

Bhishma

King Shantanu was riding along the river all by himself. He felt restless and dissatisfied. He often felt like this. For though he was a mighty monarch and one of the descendants of king Bharat and had every comfort at his disposal yet he had not been able to find a suitable bride.

All at once as if in answer to his prayers he saw an extremely beautiful woman standing by the bank of the river. Shantanu was so captivated by her beauty that he wanted to marry her straightaway. But the maiden was willing to marry him only under one condition. The condition was that he would never forbid her from doing anything nor ask for any explanation of her actions.

The king readily agreed and soon they were married. A year passed and the queen had a son. To the king's dismay she threw the child into the river.

In seven years she had seven sons and each time she threw the baby into the river. When her eighth son was born the king could no longer control himself. He forbade her to drown the eighth child and also asked for an explanation of her behaviour.

The queen smiled sadly and said, "This child is destined to live. I would not have drowned him. However, since you have broken your promise I must leave you and go away."



Before leaving she told Shantanu the reason for her strange actions. "I am no mortal," she said. "I am the river deity Ganga and the children born to me were gods in their previous birth. I threw them in the river to release them from a curse." She then explained that there were eight brothers in heaven known as Ashta Vasu. Once they paid sage Vasishtha a visit and

the wife of the eldest brother took great fancy to Nandini, the miraculous cow that belonged to the sage. She coaxed the brothers into stealing the cow. Vasishta, outraged at their unholy conduct, cursed the eight brothers that they would be reborn on earth as mortals.

Ganga stopped speaking and looked at the little baby in her arms and said, "This one was the eldest brother. Being older than the others his sin was the greatest. So he will have to spend a whole lifetime on earth." Saying this she placed the child in the king's lap and disappeared.

The king named the child Devavrata. Shantanu was a devoted father. He spent every minute of his free time with Devavrata looking after all his needs. He taught the little prince to ride a horse and shoot an arrow.

When the prince grew up the best tutors were appointed to teach him. From sage Vasishta he learnt the Vedas and under sage Parasuram he soon excelled in all the military arts. One day the hermits told the king that they had taught all they knew to the young prince. They assured the king that there never had been a worthier heir to the throne of Hastinapur. There was no other prince on earth who could be a

match to Devavrata either in strength, courage or knowledge. The king's eyes filled with pleasure when he heard what the great sages had to say. He bowed to them and said, "I am lucky, for besides being every thing you have said, he is a kind and loving son."

Soon after Shantanu had a ceremony in the palace in which he declared Devavrata as the crown prince or the heir apparent to his throne. Four years later while out hunting King Shantanu saw a beautiful girl. He was captivated by her beauty and wished to marry her. She was the daughter of the head fisherman. When the king made his proposal, the girl's father flatly refused saying that because of her poor origin no one would give her the respect due to a queen and her son would never have the right to sit on the throne. He was willing to consent to the marriage only if her son could be the crown prince instead of Devavrata. The king could not concede this demand and so he returned to the palace feeling dejected for he could not forget the beautiful maiden. Though the king did not tell anything to his son, Devavrata soon learnt the cause of his father's sorrow. Immediately he harnessed his horse to a chariot and rode off to find Satyawati, the fisherman's daughter. The prince met her father and told him, "I have come personally to tell you that I have never coveted my father's crown and I am willing

to give up my right to the throne in favour of Satyavati's child if she marries my father."

Everyone in the kingdom knew what a noble and unselfish young man the prince was; but the fisherman looked dissatisfied. "I know well enough that you will



keep your word," he said, "but some day you will marry and have sons; what then? They will certainly fight for the crown. It is too much to expect that they will give up their claims because of your promise."

The young prince had not thought of all this before. He realised that there was some truth in what the man said. He also realised that to him the most important thing in life was his father's happiness. No sacrifice was too great if it could make his father smile again. There was only one thing to do. He made another great vow, "I promise you," he said, "that I shall never marry, so I can never have children to lay claim on the succession." It was a tremendous sacrifice and a terrible promise for a young prince to make. The very earth trembled and the clouds rumbled as Devavrata uttered the vow. From that day Devavrata came to be known as "Bhishma," which means the terrible one.

