



A Ray of Hope

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An emaciated careworn old woman, with a hooked nose and sharp eyes, and a short fair-looking girl were standing among a crowd of curious onlookers. The old woman doubted if she could manage to approach the inscrutable old sadhu and introduce to him a big fear that lurked beneath her anguished heart. The fear had arisen from an oft-repeated astrological prediction of danger to her adopted son's life in his 28th year.

An elderly Italian man and his alluring young wife were keenly observing the scene. The people had gathered around the old sadhu densely.

The Italian man's wife showed a coin to the sadhu and said, "Can you change this silver coin into gold?"

The sadhu smiled at her cordially. She immediately discovered that the Italian silver coin had become transformed into gold. Her eyes became wide with surprise. She kept gazing into the sadhu's face with suspense.

"Is it magic?" said a voice.

"Yes, this is nothing but pure magic. After some time, the silver coin will get back its original colour," said the Italian man.

The sadhu ignored him and said to his wife, "Never try to get anything in exchange for this gold coin. If you do so, the Sun God will afflict you with a serious disease and shorten your lifespan. Worship the coin in right earnest. It will confer many benefits on you."

A buzz of voices followed. The people talked in whispers. The old sadhu was entirely unconcerned. He was looking at nobody and thinking of nothing. The children were impatient to see some other miracles to happen. The sadhu was lost in thought and disinclined to attract anyone's attention.

A man and his wife came charging through the crowd and prostrated themselves before the sadhu who raised his right hand and muttered a blessing. They got up and sat before him.

The man said in a voice laden with humility, "Baba, now the doctors say there is no trace of cancer in me. They are unable to figure out what happened. I will dedicate my life to your service."

"Son, I hope you remember what you promised me. Didn't we agree that you would give me nothing if I cured you? Now go home and forget me."

Dedicate yourself to the service of Shiva. Worship and pray to the mighty god as much as you can."

They touched the sadhu's feet reverently and walked away through the crowd.

The Italian man went close to the sadhu and said with hands folded. "Please, forgive us if we have hurt you. Would you mind giving us your telephone number?"

The old woman and her granddaughter were disappointed as more and more people were pouring in. Somebody told them they could find the sadhu there the next day. Hence, they decided to return home.

The next day it was afternoon. The little girl Sita and her grandmother Parbati were anxiously waiting for a meeting with the sadhu. Today Sita was able to see the sadhu clearly. His grayish hair was twisted into tightly curled strands. He was a tall thin man with sharp features and perfectly serene eyes. He was dressed casually in saffron and wore no shoes. His close-set teeth flashed in sunlight. His beard was unkempt and gray. He was sitting on a patch of ground by the side of a crowded street. A black dog lying beside him and a cobra inside a small wooden box were his companions. He said they were two great souls in disguise.

Men, women, children and old people were looking at the sadhu respectfully. The temple of Lord Jagannath was visible from there. The sadhu had taken a short respite from fortune telling. The audience was in a fret to hear him speak. He rarely read peoples' palms or their horoscopes to make forecasts. Nor was it necessary for him to see the person physically about whom he had to answer questions. The people were familiar with his insight and prayed to him as devotedly as they prayed to Lord Jagannath.

The sadhu opened his eyes and cast a frank look at Parbati whose hair had turned snow-white and the face was covered with wrinkles. He cleared



his throat and said in sympathetic tones. "A thought is causing you constant worry. You adopted a child many years ago. Two astrologers predicted his premature death, didn't they? One of them died a month ago and the other, a hare-lipped old man, is still living. A sadhu also came to your house last year. He also predicted the same thing."

Parbati walked close to the sadhu. She was crying. She fell at the great man's feet and said "Baba, you are God! The astrologers said that my son Aju would die in his 28th year. Afterwards, a sadhu came from Benaras. He made the same prediction. Can't you suggest something that might conjure away the danger?"

The sadhu patted Parbati's head and said, "Don't worry! I'll do the best possible things to prevent you son's early death. However, I cannot give you any guarantee."

Parbati sat up and scanned the great man's kind face. The audience could see a faint expression of hope on her cheerless face. They muttered and whispered among themselves about the sadhu's greatness Parbati's granddaughter Sita, a girl of about eight, was crying.

The Sadhu observed the girl a while and said. "This child was six months old when her mother died, wasn't she? She hanged herself. You still do not know why. A young tantrik had offered to marry her. The tantric took revenge on your daughter-in-law. He applied black magic and had her killed. A spirit hanged her to death. Wasn't your daughter in law having a terrible dream one month before her death? She always complained about a large black cat with fiery eyes pouncing on her during sleep. I need to do some explaining regarding this. But I'll not do so now."

The sadhu's short description of her family history stunned Parbati. She had not ever seen such a sadhu in life. The little girl Sita understood nothing and only stared into the great man's calm eyes. She considered him to be a mysterious character.

The sadhu said to Parbati, "Your granddaughter will give birth to a wonderful son. He will be deeply religious and learned in tantra. He may not be as famous as the Buddha or Mahavira, but he will possess unlimited spiritual strength. Let me call him a gift from Shiva. Your granddaughter loves to pray to Shiva."

