

The Shades Of Love

a story for every heart

from the pen of
Avtar



BlueRose ONE^{.com}
S t o r i e s M a t t e r

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U. K.

Copyright © Avtar 2026

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

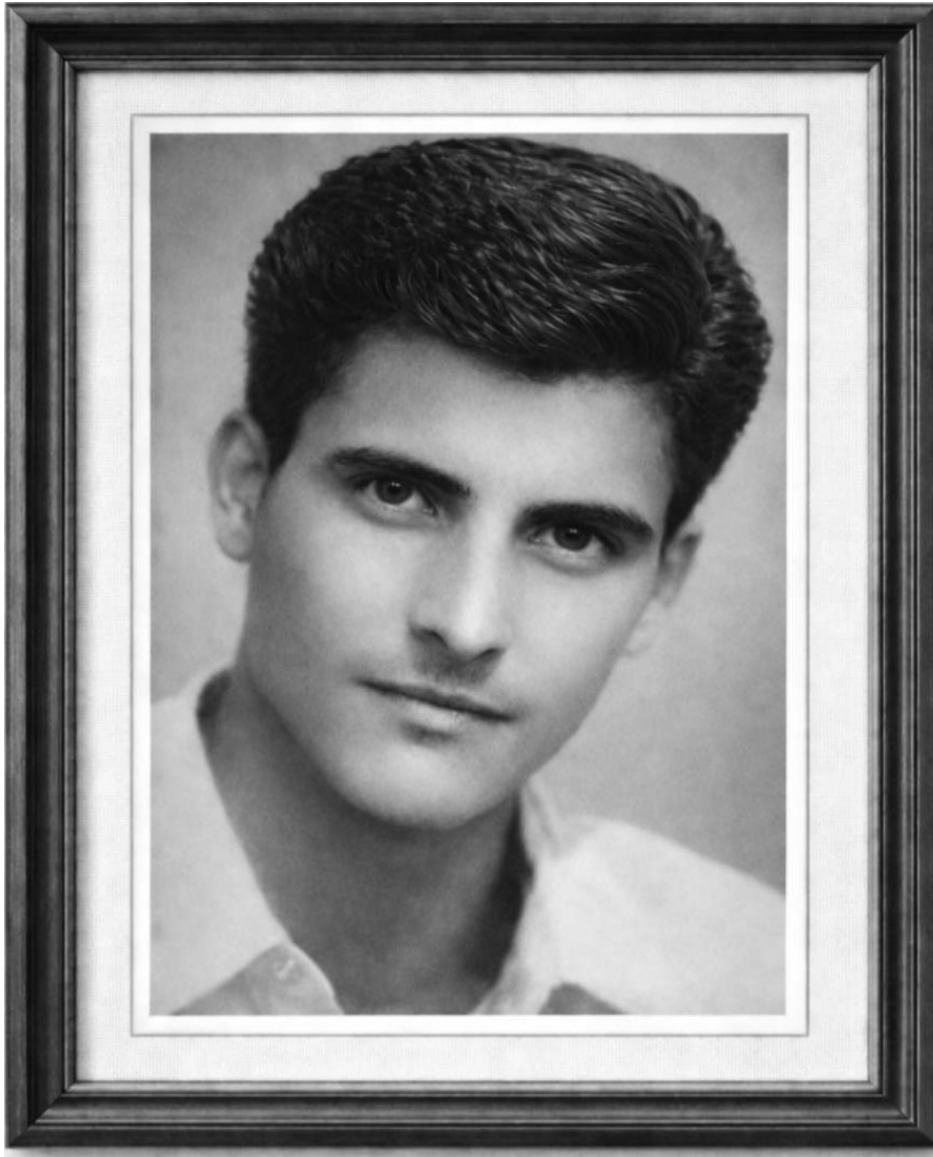
BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS
[www. BlueRoseONE. com](http://www.BlueRoseONE.com)
[info@bluerosepublishers. com](mailto:info@bluerosepublishers.com)
+91 8882 898 898
+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-93-7542-435-2

Cover design: Deepak Katheria
Typesetting: Manisha Rawat

First Edition: July 2026

Dedication



*In loving memory of my beloved brother,
Late Mr. Chain, whose presence remains eternal in
my heart and whose legacy continues
to guide my path.*

Foreword

To live in love for a single moment is to live for a hundred years, and to live in love for a lifetime is something worth dying for. From the cradle to the grave, like a mirage to a musk deer, human beings chase truth, beauty and goodness through their thoughts, actions and feelings; and in crafting my content here, I am no exception. Although everything that needs to be said has already been said and done by great people, I am repeating the same because no one was listening. Therefore, I am unravelling the secrets again- just to remember, not to forget, in the times to come. Needless to say, that this literary endeavour has been a dream project of my life. This love story is, indeed, a retelling of a folklore I heard in my teens – a phase of life overflowing with fanciful flights. Although its plot was small, the substance it offered left an indelible impression on my imagination, paving the way for my thoughts, which inspired me to bring ‘The Shades of Love’ to life. Over the decades, the old folklore faintly dwelled in my heart, its nectar quietly oozing within. As time passed, a thin recall down memory lane nurtured new thoughts and extended my imagination beyond the borders. Though in the beginning, writing came as an unending source of happiness to my imagination, only the supreme high above in the sky knows when I lost myself to this pursuit, and my experience shifted from visualization to realisation. My obsession, combined with the freedom of imagination, brought all my characters to life, and I lived their pain and pleasure throughout this long process of weaving together imagination, thought, and memory. Sarah, the protagonist in the story, may seem a fictitious character to the readers, but I believe she is still alive - in flesh and bone- around each one of us. In the contemporary world, where human bodies have survived but the qualities that make them human have become extinct, she remains divine.

First, I would like to thank the Almighty for helping me complete this dream project, which I have been pursuing for many years. I would like to dedicate this book to my eldest brother, the late Mr. Chain Kumar, about whom I speak little but think much. Although he is no longer with us physically, I still feel his presence around me.

Words fall short when I offer my sincere gratitude to my father, the late Mr. Amer Nath, who profoundly commanded my physical endurance, and to my mother, Mrs. Bimla Devi, who greatly influenced my ideology. I extend

my heartfelt thanks to my brother, Mr. Bijali Sharma, the first critic of my craft, whose constructive criticism and unwavering support have stood by me through thick and thin.

I would also like to thank my loving and caring wife, Mrs. Suman Kumari, whose emotional support- especially whenever I felt low or discouraged- helped me accomplish this work.

I am grateful to my little angels: my daughter Ananya Bharat and my son Atharav Bharat, who remind me daily of how beautiful life is.

Whether this book is read by one or many, the hands that hold it are invaluable to me, and the eyes that are following the sights taking shapes between the words have already made my job noteworthy. I hope that every sentence that you read will bring out a new thought in your mind and follow a fine feeling inside, and every page that you flip through will surely introduce you to the wonderful world that you always deserve to know and explore. On a lighter note, everyone, what I firmly believe, is going to make it to the climax, and that will certainly testify the success of my endeavours, which I call the magic of living in the moment or a trick to trick the time. This literary piece of work is less a reading experience but more enjoying a journey; hence, rather than taking it for a task to be finished as soon as possible, I highly recommend that every reader relish every beautiful sight that it offers along the way.

With great love and respect, I request you to share this book as a gift with someone you love and care for- if, in any way, it brings out the best in you or helps you experience a personal breakthrough that leads to a broader vision to live a blissful life. May it help you realise your own inner gifts and talents.

A warm-hearted welcome to this heaven on the earth.

With regards,

Avtar

Preface

For the author to write this book is no less than an opportunity and a duty towards humanity. The progress of a writer is an ever-going struggle for deriving the best out of a personality and an untiring fight against its extinction. This book is not about making a lot of money; rather, it is about making a lot out of life. The story will take you across age-old wisdom to know the secret of everlasting happiness, a priceless key to gain divine peace, and techniques for longevity. The purpose of writing this love story is not to exhibit or promote any grudge against the rich and affluent, but what resonates is a struggle against poverty, prejudices, injustice, inequality, helplessness, and ignorance.

This endeavour may sound like an old tale to you in the beginning, but the secret of true love, ultimate success, divine peace, and lasting happiness that it discloses is timeless. The history of mankind is the history of love, as love is the innate instinct of human behaviour. For centuries, humans have been groping from pillar to post in search of something precious that belongs to both heaven and the earth. Unquestionably, it is divine love - the greatest emotion in the world. From time to time, man lost it when it appeared before him, sometimes because of his incompetence to feel its presence and at other times due to his inefficiency to preserve it. Admittedly, the question, without doubt, is that love is the only precious thing available to man that is not affected by time and distance, and still exists in man's heart in equal proportion. For this good reason, everyone craves it, irrespective of one's caste, colour, creed, community, religion, or place. Since the evolution of the human race, the development of human civilization and culture, and the invention of the Internet and Artificial Intelligence, mortals have been following their insatiable desire for success. Different people see life from different perspectives. Some measure life in inches, some in centimetres, while others measure life in miles. Success means different things to different people. To a person in the world of trade, it is nothing but the multiplication of profits and diversification of business. To a spiritualist, it may mean the attainment of peace and deep faith in the existence of God. To the powerful, success may mean influence or domination over others. This tale advocates that man has failed to escape his illusion and is still entangled in money, power, and pride. Over thousands of years, man has committed not a single new mistake, as his

every mistake has been repeated innumerable times by his ancestors, yet there is no respite from committing the same mistakes. And, this story will explain if there is any point in making the same mistakes again and again.

It is also of utmost importance to understand the progress in the age we live in. The man of modern civilization and culture brags that he has made tremendous progress through science and technology, but in reality, man has mistaken progress for survival. Is it real progress or a crucial fight for survival? Today, modern civilization has more diseases for more medical facilities, more money for more facilities, and more facilities for more diseases. On the one hand, mankind has reached the moon, but on the other, it is miles away from itself and its problems. Where is the progress? We are following a vicious circle, and at the end, we reach the same point over and over again. Unquestionably, machines save time, money, and energy. But the wisdom discussed in this story will prompt you to ask inevitable questions to yourselves – what is this saved time, saved money and saved energy being used for? Do you use your saved time to rest or have a heart-to-heart talk with your loved ones? Do you use your saved energy doing something that brings you happiness? Do you use your saved money to buy something that gives you peace, or you invest your saved time, money and energy to maximise your profit and minimise your life? Find out the answer.

Humans have grown greedier, and their desires are more insatiable. It is worth knowing how greed changes the meaning of life from living to earning money. The story highlights how, on the one hand, we are progressing, and on the other, we are declining. This question is becoming increasingly challenging and needs to be acknowledged minutely and addressed entirely. The wisdom and techniques this story revolves around are as effective today as they were thousands of years ago. It is true that we can add more logic to the fundamental laws of nature, but we cannot alter anything. The central idea revolves around the concept that one should live not by chance, but by choice. The possibilities you see for others are available to you as well, and its reverse is also true - the faults you find in others are present in you too. Noticeably, not a single idea or imagination can be impractical; every thought can be translated into reality. If human imagination can invent electricity, if human brain can lead to flying of airplanes, if human efforts can devise ways and means to see and talk to the people sitting across the oceans, it can also discover peace, happiness and brotherhood for everyone and transform this earth into a paradise. The fact is that we don't know what we need to know. It is high time that man draws a line for material gains and opens new channels

and dimensions, not of science, medicine, trade, and civilization, but of thought that verifies an action before putting it into effect.

The time has come to reassess humanity's relationship with its true nature and redefine its responsibilities towards future generations. In the final analysis, the modern man needs to reaffirm his role as the creator and the director of his fortune by realising the true purpose of his life, otherwise an intriguing quest for happiness will continue to haunt humanity until an explanation is found.

In the journey of your life, read this book after short periodic intervals, and it will unfold new wisdom every time you read it. Hopefully, the air above you will grow clearer, purer and cleaner, and finally you will be able to breathe freely. I welcome and value suggestions and comments from readers.

If somewhere between these pages you find yourself, even for a moment, then this journey is worth taking. I do not offer answers here. I offer a walk through doubt and desire.

Walk with me, if you dare to meet yourself.

Now, let us begin.

Contents

The Birth of a Prince	1
The Invincible King and His Success Mantra.....	7
The Royal Kingdom Under the Prince Veer.....	12
The Girl with Fruits and Flowers	22
Danish – The Devil Soul.....	39
The Secret of Fruits and Flowers	53
Lost Versus Left	62
The King and His Transformation	67
The True Wisdom.....	90
The Final Ritual.....	127



The Birth of a Prince

In the royal garden, spring arrives like a much-awaited guest dressed in beautiful clothes with a full load of gifts. Looking sad with his face in his hands, the brooding king did not seem happy in the company of his new guest, as he always used to be drunk because his long-cherished wish to have an heir was not granted, despite having been married for over a decade. He had consulted all the best physicians, and they had experimented with every possible drug to earn their king's applause, but to no avail. Finally, the sense of emptiness became so paramount that the king was ready to abdicate his entire kingdom in favour of having a child. One day, when his festal procession passed through the city square, a middle-aged lady with a basket full of flowers urged the king to buy flowers, assuring him that if the queen smelled their scent, they would have a good-looking and long-living son. Unfortunately, the over-intelligent king not only declined her offer but also warned her to stay away from misguiding his subjects. The maid, who was convinced of the florist's conviction, accompanied the king during his procession and stealthily poured that idea into the queen's ears. The queen sent the maid to fetch the flowers the very moment she got to know about the medicinal value of the flowers. As the maid reached the city square, the florist had already left out of fear of the angry king. The maid ran for some distance in the direction that passers-by pointed to follow the florist's trail, but there was no sign of the lady. The maid immediately halted as she encountered two

young women holding the same flowers they had just bought. The maid unfailingly recognized the flowers and showed her desire to buy them, but her prospects declined her proposal. The maid was invariably taught by her mistress that if she ever wished people to do the things she wanted, she had to make the things easier. She, as a practitioner of the philosophy she had learnt, asked them to sell just one flower to make their bargain liberal. To her disappointment, they again declined, this time more strongly. She took out a gold coin and offered it to buy one of the two flowers. They both effortlessly agreed and began quarrelling over who would be the first negotiator. The maid put the coin back in her pocket and turned to return. The young women, in no time, decided to mutually resolve their dispute later and handed both flowers to the maid. For the first few moments, the queen kept looking at the flowers, which gave her a positive expression. The queen was attracted to the flowers as they bore a sweet scent that was quite inviting. After a little while, the queen was spellbound as the flowers showed welcoming gestures through their round texture, and then, closing her beautiful eyes, she smiled, smelt the flowers, and felt a spectrum of colours within. In the next moment, she stood in warm silence, her senses intoxicated by the scent. The warmth made her relaxed, and she liked the feeling, and within moments, she grew too drowsy to stay awake and retreated to the bed. The next month, the infertile queen confirmed that she was on her way to begin a family.

The summer came and ripened the fruits on the trees and crops in the fields with its heat. After summer, its successor – the monsoon sent the water inside the earth to invite the seeds for celebrating the gifts of God present only on the earth. Now it was the turn of winter. For the last three days, it was an unceasing rainy weather because the grey clouds over the sky poured patiently. The south-westerly winds ferociously blew and caused shallow-rooted and half-stooped trees to lie flat in the water-logged, long and well-manicured garden. Inside the grand royal palace, all the servants were rushing around, leaving behind their topsy-turvy belongings. At the other end of the hall, a door flew open, and an old nurse with a scarf on her head peeped out to grab a small knife, a bucket half full of steaming water, and some cotton swabs from the servants. The servants were instructed to stay alert before the old lady shut the door with a slight thump. The palace maids, tired from waiting for hours, spread out in groups on the carpet to relax their aching muscles. After a couple of hours, all of a sudden, the same door flung open with the same briskness with which it was closed. The old nurse took her half frame out of the door and, mixing her happiness with her anger, announced aloud, “Congratulations! Our revered queen has been blessed with a baby boy.”

There was jubilation in the sensitive environment of the palace. Everyone was exchanging congratulations.

“Her Highness wishes to see the head maid,” the old nurse called out.

The head maid hustled, making her way to the delivery room where the queen was dotingly looking at the little crying prince whom the old nurse was giving a bath.

“My noble! Please accept my heart-felt congratulations,” said the head maid.

“Thanks from the core of my heart, and give it to everyone in our kingdom,” the queen asked the head maid. She had a self-satisfied smirk on her face as she spoke. “Besides, please extend my regret to our citizens. Had the king himself been around, he would have thrown a grand celebration on this historic occasion.”

“My revered queen!” exclaimed the head maid. “You need not extend your regret, as our king has already done more than we expected. His grateful people understand well that he is busy.”

“Well, this is the cause of concern. This isn’t an excusable answer that he’s busy. The crucial question is what he is busy with. Well, you send the good news to the king. Maybe this happy news will bring him back from the battlefield,” the queen concluded.

Days turned into months, and even as the little prince turned five months old, the queen had not heard a word from her busy husband. A decree was signed by the queen, and she summoned all her close aides and advisors.

Speculating on the reasons for this unusual meeting, the next day, all the ministers assembled in the court. Some ministers thought it was about some grand celebrations, while others thought it was over some unexpected news from the battlefield. When the queen entered the court, all the courtiers stood up and bowed to greet the queen.

“See, I myself and your chief of army staff, Kehar Singh, tried to make the king understand, but he still remained unaffected. However, if his policy of imperialism is not checked in time, this kingdom is sure to witness an upheaval. I hope, being an expert in political affairs, you can realize better what my words are meant for,” the queen said.

“I have never thought about it, My Lady. Besides, I understand what you mean, and I know you’re right. But this is how our beloved king has given us

everything a happy citizen requires,” growing very quiet and pensive, the first minister admitted.

“We’re proud to be living in the golden era of our kingdom. Today, everyone is happy. Farmers have sufficient productive and irrigated land to yield rich crops. There is justice for the innocent, and people are law-abiding,” the second minister chipped in.

“Things have never been that good in this kingdom,” supported the third minister. “Public enjoys the onset of festivals, painters have reached the pinnacle of artistic glory, and poets and musicians are given grand honour in this court. No other empires and their public can match up to this.”

“It’s not good to rob Peter to pay Paul,” the queen said without even looking at the minister.

“I beg your pardon, Your Highness. I didn’t understand,” said the minister.

“Let’s look at it this way: you imperialists are encouraging the king to rob others to feed yours. You all are like that man who stacks food and drinks in a store and eats and drinks whenever he needs. But you people don’t even know what real thirst or real hunger is because everything is readily available to you,” the queen vented.

“Please forgive me, Your Excellency! This world knows no language other than the language of power. Peace can be maintained only by the power of the sword. If we don’t attack others, they’ll attack us. So, it doesn’t make any difference,” the second minister observed.

“I don’t think so. With your sword, you can conquer the body but not the mind of your enemy. Instead, it’ll prolong your claim over peace and security because your slaves will always wait for their chance to take revenge,” the queen countered.

“Your Majesty! You have a tender heart, which is why you think that way. We are duty-bound to assist you the way you wish,” the first minister said modestly.

“Doesn’t peculiarity of a woman’s tender heart matter to the peace, culture and civilization of this kingdom, which you all feel proud of?” quipped the queen.

“Oh yes! Certainly, it does,” everyone in the hall replied in unison.

“Then, I hope my gentle words will plead my arguments. But I’m not at all happy because all this wealth after violence doesn’t flatter me as you all

courtiers do to flatter your king. My tender heart, on the contrary, is my wise aide, and it keeps telling me that I'm just an ordinary human being, a mere mortal, subject to pain and disease," the queen retorted.

"I beg your pardon. My Reverence! We never served the policy of imperialism before the ambitious king," pleaded another minister.

"Neither did you reject it. Look! I've never had any evil intention for our ambitious king, not even in my thoughts. I'm no less loved by my husband than his people. No husband and wife have ever loved each other so much as we have." the queen acknowledged.

With an heir to the king having been born, she wanted it to be shared with her husband, whose throne was vacant. Suddenly, something disturbed her emotionally, and she stood up to hide her uncompromising urge and announced:

"When historians record events, they'll say that our cooperation to secure a future safe from greed had taken a dramatic turn here. Go to the battlefield right away, and convince the overambitious king that under present circumstances, it's more prudent to retain power than to extend boundaries."

For another three months, every day the queen vainly expected some news from the king. Indeed, she wanted her husband to name their son. At last, the crestfallen queen named her son Veer. The king's indifference made the touchy wife ill. She experienced loneliness, and her health deteriorated. The lonely wife longed for her husband, but the ministers called in the best physicians. Ultimately, the queen died, leaving behind her husband and an eight-month-old son.

The king was busy fighting battles in a far-flung desert. The scorching heat made the king uncomfortable because he was very thirsty. It was a crucial moment for the king as the warrior's thirst could be postponed for a time because he was so close to victory. He could put off his thirst, but he couldn't let go of the chance of victory in the battle. The king scolded his soldiers when he was escorted by his defence line and taken to a safe place. His two ministers broke to him the news of the queen's death. The king was in a state of shock for a while. The broken-hearted king wept and wailed over the loss of his soul-mate before celebrating the birth of his son. The hapless king ordered a retreat at once as he felt his motherless child beckoning him. Without claiming a single inch, the royal army marched back home. On his way back to the capital, his steps were hesitant. Had his son not been there in the palace as his

wife's token of memory, he would have gone to the jungle and become a stoic instead.

Before the rainy season started and blocked all the passages with heavy landslides and floods through passes, the king's wounded soldiers hustled on their return journey until they reached their base camp. They grew impatient to reunite with their families. Eventually, the same florist happened to pass through their base camp when she was on her way to the town. Seeing the miserable plight of soldiers, the middle-aged florist suspended her journey to cure them. The lady physician took out some green leaves from her basket, ground them on a flat rock and applied the green paste on their wounds. To their surprise, by the next morning, everyone had recovered miraculously. The king witnessed her philanthropy but ignored her presence. As they exchanged glances, the florist also forgot her compassion and fled in fear. Her past experience compelled her to flee before she was recognized and rebuked like her first encounter with him. He had already recognized the philanthropist to whom she was merely a quack. Unlike his past conduct, he did not say anything to her. Soon after she left the caravan, every soldier recovered from his pain, and it gave way to their long talks about the woman who was just a florist to the king but a magical physician to his soldiers. The news of her miraculous skills spread like wildfire among the masses. The king ignored their mention, thinking it was an illusion caused by their long stay on the battlefield and a sign of recovery from their homesickness.



The Invincible King and His Success Mantra

On reaching home, the king got to know how his wife had kept waiting for him with a wish to see him before her death. He felt defeated by his life and cheated by his fate. For many nights, he tried to sleep, but his regret haunted the restless king. When nothing worked to alleviate the guilt, the king decided to keep himself busier than before. The seasons repetitively came one after another as time passed, and the little prince Veer grew into a complete youth. The time played its tricks as it passed. Whoever the king met, whatever he did and wherever he went, made the king forget all the life lessons he had learnt. However, time could not make him forget his loving wife, and to compensate for her absence, he renewed his obsession with more land, power, and fame.

Under the influence of land, power and fame, the great warrior, for the second time, led his elite soldiers on a mighty-mission for expanding his borders towards the east. Although the king had a glorious victory and claimed a huge territory to expand his empire, he continued to have a haunted look. The noise of the battlefield, the clatter of swords, and dying soldiers groaning in pain echoed in his mind. Undoubtedly, the war was over and won, but another war that had erupted inside the king seemed more challenging. He was filled with disturbing guilt over the thousands of lives lost and the irreparable damage to the people on both sides. Many innocent people died of thirst and starvation. The king was deeply moved when he saw the mothers and the wives identifying the dead bodies of their sons and husbands. All these

tragic scenes upset the king endlessly. The victorious king fell down with a loud thud. His contact with the ground turned his pink, round face pale. His wife reflected in his mind. The king sensed his death approaching and lost his consciousness. The loyal minister Kehar Singh, the king's chief of army staff, the most intimate and greatest gladiator, knelt down and supported the king's trembling body around his well-built arms. As the king regained consciousness, he gave a long searching look to spot the magical florist treating the wounded and dying soldiers, but he felt very sorry for his cold treatment that he had given to the saintly lady, who was missing when her helping hands were required the most.

The king sent for Prince Veer, who had accompanied him to the battlefield. The prince was handsome and had a tall and muscular physique. His father doted on him for his submissiveness and simplicity. Likewise, the prince also had great affection for his father. He had never disobeyed his father. His mother had died when he was only eight months old, and he did not remember anything about her. The king loved the queen so much that after her death, he could not even think of getting remarried. He still cherished sweet memories of the time he had spent with her and was not scared of his death because he strongly believed that he would meet her again in the other world. The old king used to tell his son that after his mother's death, he had to wrap her shawls around him, and sleep next to him for four months. The prince saw both his mother and father in the king.

"You can't leave me like this, father," the prince sobbed, fighting his tears.

"Being your father, I wish to share my experiences with you, my son. You, being my successor, are bound to listen to this in the interest of your public. I would like to share my experience with you since it taught me things that I couldn't learn throughout my life," the remorseful king spoke to his dear son.

"Are you ready to retain whatever I fill you with?" the king observed like a saint, his eyes turning red.

"Yes," the prince nodded, his ears glued to listen to his dying father like a five-year-old child.

"First, success is the sum total of calculating and forecasting the outcome of your defence and offence, fully supported by proper time management. Second, falling constantly is inevitable on the way to success, but the determining factor of success lies in not counting the perseverance," declared the dying father.

“Father, you’ll get well soon. As of now, what you need is rest rather than worrying about me. Let me get some herbals and balm to bring you quick relaxation,” the startled prince said.