"And now will you allow me to take your daughter to my father?" He asked quietly. The fisherman was by now quite over-awed by all the happenings and realised the young prince was no ordinary mortal. He rushed in to bring his daughter. Bhishma touched his stepmother's feet respectfully and placed her in his own chariot. Then taking the place of the charioteer he drove straight towards his father's palace.

When Shantanu heard everything he was at first filled with dismay and then a profound awe by the utter selflessness and extreme generosity of his own child. He granted him a boon. "I bless you my son," said the king,

“that as long as you desire to live, none can ever endanger your life. Death itself can never come near you till you yourself want it.”

He looked at his son and the words of the sages passed his mind. Here was a prince born to the throne yet he had given it up. He would crown many kings but never would he wear the crown himself.

The king married Satyavati and in due course had two sons. His elder son Chitrangad was barely out of his teens when Shantanu died.

After his father's death Bhishma crowned Chitrangad the king. But Chitrangad was a wild young man who kept getting into trouble and shortly after coming to the throne he lost his life in a duel with another king.

Vichitra Virya the younger son was yet a child but Bhishma performed his coronation with great pomp and splendour. On Bhishma fell the task of looking after and giving a proper training to the growing king as well as managing the huge kingdom.

When Vichitra Virya came of age, Bhishma began to look around for a suitable bride for his brother. He came to know that the king of Kashi had three extremely beautiful daughters. He was holding a swayamvara so that they could marry the men of their own choice.

Kings and princes from all over had been invited to the swayamvara.

The swayamvara was about to begin. The three princesses Amba, Ambika and Ambalika were ushered into the gorgeously decorated hall. All three sisters were graceful and charming. Two of them looked a little uncertainly at the rows of kings and princes, for indeed it would be confusing and difficult to make a choice. Only the eldest of them looked calm and confident. Amba had for many months been in love with the Pallava king and was secretly in touch with him. She had seen from the corner of her eyes that he was present in the swayamvara, and she smiled to herself. There was a sudden distraction at that moment as Bhishma burst into the hall. Every pair of eyes turned towards the door. There, blocking the whole entrance stood a warrior-like youth, very tall and extremely handsome. They looked in surprise at his attire for he seemed to be dressed for a battle field rather than a swayamvara. Quite unaware of the stares he strode towards the three princesses and announced, "I am here with the intention of choosing one of you as the queen of Hastinapur." He looked at the three sisters and frowned uncertainly. Next moment his brows cleared and he laughed aloud. "It's impossible to make a selection. All three of you



are so pretty,” said Bhishma. “I have made up my mind. The king of Hastinapur will have three beautiful brides.”

There was a horrified silence for a minute. The next moment there was utter confusion as all the angry participants of the swayamvara rushed towards the overbearing stranger, determined to finish him on the spot. Bhishma was, of course, prepared for this. He jumped up on the dais and began fighting with his back to the wall. The girls watched the battle in amazement. There was one man fighting against so many but every antagonist fell before him and many did not dare to go near him again. At last Bhishma triumphantly carried

away the three sisters in a specially covered chariot. When after driving for a while Bhishma realised that the poor girls were absolutely scared out of their wits, he did his best to lay their minds at rest. He told them that it was rare good fortune to marry the king of Hastinapur and how mild and sweet tempered his brother was. He assured them that he would protect them from all perils on the way. He also told them many stories, laughing and joking all the way. So by the time they reached Hastinapur, Ambika and Ambalika were quite cheerful and willing to marry Vichitra Virya but Amba kept weeping and sighing all the way. When Bhishma learnt of her love for the Pallava Raja he was filled with pity for the girl. He told her gently that had he known about it before he would never have brought her away. However, he consoled her by saying that he would never force her to marry his brother and that he would send her to the Pallava king as soon as he could arrange it.

So Vichitra Virya married Ambika and Ambalika and lived happily. Next Bhishma made arrangements for Amba to leave for the Pallava kingdom. He also sent a note to the Pallava king explaining everything. When Amba confronted the Pallava king he refused to accept her. "You should not have come here," he told her coldly. "For I now consider you as wedded to

another.” When weeping bitterly Amba tried to explain everything, he refused to hear her and told her that he would never marry her.



