saw that there was only one way to stop this mad carnage. **THE MOMENT HAD COME.**

He picked up Kamsa's sword which lay near his feet. It flashed and descended; and Kamsa's head, severed from its body, rolled to the ground.

He picked up from the ground the gold-bordered conch which had once hung on Kamsa's shoulders and blew a sharp, shrill, imperious blast on it.

The tumult was stilled. The people were taken aback at first. Then they realised what had happened. They saw Vasudeva's son standing with a sword in one hand over the severed body of the tyrant, blowing the trumpet blast of victory. Inspired by a wave of exultation, they rushed to hail the Saviour.

Krishna threw the sword away and went to the spot where Vasudeva stood, protected by Balarama's mace. He prostrated himself before his father and said with humility : ' Father, give me your blessing.'

Vasudeva, overcome with emotion, lifted his son and embraced him. As he did so, he sobbed aloud, his head on the shoulder of the son for whom he had waited so long. THE PROPHECY HAD COME TRUE.

NOTES

Chapter 5

1. An ancient ritual recognised by the Smritis, according to which under certain strict conditions an elder brother can beget a child on the childless widow of a younger brother.—*Gautama*, XVIII. 4-8; *Manu*, IX. 57; *Kautilya*, I. 17; *Narada*, 82. *Mahabharata*, Adi Parva, 120.

Chapter 9

1. The dragged-out one.

Chapter 15

1. The king who never told a lie.

Chapter 18

1. Hindu wives always referred to their husband by some term of respect till the post-War vulgarising influence of Hollywood culture taught some of them in the large cities to refer to their husbands by his personal name and as 'thou.'
2. A term used by a wife for her husband's elder brother.

Chapter 34

1. A respectful way of addressing one's husband. It means 'son of a noble Arya.'