“It’s in vain. There’s no leeway as I’ve limited time but lots of things to say. You’ve always listened to me with great respect. Do listen once more,” breathing faster, the king hugged the prince.

“I’m listening, father. Please tell me,” the prince complied.

“Son, I’ve made a terrible mistake, and I want you not to repeat the same.”

“What mistake?”

“To measure happiness with wealth.”

“Do you have repentance over the territories you’ve conquered?” asked the prince.

“What’s bothering me isn’t wealth, but what I’ve accumulated is much more than my needs,” the king confessed.

“I beg your apology; this is what makes a king a king. So, what wrong have you done?” quipped the prince.

“One of the world’s greatest success lessons I have learnt is that all of life’s happiness comes from achieving worthy goals. When you look back at your life, what will make you happy will be the great things you have done, the true relationships you cultivated, and the prosperity you created for your men. You won’t find a sense of accomplishment in how much land you won. Your life will be elevated by one thing and one thing alone: achievement. Achievements in life appear in the form of peace of mind and a well-developed, spiritual life. As a side note, progress and success are good only when achieved without sacrificing your true self, peace, love, and relations. The only measure of your worth and deeds will be the love you leave behind when you are gone. Success is to be measured not by wealth, power or fame but by the distinction between what you are and what you might be.” the king said.

The king embraced the prince again and said, “Remember these two things from this time on.”

“I’m listening, father,” the prince nodded.

“First, attain your claim, and after that, celebrate your attainment. My lovely child, by claim, I don’t mean gains in a war, but peace and happiness for your people. Never waste your time and power in amassing wealth, rather celebrate what meaningful you gain in this transitory life. Though I’ve

expanded the borders of the kingdom and accumulated huge fortunes, still every time I put off celebration. Now, when I'm gone, you're entitled to strengthen your people's celebration with this wealth and power amassed over the years."

The king thought for some time and shared a great secret with his son: "My dear, people don't work hard for success, but they work for the sake of importance. For this reason, importance is the main objective behind everything that people do in their success journey. Everyone in this world wants to reach a level of importance. In the course of life, everyone fights for their position, due place, and due share. Above all, everyone wants success to gain importance and recognition. Give people importance, and you'll see them forget success. Importance is more valuable than success, so give respect to everyone irrespective of one's social status, and you'll get it back manifold. By giving people importance, you grant them success. Success, achievement and riches don't yield pride or arrogance, but nurture royalty, which essentially is politeness and kindness. In the final verdict, neither success nor failure is ever final."

"Do you have a message to stop wars in our kingdom forever?" the prince asked.

"My son, today, for me, a war signifies no assurance against another war. There's no guarantee that a war will always bring peace. War is an invention of the human mind. Similarly, the human mind can invent peace with love and justice."

"But you've always taught me that we can't maintain peace without power. And now you're saying just the opposite," the prince quizzed, rolling his eyes.

"I was wrong. This has cheated me throughout my life. It's the misinterpretation of peace if people mistake peace for the symbol of weakness. It doesn't mean that peace is defective. If people take freedom for granted, it doesn't imply that they should be deprived of it and ruled with power," the father answered.

"I fully agreed, yet honesty and innocence severely suffer here while cruelty and treachery rule in this world of powerful and wealthy people. Sometimes it seems to me that there's no place for honesty and innocence in this world," stamping his foot, the prince pleaded.

"The higher is always delicate like a flower, my child; you can crush it with something hard. This doesn't mean that the stone becomes stronger than the flower. It simply means the stone is unaware of what it's doing. My love

let me be the first and the last to tell you that peace and freedom don't have to be corrected; instead, we all do have to."

"Oh yes! There's a point," admitted the prince.

"If your both hands fight with each other, tell me which one will win?" the father asked.

"Neither," came the answer like an arrow.

"There's no competition among peace, freedom and man. Peace and freedom are meant for man. Man is the creator of peace and freedom, so he should be for them, not against. He has to be their guardian as they're complementary, not worlds apart," the father elaborated.

"Oh! I see your point. It's brilliant," the prince said, raising his eyebrows.

The king focused his eyes on the glittering sun, heaved a deep sigh of relief, and said, "Son, follow my words in the future, verify them with your deeds, and help me rest my soul in heaven," saying that, the great warrior breathed his last.

"Father, your wisdom will always be given due consideration," the son assured.



The Royal Kingdom Under the Prince Veer

A week after the king's cremation, Prince Veer was enthroned as the next king of the great empire. Life has innumerable ways of testing a person's character, integrity and willpower: either by blessing him with everything, or cursing him with nothing. Power and wealth weakened his character and shattered his integrity. The new king ruled unfairly. He misused the royal treasury and increased taxes. He banned festivals and traditional fairs so that people could not celebrate the onset of seasons and enjoy their harvest. He discouraged painting, craftwork, dance, music, and literature and imposed many new taxes on farmers and traders. His kingdom, once called 'The land of milk and honey', had now turned barren. Adultery became the order of the day. The new king had forgotten the lessons his father had learned over the course of his entire life. He kept a number of mistresses. Material wealth overshadowed moral values in the kingdom of the new king. Within a few months, the palace became a hub for drinking and dancing. Kehar Singh -the loyal minister of the king's father, could not tolerate his wicked ways. He had dedicated his whole life to his countrymen. He fought every battle and helped the king's father expand his empire. The loyal minister kept a watch on every activity of the irresponsible king. Everyone told the minister he was acting foolish, as there was no doubt at all that the king had become reckless. Indeed, the loyal minister himself, who was a man of punctilious honour, felt it his duty to mention the facts to the king whenever he came to discuss it.

Kehar Singh - the loyal minister could not stand it anymore, therefore, one day, he said bluntly: "My lord, I've neither words nor wit nor worth to teach or preach you, but I deeply abide by the responsibilities your father entrusted me with. So, I feel a major concern for the hovering danger over my countrymen."

"Being your king, I'm well aware of your responsibilities, just let me know your main concern?" retorted King Veer, raising his eyebrows and looking at the loyal minister Kehar Singh imperiously.

"My lord, it is vital to understand that you cannot meet an inside need with an outside substance. After all, a king is like a father to his subjects."

"Don't put riddles. Just tell me plainly what you have in mind," King Veer said impulsively.

"I'm wondering if you're no more the patron of your countrymen," the minister put it straight.

"What's it all that you want me to do to people?" asked King Veer, a small frown creasing his forehead.

"Your Majesty! I have nothing more than a humble request for you: serve the needy, and you will win the respect of everyone; defend the feeble, and you will earn the praise of honest critics; respect elders and women, and you will get the affection of children. You'll harvest love, peace and bliss, witnessing that even one life lived happily because you were the noble cause."

"Minister, you better hit the bottom line than exaggerating petty issues," King Veer interjected with a shrill.

"It's a slip, my lord," the minister replied. "Not a fall, and it's never too late to mend your mistakes," the minister continued. "You cannot misuse your powers and royal treasury for sensual pleasures. You can't be dumb, deaf and blind to the needs of your people. These are petty issues neither for a common man nor a king. It's like ignoring the crack in a dam."

"Don't you see I've protected my people and expanded my borders beyond measure?" King Veer reacted by pointing his finger towards the east, the major part of the territory his father had annexed to their kingdom.

"Humanity says that if you protect or save any life, you should help it live with honour and dignity too. And this is all what I'm helping you realise," the loyal minister retaliated.

“You fool! You dare preach to the king like this? You seem to have forgotten that you’ve to show honour to your patron?” the vain King Veer snubbed the minister.

“My king, as far as honour is concerned, it’s to be deserved, not demanded. It’s earned, not bought; it’s a natural phenomenon and not a drama,” the minister put it straightforwardly.

“Who are you to tell me all this?” the snooty King Veer smashed the wooden table and shouted at the loyal minister.

“First - boards don’t ask you questions back. Second - I don’t think a person needs to carry a title to express his pain; and I don’t think a person needs to wear a badge to show his dissatisfaction. Moreover, I am also a human being who shares the same land that you cultivate, the same air that you breathe, and the same water that you drink. I live in the same world you live in, and its construction and destruction influence me as well,” said the courageous and defiant Kehar Singh.

The stubborn king could not tolerate his minister’s advice. In a fit of fury, King Veer punished the minister merely to make him realise his mistake. He ordered the soldiers to imprison the minister in a two hundred feet high tower built in a jungle. The king’s people used to call this tower ‘The death trap’ because the prisoners were taken high atop using a bamboo ladder, and there was no way to get down. All prisoners were destined to die of hunger, thirst, or sometimes they used to jump down out of insanity.

The loyal minister’s wife had a deep love for her husband. She lost her senses when she heard of the king’s verdict. So pure was her devotion that she would rather face danger herself than lose her husband. Soon after her husband was taken to ‘The death trap’, she was surrounded by her well-wishers, but nothing could console her, as no one lent her help when she sought their support to take her to ‘The death trap’. By the last rays of the sinking sun, the visitor’s lip service established that the unfortunate woman was left alone completely. Being the wife of a respected minister, she was proud of her power and position. Trespassing on her husband’s zone by any relative or their family friends was inescapable, as no one could ever seek the minister’s favour without flattering this high-profile lady with a ministerial portfolio. The hard-headed wife was well known to her intelligent husband, so every time he ignored her competitive spirit and behaved politely, but she invariably mistook it for her brilliance. As a part of her usual practice, she grumbled at her husband a lot, but he didn’t mind, because he knew she loved him.

The heavy-hearted wife wished to visit the tower alone at midnight to avoid being seen. It was believed that ‘The death trap’ was a haunted place as spirits of those who died there were seen by several passers-by. A few years before that incident, the wife of her husband’s subordinate had seen these spirits roaming near the tower, and she had gone into a fit from which she never recovered. People avoided their way to the capital town while they passed by the ghostly tower. Since her childhood, she had been taught not to believe in ghosts and supernatural powers, and after her marriage, that belief was strengthened by a practical man—her husband. Indeed, in many ways, she was courageous and bold.

The impatient lady hustled on the faded tracks towards the forbidden land for fear that her husband would not repeat what history held of other prisoners. Along the country road with houses on either side, the voices of husbands talking to their wives, wives talking to their husbands and grandparents telling their grandchildren bedtime fairy tales helped her walk in the darkness until she came out of the town and reached the wide-open ravine over which the boundaries of the abandoned part of that kingdom began. The white stones in the faded night flashed in the dry ravine, like the teeth of a smiling lady. Stumbling and fumbling, the minister’s wife crossed the wide and headed straight ahead. The lonely lady was now out of the thick darkness as she emerged from the bushy shrubs. As the moon came out of a patch, she exposed herself to the ploughed and cultivated clearing. After walking some distance, she heard some footsteps behind her. One could not be pretentious in the light of facts; therefore, she thought of looking back as there was someone following her.

Focusing on the silence and counting the unseen footsteps, the minister’s wife turned back, but there was no one. She looked around, but there was absolute silence except for the singing crickets underneath her feet, and above her head, the moon had doubled its swiftness. She resumed her walk, but the same footsteps romped around again, this time accompanied by mysterious sounds. The faster she walked, the nearer she felt the steps. The lonely lady got nervous and felt as if someone was trying to grab her neck. In consequence of the mysterious noises, she did not dare to look back. At the culmination of that moment, she felt an urgency to run fast, but her nervousness slowed her heartbeat, and she found her legs knee-deep in the ground. Now the traumatized lady had no choice except facing the devil in hell. As she turned back again, there was neither any soul nor any sound. With every step, her fear kept increasing, and then she got fully convinced that there existed ghosts who were playing tricks with her.

The proud lady was still left with some courage and hope. The mysterious sounds turned into faded sounds of the band. The sounds kept growing shrill as the lady was getting nearer. At some distance, the lady saw some old wooden stables, one of which had a window showing some dim light. The sequence of inexplicable events in that infamous place compelled the minister's wife to abort her mission, and following her mind, she turned back to retreat. Before she started her journey back home, an old axiom turned her face towards the stables once again. During her childhood, she had heard some superstitious old folks saying that evil spirits never existed near the fire. Encouraged, she walked close to the window and peeped in. To avoid disturbance to the neighbours, a village brass band was rehearsing there. That day, the lady learnt the lesson that phobophobia leads to the multiplication of fear, which results in imaginary images and sounds. Feeling relieved and relaxed, she kept going until she reached 'The death trap' by midnight. The minister's wife shouted loudly to call her husband down from the tower. Over the tower, the brooding minister looked deep down and confirmed his presence.

"My dear, I want to help you, but I don't know how to do it. You know well I can't live without you, and my helplessness will kill me," the minister's wife again shouted to convey her message over the tower.

"You'd better go now, but when you come back tomorrow, bring a long thick rope, a thin long thread, a long light woollen wire, a snail, and some honey along," the outsmart minister Kehar Singh answered with his voice loud and his disappointment low.

She was surprised by his unusual demands and wondered what he would do with all those things. She did not understand what all of these things really signified. Then she asked with curiosity: "Well, it's alright, but what troubles me is how these ordinary things and a filthy snail help you get down?"

"I can't explain everything; you just leave now and arrange what I've told you," the minister said.

Next day, in the middle of the night, the minister kept walking to and fro on the tower, gazing around. The hope of life rekindled inside him as he saw his wife coming with the articles he had demanded. She had brought everything told by him.

"Well, here are the things you demanded last night. What am I supposed to do now?" the wife sought to know.

“Well done!” the loyal minister Kehar Singh exclaimed with joy. “You’ve done a great job.”

“Now you better do whatever I’m telling you to do,” he instructed. “Fasten the long, thin woollen thread tightly around the snail’s legs and rub some honey on the two feelers attached to its head, and then set the snail on the wall so that it may lead upward.”

The wife complied, and the slow-crawling creature began to creep slowly up the tower. Hoping to get some honey, the snail followed the honey smell that was coming from its two front feelers. By the first ray of the next morning, it had reached the other end of the tower.

As soon as the snail reached the top, the minister unfastened the light woollen wire that his wife had fastened to its legs.

After grabbing the wire, the loyal minister again guided his wife: “Well, now, fasten the thin and long thread to the light woollen wire.”

The wife complied, and the minister pulled the thin and long thread with the help of a light woollen wire. Similarly, the minister grabbed the thin and long string, and again asked his wife: “Repeat the same process with reference to the thick and long rope.”

His wife fastened a thick and long rope to a thin string dangling downward. Finally, he pulled the strong rope up, fastened it to the pole and climbed down.

As the minister regained ground, his wife hugged him tightly, gripped him by his wrist and said in a whisper: “Hustle up, dear; let’s run across the boundary of this kingdom. The king’s soldiers may discover you any time.”

“Where to go and why to run?” the minister inquired, heaving a long and deep sigh of relief.

“Are you not happy?” asked the wife.

“I’m both happy and sad,” said the loyal minister Kehar Singh, growing distraught.

“Why so?”

“I’m partly happy for my freedom and partly sad for your imprisonment. I’m sure that I’ve got out of prison, but unfortunately, you’re still behind bars,” came the complex answer.

“Will you mind helping me understand my imprisonment?”

“Dear, it’s possible to get freedom from the shackles of a prison, but it’s much more difficult to get freedom from the prison of thoughts. Real freedom is the freedom from negative thoughts, prejudices and superstitions,” the loyal minister explained.

“You’re free now. Don’t you think that now this kingdom is no longer a safe place for us?” the minister’s wife said without paying much heed to what her husband had just told her.

The minister looked around and set his eyes in the direction of the royal palace and said: “Sweetheart, I can’t leave this land because it belongs to my ancestors; because I love my motherland.”

“Everyone does, providing that one’s life is not at risk,” the wife retorted.

“And I’m committed to protect it even at the risk of my life,” said the loyal minister, his voice firm.

“What’s gone wrong with you? Come to your senses. If you are discovered, the king’s soldiers will not spare you. And this time, the king will surely hang you,” the loyal minister’s wife reacted with a severe groaning.

The minister let his wife go his hand off and sincerely admitted: “Excuse me, in this way, I can live in this world, but I can’t live with myself.”

“You may be right. But in the present circumstances, we don’t have any other option but to leave this kingdom. You needn’t bother yourself. I’ve saved some money for our future. We’ll easily settle down in the neighbouring kingdom. The emperor of the other kingdom is kind enough to give us shelter. Besides, you’re well known for your valour and honesty amongst nearby kingdoms. Moreover, keeping your stature in mind, the new king will surely offer you the same position in his court,” pressed the wife.

“It doesn’t make any difference to me. I’ve the courage to change the things I can, and have the patience to accept the things I can’t. I don’t want to go against my principles and want to live the way God has willed,” the minister said with determination in his eyes.

“The cruel king humiliated you and imprisoned you on the high tower to die a dog’s death despite your honesty and sacrifice for his kingdom; even then, your heart is filled with loyalty for him. But to me, it looks insanity. Why so?” the persuading wife turned back and said in a complaining tone.

“I know I have to fight with everyone to live up to my values and dreams, and it seems that you, too, are one of them. By the way, in spite of the king’s

cruelty towards me, I still have certain reasons for helping him,” the loyal minister accentuated.

“May I know why these reasons are more important to you than your life?” asked his wife with surprise.

“Sure,” counting his reasons to his wife, the minister expressed his deep concern: “Firstly, this land belongs not only to the royal palace but also to all of us. This is a very sensitive time for our motherland, which has been passed on to us by our forefathers. Here, in this land of great warriors, brotherhood, kindness, justice, and equality have been the evergreen sources of our true relationship, love, and mutual understanding. The only aim of my life is to protect, restore, and maintain the values cherished by our forefathers. This time, our king needs me more than anybody else. He is under the influence of evil forces.”

“If snakes had hands, they would claim their hands were clean, and if jackals had words, they wouldn’t understand remorse. I don’t think the king would realise his mistake,” the wife gave a counter response to the minister distrustfully.

“Besides, being a rational human being, it’s my duty to understand his mental state and help him get out of it,” the loyal minister added, without paying much heed to her last sentence.

“What sort of mental state are you talking about?” the wife looked at him with surprise.

“When we’re hungry, angry, lonely, and sad and tired, we’re more prone to susceptibility,” the loyal minister explained to his wife more garishly.

“Will you tell me more about susceptibility? I have never heard about it before,” the wife inquired eagerly.

“Dear, it’s the least known discipline in the world, and due to ignorance, most people are victimized by susceptibility. By susceptibility, I mean a state of thinking in which a person becomes insensitive to immorality and insanity. In the realm of insensitivity, everything seems favourable to negative ideas. Illogical things seem logical, and illegal things seem legal. Susceptibility has the heart and mind of a little baby; it takes no blame for its actions and is sure that it is right. And when it doesn’t get what it desires, it doesn’t mind using all possible means to satisfy its senses. It is quite suicidal. Alcoholics are more prone to drink during these times, and people in stressed marriages are more prone to extramarital affairs. It’s important not to share one’s needs with a man or a woman outside his marriage on every chance he is hungry, angry,

lonely, sad, disappointed or obsessed for any reason. One is bound to fall in fancy with the person who fulfils his needs and extends his company when he is under the influence of the aforesaid forces,” said the loyal minister with a tone of impatience.

“I’ve never thought about it, honey. However, I see what you are saying, and I know that you are right. Please tell me what the cure is,” the wife inquired, flashing a broad grin.

“People get influenced by negative forces in pursuit of immediate gratification and ignore positive forces because instant gratification is not at hand. When a person is susceptible, he should not go and find miserable, lonely, angry, or sad persons like himself and identify himself with them. It’s really enticing when a person is at a susceptible place to look for agreement and solace from people who feel the way he does. But that’s not who he needs to spend time with. In fact, the reverse order is the cure. When a person is susceptible, it is the most important time to connect with people who are more positive than he is at the moment,” the loyal minister Kehar Singh elaborated.

“Point well taken,” responded the wife.

“So, when you feel weak, avoid two kinds of people,” said the minister. “First, people who share your weakness, and second, people who censure them. Neither group is good for you. You should meet people who are stronger and more understanding.”

The minister’s wife was convinced now, but she had the last question to ask, and she voiced hesitantly: “But do you think that people will support you and you’ll succeed in your mission?”

The loyal minister Kehar Singh maintained a healthy eye contact with his wife, rested his hand on her shoulder, pulled her closer, and then both started walking together through the jungle.

Maintaining pace with his wife, the minister proceeded: “As a small light woollen wire helped me save my life, likewise, small reasons bring big results, small habits make big differences, and small precautions cure chronic diseases. Learning in schools may stuff you with information, logic, and calculations, but they can’t nourish your inner self with calmness, composure and patience that are the essential constituents of victory amidst turbulent times. The great people on this earth develop these unique traits not through learning from their teachers, but by undergoing life’s real situations.”

“It’s really beautiful. I want to listen to you more,” requested the wife, her eyes on his face and his eyes on the tossing purple flowers covering the expansive pasture.

“Don’t be afraid to give up the good for the sake of great,” the husband advised.

“Pretty good,” the wife remarked.

“I want to help my king not to enhance my rank or wealth, but with a desire to have more peace of mind. I may be his last hope, and the troubled king may consider me capable of helping him. Moreover, being indebted to the society in which I live may be another reason for my helping him. Finally, I want to give you a piece of sincere advice: If you can accomplish somebody’s work, if something good is possible within your authority or capacity, then move heaven and earth to do it. Through this, God gives you the opportunity to help others. Indeed, God helps people through people. By this, God chooses you to solve people’s problems; by this, God pacifies the distressed and supports the weak through you.”

“This is heart pleasing. I’m feeling a positive change within,” the minister’s wife admitted.

“The beauty of the whole exercise is that as you strive to improve the lives of others, your own life will be mounted to its highest dimensions. We must identify our gifts and their purpose; otherwise, they are as useless as gold lying unnoticed underneath the earth. You may be convinced that there are more important things to do, such as nurturing a family, earning wealth, and name and fame. But, I’m in such a mental state from where I can see it possible to make a difference in society and to shape the world I wish to hand over to the future generations,” the minister said with great conviction.

“After all, a person should be honoured and rewarded for his loyalty and honesty, especially for these exceptional endeavours you’re indulging in,” the minister’s wife said, what was bitterly crushing her inside.

“If you contribute or help someone, do it only to increase your happiness, don’t expect same or more for this, otherwise you’ll be frustrated if you get less or nothing,” the minister answered calmly. His wife was also speechless. She took a brief pause and gave herself some time to think before she managed to speak: “You are great, but I underestimated you. Today, I really feel proud to be your wife.”

That morning, the king’s soldiers visited the death tower and found the prisoner missing. They thought the prisoner had jumped down the tower in a fit of madness and that some wild animals had eaten him. The loyal minister Kehar Singh went to the city and started living in disguise.



The Girl with Fruits and Flowers

It was a cloudy day in the middle of the monsoon season when King Veer set out on a journey in a pleasant mood. On his way back to the palace, he went astray. He followed many tracks, but again and again, after an arduous three-hour journey, he found himself in the same valley. At last fed up, he alighted from the horseback and walked down to the river flowing nearby. He washed his face with cold water and quenched his thirst with it. The weariness of riding around the same place for hours exhausted him. Consequently, the king sat near the shallow waters, took off his shoes, and dipped his feet into the flowing river. A waft of sweet scent made him forget his current problem, and his senses became entangled with the sweet smell. He found a deep relationship with the scent of the flowers. The gravitational pull was too strong to resist. Indeed, he grew more restless to find out its source, and chasing it like a honey bee, he reached the source of the sweet smell that seemed like something he had been waiting for ages. As the king followed the sweet scent, he saw a girl sitting on the other corner of the river, a short distance away. He walked up to her and asked for directions to the town. The girl had a natural grace and fair complexion. He found her an average-looking village girl. She was sitting on the edge of a huge boulder with two baskets - one full of fruits and another full of flowers. As the king drew near the girl, she gave him a friendly smile. She was sprinkling water on her fruits and flowers, besides singing a tuneful lyric like a bird - happy with its existence.

She then exchanged pleasantries and guided the stranger through a shortcut to the city. Before the stranded king was about to leave, the source of the scent - the beautiful fruits and flowers—attracted his attention. He found them to be special and fascinating. Anticipating an overwhelming reaction, the king thought of gifting them to his mistress, so he bought a bouquet and a basket of fruits. The girl was so happy because now she did not have to go to the city to sell her fruits and flowers.

Rudra – a blue-eyed blonde, was the king’s favourite mistress as she had won the king’s favour with her stunning figure. She was a celebrated dancer and a good singer. With her good looks, the youthful girl with beautiful eyes and chiselled features outsmarted all other mistresses. At the king’s palace, she was a superb profile in many respects, except, of course, being respectful. She was delighted by the taste and sweet fragrance, and she became curious to recognise these unfamiliar fruits and flowers. It was the first time she had tasted such fruits. Smiling, she appreciated the gifts, saying they were superb. The mistress offered the king some fruits to taste and a long stick with a blossoming bud to smell. The king was already under the spell of the fragrance, and now he was enchanted by the taste of the fruits. Even after a month, he found the fruits and flowers to be fresh and fragrant, as if they had been freshly plucked.

Now the king started meeting the florist as her frequent customer. Whenever he would pass through the forest, he would always buy the fruits and flowers for his favourite mistress. The poor florist was happy to have a rich and permanent customer, as every time the king visited, he bought all the items in one go, and the girl had enough time to play with her younger sister because she did not have to go to the city.

One day, while buying the fruits and flowers, the king curiously asked the girl: “Will you please tell me the name and species of these outlandishly looking fruits and flowers?”

“I beg your pardon, sir. The trees that bear these fruits and flowers grow in the interior of the forest, which is difficult to access,” ignorant of his blue blood, the girl chuckled.