Feeling utterly humiliated by the rejection and in her heart blaming Bhishma for her predicament Amba searched out Parasuram. She felt that since Parasuram had been his guru only he could punish Bhishma.

When Parasuram heard the maiden's woeful story he at once summoned Bhishma before him. He told

Bhishma sternly that the only way he could make up for everything was by marrying the girl himself.

The sage was annoyed when Bhishma told him that he was bound by a promise and could not marry.

“I shall destroy you if you dare to disobey my orders,” said the sage unreasonably and attacked Bhishma with all his might. Bhishma fought back in self-defence. The teacher and the pupil fought with all their skill but neither could gain supremacy over the other. The fight continued day after day and would have gone on indefinitely had not a few devtas led by the divine sage Narada intervened. Suddenly both the opponents found themselves disarmed. Their weapons seemed to have just disappeared into thin air. They both looked at each other a little sheepishly, shrugged their shoulders and went their own ways. But Amba was not willing to forgive or forget. She sat on the bank of the river Yamuna and called on Lord Shiva to help her. After a prolonged meditation she was able to get the blessing she wanted from Shiva. Shiva granted her the boon that she would be reborn as a female warrior by the name of Shikhandi and would be responsible for the death of Bhishma.

After this she killed herself by jumping into

river Yamuna. Soon after she was born as the daughter of Dhrupad and was named Shikhandi.



In the meantime Vichitra Virya died after ruling for seven years. He left behind him two children Dhritrashtra who was blind and Pandu who was a pale and sickly child. Satyawati who was the queen mother now implored Bhishma again and again to get married for she was afraid that with two such weak children the dynasty could come to an end at any time. But Bhishma would not hear of it. She also released him from the promise he had made her and begged him to

ascend the throne in the greater interest of the state. But it was useless. For Bhishma only smiled and answered, "Don't worry I will look after both, the king and the kingdom."

So once more on Bhishma fell the task of training princes who were not his sons and ruling a kingdom of which he was not the ruler.

When the time came Bhishma found brides for Dhritrashtra and Pandu. Gandhari the princess of Gandhar married Dhritrashtra. The moment Gandhari realised that her husband was blind she herself blindfolded her own eyes for she could not bear to enjoy the light from which her husband was shut out. In due course Dhritrashtra had a hundred sons and they came to be known as Kauravas.

Pandu was married to princess Kunti and they had five sons. Though both the families belonged to the same Kuru dynasty the sons of Pandu came to be known as Pandavas.

Bhishma appointed Kripacharya and later Dhronacharya to train the children of Dhritrashtra and Pandu. Dhronacharya was known to be one of the most skillful warriors of his times.

The children were all bright and eager to learn but right from the beginning it was obvious that Arjun the

third son of Pandu was the cleverest and outshone all his brothers and cousins. Bhima was the strongest and Yudhisthir, the eldest son of Pandu was the noblest, most honest and straightforward of all the children. It was equally clear to Bhishma that Duryodhan the eldest of Dhritrashtra's hundred sons, resented the Pandavas' success and was jealous. He was cunning and treacherous and Bhishma realised that before long the terrible jealousy would turn to a murderous hate but there was nothing Bhishma could do.

The children, one and all, adored Bhishma and called him Pitamaha or grandfather. They often sat on his lap admiring his long silvery beard or arranging mock battles with him. Bhishma with his silver hair and noble features looked even more imposing than he did in his youth and every one was always in awe of this great figure. Since Dhritrashtra was blind Pandu sat on the throne and ruled the kingdom for a few years. But he did not live long. After Pandu's death, Dhritrashtra declared Yudhisther the crown prince. This was too much for Duryodhan and in his heart Duryodhan swore to annihilate the Pandavas.

He tried to poison Bhima. Another time he trapped the five brothers and their mother in a house of lac and set fire to it but somehow all his treacherous

plots came to nothing. Bhishma watched Duryodhan's growing unscrupulousness and became uneasy. He advised Duryodhan again and again to live peacefully with his cousins but it was of no avail.