"When is she going to marry? Will she get a good husband?" asked Parbati.

"She will marry a 40-year old man when she completes her 12th year," said the sadhu.

"Oh no! I'll never allow her to marry such an old man!" cried Parbati.

"You can't go against the will of Shiva," said the sadhu. "Of course, you'll not live so long as to see my prediction come true. Don't be upset. Your granddaughter will be a proud mother. She'll live a perfectly happy life towards the latter part of her life. Initially, she'll have to bear a lot of pain and suffering on account of her husband's poverty.

"Baba, please suggest something that can help my son to give her in marriage to somebody else. I don't think you want a 12-year-old girl to marry a 40-year-old man."

Parbati became meditative. Then she said, "Baba, my own son committed suicide the same year that my daughter-in-law died. I'll carry in my heart the sorrow caused by their death till my own death. I thought my Aju would marry and bring home a daughter-in-law. I am already a bereaved mother and mother-in-law. How can I bear the death of my other son? Better to die this moment than live to see my Aju die."

"Your son didn't die," said the sadhu. "He was killed by the same spirit that hand your daughter-in-law to death." He rummaged in a big blue bag for some time and brought out a rudraksha. "This rudraksha has been in my possession since I was 15. It has saved many lives by working many incredible wonders. I'll give this priceless thing to you because your heart is pure and full of love for Shiva. But I'll take it back after your son completes his 28th year. Ask your son to worship the rudraksha twice daily. In the morning and evening. He must take a bath before he performs the worship. He must give up eating meat and fish forever. He must not even touch onion and garlic. He must observe an absolute fast every Monday. Besides, ask him to chant the Mahamritunjaya Mantra 108 times daily and meditate on Shiva at a deserted place at night. Send him to the nearest Shiva temple every Monday and let him offer seven bel leaves and seven stramoni flowers to the god. He must not even drink a drop of water on Mondays!"

Parbati was staring at the sadhu, shocked by confusion and fear. Sita was a pestering her to go home.

The sadhu said to them with a smile, "Go and try to save the boy's life. Shiva is the angriest of all gods. Yet he is very kind. He responds to His devotee's prayer more quickly than any other god or goddess. Worship Shiva. He will save your son."

Parbati and Sita walked homeward. Sita remembered bit by bit what the old sadhu had said to her grandmother. She recalled that a sadhu had visited them and had offered advice to her grandmother to perform a religious ceremony to remove the danger to Uncle Aju's life.



“The sadhu who visited us last year was Bengali-speaking. Was that sadhu a friend of this sadhu? But this sadhu speaks Hindi. How could he know that a Bengali sadhu came to our house last year?”

Parbati kept silent deliberately. She was serious and thinking. “Don’t ask questions. Walk fast. See how the rain is approaching. Let’s get home before it rains.”

“Grandma, didn’t you often say mother used to dream of a huge black cat before she died?” asked Sita.

Parbati did not open her mouth. She walked more quickly. Rain started pattering. Sita was indifferent to the rain, since she was unable to contain her curiosity about the stately old sadhu. She found it had to believe that she would marry a 40-year-old man only after four years. Now she was a girl of 8. She smiled at the forecast that she would give birth to a “wonderful” son. It pained her deeply to think that her grandmother would die before her marriage. She believed each and every word that the sadhu had said.

When they reached home, it was raining hard. Parbati sighted an owl on a branch of the guava tree in front of her house. A wolf emerged out of her cowshed and went away limping in the rain. Parbati’s heart missed a beat and she hurried into the cowshed. A newborn calf lay in a pool of blood.

“Lord, what is going to happen to me!” said Parbati and started weeping.

Two stray cats started a quarrel inside the house. Aju, who had been sleeping, woke up. Parbati entered the house and shoed the cats out. Her bedroom was charged with a nasty smell. The cats had peed and shitted on her bed.

Parbati fell down on the floor and became unconscious. Sita cried noisily. Aju urged her to be quiet and sprinkled water on the old woman’s face.

When Parbati opened her eyes, she found Aju thoughtful. Sita was tense and worried. She had already told Aju that they had seen an owl, a wolf and had heard of a quarrel between two stray cats. Aju had said in reply that all the evil things had started happening and that they portended an impending disaster. He knew what he meant by the word “disaster”. He felt sure he was going to depart from the earth forever. Parbati could clearly read the unhappy expression on the young man’s face. Aju recalled his date of birth. It was 31st March. It was August then. Then counting that he had to stay alive for eight months only, filled him with an unprecedented fear.

Aju eyed Parbati affectionately and said, “Ma, it is impossible to change one’s cruel fate.”

“Whose cruel fate? What cruel fate?” Parbati barked indignantly.

Aju said sullenly, “it is a hopeless case. Do you know what I was dreaming when you reached home? I dreamt that I was in a cremation ground sitting on a heap of skeletons covered with blood-red china roses. Seven dark-skinned naked men, their heads shaved clean, were pouring buckets of mustard oil on me. You told me once that both china roses and mustard oil are suggestive of the dreamer’s approaching death. Is the dream not fatal?”