“Then how do you get them?” the king asked.

“Searching and selling these fruits and flowers is our family’s traditional vocation to earn a living,” the girl replied.

With the passage of time, King Veer grows increasingly shrewd and greedy. His lust for money and power continues to grow. One day, Rudra

suggested that he obtain trees that bear these divine fruits and flowers. He started thinking of commercialising and trading these aromatic flowers and fabulous fruits with other states. The greedy king started dreaming of becoming the richest king on the earth. The secret of flowers and fruits was embedded in his mind. That day on, wherever the king went, this idea haunted him day and night.

Hoping to discover the secret of the fruits and flowers, the king again visited the girl. After buying the fruits and flowers, he asked the girl with his sophistry: “As these fruits and flowers are superb, some of my close friends wish to see these exceptional trees.”

“But it’s not possible for anyone to reach there; the way to the interiors of this forest is narrow and tough,” pleaded the girl.

“We certainly will reach there; you just have to guide us,” insisted the king.

“You seem to be a well-read gentleman. Is it your idea?” asked the girl, her voice serious but her eyes cheery.

“No, my close friends did wish it,” said the king, naively.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to share a piece of advice that my mother used to give me when I was a child,” the girl offered.

“Oh sure, I’ll be grateful,” the king nodded in agreement.

“When we stop thinking, we start following others’ minds; when our thoughts become futile, we start believing in others, and that in my line of work is suicide. Significantly, the environment shapes our thinking and choices. Our whole search is taste-centred. Relatively, the subject matter of our research is motivated by our taste for the people we are surrounded by, the sort of books we read, the music we listen to, and the things we do,” confided the girl.

The girl halted for a while and added: “Therefore, don’t you think that you’re advancing your research in something that belongs to others? Our destination is necessarily determined by the track we choose to walk. Surroundings of the graveyard will remind you of your mortality, and a temple will remind you of your immortality and loving God. Therefore, you need to change the people who surround you, and all your questions will change too. For this, you need to change your environment to develop beautiful tastes and choices in your research area. Because the size of our

amazement is determined by what astonishing things or how beautiful feelings we've experienced in the past."

King Veer was so keen to know the source of the fruits and the flowers, and was adamant after getting the same answer. The king insisted that she tell him the exact location from where those fruits and flowers could be harvested. The girl pretended to be ignorant and veered off the subject every time he discussed it. Indeed, the king wanted to monopolise these fruits and flowers so that no one could deal in the same commodities. The king was obsessed with the idea of rising to the highest position in terms of power and money. To materialize his idea, he gave these fruits and flowers to his soldiers and sent them in all directions to find the rarest trees. The soldiers put in their best effort to search the trees, but they failed and returned empty-handed.

Thinking the whole night, the king hatched a conspiracy. He tried to play a foul with the girl. Everyday, he started meeting the girl as her frequent customer. Rudra, who was secretly monitoring the king's every move, felt threatened. The king, who was once obsessed with his favourite mistress, had now fallen prey to a mysterious girl with a secret. To her bewilderment, he gradually distanced himself from her. Planting the idea in his mind to get the secret of the fruits and flowers led to a downfall in her influence over the king. Heartbroken, the envious mistress discreetly tried to dissuade the king, but the obsessed king pushed her out of his secret plans. Thrown out of her lover's heart, Rudra made up her mind to struggle as she faced a dual challenge: to restore his craze for her splendour and youth and to get rid of her new rival.

Under his contingency plans, the crazy king introduced himself as an ordinary boy from the capital city. He would spend a lot of time chatting with the flower selling girl under a tree. His frequent visits had made the girl feel comfortable with the king, and she opened her heart out to him without any reservation. One day, when the king explored her whereabouts and family background, the florist introduced herself as Sarah. She told him everything except the secret of the inaccessible trees. They would wander about in the woods. As the king had become her regular customer, the girl was now free from waiting for other customers to arrive. She would just keep a watch over her herd of cattle grazing in the sprawling meadows, while he would roam with her in the open sunny spots.

Days slipped into weeks, and weeks into months. King Veer was sweet enough to gain her confidence, so he advanced with diplomacy in every move. He used phony and fantastic arrangements of words by which he could prove an ox to be an elephant and a lamb to be a lion. Finally, he convinced her in

such a way that she deeply fell in love with him. When she departed, she could not take her eyes off the man of her dreams until he vanished from sight. There was a sigh in the evening that turned into a whisper, and as the evening passed, the whisper turned into a melody, and as the night drew, the melody kept her mind thinking of the youthful man until she lost herself to his dreams and slept. However, she sat awake in her bed during the second phase of the night.

“What a lovely feeling it is! It has dawned upon me like a guest, and I’ll serve it like a host. It makes me like myself; it keeps me awake when everyone else is asleep. It has given me a worthy cause to hope for a longer life. They fairly say that love can move mountains. I can’t afford losing this feeling at any expense. It’s really something worth dying for,” affirmed her heart. There were twenty-four hours a day, and for her it was a great challenge to count each second until she saw him again. Conversely, time remained immeasurable when he was around. Her search for meaning in life came to an end, and all her wandering thoughts found their proper place to settle deep down. Though, the innocent girl performed every minor or major responsibility but remained under some sort of magic spell round the clock. Every night, the girl would stay awake till late hours as her heart hosted her imagination that served her soul with pleasant feelings. Then the girl would retire to sleep, thinking of another chance to see him the next morning. The separation was melancholic. God was still on her side, extending another day regardless of her chances of seeing him again. His mere presence was a treat to her eyes and heart. She wove a splendid garland of jasmine flowers for her lover and waited for hours on the hilltop. She would compose verses as her adored lover moved his lips, hands and arms. On beautiful summer evenings, they would stroll together along the banks of the river, where cuckoos called on the luscious mango trees and fireflies wove golden threads through the night. Her heart would sing with him as the king would look into her blue eyes, and at the mere contact of his hands, she felt amazed that there was so much festivity in the world. They would enjoy the voyage in silver white moonlight, where silence and solace weave their future dreams. She could not exist even for a single moment without him. Till now, no mention at all was made of the secret nor his being king in any way.

One day, the king sat beside Sarah and looked at her mischievously. The day had been warm and sunny, and in the cold of the evening, they looked into each other’s eyes. Her heart throbbed with high beating, and a flood of red colour rose on her blushing cheeks. In her excitement, she made irregular and unorganised flower arrangements in the garland she was weaving for him.

“Why is the whole universe so silent?” the king muttered under his breath.

Sarah kept looking at him for some time and then cheerfully said: “I would better be silent.”

“But why?” the king asked, his voice full of surprise.

“My love, at the moment, I consider silence the best response when I don’t want to confine your beauty in words. I want my heart to experience different shades and feelings of love by being silent,” Sarah replied.

“I probably bore you with my questions,” the king said.

“You never bore me, even if you don’t say a word,” Sarah kept looking at a bird and said without looking at him. The little bird hit the corn with its beak and then swiftly turned its head to the left and right.

“Well, tell me what if you are given an opportunity to become a rich person by trading these flowers with other states?” offered the king.

“I want to become happy,” Sarah meekly replied.

“I think you didn’t understand my question,” complained the king.

“And I wonder you didn’t understand life,” retaliated Sarah.

King Veer became speechless. For a moment, there was complete silence. Sarah was a suave and sober girl. She spoke calmly with a smile: “I’m profoundly grateful to God to have his grace for blessing me with life. I’m extremely happy with my life and love every inch of myself as a mother loves her child. I’m so fortunate to have ground under my feet to hold my balance and limitless blue sky to feel freedom. How can I ignore the red roses that remind me of love and the green mountains that fill me with enthusiasm? What can be sweeter than rising with this platonic feeling I have for you?”

“You’re too innocent to see through the tricks of people in this treacherous world - perhaps immature or novice to earn wealth,” the king remarked, without bothering if she would like it or not.

“For me, I’m mature and experienced enough to protect my innocence and maintain my simple living in the same treacherous world,” Sarah answered, setting the fluff that had gathered on his sleeve down, her voice without a trace of sarcasm.

“What else keeps you happy and tranquil?” changing the subject, said the king.

“I’ve a pure heart to love; I’ve fresh air to inhale; I’ve sweet water to drink, and I’ve eyes to see this beautiful world. What else do I need? See how rich and bestowed I am! So, I need nothing because I have everything that a person actually needs to live with happiness and satisfaction.

Six months later, on seeing Sarah in a happy mood at their rendezvous, the king cleverly asked her the secret of the flower tree. However, to his utter disappointment, the girl requested him not to ask that question again if he truly loved her.

After a few weeks, the king tried another plan. He told Sarah about his reality. The poor girl was shocked as the king told her that he was not a common man but the royal king of the province she belonged to. Before the girl asked him why he kept it a secret for all those months, the king, without any delay, told her that he did not unravel the secret for the fear of losing her. She was enthralled as she did not believe the king for sometime. The king knelt down on his knees and proposed marriage, but she asked him to give her some time. In turn, she too considered it important to tell the king about her responsibilities towards her family, which she did. She disclosed everything to the king as a guilty spirit confesses before the Bible. She belonged to a poor family and had an old father and her younger sister, Saumya to take care of.

Sarah led the king to her house. As the king stepped over the stone stairs to enter the yard of her wooden house, he lost his balance and slipped like a small child. Before he lost ground, the girl immediately extended her hand to help him control his balance. She cursed herself for not settling the stairs properly.

It was a perfect winter evening for a family meeting. The dark night, in the middle of the village, sparkled with warm waves as the village-hunters began roasting their game over the huge pile of glowing-red timbers. A public performance in their patron’s honour was scheduled after dinner. Food was served on a big oak table. Sarah sat beside her father, and across the table sat the king beside the little Saumya. Everyone was quite hungry as they looked busy in self-service while they all together talked a lot. Both men at the dining table concentrated more on the combination of brown bread with spicy potato soup, and every time its flavour multiplied when the old man filled their mugs with red wine. The females of the family nibbled at the fried beans and roasted potatoes with brown bread. However, a large plate full of salads remained the centre of common interest. Yummy green sauce prepared by a magnificent crush of mint, spring onion, garlic, green chillies and coriander leaves magnified their appetite. Before that, the king had never known such a hearty

meal, and he was dumbstruck it was found outside his palace. At the mealtime, the girl explained to him that she was the only helping hand to her father, and she had her little sister, Saumya, who was hardly ten. She sought the king's permission to take care of her family members until her younger sister could attain the age of fifteen and grow strong enough to look after her old father. The scheming king readily agreed to all her conditions.

The evening feast was followed by a traditional yet gracious festival. Above the yard, a big and high wooden chair was placed on the veranda, and the king was made to sit on it. As soon as dancing and music started, the moon shone bright over the lush green pine trees, and it looked like a clean painting of a landscape on canvas. The villagers called themselves 'The Ikvaa', which, according to their mythology, was the first of the original ten heavenly families created by God. It was only 'The Ikvaa' family that could survive on the earth, while the other nine left for heaven. The king was fascinated by the traditional dresses of Ikvaa women. It was an elaborate affair with beads, feathers of the hornbill, bangles, earrings and anklets. The Ikvaa men were in full-sleeve woollen overcoats with a collar, fastened by a different colourful waistband.

In their leisure hours during the fall, the women could be seen knitting those grey woollen coats for their loved ones. They were a united tribe - no struggle to be better and no strife to be perfect. Their lives were limited to farming and celebrating. They seemed ignorant of the concept of success. All the villagers used to forget everything except celebrating with great fervour whenever they succeeded in achieving a good farm yield or constructing a dam to harvest rainwater.

At every glimpse of their traditional wear, there was something new for everyone present. Children looked genuinely happy; men looked truthful without much possession, and women looked even more beautiful without make-up. They all sat around the fire, singing and clapping. The lovers frequently exchanged glances with each other. Every time the music and singing rose high, the dancing village youths led the king to the dancing floor, and he paired up with Sarah. They all sang, danced and laughed with their guest, whom they regarded their saviour. With the villagers, the king also swayed to the rhythm of the music. For the first time in his life, he forgot his mind and time. He did not remember when he forgot everything; he even forgot that it was his pre-arranged setup to marry the poor girl for his vested interests. In those moments, he forgot the flower tree, the secret, the money, and the power. Forgetting everything, he lived those moments to the fullest.

For some moments, he forgot his ego for being blue-blooded and for the first time, he saw only Veer and Sarah sitting together. These moments made him feel that the whole world existed within that village - the only happy human civilization on the earth. The milky white moon appeared on the distant hills to remind the village folks of the last phase of the night.

Sarah was an obedient girl. The next morning after the king's departure, she went to her father; told him everything and asked for his approval for marrying the king. Her father made her sit beside him, placed his hand on her head and said: "My child, you're peace and joy to my heart. I don't know to what extent your advancement to this relationship is justified, but what I've learnt from the world is something different from what it actually looks like."

"Father, help me understand this," the daughter requested, her voice soft and pleading.

"The world has a strange philosophy, my child. If sin achieves material, it is called a virtue, and if a virtue reaps no material, it is called a sin," the old father said satirically.

"Father, I literally understood the meaning, but I didn't understand its connection. What have virtues and vices to do with my marriage?" Sarah sought to know.

"Here is the real point I want to share with you," the old father observed. "What I've experienced is that rich people are dictators and poor people are followers. Poor people listen and accept because they don't have other alternatives. The super class rules the world; their pleadings are subtle, but their messages are long, their voices are soft, but their meanings are hard, their smiles are discreet, but their decisions are final. They have power and power does not compromise with anyone, therefore they know everything and the poor know nothing. The affluent have the right to accept or reject anything with their personal judgments."

"But, father, he is different from others. He is kind and caring; above all, we both love each other," Sarah reinforced.

"Did you initially consult your mind or me when you fell in love with him?" asked the old father, his voice serious.

"No," growing pensive, Sarah confessed.

"Then, why do you want to change your mind now? What's the logic to seek my approval now? Child, you've crossed the age of discretion. If you

believe it's right, don't think more, and if it gives your heart happiness, then don't seek anyone's approval. Go ahead," the old man pressed.

After some days of contemplation, Sarah readily accepted the king's marriage proposal. For getting married to a king, the poor girl had no intentions to relish a lavish lifestyle, nor did she intend to satisfy her ego to be seated next to the king on the highest seat and enjoy power. All that her heart wished and mind dreamt of was serving the man she loved more than herself. She felt herself on cloud nine because she had someone worth dying for. The marriage took place after a week, and Sarah became the Queen Sarah. The royal horse cart brought the bride to the king's magnificent palace. As the queen stepped down, a long and widespread lush green garden welcomed her, and a stately white mansion with multiple symmetrical rooms with windows covered with Oxford blue glasses to its left and right blocks gave her a pleasant look. A leaf-carved high and heavy door flew open with loud sound of multiple drums and trumpets, and led the new family member to the main hall. There stood many high pillars in rows holding the roof, which seemed to boast of its oil paintings and gleaming chandeliers. The shining white marble reflected the flashing metals engraved in the wooden work on the walls. In the middle of the hall, a red carpet paved the way for the queen through a flight of brown wooden stairs to another world of artistic excellence. The queen was surrounded by maids who were at her beck and call. For a girl from a humble background with limited means, those aristocratic living standards could easily replace her simplicity with haughtiness for being the proprietor of the finest things in the world.

On the first day, the newlywed queen Sarah made a personal commitment early in her marriage to expect everything of herself and nothing of her husband. She believed that love and marriage are not a fifty-fifty proposition. Even after becoming the queen, the poor girl was so humble and down to the earth that she never behaved proudly. She became even more polite, modest and soft spoken. She became as calm as the still water. After becoming the queen, her qualities multiplied manifold. She was very kind to the poor and helpful to those in need. Her sweet nature blended with her costliest jewels became a universal theme of admiration. She was very happy to have a husband whom she loved more than herself. She would become restless if he ever got even slightly late. The queen would intentionally prepare the delicious dishes in the kitchen for him. She would find enjoyment in arranging his clothes. She would request the king's attendants to let her make her husband a comfortable bed and beautify her bedroom with fresh-flower arrangements. At times, she would compare the glow on his face with the

elegant moon shining in the blue sky and his hair with the jet-black night. At other times, her poetic mind would compose verses and whisper them to him as he would fall asleep. Her heart was at the peak of its devotion towards him. She worshipped her husband the way a devotee worships God. She would sing songs like a happy bird and dance with the feeling of being alive.

The destiny had now set the stage for Sarah to know the reality of the world that confuses service with servility and submission with surrender. The poor girl was mocked by the king's mistresses for being uncivilized and uneducated. Her simplicity was mistaken for boredom, and her innocence for backwardness. A teacher was engaged to teach her royal etiquette and manners of the super-class. Hesitant to change her real self, she was forced to adapt herself to the cluster of her husband. Despite the different techniques employed to train her in diplomacy and sophistication, she continued to retain her simplicity. The queen was called by the king when he received poor feedback on her performance.

"I hope you understand that the living standards are different in a palace from the living standards in a forest," the upset king said. The greed had abolished from his mind the golden moments he had enjoyed in the company of the Ikvaa families.

"I have a high regard for simplicity regardless of where I live - in a palace or a forest." The queen threaded a diamond into the necklace of her wisdom.

"Dear, there is much truth in these words. In your search for the secret of peace, love and happiness, don't look for a miracle because you won't find it in simplicity. You'll find this colourful world appreciating only the rosy pictures; and the people who don't flow with trend attract no attention," the king observed.

"To capture my attention, one needs to be a trend-setter, not a follower," answered the queen.

"I think that's enough", sighed the king.

"This law of simplicity is available to every person who has the faith and courage to live by it. One of the greatest attributes of happy people is that they dream of the sky while being rooted deep in the earth. Simplicity has great faculties which work as a soothing balm that protects us against negative forces and helps to unleash our hidden potential and vitality," Sarah spoke simply and directly without sophistication.

"What additional do you need to undo to live with simplicity?" the king quizzed impatiently.

“Radically, nothing different but everything ordinary,” Sarah urged. “I don’t want to overly concentrate on my clothes, and I want to eat simple food, speak fewer words with more meaning and avoid multitasking.”

“What does multitasking refer here?” the king gasped.

“Here, it means playing the role of a diplomatic aristocrat and then killing the real woman inside me. It really sucks,” Sarah said in a depressed tone.

“But this is how a queen lives with royal etiquette. You knew it before you accepted my proposal,” the king protested.

“Of course, I did,” Sarah bravely admitted, taking the explanation ahead. “But a queen can also maintain a moderate pace while she walks and speaks with a slow pace and sweet intonation. I can’t play all this drama anymore. I can never be somebody else. Don’t compel me to deceive myself by imitating others’ ways of eating, walking, talking, dressing, thinking and living.”

“Why can’t you if Rudra could learn it better for accompanying me to the court?” the king asked the magic girl.

“Don’t put the cart before the horse. I’m not Rudra. Moreover, if I do fake my behaviour like her, it appears to me I’m side-tracking my own life and living others’ lives that is entirely unreal. Every moment I pretend to be someone else, it feels taking life away from every moment that I live.”

“Why are you so particular about each and everything in life?”

“Simple!” Sarah said with care and warmth. “Because life doesn’t mean to prove something to someone, and happiness isn’t showing off how much you possess or how beautiful you look like.”

“Will you please tell me what is life to you?” asked the king, flashing a frowning face.

“Well, to me, life means to live and feel every moment happily. The glitter of greed is not gold. Too much light causes pain to our eyes, and too much spicy food causes uneasiness to our stomach,” Sarah explained.

“I’ve lost the thread of argument,” the disconcerting king Veer protested.

“I can’t leave simplicity merely to become rich because it connects me with nature that will help me unite with my source one day. I’ll remember it without any distraction that I’ve to protect my real nature and be myself specifically when there are endless diversions,” Sarah avowed. She took a brief pause, gave herself some time to think and continued: “Well, tell me, what do you think and feel when you see a little child?”

“Love and affection, as everyone does,” the king replied abruptly.

“Your answer proves that most natural events leave similar effects on everyone, while each one of us interprets them in different ways,” Sarah said.

“I again could no longer follow it,” the king complained.

“Don’t get confused, a common thread is running through our discussion,” Sarah assured the confused king. “A simple and innocent child never tells anyone to love him. But you cannot stay away from showering your affection upon his simplicity, sweetness and innocence.”

“No doubt he is simple, but he is happy because he lives unconsciously. He is not aware of the world and the responsibilities he will have to carry out one day,” King Veer remarked, his voice full of surprise.

“Let me remind you here that we grow physically with time, yet that innocent child never dies in us. Every day, he just keeps fighting within to be recognised throughout his life. I never want to let that artless child die while discharging my duties,” explained Sarah.

“After listening to your views on simplicity, I can now conclude that you have grown puzzled about whether to strive for advancement or practise simplicity because both seem to be opposites. Dear, I actually want to let you understand that this materialistic growth always leads us to perfection, not to destruction,” the king expressed what he strongly believed.

“I really like your observation. It is actually an irrepressible question and the urge of the hour,” Sarah said. “I’m not against progress and growth. My point is that an excess of everything becomes poison. We should draw a line for progress in everything we do. Your solution is unmistakably defective because it’ll resolve one problem but create five more. See! if progress is the heart of human civilisation, then ethical values are essentially the heart of progress. We must understand that human values in everything we do should gain more respect than material gains. Fundamentally, you and I need time more than facilities to come closer and understand each other. For me, for you and for all, values of life should be shifted to honour simplicity.”

“Though it is quite true, yet it seems hard to implement in real-life situations,” objected the hesitating king. To such regal dignity, it was not graceful to accept defeat before a poor and loutish girl, no matter how much his arguments had dried away.

“It is so simple if you believe in giving back twice more than you take,” Sarah suggested, “Well, my dear, as you simplify your life, the laws of the

universe will appear less complex, sounds will appear as solitude, and poverty will appear as prosperity. Ask not what your people can do for you, but rather what you can do for them. And leave your empire a wonderful place in which love should be the greatest force uniting all people and religions.”

However, from the day of their marriage, Queen Sarah noticed sizeable behavioural changes in her husband. He was growing indifferent and cold to her. She did not like his eccentric behaviour and wanted to know the reason.

“My lord, being a wife, I ethically understand the imperative of sharing everything with my husband, particularly when a wife regards her husband above God. Your silence will be my demise. Please tell me what has made you so indifferent towards me,” Sarah asked the king straightaway.

“May I know what you can sacrifice to avoid this indifference?” the king demanded.

“What’s my sacrifice?” Sarah asked without delay.

“I’m afraid, you keep the secret above your relations,” the king said and turned his eyes away.

“Relations don’t have benefits; they have meanings. It is neither secret nor wealth but love and understanding that last long,” Sarah said. The king looked at her again.

“I suppose the disclosure of the secret wouldn’t disturb our love and understanding anymore,” King Veer assured.

“I choose to preserve the peace and happiness that may be lost if the secret is revealed,” Sarah emphasised. “Therefore, I’m helpless to share the secret of fruits and flowers on this earth with anyone.”

“Don’t you think if I trade in these fruits and flowers, they would also bring peace and happiness?” said the king.

“Power and wealth may be the way of the world, but it’s not the way to a peaceful and happy life. Power-driven societies resemble animal societies. ‘Might is right’ is the rule of the jungle and applies to beasts, not humans. Beasts do not progress in peace and happiness. Only humans do,” Sarah observed, her face calm and her voice moderate.

“But I don’t approve of the secret you keep,” the king said in a complaining tone.

“I am concealing the secret over and over again because it’s something that belongs to God, and its disclosure will inevitably lead to dire

consequences. These fruits and flowers are meant to disperse love and peace among people. Nobody can use them for trade,” clarified Sarah.

“I’m constant as the northern star at my say,” the king avowed.

Sarah thought hard and long, but there was not much in the way of good news to pass on. The newly-wed bride felt herself quite helpless, like a fish out of water. She tried a hundred ways to make him happy, but the king did not budge even an inch. After that day, the king grew increasingly adamant and angry. Although they lived in the same palace, the king slept in a separate room. He became extremely silent and stopped talking to her entirely. The king avoided and neglected innocent Sarah whenever he confronted her. She expected nothing of her destiny except being near him; however, she could not bear his melancholy. Above all, she was filled with profound happiness at the thought of being near him.

One day, Sarah stopped the king in the corridor. She was extremely nervous, her heart was beating fast, and her legs began to tremble. She gathered enough courage and demanded with a stream of questions, “Don’t you think it would be comforting if you told me the reason for your silence? May I know why you’re not treating me as your wife? Why have I been deprived of my rights? Why have I been relieved of my duties as your wife? I beg for your apology if there has been any deficiency in my conduct to your service.”

“Tell me the secret that rests in your heart. I’m not commanding you, just asking humbly,” the king asked diplomatically.

“This is not important that you are asking me, the crucial point is that you won’t protest if I say no,” Sarah stammered.

The barbaric king glared at poor Sarah with a face that looked as if it were carved out of stone. He again accentuated the same utterances, “I want the secret of fruits and flowers. You’re wasting my time. Either disclose the secret or face the grave outcome.”

“We’re wasting ourselves, not our time,” emphasised Sarah. “Time neither comes nor goes, but rather we just come and go like winter comes after summer. Empires rise, and empires fall but time always stands still.”

“Never has the world known such fidelity of a wife to her husband,” protested the king, tossed the silver tumbler down the floor and left, leaving his queen dumbstruck with terror.

More than six months had passed since Sarah married King Veer. The poor queen was not allowed to leave the royal palace, let alone help her father and sister, as the king had promised.