Duryodhan often suggested that their grandfather was partial to the Pandavas but did not dare to say it in so many words.

“I am afraid,” said Bhishma, “all this bitterness and rivalry can bring nothing but disaster. If things go on this way it can only end in a war.”

Duryodhan asked with a slight malice in his voice, “If there is a war between the Kauravas and Pandavas, on whose side would you fight, grandfather?”

“God forbid,” said Bhishma, “that such a situation should arise, but if it does, you know very well that I owe my allegiance to our father and I must fight for the Kauravas.”

“I know your loyalty grandfather,” said Duryodhan. “You will fight for us, but your heart will be with the Pandavas.”

Bhishma could not deny this statement. The five brothers had a special place in his heart. He felt that he had at last found in them all the kingly virtues he had been looking for in vain in three generations of princes. The Pandavas had all the fine qualities that Bhishma admired and possessed himself in such abundance.

Duryodhan did not wish to annoy the great Bhishma. So when sometime later, Bhishma suggested that it was Duryodhan's duty to give Yudhisthir half of the kingdom Duryodhan pretended to agree willingly

and pacified his grandfather by giving a part of the kingdom to the Pandavas without any fuss.

The part that was given to Yudhisthir was, however, wild and covered with jungle, lying towards the Jamuna. Yet such was Yudhisthir's efficiency and determination that soon he had been able to erect a mighty city with fortifications so strong that no army could destroy it for many generations to come. This new capital was Indraprastha and the fame of Indraprastha spread far and wide.

This re-awakened all the old hatred and bitterness in the heart of the eldest Kaurava and he began once more to relentlessly pursue his one aim in life—the destruction of the Pandavas. When he could not kill them he decided to get rid of them by sending them into exile. This Duryodhan did with the help of Shakuni his maternal uncle. Yudhisthir was challenged to play a game of dice. The entire game was rigged. Yudhisthir lost everything ; and at the end of the game the five brothers and their wife Draupadi had to go into exile for thirteen years. Another condition was that the last year of the exile had to be spent in disguise. If any of them was discovered during that period then the Pandavas would have to go into exile for another thirteen years.

At the end of the thirteen years the Pandavas returned to claim their kingdom but Duryodhan told them blankly that they would have to fight for it. All requests of Bhishma fell on deaf ears.

So began the greatest war of ancient times—the battle of Mahabharata. There was a spectacular array of warriors lined up on the field of Kurukshetra. Row after row of warriors each falling in place according to their ranks. The bows and arrows, the swords and shields and the spears and maces glittered in the sun. The generals and soldiers of higher ranks were on elephants and horse-drawn chariots. There were thousands of soldiers on horse-back and on foot.

The war began and the battlefield was filled with the sound of clashing steel, screams of falling men, trumpeting elephants and neighing horses. The battle raged on for nine days but the end did not seem to be in sight, for both the parties had some of the finest and most skillful warriors of all times. Both the sides were well matched and though there were many hundred victims each day none of the opponents could gain supremacy.

But if there was one greater than all others who dominated the entire battlefield it was the mighty figure of Bhishma. He looked like some avenging angel as he sped on in his chariot creating havoc on the battlefield.

Duryodhan had appointed Bhishma as the supreme commander of his army. At first Bhishma had been reluctant to fight but once he took charge he made himself forget everything except his duty and it was his duty as the general-in-charge to do his utmost on the



battlefield. Bhishma at his best was unsurpassable. No man or animal could stand before him. No weapon

could destroy him. He loomed large like a demi-god making all others appear small and insignificant.

A tempestuous battle raged on the fields of Kurukshetra for nine days and it became evident to the Pandavas that they could never hope to win the war while their grandfather lived.

On the ninth night when darkness fell and the soldiers of both camps sat resting in their tents, Bhishma was startled to see the curtain of his tent being lifted and the five brothers walked noiselessly into his presence.

Bhishma was happy to see the five men whom he had loved as his own sons. His heart warmed specially when his eyes fell on Yudhisthir. He looked at the brothers looking shamefaced and embarrassed and he knew at once the reason for their visit. They had come to ask for the most precious gift a man could give and Bhishma knew that he would willingly give it.