“You are brooding a lot these days. That’s why you dream evil dreams. Have strong faith in Shiva. No power can snatch you from me,” said Parbati. However, she could not restrain the tears that came to her eyes in great profusion.

Some moments passed in silence. All of them were petrified by Aju’s account of the dream, which lent credibility to the predictions of the astrologers. All the three were now absolutely sure that something dreadful was going to happen. At last, Parbati courage and expressed the determination to undo what, she thought, was predetermined. She offered the rudraksha to Aju and minutely explained the old sadhu’s directions to worship it in the proper way. She said to him that the rudraksha was Shiva in living form. Aju was deeply learned in the puranas and shastras of Hinduism. They often discussed instances as to how Shiva had saved the lives of his devotees. Those instances reinforced their belief that Shiva along had the power to cancel the inevitable.

For a while Parbati forgot her persistent anxiety and took delight in the old sadhu’s prediction that Sita would give birth to a wonder son. She said to Aju, “Son, I’ll die before Sita gets married. The old sadhu said she would birth to a son having the soul-force to perform miracles and do good to distressed people. The old sadhu also said she would marry a 40-year-old man after she completed her 12th year.”

“Why’ll she marry a 40-year-old man? This is quite a mysterious to me,” said Aju.

“I also don’t understand that”, said Parbati. “He said she would be the mother of a ‘wonderful’ son.”

“What does ‘a wonderful son’ mean? Will he possess miraculous powers?” asked Aju.

“Yes, you are right.”

“What sort of miraculous powers?”

“I can’t say. The sadhu didn’t say much regarding this. I am not fortunate enough to live to see him and his powers”.



Parbati paused for some time and was busy thinking. Aju went out to see if the rain had stopped. It was dark outside. He traced out a large shadowy figure at the top of the house and was struck dumb. He decided to keep it secret from Parbati and Sita.

Sita was closely observing a framed photo of Shiva. She wondered why Shiva had three eyes, why he bore the crescent moon on his head and snakes around his neck, why his neck was blue and why he always sat in meditation.

“Grandma, there is a snake behind the photo of Shiva!” Sita cried out in utter panic.

Aju came running into the house and picked a sturdy stick “Where is the snake? Let’s strike it dead!”

“No!” shouted Parbati, “I can see that the snake is a cobra. He is a representative of Shiva. The god is please with me. He’ll save us all. Hence, the appearance of the snake.”

But Sita’s thoughts were different. Since the cobra always symbolized good, she took it for granted that her belief would come true. Surely, she would give birth to a “wonderful” son.

The cobra came out of its hiding with its hood expanded, stopped for a moment and went out. Parbati and Sita folded their hands respectfully. Aju was transfixed where he was.

“Son, don’t worry,” said Parbati. “Shiva is going to protect us all. I am an unfortunate old woman. Therefore, Shiva is kind to me. I lost my daughter-in-law as well as my son. I know I am not going to live long. However, before I close my eyes, I must see the tantrik who killed my daughter-in-law and my son. Why did he kill my son? What harm had he done to him? I will pronounce a curse on the villain. Oh Shiva, if I am honest, if I have not harmed anyone in my lifetime, if my devotion to you is true, make the cruel tantrik blind. Afflict him with leprosy! Let him lose his young son! Let him weep like me forever!”

“Why do you think that a tantrik killed Sita’s mother?” asked Aju.

“Because now I realize that somebody practiced tantrik on my daughter in law. Besides the large black cat, she complained about many other things. She called milk blood. When eating rice, she

complained of a short dark man defecating on her plate. She also heard a strange voice calling her at night. She sometimes said rats were crawling over her body. I considered these things to be hallucinations caused by persistent fever. Today I realize I was wrong.”

“It is not wise to quarrel with such a villain. There is God to punish such people. Every tear that I weep will have its effect on him. Have control over yourself. Commit yourself to the worship of the rudraksha and Shiva.” Although Parbati counseled patience to Aju, she herself was thirsting for revenge. She could not forget and forgive the man who had robbed her of all happiness.

Having eaten her food, Parbati retired to bed. Her faith in Shiva was complete. Yet the rationalist in her provoked a doubt. “Is it really a fact that my Aju will die in his 28th year?” Some moments later, she bothered about the identity of the black cat be?” she said to herself. When she felt sleepy, the thought of her death before Sita’s marriage disturbed her. She closed her eyes and prayed to the wise old sadhu to protect Aju and Sita after her death.

Months went by, and it was found that Aju had become a very dedicated worshipper of Shiva. He regularly worshipped the rudraksha strictly in accordance with the directions of the old Sadhu. Nevertheless, he found it difficult to root out the fear of 31st March. “Will I outlive 31st March and cross my 28th year?” he asked himself every moment. On the contrary, parbati was sure her prayers would not go unrewarded.

Parbati was in her dead daughter-in-law’s village. She was burning with anger, though she looked outwardly cool. She was about to step into the house of the tantrik who had turned her life into a desert.

Parbati entered the tantrik’s house and her eyes stopped over a plump black cat. She quickly discovered that there were a number of black cats in the house. She counted and eleven of them were there.