The anxious father got worried as he did not hear from his elder daughter for so long. Therefore, out of apprehension, one day he decided to go to the royal palace to inquire about his elder daughter. Saumya, the younger sister of Sarah, was a little girl, lithe and lovely as a fawn, with a fine freedom in her large blue eyes. She grew so excited to see the royal palace and her sister as a queen, surrounded by dozens of maids. That day, she had to spend a lot of time before the mirror admiring her beauty and adoring her identity as the younger sister of the queen of that kingdom. Her uncompromising conversation to herself was suddenly disrupted by her father as he loudly called out, "Hustle up, Saumya; we're getting late."

The overjoyed girl, out of confusion, every time mishandled the buttons in her long off yellowish gown that boasted of leaves sparsely painted on it in purple, green, crimson, and black. Another loud voice reached her ears, and the super-excited girl stormed off through the bare floorboards like a horse galloping, her sandals dangling in both hands. As she came out of her house, every living creature, plants and her father looked happy at her uplifting spirit. She ran to her father and ordered him to help her do up the laces of her gown. The next moment, they mounted their horse-cart and set off. The father whipped the horse, and the little girl adjusted her dress on the back seat. It was quite strange to the well-groomed fairy on the airplane why her house looked old-fashioned to her eyes for the first time in all those years. Soon, she was watching the track sliding away from her. They passed forests, valleys, and mountains covered with grass. Until the sun came over their heads, the father sang all his daughter's childhood songs at her request. For the rest of the day, they rode along the riverside, which led them to the capital. Before sunset, they reached the royal palace.

The father got down at the gate and introduced himself to the security as the queen's father and his daughter, Saumya as the queen's younger sister. The security head at the main gate immediately sent another guard to convey the message of the poor relatives to the king. As per the schedule of his nocturnal activities, the drunken king was out of his mind and did not want anyone to disturb his private life. For her part of the job, Rudra- the alluring girl-was serving him with wine and song. Seeing the guard at the door, the mistress put all her affairs on hold and briskly ran to the guard. After grabbing the message, she closed the door and minutely scanned the lines by

moving her head from left to right and vice-versa. The next moment, she opened the door again and silently poured some secret words into the messenger's ear, who in turn shook his head twice in confirmation.

The guard shocked both the father and his daughter by saying that, with the king's order, no relative of the queen was allowed to enter the palace and meet her. Through a messenger, the poor father sent a message requesting the queen that they did not want any sort of favour, neither from the king nor from the queen; her father and younger sister would be glad knowing that she was happy with the king. They were made to wait nightlong outside the royal palace, but their request was not answered. Finally, humiliated and embarrassed, the poor relatives returned home. On their way back, both the father and his younger daughter did not talk to each other as they were preoccupied with endless speculations and apprehensions. On reaching back to that lonely forest away from the city's civilized and cultured life, the old-fashioned wooden house looked more beautiful than the royal palace to the little, sad sister.



Danish - The Devil Soul

Queen Sarah felt very bad when she discovered that her family received unwelcoming treatment from King Veer. She could sense the reason for the inhospitality. The queen decided to set her relations right with the king before explaining her helplessness to her father and sister. The queen, who believed in making everyone happy, could neither displease her husband nor was she able to disclose the mystery of the divine flower tree. She found herself between the devil and the deep blue sea.

After knowing the ill-treatment of her husband to her relatives, the queen visited king's chamber. The hurt queen complained of his neglect to her family members who were innocent. According to her, he should not have brought her family into their private affairs. Many shock waves clutched the complaining queen when the king told her that he knew nothing about her family's visit. For some time, both the king and the queen remained motionless and silent, perhaps thoughtful of each other's statements. After a short while, before the king left the corridor, he said, "Lady! I've my life and you've yours. I'm not in this world to fulfil your expectations, and you're not in this world to fulfil mine. You're still the same and so am I, and if by luck we cooperate with each other, then it's fruitful; if not, it can't be helped."

As the king moved forward, the queen rushed briskly and stretched her long arms to stop him. She walked down to the King. With her both hands, she held his head that was covered with gold plated crown, studded with dark

blue diamonds and green jewels. The queen kissed him on his forehead, looked into his eyes and said, “Let’s enjoy the peace and happiness that almighty God has showered upon us. In this world, every second, hour, and day, millions of people lose their precious lives in different incidents. Look! We’re those blessed ones who’ve been gifted with life. For God’s sake, extend your gratitude for this life and live it to the optimum.”

“It’s not mandatory to be a good cook to relish delicious food,” the king remarked with shrewdness.

“I don’t follow you,” said the queen.

“I need the secret for making wealth and gaining power, which will surely bring peace and happiness to me,” the king said promptly.

“It’s not possible. No one has ever been able to make a fortune without sincerity and commitment,’ Sarah said.

“Do you believe these fruits and flowers can earn money if they are sold?” asked the distrustful king.

“Yes, exactly so,” the queen admitted.

“But you earlier said that it’s impossible,” the king complained.

“I meant I don’t like to buy peace and happiness by trading these fruits and flowers,” Sarah clarified.

“No one had thought of pleasing you when those rare trees were grown in the interiors of the forest,” the king reprimanded her.

“Why don’t you see? This second, this day, and this life will never come again. Don’t underestimate what you have. Rest assured, we can live happily and peacefully without trading these fruits and flowers. At least it’s direly needed to be an ordinary cook for not dying of starvation. I’m a simple and poor girl. I can live happily without all this wealth as I used to live earlier,” the queen insisted.

“I’m fully convinced,” the clever king cunningly confirmed. “Still, I want the secret.”

“I say it once more,” the queen pressed.

“And I reject it twice,” the adamant king declined, this time his voice louder and stronger.

As soon as the queen sensed his anger beginning to build up, she decided to let it go for the present, hoping that the king might be more reasonable in the future.

In the meantime, Rudra found the susceptible king Veer more accessible. Her frequent visits to the king helped the villainous mistress poison his mind against his innocent wife. The cruel lady fished in troubled waters. She tarnished the queen's image by saying that his queen was too clumsy to accompany the great king to his court, as people used to mock her weird dresses, rolling gait, and language barriers. The over-credulous king rejected his idea of bringing his loutish wife to his court. To her satisfaction, the king, whose physique was designed by his ambitious father and heart by his compassionate mother, was ready to revive his old affair with his old mistress. The mistress now vowed not to lose her grip on the king, so she spent more nights in and days out with the king.

One evening, Sarah met Rudra outside her husband's bedroom when she was on her way to meet him. After sizing up each-other, it was the mistress who dared to speak first.

"Under the present circumstances, I'm victorious in spite of being defeated. You better make a compromise rather than seeking a perfect solution. At least, I may help you get out of this palace and save your life."

"Many a time life becomes so bad that it isn't death but life itself that frightens us; it's not hatred but love that gives us shocked silence," the queen answered.

"Please accept my condolences," Rudra mocked.

"You know what your problem is!" holding a candle upright, the queen remarked.

"Like what?"

"Can it be something personal?" seeking Rudra's permission, the queen said.

"Sure, I'd love to know myself with more clarity," the unashamed Rudra approved without showing any sign of hesitation.

"You're deft only at playing tricks to seek what you want, but you don't know how to earn it with hard work and honesty," the queen observed.

"What did you achieve by being honest and hardworking compared to a trickster like me?" Rudra challenged.

“At least I’m satisfied that I’ve got a heart that can feel good for others,” said the queen.

“I think, you’ve a wrong notion about yourself. Let me help you understand yourself better. In the prevailing situation, you can’t love, but you can preach how to love; you can’t live, but you can preach how to live well. And, oh yes! Does it look familiar? What an irony! Isn’t it?” Rudra said mockingly.

“Be happy with whatever you believe in. Everyone in this world is free to be happy with whatever he thinks, believes, and does,” the queen said.

“My dear Mrs. perfect, there are only two ways to remain happy in this round and rotten world- either accept wholeheartedly whatever you have or get what you wish fairly or unfairly” , Rudra suggested.

“But every time, make sure what you sacrifice is not bigger than what you gain in pursuit of getting more and more,” the queen warned.

“Let it be understood for once and all - the king belongs to me. He was mine in the past, and he’ll continue to be mine. So, you’re wasting your life in this palace. You better confide in me the secret of the fruits and flowers hidden in your heart so that I can help you,” Rudra proposed, casting a cold eye.

“A bad slave can’t be a good master. Do you understand?” the queen retorted.

“What do you think of yourself? It’s your husband, who, for a purpose, made you think you’re more beautiful than your ugly features can make you imagine,” Rudra sniffed. Her face was red, and her voice was broken.

“You’re very nervous like the parrot that is louder in hoping for rain,” the queen said, her face calm and voice smooth.

“You’re ugly enough; don’t make yourself stupid, too. If you have an iota of self-esteem, leave this palace right away as you’re unwanted and unwelcome even by your own husband,” Rudra burst out.

“Oh! Dear comely lady, you may arouse me like this no end, but I prefer my love to your provocation,” the queen claimed.

“You also remember, I too, am the one who does what I think is right, regardless of the penalty,” Rudra challenged.

“If you say so, then so shall it be,” the queen answered.

“Don’t worry, dear. I’ll get to the bottom of your secret and make a lot of money,” said Rudra.

“It becomes the duty of those who make a lot of money to help those who don’t have sufficient means to earn. There can’t be peace and happiness on this earth unless there is equality in every respect,” the queen voiced a note of human virtues.

“I’ve heard these discourses many times before,” Rudra prompted.

“So what, there’s no harm in listening once more. Give your tongue complete rest. How will you ever hear your heart if you never stop talking?” said the queen.

“Go back to your home- the woods, where animals understand your wisdom and appreciate your wild-beauty,” Rudra pressed.

“Oh, sure! This is perhaps the first time you have said the right thing. I have been in this palace for a long time, but I find the woods far better than this grand palace. In the woods, no one always tries to bend the other into what one wants,” the queen remarked.

“I just tried to improve my relations with you, but you still misbehaved with me,” Rudra said coyly. By changing the air, she abruptly attempted to change the weather.

“It is much like water complaining of being cut with a knife. What an immature defence,” the queen made a fair comment and continued.

“But we all are family members,” Rudra said in a compromising tone.

“If you call it a family, then all family members are enemies to one another,” clarified Sarah.

Rudra had got her favourite secret agent deployed in queen’s palace. Danish-the devil soul, was brought to the palace from a slave market. He was proud to be called a devil soul by his patroness owing to his enormous body with a jet-black complexion that had shielded him for many nights from being caught after several grotesque killings with his favourite long, sharp knife, which he always kept under his long boots. Since his childhood, theft has been his hobby. For the whole world, he served the palace in the capacity of a slave or a servant, but as a matter of fact, he was a serial killer after he came in contact with the diplomatic Rudra many years back. Since his childhood, his cruel heart had never seen kindness for him in the eyes of even a single person. His stone heart had never felt love for him in the heart of anyone. Every time, his back received a severe pain after each flogging, his expectant eyes seriously looked around in search of justice by a wise philanthropist, but to change him into a hard-hearted man, it was sufficient to find people looking at his

helplessness at one moment and ignoring what was happening to him the other. Until Prince Veer was enthroned, it had never been the case that many of his loyalists- his chief counsellors and advisors—were murdered one after another under mysterious circumstances. All those counsellors and advisors met the same destiny who tried to keep the king off Rudra. The same was happening to all those mistresses who tried getting closer to the king. Some dead bodies were recovered from the outskirts of the capital. What else could be a safer heaven for that evil soul than that palace - having an intelligent mistress with a brilliant mind to serve and no eye to suspect his hideout! Everyone, both at the palace and the capital city, was living in terror everyday. The entire governance, supervision, and security system had given up on the criminal. The soldiers searched every nook and cranny of the kingdom, except the palace.

It was a summer afternoon, and the queen was sitting on a newly assembled reclining chair, working on her embroidery frame. Spreading a piece of cloth over her bending knees, her long and soft fingers were playing with colourful round beads, threads, milky white cowries and pearls. She was profoundly absorbed in her golden days spent in Sundervan and, remembering the company of that good-looking boy who later turned out to be a selfish, proud king. She allowed only the former part of her life in her mind because it was heart-pleasing, and avoided the latter as it was thought-provoking. Danish was like a man awakened from the grave. As he entered the hall, the busy queen gave rest to her hands and mind; she stared at him in silence with a smile in her blue eyes that could make even a fastidious soul light and bright. It was the first time in his life that he was unprecedentedly welcomed by someone with a smiling face. In response to her welcoming gestures, Danish had goose bumps for having been treated with such profuse warmth and respect. Thinking the man in the hall was a housekeeping service, she again pulled her ball of wool and bent down to closely examine the patterns she had knitted a short while ago. The next moment, with his soundless gait, the devil soul walked down to the five feet high golden coloured statue of an ancient archer. He put his right hand into the pocket of his long black overcoat, and after a long pause, took out a white rag with some difficulty and started cleaning the statue that was standing still beside the queen's chair. As his hands moved over the ancient archer, his keen eyes precisely judged the distance between the statue and his target. It was the appropriate moment to execute his wicked plans because there was not a single soul in that remote part of the palace at that time. Counting his steps, he very softly and swiftly moved to the queen and stood before her, holding the dagger between his

hands, which rested over his waist. Sensing someone approaching, the ignorant queen raised her head and gave a broad smile to the man by stretching her symmetrical, glossy lips. Like a gullible lamb, unaware of what was being instigated against her, she bent down, picked up her exquisite handiwork, and showed it to the sinner who was standing before her like an angel of death. Despite his best efforts, unknown forces stopped him. For a long, successful career with many killings, it never occurred to him that his prey had ever greeted him with a heartfelt smile and sought his commendations for something beautiful she had carved and crafted. To the awestruck slayer, it was a conventional yet convenient practice to show his hatred and anger, but not to share his bitter experiences. He started trembling because he did not know what was happening to him, as his heart started having a foreign feeling he had never experienced. In an unruly state of affairs, he bent his head down as he lost his confidence and left the hall without delay as someone approached. On the whole way back to his chamber, Danish kept his left hand on his heart and pressed it, as it was a queer feeling which he was unable to describe, whether it was good or bad. Since birth, he had been acquainted only with his mind, but after encountering an altruistic person like her, he was introduced to his conscience for the first time. He could not sleep the whole night because his head conflicted with his heart every time his mission-driven mind planned to accomplish his uncompleted task. Finally, when nothing worked, he poured a vessel full of wine into his wide-open mouth and gulped the fluid down until the container was emptied. In no time, the more he became intoxicated, the less he felt his heart. The less he felt his heart, the more confident he became about killing the queen the following day. Thereafter, he did not know when he would go to sleep.

The next day, when Danish approached Sarah with his evil intentions, her innocence was conveyed through a language beyond sounds and symbols. The man found no animosity on her emotionless face. She looked like a friendly soul to him and to the whole world. The silence on her comely face without any peculiar expression worked as an irresistible force on both his body and mind. His well-built hands lost every single ounce of energy to hold the dagger, and like a ripe mango, it fell to the floor without external force. Compelled by her laborious nature, the queen bent down to restore the fallen article to its original place. For some time, her fingers ran over the floor. Intriguing and incomprehensible expressions started playing on her face as her fingers caught hold of the long, sharp-edged dagger. Holding the dagger tightly close to her bosom with its sharp end downward, the soft-hearted queen observes:

“Perhaps, I forgot to tell you, I won’t eat fruit salad today.”

The next moment, more than a miracle took place as Danish confessed like an innocent child:

“With my ill-intentions, I can mislead this ignorant world, yet today my newly awakened conscience is crying out I’m ugly not only by my dark skin but also by my charred soul, which sheltered ill-will for innocent and noble souls.”

“Good news for you! Your clean heart confession has washed away all of your sins. Dear good soul! Life starts afresh again precisely at the very moment you wish to move on,” Queen Sarah nodded her head and said.

“Why are children like me born to parents?” Danish said, trying to smile, although there were tears in his eyes. He turned both his face and voice hard. Sarah tried but could not figure out whether it was for pain or for anger.

“Don’t cry,” said Queen Sarah in a soft voice.

“No, let me cry, nothing relieves like tears,” breathing deep in relaxation, he said. Sarah took a long pause and gave her undivided attention so that she could listen to him more.

“Since my childhood, I have never been fortunate enough to go to a monastery and have a teacher for formal education. Everyone cast an evil eye on me and treated me with hatred, discrimination, and indifference,” Danish complained in a tired and listless tone.

“For a learner, there’s no better teacher than his own life,” Queen Sarah encouraged.

“I haven’t been trained to think this way. But today in your presence, I can witness my mind reasoning. I’d already heard a lot about you, and this moment I’m witnessing it without exception,” said devil soul with a positive note. He really looked relieved this time.

“If I’m not getting you wrong, can you gather some courage to make a confession before the king,” asked Queen Sarah. For a short while, Danish did not answer, but she looked at him significantly and waited for his answer in silence.

“I give you my word, my redeemer,” Danish asserted. “A few moments back, I was a fearless murderer, and after meeting you, now I’m afraid of betraying an innocent heart.”

“Do you have the courage to expose your patroness who plotted all these murders?” Queen Sarah said.

“You always help the poor and the weak. Take me to your king right away. This way you’ll help me to rest in peace,” Danish implored.

“I want you to go back to your chamber in profound faith. Tomorrow, I’ll expect you at the same place at the same time,” said Queen Sarah.

“Trust me. I’ll keep my words, the same place, at the same time,” Danish said in confirmation.

“Wait for a while. Tomorrow, I’ll take you to the court. I can’t guarantee you freedom, but trust me too, I’ll try my level best to protect you from capital punishment,” raising her eyes pensively, said the queen. Danish bowed in token of respect and acknowledgement before leaving the hall.

Revelation by a slave had solved the long- pending puzzle. The king and queen had avoided each other’s presence for a long period of time because of their impossible expectations from each other. The queen considered it an opportunity to change the king’s bent mind by helping him trace the kingpin in the garb of his mistress. As a petitioner against the persecutor in that attempt, she was very confident, as she had never been before. For the undiplomatic queen, having eye witness with concrete evidence in a legal proceeding was meant half the battle won in the thick-packed court of the king. Without much thought, the redeemer of the king and his kingdom headed towards the king’s chamber. The queen was less concerned about her safety, but she was more worried about the well-being of her soul mate. She spoke to herself once more, the old paradigm: ‘actions deeply rooted in noble cause have always victory over the evil’ that was quoted under similar circumstances by her father and father’s father down the ages. As the king got to know that the queen wanted to see him urgently, sensing a new improvement in his wicked plans, the king maintained an outward air of annoyance, but internally, all his inner senses and faculties swung into action.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” the king offered.

“Under current circumstances, I think you need help rather than lending it to someone,” answered Queen Sarah.

“Ah! For you it’s very interesting, but for me it’s hardly possible?” retorted the king.

“My Lord! I’m not here to convince you with baseless prattles and ask you to change your mind,” Sarah said in a serious tone. Hearing this, he shrank his facial muscles but kept his remarks reserved.

“Oh, I wonder then! What else can be so important that troubled you to visit me?” retorted the king after a long pause.

“It’s all about the mystery of serial killings you, me and everyone in this palace is scared of,” the queen said in a dry tone.

“You mean, now you’ll solve the mystery of these murders which couldn’t be demystified even by my best detectives,” the king said, in a pathetic note.

“I know this brutal killer, and to rob you of your sleep, she enjoys a great deal of your confidence,” said the queen contemptuously.

“Spill the beans. Now, I don’t have any more endurance to hold this curiosity,” frowning, the king said.

“This barbaric criminal is none other than your sweetheart Rudra- the real mastermind behind these serial killings everyone is wondering about,” the queen said, giving him a wakeup call.

“Come on! Talk sense. For heaven’s sake, don’t say she’s after you now. I see what’s driving your mind,” ruffling his long hair, the king said.

“Don’t get me wrong. You can’t nurse a snake in your backyard believing it’ll bite only your neighbour one day,” the queen gave a stern warning.

“I can distinctively see that the source of your words and acts for this pretty girl are maligned by your animosity and jealousy,” the king said, looking at her with a dull, immovable gaze.

“Before coming to you, I knew you won’t trust my words. I know you’ve blind faith in your pretty girl,” the queen admitted.

“I was not born yesterday. Even a child can see the vengeance you nurse against Rudra. It’s made you unreasonable, and now you want to settle the score with her,” hissed the king.

“And your adultery has turned your eyes blind and ears deaf,” the queen answered.

“All this is disgusting,” the king said, crossly.

“What if I produce her accomplice before you, and that too with solid evidences,” the queen pleaded.

“Granted! I bet you, it’ll strengthen my belief in you if you prove her a criminal,” the king roared.

“So, let justice take its course tomorrow in your prestigious court,” Queen Sarah demanded.

“You may leave now; I’ll see you in the court with your witness and evidences. May God set your mind right by tomorrow,” ridiculed the king.

“I don’t mind being regarded as fanatical for protecting my husband and his people,” Queen Sarah acknowledged.

Rudra, the mastermind, to deal with her failure over her manoeuvres, had set her trustworthy agents after agents. On that day, during the secret conversation between Queen Sarah and Danish, a sweeper went unnoticed. The secret agent saw them under half-closed eyes and set his ears to their discussion and later alarmed his mistress with the approaching threat. She planned everything carefully and left nothing to chance. For some time, the villainess thought of some awesome expressions and faked them until they became real. Without any delay, with some of her close aides and agents, she hastened to reassure the king before the evidences were tampered with by the queen to mess up with her much-cherished dreams. Her thin and dignified face exhibited war-time horror and restlessness. With her gift of the gab, she began with a mixed sensation of helplessness and urgency.

“Your Excellency! Some of your guards have caught the most wanted killer, who has disguised himself as your slave in this palace for all these years. And today, he has been caught red-handed with a long knife when he tried to kill me in the afternoon,” said Rudra, sighing.

“But, the queen, who also visited my chamber, had a different side of the story. Humm... hummm... she was confident of.....,” the king said, fretting and fidgeting.

“Your Highness! Kindly show your mercy upon me and don’t make me speak what I hesitate to,” brushing off the feather fluff from her long gown, Rudra begged with a spurious suspicion.

“Dear, I’m also hesitating to say- who else should I trust if you too, despite being so close to my heart, keep a secret under your chest like my unfaithful wife?” the king complained.

“Ah, no! Keeping a secret, that too from you, is not easy. Impossible! Never! Let me tell you, I didn’t share it with you for fear you’ll get hurt,” answered Rudra, putting back a stray coil of rough hair on her forehead.

“You ladies are all cut from the same cloth, always putting my patience to the test,” the king complained again.

“Pardon! Your Excellency, call me a lost woman rather than unfaithful or ungrateful,” Rudra beseeched with a loud voice.

“Tell me everything that your heart holds,” the king insisted.

Rudra started with a respectful composure. All her secret agents were surprised to notice how an expression of intense grief came at once into her eyes, and their forced expression of grief also found inspiration to appear on their faces.

“His Highness! I don’t have the courage to defy your command. Here is the incident which I recently went through. On a mid-night, when I was on the way to your chamber, I saw the queen secretly meeting her father outside the palace, and your mother’s world-famous diamond necklace, which my lord had gifted his queen on their marriage, was shining around her sister’s neck,” Rudra lied.

“Alright, that’s enough. I can see what she’s up to,” the king said.

“My lord, forget all this. There’s nothing new in it. It is an age-old tradition that the poor girls married to the rich husbands stealthily help their kinfolks for their whole life,” Rudra acknowledged.

“I don’t mind helping. Do you know what is more panicky?” the king asked.

“Showing ungratefulness despite taking others’ help, for sure,” Rudra said rapidly, smoothing the folds of her frock and hair.

“Precisely,” the king said approvingly.

“It’s as clear as the daylight that the queen, out of revenge, has mixed it all up. I’ve brought the criminal along to avoid any confusion,” Rudra said with great confidence. The agents brought Danish into the chamber and made him kneel before the king.

“What’s your name? Why did you kill those innocent folks?” the king asked, turning to the devil soul.

Danish kept quiet. Having been tortured by Rudra’s secret agents, his condition was no better than the soldier who was taken hostage by the enemy and was counting his breath and heartbeats. For the over-credulous king, it was difficult to learn that his tongue was chopped off and his limbs were disfigured so that he couldn’t plead for his innocence and reveal the truth of

Rudra. For once again, the devil soul gathered evil-force, inappropriately shook his whole body leftward and rightward turn by turn, and tried to speak out. A fountain of blood mixed with thick saliva gushed from his mouth. For a moment, he had forgotten that his tongue was ripped off, and realizing the fact again, he growled out of protest like a bear in his loud throat that dominated other sounds. The chained criminal was taken out of the room. The king, after all, had already a soft corner for the alluring girl who had influenced him with her glitz and glamour. In the final verdict, her servitude made her petition carry weight.

“What a strange thing! Despite having a well-trained guard of soldiers, no one could notice him for so long. Has he accepted his crime?” the king demanded.

“Yes, My Excellency, without any delay or denial. The guards, after a long interrogation, recovered six skeletons from different spots on the outskirts of the royal palace,” Rudra readily reported, nodding.

“What a stupid creature she is! I’m now sick of her tricks and tantrums,” pacing up and down again and again, the king murmured. He repeated some indistinct words while shrugging his shoulders and gesticulating.

“Sir, as the murderer is accused of serial killings, with immediate effect, he should be executed in public to set an example to the law breakers,” demanded Rudra loudly.

The following day, Sarah became restless when Danish didn’t turn up on stipulated time. When the maid came to serve her midday meal, she inquisitively asked the maid about her witness. As the maid broke the news of his execution in public, her eyes got fixed, and she felt a sharp arrow piercing her breast through one deep core after another. She ran to the king’s chamber, but he denied seeing her. Hurried and worried, she rushed to the prison where Rudra’s secret agents were already anticipating her. They stopped her from meeting the prisoner.