He waited for them to speak and there was a twinkle in his eyes for he was amused by the guilty look on their faces—a look which meant that they had come to ask for something they had no right to ask for.

“Dear grandfather,” said the eldest breaking the silence, “we would never have come here had we not

been sure that you want truth and justice to win over falsehood and treachery.”

“Ask for whatever you want,” said the grand old man. “You know I can never refuse you anything.”

“Grandfather,” said Yudhisthir softly, for there was love and sadness in his voice, “it is impossible for us to achieve victory so long as you remain the leader of the Kaurava army. Yet everyone knows that even the shadow of death cannot stray near you until you will it yourself. We have come to learn how to slay you.”

The grand old man smiled gently. At last the moment of his release had come. Many times during his lifetime Bhishma had wanted to rest but always the heavy burden of duties had spurred him on.

He had always considered it his sacred duty to look after the state and the people. But looking at Yudhisthir he realised that here was another pair of hands, younger but as able as his own to hold the reins of the kingdom. His duty was over and he was prepared to die.

So Bhishma told them, “There are two types before whom I lay down my arms—the physically weak or a woman. If you can stand behind any woman warrior and shoot arrows at me then I will be

unable to fight back.” The brothers knew at once that the selfless man was referring to Shikhandi. Tears trickled down Arjun’s cheeks as he imagined himself shooting arrows at the beloved relative—the man who had given them so much of love and affection and was dearer to them than their own father.

Bhishma saw Arjun weakening and raised his hand, “Once on the battlefield a warrior should forget everything but his duty. Tomorrow you can be sure that I will do my best to finish you, so try your best to get me before I get you.”

The brothers, encouraged by their grandfather’s words, took their leave after taking his blessings. On the tenth day the war began as usual. Bhishma, true to his words, created panic in the enemy ranks. He moved like a whirlwind causing death and destruction wherever he went. It was sometime later that the first arrow hit him. He looked up and saw Arjun’s chariot pursuing him. Krishna was as usual Arjun’s charioteer. Next to Krishna stood Shikhandi and from behind her Arjun shot arrow after arrow at the head of his horse. Bhishma tried again and again to strike at Arjun but the young man took good care to hide behind Shikhandi. Bhishma laughed out loudly when he saw Arjun crouching behind a woman but he refused to attack Shikhandi. Bhishma had never in his life raised



his hands against a woman and he would not do so now.

As the sun began to go down in the west, Arjun's attack grew more violent and soon his grandfather's entire back—from his shoulders down to his heels—was covered by darts.

As the sun touched the horizon and reddened the western sky the great man fell from his chariot. As if on a signal the battle stopped and every single man rushed towards the fallen leader. Bhishma lay on the arrows that had pierced his body. It was as if he was lying on a bed of arrows. His grandsons wanted to pull the arrows out of his body and lay him down on a comfortable bed but the warrior shook his head. "I am lying on a bed most suitable for a soldier," he said. "Now all I need is something to rest my head on."

Some people rushed to get soft feather pillows for the wounded man but again Bhishma shook his head and looked at Arjun. Arjun, understanding what his grandfather wanted, shot three arrows on the ground and gently laid Bhishma's head on the arrows saying, "I have given you a pillow suitable for a hero."

But Bhishma had no intention of dying just yet. One reason was that the time was not auspicious. It was the dark phase of the moon and he wanted

to die on a full moon. Besides he could not die in peace till he saw **the** end of the battle.

So Bhishma lay serenely on his bed of arrows for many days till, at last, the Pandavas emerged victorious. Yudhisthir was crowned the king and he came to his dear beloved grandfather for his last blessing. Bhishma spoke to him for a long time telling him his duties as a king. Bhishma made one last request. He wanted a drink of fresh water ; and Arjun shot an arrow into the earth. It went deep into the ground and out sprang a fresh water fountain. Bhishma drank the cool sweet water and smiled his farewell. He closed his eyes and there was a gentle smile on his face for, at last, he was ready to go back to heaven and take his place among the devtas and be one of the Asta Vasus again.