After a short while, a wagon brought the chained criminal to the crowded city-square. Escorting the prisoner, the soldiers took the devil soul to the high platform built in the centre of the city square. The public abused him; hit him with stones, rotten eggs and tomatoes. While passing through the crowd, two ladies pulled him back by his long hair. Two soldiers made him lie on his front with his head resting on a long and flat scaffold after they tied his hands and legs with a rope. His sideward glance met with Queen Sarah, who was looking at him with her eyes full of tears for his sanctified soul. Her tears proved him

his success and were enough to know that, despite having a devil's soul, his last deeds melted an angel's heart and turned her eyes watery. For being a close aide to Rudra, he had satisfied all his physical desires, but a smile never beautified his bruised face before. At the final moment when his life was ending, Danish looked divine as a broad smile danced about his face and made it supremely beautiful. At his last moment, that good feeling was more than enough for him to close his eyes so that he could rest in peace. Her calm and lineless face with innocent eyes gleaming with tears was the first and the last sight his motionless eyes caught from the wooden scaffold when the executor, with his axe, separated his head off his body.



The Secret of Fruits and Flowers

Sarah waited for a month. Every day and night, she struggled with a dual inside. The king now exercised biting silence that severely tested her patience. The communication gap was so wide, and the differences were so deep, that the gap that separated them stood as two opposite coasts of a sea. Lastly, she gave up and decided to reveal the secret. The king's happiness after all meant the world to her.

"So, what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?" the king asked, still cynical.

"I know that things aren't as idyllic as they appear, yet I'm ready to share it with you providing that..." the queen said warily and grew silent.

"Providing that, what? Please complete your sentence," King Veer said, staring at her.

"I mean, I can share the secret with you provided you don't disclose it to anyone," putting a condition, the queen said. After completing the sentence, she heaved a deep sigh. At her vow, the king became energetic, and nodded his head eagerly as if he was about to get some source of a gold mine.

"Are you panicky over the disclosure of the secret of the fruits and flowers?" the king shrewdly asked as he sensed lifelessness in the queen.

“You’re my husband, dear. And the loss of husband hurts me more than the loss of the secret of fruits and flowers,” the queen answered, stressing the last phrase.

“Will you still love me with the same intensity after disclosing the secret?” the king inquired rhetorically.

“You don’t need me for love but for the secret. And I need you for myself. Without you, there’s nothing for me. I’ll always love you with the same intensity. My love for you will never die,” the queen affirmed.

“Well, let’s see. Imagine you have a situation and your solution to it will reflect how much you love me,” the king said.

“What situation are you talking about? Do I still have to undergo an assessment to prove my feelings true?” the queen innocently asked. Her eyes caught sight of the jasmine creepers that she had planted a year back. They were overrunning every direction on the rectangular mounds bearing many small white flowers by that phase of the year. After recollecting the time gone by, she was surprised to see considerable growth and changes the plant had, and the next moment, she grew sad knowing there was no change in her husband’s behaviour.

“Are you afraid?” the king smirked.

“No, I’m not, I’m surprised,” the queen replied. She was at a complete loss.

“Here is your situation. Well, for my sake, just for a while, imagine you’re sailing along with your younger sister, Saumya and me. And, in the middle of the river, our boat is struck by a violent tropical storm and floats away. Now, the complexity is that both Saumya and I don’t know how to swim. Just tell me, who would you save? Because you’re the only one who knows how to swim,” explaining the situation, the king demanded.

“I’ll surely save both,” the queen replied hurriedly.

“But, what if you can save only one person?” adding more complexity, the king said.

“Even then, I’ll try to save both, or die with both of you while saving you,” the queen answered quickly.

“No! no! no! You don’t have a choice. You can save only one person. Do tell me his or her name,” laying ground rules, the king crisped.

“Well, if this would be the case, I’d save the one who comes in my grab first, or the one who would be within my reach. It may be Saumya, or it maybe you,” the queen replied without any calculation.

“Why is it not only Saumya whom you would save?” feeling defeated by her witty repartee, the king complained.

“Because love knows no discrimination and comparison,” the queen distinctively said.

“Why, don’t you have enough reasons to hate me after all this?” asked the king craftily.

“Because I understand the law of opposites and its exception,” the queen said, her voice normal as if nothing had happened.

“I don’t understand the law of opposites and its exception,” shrugging his shoulders, the king said.

“According to this law, the opposite of something grows with an equal proportion in its opposite directions. For instance, if something grows high, simultaneously it grows deep too with an equal degree. This is why if there are sky-mounting Himalayas, there are immeasurable deep oceans too.”

“But it also implies that a person who loves you profoundly can hate you at the expense of his life too,” cutting the queen short with his quick reaction, the king countered.

“This is where you’re again getting me wrong. This law applies everywhere except for love. A pure feeling invariably grows upwards, no matter what happens. Once you love a person, you can’t hate him. And if you do, it’s something else, not love in any sense, because pure feeling never goes downwards. Though time has changed my stars, it could not bring any change in my heart,” the queen explained.

“Shall we start?” King Veer said impatiently, wondering if she had changed her mind again.

“My mother was a saintly lady who used to look after a blind hermit. The hermit lived in a hut near our village. He was very happy with my mother for her kindness and service. One day, the hermit left the world. Before dying, he gave her a mantra and said: ‘My daughter, this is a divine mantra and make sure that you use it only for two purposes: the first - always distribute these fruits and flowers to spread peace and love, and the second - take whatever you’re paid for them,’ the queen confided.

“What source of the fruits and flowers did he tell?” the greedy king asked keenly.

“I was a child when my mother died. On her deathbed, she disclosed the secret to me. She gave me a divine mantra. You’ll be surprised knowing that there’s a glade surrounded by sandalwood in the interior of the dense Sundervan forest. On an auspicious night with a full moon, my younger sister Saumya and I go there. With my eyes closed, I stand still in the open. My sister recites that mantra thrice, which turns me into a big tree laden with these fabulous fruits and luminous flowers,” narrated the queen.

“What happens next?” the king inquired. He looked completely lost in what he was hearing and then grew excited by what was coming next.

“My younger sister climbs the tree and shakes its branches. After shaking the branches, she climbs down the tree, recites the same mantra once again, and I get my human existence back to me. After that, we both sisters collect all the fruits, flowers, and broken leaves in our baskets and take them to the market to sell. These leaves heal the wounds miraculously; the flowers treat infertility, and fruits keep human beings ever youthful,” Queen Sarah revealed.

“Is it really true?” King Veer asked in disbelief. He gave her an odd, intense look that she could not understand.

“As true as night follows day,” the queen noted confidently.

“Impossible. I’m not sold on this idea yet. It seems like a cock and bull story. I can’t believe it until I myself see you transforming into a tree,” the intrigued king reiterated with no interest in her qualities or capabilities.

“My lord, this transformation process isn’t an ordinary process that everyone can see. As a rule, the transforming person should not be exposed to others during the process of transformation; otherwise, the transformer may have to face drastic consequences,” cautioned Queen Sarah.

The sceptical king thought the vulnerable queen was merely bewitching him to protect her secret. Therefore, he pressed her for a demonstration to prove her unbelievable story.

“Rest assured. I’ll certainly not look at you while you turn into a flowering tree,” promised the king in a convincing tone.

“Listen to me carefully,” said the queen, her voice clear.

“Now what?” the king asked inquisitively.

“Necessary instructions have to be followed,” Queen Sarah looked at the sky and continued pensively: “After some days, on a full moon night, when the tide will be high in the ocean, I will take you to the interior of the Sundervan forest. As you reach the spot, hide yourself behind the sandal trees before my sister Saumya reaches the venue to perform the ritual. You don’t have to look at me until the transformation process gets completed.”

“But how will I come to know that you’ve completed your process and become a tree?” the uncertain king asked.

“Just count till a hundred after Saumya stops offering prayers, but make sure my younger sister doesn’t notice you,” the queen replied with a simple solution.

Finally, the wild pact came to pass between the amicable queen and the astute king. On the auspicious day of that summer mid-night the king, with downcast head submissively followed Sarah whom he trusted less and doubted more. Her story was unbelievable, so the doubt had to be passed through a test to be trusted. The day was bright and hot, and the night was starlit and cold. Above, in the blue sky, the bright full moon moved noiselessly, sprinkling its light on every living and non-living thing below. In its divine light, every colour on the earth faded away and turned everything into black and white. Peace – the elixir of eternity–flowed through the mountain. After walking for some distance, the silence and serenity made the king forget the secret, possibly lost to the place, and every micro moment moved him behind his guide. His mood utterly transformed – he was surrounded by a state of being light and bright, where he grew unmindful of thought and emotion, unaware of day and night, and unconscious of body and mind. A big rock hit his feet hard, and the pain prevented that fulfilment from registering in his subconscious. Again, he attained his previous state of mind, and the secret occupied his mind.

“What was that good feeling?” asked the king

“Calm down, that was living with natural harmony,” supported Sarah.

“Do explain, what’s living with natural harmony?” asked the king. The man moving in frantic pace subsided into slow motion.

“My love, I’m very pleased that you ask questions. Knowing what’s living in disharmony with nature is living with natural harmony,” explained Sarah.

“I’m eager to know more about that, dear,” said the king.

“My saviour, many think they do it, but hardly anyone practices. You take a step, and then there is a rush to take another as though you’ve to reach the hilltop as soon as possible,” complained Sarah.

“You mean slow down?” the king made a wild guess.

“Yes, a sort of. It simply means, don’t exert extra efforts whatever you do. Be patient, my love. When you inhale lungful air, you invest each breath moment by moment,” simplified Sarah. The king made a brief halt, slipped his hand into his pocket and after a short while took something out, holding in his fist. Extending his fist before Sarah, he offered:

“I do have a secret, too. Guess, what’s under my fist?” panted the king.

“My life” , Sarah giggled. When the king opened his fist and offered her dry fruits, they both broke into belly-bursting laughter. Then suddenly his sight met a bunch of flowers tossing on a shoot. It made him think about the tree with fruits and flowers hidden in the secret.

“Something is bothering me a lot. Tell me, how does this magical tree have existence with all its leaves, flowers and fruits?” inquisitively asked the king.

“Nature,” replied Sarah.

“What’s nature,” the king asked. With his climb a few rocks down, he was struggling behind.

“God is nature,” Sarah smiled and answered.

“Dear, what’s God and where does he live?” the king scratched himself under his left ear and then asked.

“Honey, I don’t know who he is yet, but I know where he lives,” Sarah answered.

“Where?” asked the king.

“In heaven,” answered Sarah.

“Where is it situated?” explored the king.

“It’s situated where I live with you,” answered Sarah.

“Alright, for the time being, it’s the mysterious tree I want to see,” said the king, remaining squarely focused on the task at hand.

“For that you must wait and see something really wonderful that takes place only in the heart of night,” insisted Sarah.

“I wonder what it is that you find extraordinary in such a silent summer midnight,” doubted Manav.

“Besides the secret tree, it’s really more than extraordinary to see the colony of wild rabbits with their gay and gaudy kittens rocking to and fro over those small rocks,” rolling her eyes upstream, called the mountain girl. The roaring mountain breeze blew and went between the rocks and small bushes, and it fed the king’s curiosity to see the fantasyland he was promised high above the humanity below. The king, earlier lagging behind, now increased his pace and surpassed his companion.

“Slow down, don’t walk fast,” cautioned Sarah.

“But why?” protested the king.

“We’re not here to win a horse-race and setting world record,” Sarah giggled.

“Freaking about a mountaintop to know the secret has no sense either,” said the king.

“You did wish the secret, nor did I,” Sarah gave a counter reply.

“Get along. After all, what do you want me to do?” asked the king.

“I want you to slow down so that you could see the sights and feel their beauty,” urged Sarah humbly.

“I don’t care about sights and their beauty. I just want you to see turning into a tree having divine fruits and flowers,” revolted restless king. With increasing height, his patience decreased proportionately.

“But I do care about the journey more than the destination. God knows if I’d live tomorrow to see it again or not,” doubted Sarah. For a while, her remarks reminded him of his father. He focused on every sight, but nothing extraordinary crossed his mind.

“Tomorrow! Let it be the day for celebrating the secret,” discourteously declared the king.

“If there would be no tomorrow, then the secret would be useless, and if there would be no secret, then there would be no tomorrow, only today,” Sarah suggested in a consoling tone.

“Well, you tell me which one is the best occasion to celebrate?” asked the king. The impatient king tried hard to understand the last sentences Sarah uttered, but he could not make any sense of them.

“How about the night before I die?” replied Sarah. She looked at him, paused for a moment, and then walked away.

“Are you kidding?” questioned the king.

“No, I’m not. Do I sound like a clown?” asked Sarah.

“Stupid, if not a clown. Don’t you know death keeps no calendar?” the king reprimanded.

“If it’s so, let’s count this moment as the best occasion to celebrate life. Let’s not allow the Sun and the Moon to forget us the fact that each day and night is a miracle,” proposed Sarah.

“Where did you learn all that nugget of wisdom?” inquired the king.

“When I was a child, before dying, my mother used to say that a young must listen to his elders to avoid getting old,” revealed Sarah.

At the stipulated time, on the mountaintop, King Veer and Queen Sarah reached a glade before her younger sister arrived. Soon after he supervised the spot, he heard the footsteps of Saumya, who emerged from a grove. The committed king hid under the hedge that surrounded the natural stage. That night, the queen was wearing an onion-coloured sari. The ground was like a carpet, covered with thick lumps of grass. Both the sisters started performing the ritual. The king sat with his back to the main spot and avoided the process as per his agreement with Sarah. He mistakenly commenced his counting to the hundred as his younger sister began reciting the holy mantra aloud. Eventually, the king forgot the commitment he had made after the sweet scent of flowers entered his nostrils. Overwhelmed with aromatic perfume, he could not suppress his curiosity, and turned back to see the upshot. He, out of miscalculation, interrupted the process despite being repeatedly instructed. The king got awestruck as no one could believe what he saw. He got dazzled when he saw a tree where Sarah had been standing a little while ago. It was a giant tree with long branches, waving outward with full of sweet-smelling onion-coloured flowers. The whole Sundervan forest scented with the mesmerising aroma. Poised beyond her age, the elder sister exhibited a lifelike example of sacrifice that was rare to human eyes. No sooner did the king expose himself before the tree, Saumya threw up her hands in terror and fled. Having seen the flower tree, the king went into frenzy and started dancing with joy. It struck him as very brilliant, and he began to laugh with all his heart as uproariously as the crowing of a proud cock. He did not stop laughing for a full hour. After this unbelievable event, he forgot his wife Sarah, and thousands of plans erupted in his mind to trade the fruits and flowers with

other states. He started seeing his much-awaited dream of becoming the richest and most powerful king in the world come true.

The same night, the king had the whole Sundervan forest fenced and guarded. He deployed dozens of guards to watch over that wonderland. No one was allowed to enter the forest without the king's permission. For unknown reasons, the king kept the secret locked in his heart. He did not unravel his future plans to anyone. After some months, the tree was laden with luscious fruits. A chamber of commerce was set up, and the king started trading divine flowers and fruits with his neighbouring kingdoms. The spectacular fruits and flowers became popular everywhere. The king's trade soon expanded all over the world and his success sky-mounted overnight.



Lost Versus Left

It is as old as this earth is that misfortune never comes alone. One problem follows the other when unfavourable stars cast their shadow over its prey. After seeing the king, Saumya was unable to run as she could unmistakably count her heartbeats beneath her breast. Her mind did not want to leave her sister, who stood there erect like a speechless tree, but her tender body prompted her to flee without consulting her chaotic mind. Like a wounded bird that repetitively flutters its feathers to fly and again falls head down, Saumya rushed out of the forest. That moment was such an alarming she did not know when she got out of the forest. She coughed at regular intervals as she thrust her knees deep into the sand. Perhaps, the changed spot and moments helped her regain her fair mind to evaluate what precisely had happened. In that most extreme situation, she effortlessly started remembering the ones whom she loved the most. Her father immediately reflected before her eyes, and she hurried to break him the news.

The next morning, Saumya straightaway went to the vineyard that was the usual place of her father - an old sailor, but to her disappointment, he was not there. She then searched every corner of the house, but there was no trace of him. The little girl grew mad as she found her father nowhere. Under nervousness, she mused that if her memory served her well, her father, as per his daily schedule, had gone to the river-bank. After his elder daughter was married to the king, the old father opted to be a sailor because, in the wake of

unanticipated events, Sarah forgot that she had an old father and a younger sister to take care of. The younger sister rushed to the riverbank cursing the loss of her memory, but again received another blow: when she reached the river, she saw her father in the middle of the river carrying the passengers across the river. Due to professional and family obligations, the old man had to wait across the river all night and return with the morning passengers. It was the longest night the little girl ever had, and that too without her father and elder sister in the face of such a terrible state of affairs. The whole night, she fretfully waited for the morning, and finally it arrived as if it had taken ages to come.

The following day, before the first ray of the sun, the younger sister reached the river bank. As the boat appeared out of the fog, she burst into tears. Amidst the whole catastrophe, perhaps, holding her tears till now, she was acting grown up.

“My sweetie, what’s made you bring here so early? What’s the matter? Why are you crying?” the father consoled the child. He looked puzzled.

“Father! Sarah is in trouble,” Saumya gasped in a choked voice.

“What happened to your sister? Isn’t she alright?” he said as he held her close.

“It being a full moon last night, we offered prayers in Sundervan. The king breached the set rules and appeared before Sarah, the flower tree, and transfixed her there forever. The moment the king interfered, the stars turned moonlit-setting into a blackish surrounding, and she became cursed. Father, I’m awfully sorry. My sister kept peering into the shadow, but I couldn’t do anything to save her,” Saumya said, hiding her face in her hands.

“So finally, it came to happen,” said the father with a sigh.

“Did you have an idea it was bound to happen?” Saumya inquired.

“Yes, I did, but I wasn’t expecting it too early,” the father confirmed.

“Why didn’t you alert her in advance? And father, you always loved both of us. How could you allow yourself to see your children suffering?” Saumya protested.

“Yes, I did alert Sarah, but she perhaps wanted to turn it the other way. After all, no father could ever afford to see his children suffering,” the old father acknowledged and looked straight into Saumya’s face, trying to read her expressions.

“I strongly believe she must have followed your advice?” evaluating her sister’s stance, Saumya said.

“Honey, in life, there are many abstract subjects which no parents can make their children understand and no teacher can explain to his students. You get to know the facts only when you pass through the hardships and soreness yourself,” the father added.

“I know nothing. She needs our help, and we should do something to bring her back. There should be a way out,” Saumya begged.

“There’s no solution left with us. The greedy king wanted money-making fruits and flowers, not a loving wife. He has power, and the powerful never compromises with the weak. He would certainly put us behind bars if we tried to disengage the flower tree. You better understand it sooner than your elder sister did: the poor’s friendship with the rich is always a matter of mockery and abuse,” the poor father observed.

The old sailor accepted his elder daughter’s loss as his fate, and being with his younger daughter was his only reason to stay alive. Saumya was physically with her father, but mentally, she was with her elder sister because she could not resign herself to her sister’s separation. It was not the first time she had been separated from her sister since her elder sister turned into a tree. Saumya had not felt lonelier since Sarah got married than she did now. She perhaps knew that the first separation was for a worthy cause. After that unfortunate mishap, the poor sailor aborted his night stays on the other riverbank and thenceforth, he would spend his evenings in the company of his younger daughter, cultivating the vineyard and drinking in his winery. The next spring season began slightly earlier. The passage of time had left the old man shrivelled like a nut, and a series of setbacks had affected his morale. One day, the old sailor fell ill, so he was unable to resume his routine work of carrying passengers across the river throughout the day. Saumya rose to the occasion and offered assistance. The old sailor had no choice but to allow her to set the sail.

It was a bright day with tender leaves and beautiful flowers. The brave Saumya sailed the boat that was full of seasonal merchants. With every current her oars formed, her reminiscent mind meditated on the loving and caring companionship of her sister. After unloading the boat, she started her journey back to the base. Soon after she returned, a dilemma cropped up in her mind. She felt as if her sister was calling her back, and being a coward, she was deceiving her sister, who truly loved and cared for her. She was unable to make further advancement as an unknown force resisted the movements of her

wrists. In the final verdict, she decided not to let the grass grow under her feet, and the little warrior changed the course, sailed the boat through the lagoon, and fastened it to a dry log under the long grass.

In the evening, the old father got nervous when his younger daughter did not get back. He sent some friends to look for her, but she could not be found. The next day, he himself visited the riverbank and inquired some passers-by. In the afternoon, some divers informed him that the young girl was last seen on her maiden voyage, but no one had seen her getting back as they had all been there till the evening collecting oysters under the water. All the clues in the puzzle had now fallen neatly before him. He could easily predict where she had gone.

In the dead of night, as smooth as fish darts around in the sea, Saumya ventured into Sundervan forest. A tap on the bush, or leaf on which the birds sat, put an immediate end to the nocturnal silence, and the girl resumed sauntering. It being alone, she was no more frightened because her anxiousness to see the flower tree had taken the place of her fear. The forest did not show many changes except two or three - some outposts had been installed there, the thick density of vegetation and the dark nights. Apart from the first one, the other two changes worked as armour while she infiltrated into that wonderland. Saumya waited till morning to have a glimpse of the flower tree, as it was completely dark. The next day, she had a sigh of relief after seeing the flower tree unharmed at its place. Saumya decided to hide in the woods until the auspicious day came so that she could perform the set rituals. Being born and brought up in a forest, she found its weather easy to cope with until she one day fought her way through a snow-storm. Everything was white all around - her whole body was numb with cold, but the snow-blind girl remained deaf to natural blow and dumb to the Goddess of weather to have her favour. When she spotted fumaroles over a green grove, her tottering legs found their way to a hot spring that emerged from a rock. In such inclement weather, the mother nature showed mercy upon her, and she readily obliged; took off her clothes and then silently immersed herself into the steamy pool. Around the hot-spring, the white snow shrank every life and non-life, and under its surface, the hot groundwater cured all her wounds. Her tender body had never felt anything more relieving than this. Above the timberline, every morning the sun shone, and the hills looked like a zebra or a jaguar as the thick covering of snow began to melt and changed its patterns day after day. Saumya kept hiding under the caves, protecting herself from natural calamities; ate sweet potatoes, almonds and other seasonal roots. The soldiers were not allowed to enter the forest. Only the king could explore the

forest for reasons unknown to everyone. After a long period of three months, the hills with white snow turned green with new growth, and then the auspicious night drew in. Saumya had already made all the arrangements. She started the process, fully lost in the prayers, and soon reached the final stage. Before she completed the recitation of a few rhymes with rhythm, she was struck by another setback: rustling caused by unknown footsteps jeopardized the transformation process of the flower tree. A few seconds before the king's routine supervision of that secret site on that day, she noticed the approaching voracious king and ran away. This time, while getting back, the little warrior found it difficult to clear the security as it had been beefed up for those particular days, but anyhow; she made it to the riverbank. At that time of the year, the rainy season was at its peak. She suspended her thought to locate her boat as the river was ferociously flooded. The hard-tired and broken-hearted teen sat on the riverbank and kept staring at the eroding soil and floating trees through the muddy water. She had to wait until the water receded and the fishermen with their dinghies resumed their business.

When Saumya left her father, emotional turmoil converted his minor disease into a chronic ailment. Every day, waiting for his loving daughters, the sick father would sit on the riverbank and talk to his daughters across the river imagining they were listening to his narrative which involuntarily turned into his family saga - beginning how happy the parents were when the daughters were born; how heaven had descended when they played in their yard, and in the evening, how he told them bedtime fairy tales; how they grew up, and became the support of each other when he lost his wife and they lost their mother, and then concluding how the fate took a wrong turn when the shrewd king took away his daughters. For all those months, the poor father used to sit on the riverbank and sing his family saga until he died.



The King and His Transformation

The extraordinary fruits and flowers brought name, fame and wealth for the king. Now he had everything that he had desired. He was the mightiest and richest king on the earth. There was no trace of Sarah in his memory. He had not remembered his wife even once in those years. He re-married Rudra and kept enjoying power, money and fame.

Five years passed since he had been trading the divine fruits and flowers. Rudra, his second wife, was a cruel lady. There was not a prouder woman than her in the whole kingdom. Now, she was the actual ruler of the people. She had her secret agents at every corner of the palace. The mistress-turned queen strongly believed in oppression. As the king became fed up with chasing power and money, his fondness for wealth and power was forgotten in the daily grind of his mundane existence. He decided to set up a council of ministers in order to gradually transfer some powers into the hands of common folks. She was against the democratic set-up of the council of ministers. However, the king did not listen to her and constituted a council of ministers despite knowing that it could upset the new queen. Under this new political set-up, the people used to elect their representatives who would go on to constitute the council of ministers. Of course, the council was under the king; nonetheless, the mighty king used to take important decisions in consultation with the council. The queen always intervened in every decision

the council of ministers took. She urged her husband to abolish the council of ministers.

“Today you’re pleading a lot for these poor people, but yesterday, you were exploiting them. This idea of democracy will erode your authority, and the people who obey you today will rise against you tomorrow. By the way, if you want to alleviate their poverty, why don’t you go down to their level and help them in their miseries?” said Rudra with sarcasm.

“That may suit your jurisdiction. I don’t want to go to their level, but I want to bring them up to my level,” the king answered with strong determination.

“This world knows only two things: money power and muscle power. So, I also want to increase your power and assist you in your governance,” Rudra demanded.

“Sorry dear, you’re under-qualified for this,” the king said. His remarks, without straining her mind, matched with Sarah’s.

“Dear, is there anything you can do for me? Give me a chance,” Rudra pressed.

“I’m doing it. I’m saving your time and energy,” the king clarified.

“Don’t get me wrong, a woman’s highest calling is to lead a man to his soul so that he can unite with his best,” Rudra said.

“And a man’s highest calling is to protect a woman so that she can be safe to walk the earth unharmed,” the king answered.

“Let me remind you, I’m no more your keep now, but the queen of this kingdom and your wedded wife too,” Rudra complained.

“Well, don’t forget before reminding me that you’re my wife first and queen later. And it’s the duty of a wife to serve her husband. Besides, a queen does not need to intervene in royal affairs unless the king dies,” the king countered.

“I totally disagree that only a wife should serve her husband. Husband and wife are equal, so they should serve each other,” Rudra claimed.

“They aren’t equal, they are different. The one who has qualities is always served. It may be husband or wife,” the king emphasised.

“What if both of them have the same qualities? Who will serve whom if both are equally qualified and capable?” Rudra quizzed.

“Then, there won’t be arguments between them over it. Or they won’t expect service from each other,” the king concluded.

Queen Rudra was adamant about abolishing the council of ministers. Being over-ambitious, she finally dismissed the council. The angry public revolted. The king found himself caught in a complicated situation. He did not know what to do. His second wife’s sadism made him nostalgic. Although, during his courtship with his first wife Sarah, he had played a fake role, but she had done full justice to her part and had left an everlasting impression on his subconscious.

Queen Rudra took over the king and commanded the royal army to crush the mutiny. After trying her level best, she got convinced that suppressing revolt was quite difficult. Meanwhile, she learnt from her secret agents that the loyal minister Kehar Singh was alive and living in disguise. She knew that only the loyal minister could pacify the mutineers, as he had great control over the royal army and citizens. She secretly planned to bring him to her side. She put her detectives on the job to find him, but to her astonishment, the loyal minister could not be traced. One day, through one of her secret agents, Rudra received a message from the loyal minister. He strictly warned her to leave the kingdom as soon as possible; otherwise, she was destined to lose her existence. Rudra was an evil force. She firmly believed that there was a limit to everyone’s patience, but no limit to one’s satisfaction in the world she was living in. Therefore, whenever patience was exhausted, satisfaction expanded, and everyone was ready to be sold. To her, everyone had a price tag. She did not want to lose any opportunity to tighten her grip on the kingdom. She took the advantage of mediators to exchange messages with Kehar Singh and somehow arranged a secret meeting with him. Both sides met in a deserted castle to settle the terms and conditions of the secret alliance.

“Brave soldier, I’d be glad to know what you would like to have to side with us,” offered Rudra.

“Before I answer your question, just tell me, what is the most heinous crime in the world?” the loyal minister asked Rudra.

“I don’t know, soldier,” answered Rudra.

“There’s only one sin. And that is theft,” the loyal minister said. “Every other sin is a variation of theft. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, because I never stole anything.”

“When you killed innocent people to suppress their voices, you stole their lives; you stole their wives’ right to their husbands, husbands’ right to their

wives, and their children's right to their parents. When you didn't listen to your people, you stole their right to justice. And when you betrayed your husband, you stole his right to fidelity," the loyal minister chided.

"Not in the least. I can barely see any connection," Rudra refuted with a glint of the devil in her eyes.

"It's always easier stealing than earning. There's no act more heinous than stealing. With the power of weapons, you can devastate the whole world within a few moments, but you cannot create the same world in thousands of years," Kehar Singh noted with precision.

"I appreciate your knowledge and loyalty to the king, and regret that you suffered for which you had never done," applying balm on his wounds, Rudra said.

"I don't hesitate to say that my king did what was right to him, and I'm doing what seems right to me," Kehar Singh answered.

"So, you're convinced that you're at fault," Rudra pressed.

"No, I'm making you satisfied with whatever you're happy with," Kehar Singh smirked unpleasantly and said.

"I also have an attractive proposal for you to make you happy too," casting her net wide, Rudra said.

"Proceed."

"Your life would be spared, and you'd be restored to the previous rank in the royal army with due respect and honour, provided you accept my authority and help us in suppressing this upheaval in the kingdom," Rudra cleverly offered.

"I'm sorry, this proposal paints a horrifying picture of the future for humanity," Kehar Singh reacted.

"I'd be comfortable to add more stars on the chevron of your uniform if you explain the 'horrifying picture' to me that you mentioned right now," Rudra said in a plain and polite tone.

"Anyone like me, who's born free, can't be enslaved, and a keeper like you can't become a good queen," Kehar Singh asserted boldly.

"I wonder why you're not getting me. You're running from one place to another to save your life, and I'm offering you a secure life. You're no more a slave; you're a free man," ignoring the latter part of his statement, Rudra reassured.

“I also wonder, until all men are free, we all are slaves,” Kehar Singh said.

“You’re wasting my time, gentleman,” Rudra protested. “Well, my doors are always open for you. You can come any time and reclaim your position.”

“I very well understand that the purity of ways and means we adopt to reach our destination is as important as our destination is,” the loyal minister clarified.

“You look angry,” Rudra said, politely.

“Guess who’s behind it? What a way! You people first make a person commit something wrong and then blame him for being wrong,” Kehar Singh remarked.

“I’m sure, we won’t meet again,” Rudra said, agitated.

“But I’m sure, we’ll,” the loyal minister said defiantly.

Rudra was determined to find a solution. She has now changed the route and focused on Dilawar Singh, the leader of the mutineers. The diplomatic queen held a secret meeting with him to discuss the matter. He was an ordinary person with common problems, like regular folks. After Kehar Singh declined her proposal, she gave lots of gifts to the needy and poor man. In the first attempt, she offered him five hundred gold coins to withdraw. The leader did not accept her gifts. Being the leader of his men, he felt proud in spurning an alluring offer. In their next round of negotiation, she again met him, and this time she offered him a big piece of land, but to her disappointment, he adhered strictly to his principles. This time, the leader compared himself with the loyal minister Kehar Singh for his loyalty to his people. Like other poor farmers, he was struggling for survival. The diplomatic queen kept meeting him, and Dilawar Singh every time outweighed to exhibit his men his integrity. As a final offer, the clever queen offers him the rank of chief of the royal army. It is said that in the beginning, man was also an animal, and it took him ages to become a human being, but it took Dilawar Singh a second to become an animal again. A promising position made him forget his principles and fellow citizens, and he readily accepted her proposal.

Enthused by their position and encouraged by their power, the reckless Dilawar Singh and his supporters disclosed the hideouts of their units. Rudra’s soldiers imprisoned hundreds of mutineers and hanged them one by one. The helpless king could not do anything to stop it. The new queen committed more atrocities against the public and suppressed the mutiny. The king never told the secret of the flower tree to anyone. Not even to his second wife, Rudra.

First of all, the old father was after the wealth; afterwards his son – the king followed in his foot-steps, and now it was his second wife, Rudra, who had fallen prey to the same. One day, she asked the king about the secret of the flowers, but he refused. She became more inquisitive about the secret. Every time the king was asked the secret, he declined to disclose the secret to anyone on the earth. Rudra changed her behaviour towards the king same as he had changed his towards Sarah. Seeing himself falling into his first wife's situation, one day, he thought of settling things between them. She knew nothing, but the helpless king realized that history was repeating itself. The stubborn queen declined his request to discuss anything until he disclosed the secret. One day, he succeeded in stopping her when she was on her way to the garden.

“Dear, I think you need my help,” offered the king.

“Sorry, you're mistaken, I don't think so,” Rudra reacted.

“But I need your help because I can't see you like this,” the king suggested.

“Will you mind if I ask you something before you ask me a question?” Rudra demanded.

“Well, it depends on what you ask,” the king said.

“Don't worry, I won't ask you the secret of fruits and flowers which has become more valuable to you,” Rudra assured the king.

“Go ahead.”

“Look, you've worked hard for years and earned huge wealth. Well, just think if we both work together, how much wealth we can attain,” Rudra pleaded before the king.

“No more trade and no more wealth. Is that clear?” the king announced, ignoring her as a peasant ignores the drifting clouds.

“I repeat myself. Let's keep doing it, and one day the whole world will be under our feet. I can unmistakably remember it was what you had dreamt of,” Rudra reiterated.

“I'm sorry to say I had also the same plans - one more step and then one more after another, but all went in vain. Every time I met failure. After all, to what extent can a man be greedy? This way, the whole life can go to waste. What I've personally experienced from this is that greed is such a disease that if you retain the slightest part of it, it still exists wholly. No matter how tiniest part it is, it affects with dormant forces,” the king advocated.

“Let it be the last time. One more effort and I’ll never insist again,” Rudra pressed.

“Just tell me - what difference can another effort make when thousands of efforts have already proved futile,” the king straightaway rejected.

“This is negative thinking,” Rudra complained.

“If protecting a life is negative thinking, then what’s that which makes our thinking positive? I also have a curiosity to know this positivism,” the king observed.

“Protecting a life sounds interesting. What’s it about?” Rudra asked curiously.

“I can’t disclose the secret because it’s the question of Sarah’s life and death,” the king said.

“So, again it’s Sarah with the secret,” Rudra confirmed.

“Don’t flog a dead horse; Sarah has nothing to do with you,” the king said.

“Do you still think about the young tribal lady who disappeared mysteriously?” Rudra asked.

“All the time,” the king answered.

“But you don’t talk about her much,” Rudra said.

“Yes, that’s how we deal with the dead - understand,” the king responded.

“She’s still in your mind, and you’ve kept me in the dark all these years, wonderful! What a twist in your love story! I’m impressed. By the way, if you believe in hiding the secret of fruits and flowers, then keep it to yourself till your life ends, but don’t stop trading them,” Rudra suggested.

“I trust Sarah, and I believe in the selflessness she lived by; and I also believe in my father, who taught me that wealth is meant for man but man isn’t meant for wealth,” King Veer affirmed.

“You think more with your heart and less with your mind,” observed Rudra.

“I’m glad to tell you that it’s only the heart that feels and the mind just keeps you busy in thinking and thinking again,” the king said.

“You can’t get success with your heart,” Rudra reacted.

“But I can be happy in partnership with my heart,” the king said.

“It is success that results in happiness, and it is the mind, not the heart, that leads you to success,” Rudra said.

“To me, being happy is being successful,” the king shot back.

“You seem suddenly changed compared to what you were in the past,” Rudra complained.

“You’ve also become an efficient observer,” the king answered.

“I may be wrong,” changing her stance, Rudra said.

“Will it bother you if you’re wrong?” asked the king.

“Will it bother you if I’m right?” Rudra quickly retaliated.

“I very well know who you’re, right or wrong,” said the king.

“And, don’t you know who you were?” Rudra replied.

“Certainly. You only know who I was, but you don’t know who I’m now,” the king reinforced.

“I can clearly see you were a drunkard and adulterous in the past, and still you’re the same,” Rudra said.

“I don’t know what had happened to me, but I know well I had become a bad person who got better now. I was a sick person who has become well,” the king clarified.

“You can’t change the rules of the game while we’re playing it,” Rudra warned.

“Life can be a game to our destiny, not to a husband to his wife,” the king emphasized.

With passing time, the king started growing more and more restless and listless. He preferred silence and staying alone. It was a long period of five years since Sarah was standing lifeless in Sundervan. The king was still hungry for something, and he still found himself unsatisfied and incomplete despite his conquests. His condition was like that of a fish thirsty in the sea. He sensed a lack of something: loneliness for someone unknown, which made him restless and curious. Disturbed by his own mind over what he wanted from the world, he was strongly pulled by the fragrance of the divine flowers arranged in a silver vase that decorated his central hall. He smelled the fragrance and tried to capture and hoard the scent forever, thinking it was something his heart was craving so profoundly. The king committed his heart and soul to this cause. He extracted the flower’s nectar and made its perfume,

but it drifted away in the air immediately it was applied to a human body. He tried all possible ways to preserve the fragrance, but failed every time he applied it. Perhaps he found himself at the same point where his father had ended up. Despite having huge wealth and a vast kingdom, he found life dull and meaningless. His wealth had made him the king of kings, but his soul was still distraught because he was feeling alone in the crowd. Over time, his second wife, Rudra developed an illicit relationship with one of his ministers. She started avoiding and disrespecting her husband. He was not consulted on internal or external affairs. Now the king was welcomed nowhere in his own kingdom. Five years after his marriage, the palace became a hub of plots and conspiracies. Rudra and his political rivals instigated conspiracy to defame the king. His authority was already eroding day by day. The public hated his very name and sight. Rudra asked his ministers not to obey the king's orders. For keeping the secret, the king was put in a little low room and shackled. The secret agents of the queen brutally struck him with hunters and interrogated him to unravel the secret.

"What's the best way to disclose the secret?" Rudra inquired.

"The way I die, dear," the king responded.

"Tell me the secret. Don't you love me?" pressed Rudra.

"Flattery or buttering isn't in any way love, but purity in relationships is so scarce today that we derive respite even from fake and false. I'm unfortunate to realise it too late", admitted the king.

"What choice do I've now?" complained the leering Rudra.

"Young lady, you may whip me like this for a whole year, because I prefer your whipping to the disclosure of the secret," the king screamed.

"Let it be, then," she huffed. The secret agents mercilessly thrashed the king; he rolled on the floor and tried hard to breathe. He thrust both his hands against the floor; hunched his shoulders and tried to stand up again, but another push and the half-erected king fell down onto the floor again. A bloodstream gushed out of his mouth.

"You very well know who I came to know the source of these fruits and flowers from," the king groaned.

"It matters the least who you came to know the source from; what matters the most is what you know. Well, look at your wisdom and tell me what is awaited," Rudra ridiculed.

“If you continue on your current path, you’ll face a fiasco,” the king loudly cried.

“That’s impossible because you know I’m not a prey but a hunter. Don’t do to yourself what you did to Sarah, because, like her, you also keep a secret,” Rudra bragged.

“Any person can verify your school of thought. These words aren’t coming from you but through you. The only render is greed,” the king said.

“It seems you’re afraid that you would be killed,” Rudra said.

“No! Being killed sounds more relieving than living with fraud.”

“Wise people bend down when there’s a storm. Those who don’t, break. Do you know that?” Rudra asked with disdain.

“What I know is that mostly the people who bend become hunch-backed as they get habitual of compromising every time,” the king said.

Rudra had men, money and power at her beck and call. The barbaric queen tortured the king to know the secret, and when she failed, she proclaimed him an outlaw. She disowned him of his kingdom with the help of her close ministers. Now the king was no better than a beggar. Never in an unapologetic and unabashed career of five years had he been so badly insulted. His eyes were as red as burning coals; long, black and uncombed hair fell over his shoulders; his garments, which were soiled and ragged, and from his wrists and ankles hung heavy chains and rusty shackles. It was apparent that he was completely mad and unpopular among his countrymen, given that his second wife threw him out of the palace just to attempt suicide, or to be killed by a lynch mob.

The betrayal and mistreatment of Rudra drove the helpless King Veer to the verge of insanity. That morning, he was unaware of what was going to happen to him. But now, as the sun began to set, he was a stranger in his own country where he could only speak the language of sigh. He was feeling sorry for himself and lamenting the fact that his life had changed so suddenly and drastically. Plodding slowly along the track, every turn looked strange to him before he passed through it, and then, looking back, he found it familiar, pulling him back to his palace. Over his folly, he was so ashamed and wanted to give a shrill cry, yet something forceful suppressed his emotions. He had never wept in front of any person except his father. Suddenly, his first wife, Sarah, appeared in his mind and shook his heart. It was the first time in his life that he missed his mother, whom he had never seen. He couldn’t expect mercy from his first wife as he found himself guilty. Of course, his mother could have

forgiven him because he had never done anything wrong to her. Feeling orphaned, he imagined the peaceful face of his mother, rested his head on her shoulders, and wept bitterly. He was shocked by the memory of his first wife, Sarah. He remembered the atrocities he had committed against the innocent lady. He sullenly regretted the cruelty and cursed himself for his greed. He wept because that was the way God had punished him for his ingratitude to his father and infidelity to his first wife, Sarah.

Awed and embarrassed, the king kept thinking of his mistakes one after another. The promises he had made to his father, his unfaithfulness to Sarah, and Rudra's treachery repeatedly flashed in the back of his mind. To rid himself of his mental commotion, he tried thinking of pleasant things to divert his mind, but he could not think of anything else. His pain of guilt was unbearable. Harried and worried, the king gave up and decided to end his life. With the growing dark, the king kept moving until he reached the steep cliff that separated his kingdom from neighbouring states. There was a moment of silence, so profound that it seemed the whole world was asleep. His heart was beating faster, and his body was simmering with bitterness. He did not want to live. From the cliff-top, he looked down at the gorge, which was deep enough to tear his body to bits. And there was a swirling flood with a loud noise in the river behind him. He had already said good-bye to the world, which was full of sorrows. His pessimism was too strong, and his legs were too weak to support his weight. He chose to jump down the gorge to unmistakably avoid an escape. He held his breath at the last-minute preparation. But before he jumped, he heard the sound of steps. His mind immediately forgot everything he had thought of so far, and it readily shifted to a neutral state: neither for life nor against it. He saw a figure at a close distance in dim moonlight. He seemed to be facing down to the river. The king could not see his face in the darkness, but the new arrival sounded like an elderly fellow.

"Hey! Who are you? What are you up to here?" the king asked dryly.

Meanwhile, the stranger swung his whole body up in the air and jumped deep into the river. The king grew dazzled, and his head became numb. For a while, he could not comprehend what had happened. The king was unsure of what to do. Then, he heard screams of 'help, 'help'.... . loud enough to wake the dead. The king mustered all his courage and once again unchained the old warrior. He also jumped into the river. The water was freezing cold, and it was flowing with great force. One floating log hit him hard and injured his arm. The king briskly grabbed the log, pushed it down at one end, and

mounted it. Fumbling in water, as he floated for some distance, his hand happened to catch hold of a human body. He pulled it up and took it to the riverbank. He put the stranger on a flat rock and pressed his back with both hands. As the moon appeared on the horizon and its light grew a bit clear, the survivor regained consciousness and got better.

“Why did you try to kill yourself?” asked the king in an angry stream of words.

“I’d no other way out to save your life, Your Highness,” answered the stranger.

“Who are you?” questioned the king as he found the voice very familiar.

The king walked down to the stranger to have a closer look. As he did so, the moon came out from behind a black cloud and flooded with its silent silver the rock-strewn riverbank. The king could not believe what he was seeing.

“My lord, your servant is at your service once again,” kneeling down before the king, greeted the loyal minister, Kehar Singh.

They both were silent for a while. It was the king who spoke first.

“How come you’re alive? No one has ever escaped from ‘The death trap’,” the king said with surprise in his eyes.

“My king, hope kindles hope,” the loyal minister Kehar Singh said after narrating his whole story.

“I’m ashamed of what I’ve done to you, and despite the fact that you delivered your loyalty. I’d promised my dying father to bring peace and happiness for everyone with justice. My father is looking me over the heaven, and he won’t forgive me for this act of ingratitude,” admitted the king, his tone apologetic.

“You’re my king, and for this reason you shouldn’t be ashamed of,” the loyal minister said, stressing the last words.

“I’m sorry, my friend; now, I’m no more your king,” the desperate king replied, fighting a lump in his throat.

“At this point, I think differently. I repeat it once more: you’re still my king, and you’ll be my king in future too,” looking up to maintain eye contact with him, the loyal minister plaintively said.

“I was really a foolish king who couldn’t distinguish between friends and foes. My second wife, Rudra cheated on me. She wanted me to disclose some confidential things, and when I refused, she robbed me of my kingdom. Now

I'm nobody everywhere. You better leave me alone to my fate," said the king, exasperated.

"I believe this isn't what I'd been living in disguise for years and uniting people for," said Kehar Singh.

"But I'm totally ruined. I'm left with nothing - neither my loving wife Sarah nor my ancestral kingdom," the king reacted sullenly.

"I beg your pardon, sir. Understanding your circumstances is good, but brooding over your circumstances is bad. My lord, you're only at a bend on the road but not at the end of the road. Don't waste time being good to start, but start to be good. And still if you have made up your mind to die, let it be dying empty," said Kehar Singh.

"Dying empty, I don't understand," confused, the king admitted.

"Dying empty means dying fulfilled. It means the more negative emotions you carry in your heart; the deeper it drowns you with heaviness. The more you rid yourself of negative emotions, the higher you soar in the sky with lightness. Now tell me how would you like to die- heavy-hearted or light-hearted?" asked Kehar Singh.

"Light-hearted," replied the king.

"Then use all your wealth to make your happiness larger and maximize your life with meaningful experiences. And if it's not used well means not lived well", suggested Kehar Singh.

"My friend, why are you kidding? What sort of wealth are you referring to? Don't you know I'm left with nothing?" the king complained, not even giving him the courtesy of a sight of acknowledgement.

"My Lord, it's not your money or material I'm talking about. Let's give it a closer examination. It's your time that's your real wealth. While you were busy accumulating wealth and building a large legacy, you were not earning but spending something irreversible, which was meant only for living and living. It's far better to live fulfilled than to die rich. Henceforth, I request you to spend your time earning something meaningful that you can experience for a lifetime," insisted Kehar Singh. The king was overcome by hope and enthusiasm. He once again began to see himself as someone having something worth-spending. He was slightly happy; acknowledging that he was not completely broke yet.

"You better go and search for our revered queen, Sarah and let me take care of your enemies. I don't know how to help you unite with the queen, but I

promise to restore your authority and protect your honour,” the loyal minister affirmed.

The loyal minister Kehar Singh took the king down the cliff. On their way back through the grassy slopes, they talked a lot and helped each other maintain their balance. After getting to the bottom, the loyal minister handed his favourite horse to him.

“But I can’t change my destiny, my friend,” the king doubted.

“You say the same thing almost all other people in the world say,” the loyal minister emphasised.

“What?” asked the king.

“Most people believe that at a certain point in their lives, they lose control of what is happening to them and their lives become controlled by fate. But I say it is their inability to choose their own destiny,” explained the loyal minister.

“Something that can neither be chosen nor be rejected is destiny,” the king remarked.

“You chose death for me, but I rejected your choice and chose life. People learn in their early lives what their reason for being is,” the loyal minister pressed. “Maybe that’s why they give up on it so early. But that’s the way it is.”

“But there’s no peace in this world as long as we live with our body and mind,” the king expressed his doubt.

“Let me share with you that people on this earth ignore ninety-nine times out of a hundred occasions,” the loyal minister said. “A sense of escapism has been embedded deep down in man. No one wants to stay alone because everyone is scared of one’s inner emptiness that is why a companion, good or bad, will do. Due to the struggle to meet the rising standards of living, people consider their lives a punishment. Life has become so miserable that even death seems like a relief.”

“Practically speaking, to make the matter worse, even the chief priest preached me salvation when I needed peace and patience the most,” the king observed without any delay.

“My lord, accept the reality, however bitter it is, and you’ll instantaneously see it disappearing,” the loyal minister said.

“Do you mean we should endure what cannot be cured? Is it some sort of compromise with something that is incorrigible?” confirmed the king.

“I never meant this,” explained the loyal minister. “Well, let me put it this way. Problems and troubles get weakened as soon as you accept them. Struggle turns into a sport to a person who accepts it. Don’t mistake acceptance for submission or helplessness. By acceptance, I mean tightening the belt to face them fervently.”

“It’s not unwise if I say I can’t change the unforeseeable events of the future,” the king doubted.

“I do agree,” added the loyal minister. “You cannot control natural calamities or the moods of all those around you. But you most certainly can control your attitude towards these events and people.”

“How so?”

“You’ve all the power to determine what you’ll think about in any given situation,” said the loyal minister.

“You mean conditioning my thoughts over a given event,” asked the king.

“Exactly,” said the loyal minister. “Some thoughts and emotions are irresistible, but you’ve to choose what to do with them. It doesn’t matter where you take birth, or what you are born with, but it greatly matters what you choose to be. Riddance from life is not a form of salvation. Life isn’t the preparation to die. Life means living with elation. The quest of your life isn’t to put something in order that’s beyond your death, but it’s an opportunity to beautify your present and create your heaven on this earth that you imagine after your death.”

“What a fabulous approach towards life. I love it,” said the king, looking happy with a new brightness in his eyes.

As the king mused on his minister’s words, he realised that he had to choose between thinking of himself as the poor slave of fate and as an adventurer in the quest of life.

“I’m an adventurer, looking for life,” the king said to himself.

The loyal minister then turned to his newly awakened king and offered: “I’m thankful to you for saving my life.”

“My friend let me extend my thanks. It’s not me who saved your life, but you who did save mine. But I’ve been wondering for a long time: why didn’t you say a word to stop me when you first saw me,” said the king.

“My answer is pretty simple. If speech is silver, then silence is gold,” retorted the loyal minister.

The haughty king Veer now realised the worth of his first wife, Sarah. He could see in all directions equally from the ridge where he was sitting. It was absolute solitude with pin-drop silence up there. To the king, the whole world seemed thousands of miles away. For the first time, he felt light-headed for not carrying the burden of any responsibility but felt heavy-hearted for reuniting with his transfixed beloved.

The thought of Sarah brought the king a good feeling. Her virtues and values were invisible to the king, blinded by greed, when she was physically around. And now, when she had disappeared, her worth effortlessly gained prominence. She became an inspiration for him to live another day on the earth. The next moment, he closed his eyes and remembered his first wife without thinking of time. His glorious past sprouted up in him. He melted with the upsurge of platonic feelings in his heart. Everywhere he could feel the imprints of her feet and the tenderness of her palms. Sarah appeared in his imagination. She was of medium height with a fair complexion, wearing a garland of red and white roses around her neck, and a bunch of jasmine flowers was glorifying her jet-black hair. She was looking as peaceful as the meditating Buddha in her onion-pink sari with a thick edge in light purple embroidery on it. She had a divine aura to soothe his soul and a sweet voice to heal his heart. She had an angelic smile - enough to turn his helpless face with misty eyes into a cheerful one with smiling lips in hope. She was the most wonderful creation of God. To him, she seemed to represent truth, beauty and goodness on the earth. The world looked new to the king every time she reflected on his memories. No doubt, all that was just his imagination, much like a beautiful dream, but the heavenly feelings his body and mind experienced were real.

Her memories made him feel fortunate enough to be a human being blessed with unlimited powers to visualise perfection. The king recalled the selfless fidelity she had rendered as his wife. She behaved so decently with her soft gestures and sober expressions that he could barely believe that such a human presence could ever exist in his complex world. Her goodness and purity made him realise that God really had created human beings out of his own image. The king felt something inexpressible, more than happiness, beyond elation, and something internally fulfilling. His love for Sarah made him understand the worth of love and life. He lived a complete life at that moment. A gale blew down thousands of trees. The strong current increased

its velocity and interrupted the king, who was lost in his old memories. Within some moments, black clouds spread over the sky. It started thundering and then followed by lightning. It seemed it was about to rain.

The king could not hold himself and rushed to Sundervan forest with a heavy heart, where Sarah was transformed into a flower tree. Nothing had changed there except the king's newly awakened heart. There stood the gigantic tree- still with its extensive branches outfacing the piercing westerly wind preceding the windfall. Honeybees were humming all over its branches, sipping sweet honey for adding more into their future reservoir. Off the tree stood the king on the ground that was covered with pink flowers, the wind had blown down. The whole forest smelled with sweet scent, but the blowing wind seemed to be buzzing an elegy. Nobody knew about the flower tree in the royal palace leave alone a soul in that lonely forest. As soon as the king saw the flower tree, he could not help himself. He ran over the thick bed of flowers and held the mossy tree trunk tightly around his arms.

“Oh dear, give me only a slim chance, I'll never repeat this mistake. At this moment, as I take this oath before God, I cross my heart and promise that I'll love you forever. I'd always be committed to you; there will never be another woman in my life, and I'll always be married to you. And if by chance the Almighty changes our stars and we never see each other again, to the day I die, I'd stay committed to you forever. Sweetheart, I beseech, come back only for once, this time, I won't let you go again,” looking at the branches above, the king made an emotional appeal.

But it was to no avail. The flower tree stood still, like a statue. There was only rustling of leaves, chill of winter, and sadness in twilight, but no response to his clean heart confession. The poor king wailed and cried until his throat grew sore and voice hoarse. Finally, the tired and exhausted king fell asleep under the flower tree. His sincere repentance washed away all his vanity.

As the time went by, the king kept growing weaker and feebler. Birds on long flights from far off places would make their halt on the flower tree and have their siesta after savouring its sweet fruits. Every evening, he surrendered to sleep with a quiet hope of reuniting with his first wife, like desert dewdrops that endure the night, waiting for the morning's tender touch. Every morning, the desperate king would visit the kingdom far and wide in search of clues, much like the skylark that flies from one garden to another, hoping for much-awaited raindrops of *swatinakshatra* (auspicious time period during specific months of the year) to quench its months-long thirst. Every day, he wandered from pillar to post and returned to the flower tree in

the evening. Believing that the tree was listening, he would derive relief after sharing his struggles, failures, and regrets with it. Now, burning logs and the flowering tree were his only companions in that far-flung forest. After having a talk to the flowering tree, he would sit by the burning coals, roast wild roots and eat them. Like his hope, he would shake amblers to keep them burning and glowing. Then he would stay awake till late at night, recalling the golden days he had spent with her.

While sleeping one night, as the king, using tree's roots as cushion, rested his head, a large drop of water fell on his forehead. "What an amazing thing," he said to himself. "There's not a single patch of cloud in the sky, the moon and stars are quite clear and bright, and yet it's showery." The next moment, thinking it his flimsy fantasy, he ignored it and tried to rest again. Then a scattered shower fell, the second time he felt that the last drops were lukewarm. He strained his mind and thought that the tears shed in bliss are cold and come from the corners of the eyes, and the tears shed in grief are lukewarm and come from the centre of the eyes. Now the king decided to open his eyes. However, before he opened his eyes, another shower fell on his head, and he fell asleep. Then he had a dream in which he saw his first wife weeping.

"Why are these tears in your eyes?" inquired King Veer, still half awake.

"Tears roll down when there's something overflowing - it may be agony or ecstasy," Sarah replied with a screech.

"What are your tears for?" the king asked.

"Both," answered Sarah.

"Means."

"Today I'm profoundly ecstatic to see you and very sad over your miserable plight," Sarah pronounced with a grimace. The king was still half awake. Sarah glared at the king for longer than usual. It made him curious, and to quench his query, he demanded:

"What are you looking at?"

"I'm looking at nothing, just looking for something timeless that once I had had a glimpse of. Unfortunately, it's missing", reported Sarah.

"What's that?" prompted the king.

"Purity and innocence", revealed Sarah.

"Do you want to know the source of their origin?" offered the king.

"For sure. Tell me what's it", asked Sarah inquisitively.

“Place your hand on your heart and feel it close to your bosom,” suggested the king. The sprinkling of tear drops grew more intense than before. Then it was the king’s turn to shed tears. He too looked at her face a little longer than she did. The sides swapped in the next moment, and so did the scripts as their energies matched each other.

“Now, what’s it you’re looking at?” Sarah posed the same question that the king had asked in the opening remarks.

“I’m not looking at anything. I’m just looking for a passage through your eyes to reach out to your heart, but quite helpless” , said the king.

“Needn’t worry; let me help you with it. Place your hand on your heart and feel it beneath your chest. It’s already beating there,” expressed Sarah.

Suddenly, a strange sound disrupted the king’s dream. He immediately woke up and felt someone around. He looked in all directions, but saw no one except a wise owl that was precariously perched on a branch. First, it faced the stranger with its broad chest and big, round eyes, and later it tried to comprehend the king’s tears, but remained unsuccessful, and then started terrorizing him by swinging its head forward and backwards. To the king’s wonder, his forehead and hair were drenched with tears. The king stood up with surprise and meaningfully looked at the flower tree. After regaining his full consciousness, he developed a firm belief that his first wife Sarah was still alive in the form of that flower tree. He was convinced that she could see him, feel him, and even listen to him. This strengthened his belief that the people who truly love each other can sense their loved one’s presence even if they get separated by time and distance. He tried to recall her face in order to determine the emotions it was bearing. From his personal experiences, unlike the wise owl, he had made a study of men’s faces when they had suffered a huge loss of something great value. The covetous men showed panic, the affluent men showed anger, and the deprived men showed horror. But he knew that it was neither panic nor anger, nor horror on the poor girl’s face: only a terrible sadness, not for the loss of the secret but for having her trust betrayed. Now he started remembering his first wife and the gentle ways she used to take care of him. The king knelt down, leaned backwards and stretched his arms skyward with tears trickling down his eyes.

“My true friend, through your absence, I came to know why God has offered me eyes. Today, when people have made me silent, I can listen to the sweet symphony from your lips that has made me realise the worth of my ears,” the king said to himself regrettably.

One inauspicious evening, no sooner did the king reach Sundervan forest, a terrible sight met his eyes. He was startled to see a bunch of woodcutters swirling around the flower tree. No sooner did he react than the flower tree collapsed with a loud thud at the last stroke of a woodcutter's axe. A cold sweat drenched the king; he felt orphaned. A sort of helplessness haunted him. He rushed to the fallen tree, shouting with blood in his eyes and violence in his body. The tree was dying, all its branches were gasping for breath, but neither the woodcutters nor God could see what was happening. Nobody minded his melting emotions.

King Veer heard as if the bleeding woman was screeching aloud the question: "For how many years? Why haven't you bothered at the least to feel that tender love I had in my heart for you? Instead, you sold it to the butcher to help you become the richest and mightiest king in the world. But I'm content to die because I'm going to my maker with a clean heart."

When the wife was on her deathbed, the husband was utterly upset and downcast. Something beautiful died in him. Her death was also his death. He saw her as half of him, and the collapsing tree took something away from him. With its death, some inner part of him also died. He was no longer the same person. From his bulging eyes seemed inner violence of an unbridled vitality which his weakened body could hardly restrain. The helpless king shrilly cursed the merciless woodcutters and attacked them violently. They took him for a lunatic, beat him up severely and threw him out of the vicinity. The woodcutters cleared all the branches and chopped the tree into small logs. The king felt every stroke of the axe, tearing his body apart. From a distance, the king slinked through the bushes to follow the lifeless flower tree like a restless bird that flutters from one shoot to another, wailing for the protection of her newborn and protesting against the invasion of a shrewd crow. The king shadowed the woodcutters to their last destination - the timber shed, where they piled all the logs of the flower tree in a corner.

After undergoing that catastrophic experience, the king was growing feebler day by day, fearing what would happen if he were to lose his first wife again. He simmered in his pain and fear so severely that his anguish shifted him to a level where his thinking patterns changed. A supreme stage of fearlessness descended beyond the extreme of fearfulness. The king could not wait without putting in effort. He did not want to be patient without sowing seeds and yielding a golden crop. Hoping for some solution, he visited many famous sages and saints. Some of them made him observe fast; the others made him count the beads of rosary and preached him to renounce the world,

terming it a bondage and false illusion. He left no stone unturned in search of some divine favour. Six months passed; nothing happened, another six months passed, and still nothing happened. The king tried every conceivable mantra to carry out the transformation, but nothing served his purpose. Nobody quenched his thirst, but it confused him more and more. Finally, the king gave up on them. He lost faith in the world and decided to help himself.

The king went to Sarah's parental home in search of her younger sister, Saumya. Unfortunately, the villagers broke the news of her father's death and told him that the younger daughter had deserted her house some years back after her father's death. Nobody knew about her whereabouts. The villagers' last sentence shattered the king. He sadly sat on a flat rock in her house yard. The orderliness of the items refreshed the happy memories of their time together. Everything was alive. There stood her small wooden house bearing a mournful look. It was standing quite still without a single change. Sarah's basket, which she used for carrying fruits and flowers, was still hanging intact on a peg on the outer wall. The fields were full of seasonal paddy crops. The view of the high ridge from where Sarah used to gaze at him, the banks of the river, where they talked and laughed for hours together, looked gloomy. The sweet black berries on the rain-soaked trees were hanging half-deep in the pearls of shower. The green meadows, around which they both used to play, sing and dance, transported the king back to their long courtship. For a while, he had a glimpse of everything happening around him. The next moment, the king got desperate. There was no limit to his agony. His heart melted with the reflection of her face in his mind and her resounding giggling in his ears. On his way back, the king discussed with the villagers about the hut, where once the blind sage used to live. The villagers guided him to the sage's hut. The next morning, he rose early in high spirits; mounted the horse, and rode through the forest. Despite it being foggy, the king and his horse could see their way through the sky-mounting pine trees, which were shedding dew drops through their leaves. Every falling drop kept him awake from his adamant drowsiness. For hours, he rode through the broad tracks of that dense forest, disturbing the pin-drop silence of the woods as his horse galloped past in clouds of dust. After riding through a valley, he reached a heavenly place. It was now clear. The beauty and grandeur of the majestic mountains made it clear that, once upon a time, that place had been the abode of the mystic. There was a beautiful hut situated on the bank of a pond. The pond was still with its translucent green. It was out-flowing from one of its corners and gave life to a perennial stream over which stood a watermill. A big farm full of tossing maize crops, a cow with a newborn calf tied to a guava tree,

frequently trodden-tracks interlinking barn-cum watermill, and the renovated sage-hut marked that place with human presence. The pond to the dumbfound king symbolized the blind sage whom Sarah's mother had served. The hut had a smooth front, covered with orderly, well-laid arrangements of moss-covered heavy slates all around. It was a beautiful, crispy morning. The view was foggy, but he could see the tall cedar trees. The condensed ice, hanging on the wet-green leaves, was showing the freshness of the environment. The king searched every corner of the hut but could not find anything that could help him unravel the secret of Sarah's transformation. He patiently waited till evening, but no one turned back to claim the sage-hut. A chill ran down his spine. He lost the last ray of hope. The silence and emptiness of the hut sapped the king of his energy and enthusiasm. He was deeply anguished. He halted for a moment, and turned back, pulling his head down. Then he preferred to walk for some time with his horse's bridle in his hand and tears in his eyes. When he strolled past the windmill, he suddenly saw a woman sitting on the slope of a large rock. From a distance, she looked as though she was well known to him. Curiously, the king went close to the woman and was left awestruck. As she turned back to see the approaching stranger, he found her none other than Saumya, the younger sister of Sarah. The girl was sadly looking at the range of hills, where once upon a time she used to live with her family. Immediately, the king felt his spirit high. His happiness knew no bounds at her sudden appearance. Once again, her presence seemed like a silver lining in the clouds to the stumbling king.

"So, you reached even this place, what else do you need now?" Looking at the king with scowls on her forehead, Saumya complained without worrying about the loss of her innocence.

"You need not agonize, I already have been punished for the wrongdoings I've done to all of you," the king stated in a normal voice without showing any emotion. He later narrated his entire story to Saumya.

"Let's forget the past and focus on the future," said Saumya in a confident voice. The king looked at her affectionately, and there was chubby, cheerful and uncomplicated Saumya again.

"Before the future, let's take care of the present. Why don't you offer the same prayers at the same place to call your sister back?" the king urged.

"I can't," Saumya replied forlornly.

"Why can't you?"

“Offering prayers only before alive tree could be helpful, otherwise it would be meaningless. Let us find out the source,” thinking deeply, Saumya said, pacing up and down.

“I’m not sure I follow you,” following her, the king said.

“Let us find the sages,” Saumya suddenly stopped and clarified with her clenched hands.

“Do you know their whereabouts?” the king asked Saumya impatiently.

“Nobody knows the exact abode of these rarest of the rare sages. But in my childhood, many times I’d heard my mother saying that these sages live in the Sumer Mountain - a place in the high mountains towards the east. She also used to say that every year, many people go to these high mountains in search of these sages for obtaining life’s true wisdom, but only those who are fortunate enough find them,” said Saumya.



The True Wisdom

It was a high summer day, and the sun was letting out scorching heat. The king set out for the lost land of the Sumer Mountain. After riding for some hours, he saw some old folks chopping the branches of a pine tree that was lying flat across the way. He alighted from the horse and asked the men the exact time for the way to be cleared. One of them gave him a cold reply and showed their helplessness, as it was a giant tree. The temperature was soaring, and he was feeling parched. A brook flowed nearby. He sprayed water on his face, quenched his thirst, and rode back. He took the road less travelled. The track was narrow, but his determination kept him climbing. Leaving every mile behind, he kept gaining more and more height, and the temperature continued to drop proportionately. His mood kept changing with the changing climate as the hills were left behind and the plains stretched out below. The higher he climbed the mountains, the more he forgot the world; the more he forgot the world, the more he listened to his inner compass. Finally, after a long five-day journey, he found himself atop another mountain. The stunning view was astounding, as it was an incredible natural sanctuary. His clothes were fluttering in the wind. In the valley, a river with clear flowing water enlivened his heart. Though it was running at some distance, he could hear the music of its rejoicing waves.

Suddenly, King Veer stood alert to see a figure in that wonderland, which had taken him several days to reach. The king freed his horse and followed the

stranger. He was a yogi in saffron clothes with a basket of flowers in his hands. The yogi was crossing a small stream through a wooden bridge. Having seen him, the king was certain that he had reached his destination after a long journey through the high mountains. He decided to approach him before he disappeared from his sight.

When he got close to the yogi, the king respectfully requested, “Excuse me, sir, would you please guide me to the sage Kanav? Indeed, he has his abode in these high mountains.”

The yogi stopped, turned back, looked straight into the king’s eyes, and answered politely, “Sure, my child, I am sage Kanav. What can I do for you?”

The sage Kanav had an aura that made the king forget himself. He was wearing a robe that was covering him knee-down. He radiated an abundance of agility and vibrant youthfulness, with a glow on his face. He was profoundly calm and had a pleasant smiling face. The king immediately fell at his feet and requested, “Master, I am in a baffling situation. I need your help because I am in great trouble. I want to learn how to attain true happiness and peace in this world.”

“My dear, what’s your name? Where have you come from?” helping the king stand up, the sage Kanav asked him. A grin spread across his face.

“Master, gone are the days when I used to be the king of a great kingdom, and now even I myself have forgotten my identity. Gone are the days when I used to live in the royal palace, and now no place belongs to me,” the king thought for some time and answered.

“Who guided you to these mountains?” inquired the sage Kanav compassionately.

“Saumya, my wife’s younger sister,” answered the king.

“Where did she get to know of it?” the sage Kanav interrogated the king.

“Saumya used to hear from her parents about the sages of the Sumer Mountain. Once upon a time, her mother used to look after a blind and old sage who hailed from these mountains,” the king explained.

The sage Kanav made a brief halt and said in his slow and sweet voice: “Dear seeker, everyone cannot be our disciple, and we are not accessible to everyone. It rarely happened in many years that someone privileged reached us. I appreciate that you’ve already qualified for being our disciple as you’re the first to find us in many decades.”

“Master, I’m grateful to you,” the king genuflected.

“My son, nothing happens without a purpose in the larger scheme of life. Every event has a purpose in this world. Our meeting with other people serves a divine purpose, but we should have the foresight to see behind the hidden objectives. If you truly have a heartfelt desire to learn the wisdom for the truth, beauty and goodness, then I’m duty-bound to help you. You need to stay with us for thirty days, and every day you will learn priceless wisdom and practice the age-old techniques to see the wisdom working practically,” placing his hand on the king’s shoulder, the sage Kanav said gently.

Both the sage and the king kept walking and talking alongside a spring that was running downhill to add more water into the riverbed. The sound of variously coloured birds, which he had grown used to, was drowned by the sound of water, but the birds themselves could be spotted. Though the summer was at its peak, the mountains felt so silent and cool, while their heart so loud. The music of the running stream made the king high-spirited, and his body moved tirelessly while climbing the terraced mountain, which sounded boastful of full-grown paddy and maize farms.

As they kept climbing over the rock-stairs leading to the hermitage, at every step, one eye-catching view followed another. The king got into a dream world when he entered the wonderful snow-white clouds which kissed his face. Looking back, he found the whole world under his feet, and the next moment, turning ahead, he grew curious to see the hermitage. After climbing for about an hour through a trek covered with sky-touching cedar trees, higher up the mountain, above terraced land, stood a monastery – a small cluster of huts. They reached a blissful place that he had never imagined. Finally, the king found himself in his final destination - an oasis of calmness, where nature had assumed complete silence. Despite being on a mountaintop, the place enjoys all seasons with no climatic restrictions. He could feel the touch of breeze and its irregular velocity that was whistling a tune at a high and low pitch. Peace prevailed for miles. The fresh breeze was so clear that it made him feel purified, and he forgot himself for a while. When they stepped over the last stair, a monk – a disciple of the sage Kanav–welcomed them with a lovely smile on his face. They were made to sit on a thick mat woven from long coconut hair. He offered them herbal tea with a unique flavour. The king could not believe that such a beautiful place could ever exist in the world he was living in. The entire mountain seemed completely isolated from the rest of the world, like a hanging lump of earth in the air. Facing down to the rest of the world, stood a big prayer hall that was made of wood and clay. Its roof was covered with long and thick dark-blue slates. There was a beautiful garden full of flowers in different colours. Contrary to the profit-oriented world below,

here, in the Sumer Mountain, time appeared to stand still. The sage Kanav showed him some gigantic trees which were representatives of his predecessors, and then he explained how his ancestors had transformed themselves into those trees, mountains, rivers and ponds hundreds of years ago. It was beyond the king's worldly wit to believe that they were all still alive and could communicate with the sage Kanav. Another monk served them greens with maize-bread, cow-milk and freshly plucked mangoes. After having the exotic dinner, both the teacher and his new disciple had a general discussion under a glowing moon. As the day ended, the sage Kanav guided the king to his hut and told him that he will see him the next morning.

It was the king's first day of learning wisdom in the Sumer Mountain. A heart soothing and resonating word 'Aum' entered his subconscious and waived his heart. The slow and smooth rhythms awaken the king with a smile on his face and calming music in his heart. It was a strikingly lovely day. The sage Kanav was sitting with his legs crossed on a high platform built around a peepul tree. He was reciting the heart soothing word 'Aum' from the deepest core of his navel.

When the king joined the prayer, the sage Kanav asked him to come closer. He put his hand on the king's head softly, caressed his hair gently and said: "Now, open your heart and tell me thoroughly, what has made you feel so indifferent about life?"

The king was totally broken; a series of setbacks had sapped all his energy and left him spent and discouraged. He was inwardly worried and shrinking from life. He was suffering from a deep sense of inadequacy and insecurity. He doubted his own powers. Deep within, he mistrusted his abilities to get his life's precious back. The sobbing king narrated his whole story and bitterly cried before the sage, much like that small child, who shows his scratches to his father to gain some sympathy.

"My lord, my first wife served me with untiring hands and loved me with a pure heart, still I humiliated her. I was foolish to mistake her service for servility and her submission for surrender. Now only death will cure my regret if I could not get her back" the king said with an icy grimace of pain.

"Don't cry, my son. You need not to die to savour the nectar in god's garden. How blissful you are to have found such a rare woman with a clean heart who completely lost herself to you. How much do you know about death when you know very little about life?" reprimanded the sage.

“Is it all not enough what I’ve gone through to know about life?” asked the king.

“Let me be very direct in telling you what it all was that you call life. Days in and days out, months in and months out, years in and years out, you discovered hundreds and thousands of ways, means, and methods to get more and more, but never took a pause to see the magic that turned a human into a flowering tree. Son, it wasn’t in any way life but an inevitable invitation to your present situation. But don’t lose your heart because to know the good one must go through the bad”, explained the sage.

Hearing the sage, the climate on the king’s face changed dramatically. The sage Kanav closed his eyes; thought for some time, and consoled the dejected king, saying: “Life sometimes separates people so that they can realise how much they mean to each other.”

“Can you help me get through all this?” requested the king.

“That’s not the real question,” outlining the pre-requisites, the wise sage said. “The real question is whether you can take my help. Will you let me help you? Will you not oppose?” the sage asked with suspicion.

“I give you my word, master”, the king responded firmly.

“Because my help is a great surgery. It’ll give you a cut in the beginning, pain in the middle and relief only in the end,” cautioned the sage Kanav.

“You’re my only hope now. I want to save my wife at any cost,” bending down on his knees, the helpless king begged.

“Why do you want to save your wife?” the sage mysteriously asked.

“Obviously, I truly love her,” replied the baffled king.

“I’m pretty sure; you can definitely save your wife, Sarah,” said the sage Kanav with assurance. His voice was confident and steady.

“How can I?”

“I’m sorry, my son, here ‘why’ is more important than ‘how’. It’s unmistakably not how versus why.”

“I’m totally unable to see your point, master,” the king admitted, hesitantly.

“Ok, tell me if you come to know that right there beneath your feet is hidden a mine of diamonds, do you need to know how to unearth it?” the sage questioned.

“Absolutely not,” the king replied at once.

“I still don’t see the connection, though I well understood that if I know why I want anything, the ways and means to achieve it will appear automatically.”

“Impressive. You’re a good learner,” applauded the sage Kanav.

“But I’m feeling totally helpless. Please guide me through this turbulence and trauma. Everything my father had built over his lifetime has been stripped away,” screamed the king.

“Are you sure you’ve left nothing?” the sage Kanav, confirmed.

“I’ve lost everything,” the king repeated. “I’ve been left with nothing at all. There’s no luck, I’ve lost everything,” stammered the king.

“But I can see you with ample valuables,” sage Kanav said emphatically.

“There’s no use,” the king sighed. “I’ve not a single thing left. I’ve already explained all that to you,” complained the king.

“Just give me a chance, anyway. Wait for the dust to settle,” the sage Kanav suggested.

“Much obliged” , the king said.

“Do you have good health?” the sage asked.

“Yes, definitely, I’m quite healthy and in pretty picture-perfect shape,” the king answered without delay.

“Do you have ground beneath your feet to help you hold your balance?” the sage Kanav again asked.

“There’s no doubt I’ve the same land to walk and the same amount of time to work that each one of us has on this planet,” the king answered.

“Do you have any friends or relatives?” came the next question.

The king thought for some time and then said: “Yes, I’ve Sarah’s younger sister, Saumya, who is working shoulder to shoulder, my father’s loyal minister Kehar Singh, who always stood by me even when I was against him. And I look up to you as a father figure who is guiding me through this down time.”

“Do you trust God and that God will help you?” the sage asked.

“Yes,” the king cleared his throat and then said, “I don’t think I could have got through this turbulence so far if I hadn’t had some favour from the Almighty.”

“My son, let’s now count the treasure you’ve figured out,” said the sage Kanav.

“A – good health to have a feeling of existence with which you can strive and reunite with your wife and reclaim your lost kingdom. Tell me, do you find it better than the silver?” asked the sage Kanav.

“Yes, I do,” an answer came.

“B – time and land in equal proportion to live and walk on. Do you find it costlier than the platinum?” asked the sage.

“Yes, I do,” answered the king.

“C – three true friends who are standing by you through thick and thin. Do you see them more valuable than the gold?” the sage queried, in full knowledge of the answer that he expected.

“Yes, I do,” answered the sage.

“D – deep faith in God, which is the most essential element to live in this world. Do you see this trust shining brighter than the diamonds?” asked the sage.

“Yes, I do,” answered the king.

The sage Kanav repeated all the things one by one and said: “I firmly believe that you have everything that a person requires to live anywhere, but you told me that everything had been stripped away.”

“Master, I never thought about these gifts like this before,” the king said, sparkling with excitement.

“After all, you should not sacrifice the whole forest for a few trees. Look around and see how much you have achieved. If you start counting your gifts, the whole night will come to an end, not your calculation,” stretching his arms, the sage Kanav said.

The last sentences of the sage drifted the king’s mind back to his insightful conversation with Sarah when she had advised him not to trade his peace for the fruits and flowers. In the next moment, he looked very thoughtful. Observing his thoughtfulness, the sage told the king not to get upset, saying:

“It seems you have some questions that you want me to answer. I encourage you to speak your heart and feel light as a feather,” suggested the sage.

“Master, do you have someone who loves you with all his heart?” asked the king.

“Yes, I do have”, replied the sage, flashing him a bright smile.

“Who is it?” demanded the king.

“Of course, God,” prompted the sage. The king, flashing the sage the same smile, found the concept of God and his love a little mysterious. The sage Kanav sensed his difficulty and continued:

“Son, I need not to make you realise how rich you are. As a matter of fact, you’re richer than me because I know my love exists and I haven’t met him yet, but you’ve already seen, heard and touched Sarah alive,” reinforced the sage.

“Very much true, Master,” nodded the king in agreement. His eyes reflected satisfaction and confidence. He continued, “Master, I beg your pardon. To me, love makes some sense only when I remember my wife, who loved me as if it was all that she knew.”

“Son, it’s the same; the only difference is how you experienced it. You took the support of her physical presence, but fell in love with something divine that resides inside her. Because the divine cannot be seen, touched, or heard in the world, it can only be felt with the heart, which is the only mediator between the divine up in heaven and humans down on the earth. Do you still need anything more precious than this?” explained the sage.

“Unprecedented. It needs not any testament,” remarked the king.

“May I give you a sincere advice before proceeding?” The sage asked in a serious voice.

“Sure,” nodded the king in agreement.

“For as long as I’ve been sharing the ancient wisdom with you, you’ll put your perceptions and prejudices aside,” sage Kanav softly demanded. “Now I’m going to share a timeless and priceless secret of blissful life with you. Control all your senses from all subjects and concentrate on the task. The barrier of self-doubt disappears and transformation takes place the very moment when both the master and the pupil are deeply absorbed in the same subject. This

life consists of many small moments of happiness, my son; and if all those moments are put together, your life becomes bliss.”

“Master, where do we falter to miss living all those small happy moments,” the king requested, his interest aroused.

“Much like those small happy moments, many small unhappy moments keep you involved, so you cannot enjoy those small happy moments. This prevents you from tackling the real problem. This is the tyranny of impoverished living,” the sage Kanav observed. The words of the sage transported the king back to the small happy moments he had spent with Sarah.

“What are those small unhappy moments and what is our real problem?” asked the startled king.

“In general, the biggest problem with man is that he does not know what the real problem of his life is. Till now, no one has become restful and peaceful without knowing what one’s real problem is.” the sage replied.

It was a rainy evening. The showers were making the weather awfully cool, and the pleasant weather made the king feel as if it was winter amidst that summer. They both were sitting around a bonfire and the new visitor was helping the logs to burn. The host found the weather an ideal occasion to tell his guest an interesting story.

“There’s a story that I’d like to share with you. It’ll help you understand what I mean to say,” offered the sage Kanav.

“I love stories, master. My father used to tell me fairy tales in my childhood. They were so interesting, and I still remember some of them,” the king sincerely admitted.

Adding fuel to the fire, sage Kanav began: “Once, there was a rich man in a big town. He spent lots of money and built a splendid ship. Its architectures called it an unsinkable ship because of the hard work put in for many months. The ship eventually met an unsolved problem after six days it set for sail and started producing creaking noise after short intervals. The captain inspected every inch of the ship for many days, but to no avail. The owner of the ship became tense and hired a skilled repairman to solve the problem. The new repairman inspected the whole ship throughout the day. In the evening, he hit a joint three times with his tool. No sooner did he hit on a particular point, suddenly the creaking sound was gone and the ship was completely fine once again. The ship owner asked the repairman for his labour. But, when he saw the maintenance bill, he got surprised to see five hundred coins merely for

three hits. He asked the captain to have another itemised maintenance bill to know the exact expenses. Next day, the owner found the details of the expenditure on his table. It read:

Three hits with the hammer = One coin.

Detecting where the fault lied = Four hundred and ninety-nine coins.

King Veer thought deeply about the principle he had just listened to. He sensed that greed for power and wealth was not his real problem. He now realised it was his incapability to figure out what he actually wanted from life.

“Before you can master an enemy, you must know his name, where he lives, and the special skills he possesses. You can’t fight with your enemy without knowing his whereabouts. Though you had every material possession that everyone desires for, you still didn’t find whatever it was that prevented you from having a joyful existence.”

“And in particular, what is our problem?” asked the king.

“You live paradoxically to what you wish in your heart and what you do with your hands. Tell me, how peace is possible inside if you run after money outside? It’s a great secret unravelled ever by a living knowing that materialistic progress can’t go hand in hand with mental peace. How strange, inside you believe in selfishness, politics, and arrogance, and outside you wonder over having no love in life. What’s this, if not paradox?” explained sage Kanav.

“I can clearly see how one desire led me to another until it completely broke me,” confessed the king.

“Contentment, by nature, is insatiable, and if it was ever satisfied by anything precious available at human’s disposal down there, it was only love that absorbs desire as a sponge soaks the ink”, observed the sage.

“Precisely, it’s the gap in the joint where the real problem lies and needs repair,” confirmed the king.

“Do you know what’s funny about people living down there?” pointing to the civilizations dwelling in the plains, the sage Kanav asked the king.

“I know nothing. Please tell me,” the king gave up.

“One of the strange things about human beings is that they value only that which comes with a price. The easily available people and commodities do not impress them because they come for free. The priceless gifts in the world

are free, and they are underrated and ignored because of their easy accessibility,” the sage observed.

“Awfully wonderful,” the king exclaimed in surprise. “It’s amazing; I regret I’ve spent a major part of my life without knowing such incisive insights.”

The sage Kanav continued, “God has blessed you with so many extraordinary people. There was no one standing in your way, but you were the most difficult person with whom you had to work with. My son, I want you to become wise instead of being intelligent so that you may identify these gifts and talents of nature.”

“I don’t see the distinction. For me, both intelligent and wise are equal. Is there any difference between being intelligent and being wise?” the king asked.

“Similar distance that exists between day and night. Both look alike in build, yet they are quite different,” clarified the sage Kanav.

“I’m totally confused because it’s beyond my intellect to find the difference. Please make the distinction clear,” the king requested.

“Understanding the fact is intelligence, and applying the fact in practical life is wisdom. Now, find out the difference. Training may develop good hands and minds, but self-realisation certainly shapes good hearts. Learning institutions may stuff you with information, but nobody can teach you how to have feelings. Your teacher can train you how to add and how to subtract, but he can’t teach you how to love. Your parents can help you learn how to behave properly, but they can’t tell you how to show respect to other’s emotions. Wisdom, in nut and shell, is the ability to choose the right out of many available around us,” elaborated the sage Kanav.

“Why is it so difficult to teach and learn it like other disciplines?” inquired the king.

“Because it’s not possible through doing, but can be attained with feeling. It descends by being aware that you’ve a self and you’ve to listen to its voice, rather than the other voices. Solving problems is intelligence, but nipping the problems in the bud is wisdom,” explained the sage Kanav.

“Right you are, there’s a marked difference,” weighing both aspects, the king admitted.

“Now imagine yourself in the midst of high waves of deep blue sea fighting for your life, and compare it with your current situation, and see if

struggling for your wife and kingdom is worse than saving your life in the dark blue sea,” the sage Kanav continued. “My son, you must have heard people saying, ‘A coward dies every day, but a brave dies only once.’ Let’s accept for a while that you’re in the worst of situations with the worst outcome. But you can’t give up because the gift of life is more gratifying.”

“My apologies, master. I’ve no meaning of life without my wife,” the king said in despair.

“This is half true and half false,” said the sage Kanav.

“Means.”

“Perhaps your sentence is incomplete. Well, let me add the residual part to make it complete, yet meaningful,” the sage Kanav corrected the king.

“Sure.”

“You can hope for your wife if you have life. My son, life is the most precious gift of almighty God, and you should protect it even in the worst of situations,” the sage observed.

“If I’m not wrong and following you properly, you’re talking about the gifts of life we’ve discussed earlier,” the king confirmed.

“Absolutely right, you’re on the right track, my son,” the sage Kanav reinforced. “Now I’ll ask you certain questions and you just hold your answers back in the safe of your mind.”

“Interesting,” the king nodded his head in agreement.

“Here’s the real point I want to share with you,” the sage Kanav observed. “Just sincerely, for a while, imagine yourself in the following situations:

You lost your eyesight, and God blessed you with your eyesight again. What would you like to see in the world?

You lost your legs and became lame, and then you are given a hope to regain your normalcy, what places would you dream to visit?

You lost your tongue and became speechless, and someone gave you hope to restore your voice. Would you prefer to tell a lie or plead for the truth? Would you prefer to abuse in a high pitch or show gratitude in a moderate tone?

Fighting in a battle, you lost both your hands and became helpless, and God offered you both of your hands back, what would you promise Him to work for?

You are dying and God offers you the same life once again. What would you like to do with it that remains undone?

If all the jobs that you've already taken up brought you the same results, what different job would you like to try next? I hope you are reasoning."

An absolute silence prevailed as the king did not respond. For a long while, he sounded lost. He was dumbfounded.

"Master, the answers are so vital that I'm receiving them in my mind through my heart," the king reported.

"Now see your riches that you can reap in present and future," the sage continued, "see the worth of your life and the value of the wonderful gifts that God has bestowed upon you. Undoubtedly, today you may not have your kingdom, but you must be happy to have your life worth more than your kingdom. Perhaps now it must be easier for you to ask yourself what precious things you are regretting. On a practical note, lasting happiness and eternal peace expect every hopeful person to translate all the answers into reality, which you are holding in the safe of your mind."

"It's really a pragmatic approach to get inspiration. How silly I was to underestimate this precious life when I tried to finish it by committing suicide." The king reflected on the past and repented.

The sage Kanav added, "My son, one should never give up, however hard the situation is. One should not quit if one doesn't have money; he should find out - he may have intellect to share the wisdom with those who have money but don't have wisdom. One shouldn't become passive if one can't think intellectually; he should find out - he may have good health to play a sport to entertain those who have intelligence but don't have good health. One shouldn't lose heart if one doesn't have eyes to see, he should find out - he may have a sweet voice to sing a melody to heal the hearts. Navigate your deep interior; you may have untapped skills and unexplored gifts. Remember, in this world, everyone has something unique to discover and distribute. Just see yourself as strength for good and an instrument to improve the lives around you."

After listening to the sage Kanav, the king heaved a sigh of relief and said: "Master, please accept my heart-felt gratitude. I had never thought of these priceless gifts before. You've changed my way of thinking and crystallised my vision to view this life and its gifts with a different outlook."

"What will you say to your first wife if I make her stand before you right now?" the sage offered secretly.

“Really? Is that true? Is it possible for this moment?” the dumbstruck king promptly reacted. He thought the sage Kanav was making a miracle happen. His voice was penetrating with hope and disbelief. He didn’t know whether he should laugh or cry.

“For that, you need to be patient because you’ve to pay the price for everything. Let us learn from your experience what a person who is blessed with a family needs to realize when his dearly loved ones are with him. For the sake of having a fair assessment, answer the questions that I am going to ask.

What would you like to do to make Sarah happy if she really appears before you right now?” repeated the sage.

“I’d like to make her realize that she is the most important person in my life and she is the reason that makes my heart beat and my soul breathe,” answered the king, his eyes wet and throat dry.

“What feelings would you like to express to disclose your heart?” demanded the sage.

“I would like to say that she is the most beautiful woman in my life and my love for her is growing with every passing day” , replied the king.

“What loving gestures would you like to make?” came the next question.

“I’d like to give her a close hug,” the king said. He looked quite calm and composed.

For some time, that moment stood still with the king’s melancholy. He constantly kept looking down at the ground, perhaps thinking about his current wishes which were once granted. He sounded apologetic for losing everything owing to his imprudence.

“Ask yourself what so precious kept you over-occupied to wait for these tragic moments to happen to realise these platonic feelings for your sweetheart when today she is no more,” the wise sage inquired, “If one is devoted and determined wholeheartedly to the purpose of one’s life, he should not wait for a favourable time and chance. One should express these feelings not only in words but also through actions. It would have been better if you had shown your best and striven for excellence when Sarah could see it and feel proud of your achievements. Conversely, it’s too late now to demonstrate your fire, hard work, love and your commitment when she has turned into an insensitive bundle of logs.”

“Had I learned this wisdom before I lost my love, I wouldn’t have made a single mistake,” said the king, recalling the mistakes he had made in the past.

“Man should perspire in time for the happiness of those whom he loves from the core of his heart, otherwise he is bound to cry in the crowd of this transitory world much like that small child who is lost in a fair, cries for his parents, people pacify him, console him, offer him sweets and flashy toys, but now all these superfluous things have no value for him. His eyes and heart search only for his loving parents,” remarked sage Kanav.

As the king was feeling better and lighter, he shared his feelings: “Master, no doubt I’m feeling better, but with every next wisdom, a new regret erupts in my mind and deprives me of peace. There’s an entanglement of uneasy emotions in my heart. Please help me settle with my emotions.”

The sage Kanav put his magical hands on the king’s head and asked politely:

“Son, let me know - how will you feel if many sharp thorns are deeply stuck in your body?”

“Needless to say, severely panic,” the answer came like an arrow.

“Disengage yourself from your past,” the sage Kanav suggested.

“How so?” the king asked with great interest.

“You’re suffering from your past. Your ingratitude to your father, your cruelty to your wife, your unkindness to your loyal minister and the shocks that you received from your second wife Rudra are still haunting you. All your negative emotions and incidents are old. They were made up when you were a child or when you were young, when you had a more limited view of the world. They were decisions you made about how to handle life. They held you back from having to deal with every new situation from a fresh angle of vision.”

“Master, what’s the cure?” asked the king inquisitively.

“Close your eyes,” the sage Kanav instructed the king. “Revise the following affirmation in your mind over and over again until it becomes your reality: what is gone can’t come back, and what is bound to happen needs to be accepted.”

The king complied with whatever he was told.

“Now go back to your previous years and undo your tragedies and traumas; rectify what is shadowing you since your mother died,” the sage suggested politely. “It’s the time to empty your mind: empty your mind of fear, ego, hatred, jealousy, anger, greed, insecurities, regrets, and revenge you have accumulated over your lifetime. Empty your heart of bile and bitterness

that you are holding for Rudra. And for all this, you need to forgive her for all the wrongdoings she has done to you.”

“Master, what’s wrong if I don’t forget the wrongdoings of my second wife and punish her for her misdeeds? Please throw some light on how avenging is a malpractice,” the king requested the sage Kanav.

“Forgiveness is so useful because when you forgive a person and forget grudges against him, you treat him like parents treat their children; you apply a curative salve on your wounds. Man is full of possibilities to become happy, and unless he becomes peaceful, there’s no possibility of attaining real happiness,” the sage gave the king a pleasant look and said.

“It is profoundly meaningful insight with bountiful benefits,” the king said with great understanding.

“Are you feeling better?” the sage asked caringly.

“Yes, it’s a sort of relaxation,” said the light-hearted king, closing his eyes slowly.

“Let’s now discuss a little more how you can make peace and happiness possible, which is your birth right” , the sage Kanav offered.

“Thanks, I need to hear this,” said the king.

“Son, here you play a significant role,” said the sage, breaking into a broad smile.

“What does that role involve?” the king asked curiously.

“All it takes is liberating your body and mind from negative emotions. These efforts make you increasingly available to positive emotions. All these negative emotions are energy sapping. It’s easy to understand that when you focus on the positive, you distract evil and attract good. You flow at once towards peace and happiness when you get rid of these unconstructive emotions,” the sage explained.

“And what are positive emotions like?” asked the king.

“The people free from negative emotions are those who are full of positive emotions, like Sarah, who loved you more than herself despite knowing you were using her to get the secret, and your loyal friend Kehar Singh, who, at the cost of his life, saved you despite knowing that you had punished him with the death penalty. With faith in her goodness, Saumya forgave your betrayal and guided you to us so that you could seek your divine destiny. These are the people who love the happy, are kind to the troubled, are happy with the

innocent, and are indifferent to sinners. Ridding your body and mind of negative forces, you liberate your life from chronic diseases. It possibly paves the way for the truth, beauty and goodness. It's just like draining ulcers and acids out of your body and mind."

The longer the king listened to the sage Kanav, the more he came to realise that his spirit had dried and become dusty. Every day, both the master and the disciple would stroll through the woods and have a heart-to-heart talk. Very soon, the king became the favourite student of the sage Kanav. He grew accustomed to their daily customs and rituals. Following his daily routine, he would wake up in the early hours of the morning and perform all the rituals that were compulsory for a disciple residing at the hermitage. When he was free from his lessons, he would collect wood from the jungle and arrange fodder for the cattle. He was no better than his first wife, who used to spin and weave beautiful dreams while watching over her cattle. One evening after having dinner, the king picked up a tumbler and started cleaning it with a small piece of cloth. The sage Kanav, who was also sitting beside him, kept watching the king until he finished his job.

"A utensil made of bronze always gets dirty if it is not cleaned every time it is used. But once having it polished with gold, it becomes free from getting dirty forever," the sage Kanav observed.

"Master, please don't speak in riddles. I cannot relate these lines to my life. Please extend me your favour to understand this," requested the king.

"Appreciate the truth, beauty and goodness," said the sage.

"My son," the sage Kanav continued. "Few people are practising it that's why more people are victims to these negative emotions. Appreciate the truth, beauty and goodness of other people. Applaud people for their merits. When you appreciate the good qualities of others, the very moment you become similar to the people who possess these qualities. Praising doesn't mean being inferior or lessening your reputation in relation to others' success and achievements. If you improve your life, it improves the lives of others as well. This is a golden rule, not a rule about gold. It's like a whiff of fresh air in your life."

"Do I need to search for the truth, beauty and goodness in others?" asked the king.

"It's not a subject of searching; it's a subject of self-realisation," clarified the sage Kanav.

"Will you elaborate it further?" requested the king.

“Ok, let’s understand it this way. When you see something heart-pleasing, you immediately say it is beautiful. Am I fair with my point?” asked the sage Kanav.

“Yes, certainly you are,” the king replied.

“In a fair assessment, indeed, it’s not because there’s something beautiful outside. It’s actually the beauty that’s already available within you, and something beautiful that you see outside is merely a medium to realise it. How can a person appreciate something beautiful until he has it first hand? The moment you applaud the truth, beauty and goodness of others – others’ truth, beauty and goodness become your own truth, beauty and goodness. My son, God is not to be worshipped: God has to be lived. And to live God; you need not go anywhere - He is already in you in the form of the truth, beauty and goodness,” the sage Kanav simplified.

“Don’t you think it’s highly impractical for wealthy and proud people who consider this noble act below their dignity,” the king ventured with a tentative smile.

“I’m confident to say not,” affirmed the sage Kanav.

“There’s nothing called fantasy in the world, there’s nothing impractical in the world. If you look within for beauty, fiction can become fact. People believe more in fairy tales; this is why they listen to them with deep interest and profound happiness. This is the whisper of the real man within, the one who reveals to him the beauty he never knew he carried. Indeed, when you appreciate others’ truth, beauty and goodness, you don’t appreciate others’ qualities. Rather, you not only discover your hidden truth, beauty and goodness but also multiply these qualities manifold. Let these buds bloom in your heart. Like a chiseller identifies a diamond among rough stones - only the person who himself possesses the truth, beauty, and goodness can see these qualities in others,” the sage explained.

“And what possibly happens when a person fails to practice this virtue?” the king inquired.

“It’s noteworthy that when a person makes or breaks himself, he is simultaneously making or breaking the whole humanity. When a person lays the foundation for the peace within, he is discovering the way to peace for the whole humanity. And when he sows the seeds of hatred within, he is sowing hatred for the whole humanity too. You’ve already learnt that your external world is the reflection of your internal side,” the sage replied.

“It’s impressive and highly effective. I’m feeling something good inside me full to overflowing,” the king admitted without any reservation.

The sage took a long pause and resumed the conversation: “The next technique that I’m going to share will change poison into nectar and bane into boon. As soon as you develop ego, hatred, revenge, jealousy, competition, greed, cleverness and anger; your relationship with your maker is broken. On the bright side, the moment you free your mind from these negative emotions, and nurture your heart with positive emotions like love, forgiveness, cooperation, brotherhood, kindness, understanding, sympathy, tolerance and equality, you enter into the realm of heaven.”

“Awesome,” was the only response the sage received as the king was intensely engrossed in the nuggets of wisdom the sage shared.

After listening to the discourse, the king felt his heart flip. He improved internally. All his resentment started disappearing like dew drops get evaporated in the beams of sunlight.

“Let me share another effective technique to neutralise these negative forces,” offered the sage Kanav.

“What’s it? It’s equally important to know how to get rid of these energy vampires,” inquired the king.

“Self-expression,” the sage introduced the next ritual. “Never suppress your emotions; otherwise they’ll explode after becoming volcanoes. How could you possibly do good if you don’t even feel good? Simmering by holding these negative emotions kills a person by degrees every day. A physician can treat your body, but he cannot treat your thoughts, which pave the way to your emotions. Find someone close and share your heavy heart with them; take the poison out and purify your mind. You’ll feel both light and healed, besides getting able guidance.”

“Unquestionably true. Had my loyal minister been with me, I’d have shared my heavy heart and repenting mind with him, and I would not have been driven to suicide,” the king recalled his past upheavals and confirmed. “And after he saved my life, I felt much cured when I extended him my apology, and he forgave me for my wrongdoings, and I was much healed internally when I opened my heart before him.”

“Excellent, my child, I’m happy that you’re following me without a miss,” the sage Kanav remarked with great appreciation. “Have you ever thought why there was so much anxiety in your life despite the fact that you had so much affluence?”

“Greed,” the king suddenly shouted.

“That’s fair enough. But you’re above the mark. There was something else that made you major in the minors” , said the holy man gently.

“What was that?” asked the king.

“Lack of integrity. It was not there in the least, only vulnerability reigned in the realms of your interior and exterior. But remember: nobody was accountable except you,” the sage Kanav said.

“Undeniable,” the king admitted.

“You can never accept your mistakes unless you are true to the real man sitting inside you. You cannot love others until you love yourself and your life. You are unique because it is an irrefutable fact that no one can be like you in this world. The creator must have had some beautiful plans behind your creation,” the sage suggested.

“Master, why was it so difficult to accept whatever I had?” asked the king.

“My son, it was a trap which tested your integrity. Here, greed came into play when you failed to show integrity. In fact, when you had more options and choices, you became greedy, and greed made you restless. So many options created a complex situation. They decreased your comforts and increased your tensions. With more choices, you grew reactive rather than creative. What is of paramount concern is that when we accept whatever we have, we enjoy every moment of our lives regardless of how precious or how competitive we have. This has also been one of the secrets of a happier and fuller life of ancient people who had less facility, but more happiness.” The last wisdom reminded the king of the contented folks of Sarah’s village who chiefly focused on celebrating life, no matter where they lived and how much they earned.

“So, you mean I should just be content with what I have? But I don’t understand how will I progress if I remain satisfied with whatever I have?” showing his dilemma, the king demanded.

The king changed his sitting posture, but the sage Kanav was sitting still in Padama Asana – one of his favourite sitting postures.

“No, I didn’t mean being passive. I mean strive for excellence and strike on an insatiable hunger for the unnecessary. Just take out greed that exists between satisfaction and happiness. I mean, you should not demean the things you have for the sake of those bigger things you dream of. With the upsurge

in alternatives, it's not really shocking that the volume of patience becomes compromised."

The sage Kanav continued: "It may cost you your whole life if you don't allow yourself to observe your state of being in the moments of love and happiness," advised the sage Kanav.

"Master, tell me what is the state of being when a person savours love and happiness?" asked the king.

"It's a universal phenomenon and applies to everyone irrespective of person and place. In a state of love and happiness, a person becomes slow and silent because he has to go nowhere, as he has already reached it. He enters another world of contentment. Love and happiness can never happen until you are free from your mind, ego and time. They all disappear effortlessly, only you, the observer, is left," explained the sage.

"How simple, yet how rare," shocked the king.

"Things will be very different for you if you give a real trial to the next ritual I'm going to share with you," assured the king.

"What's next?" asked the king.

"Slow down," the sage introduced the next ritual.

"Sorry, I'm losing you again," the king surrendered before sage Kanav.

"Slow down the pace of whatever you think and do. You are running your life at a frantic pace. Your life is not just like a death alarm in a war situation. Take every moment of your life as easy. Do not rush every time. Develop a normal and natural pace of speech. As I have already explained, life is not preparation for death. My child, never forget that wise people stitch in time and save nine, and intelligent people take a thousand stitches today to save nothing for tomorrow," the wise sage said.

"Master, the last proverb you mentioned is beyond my understanding. I need more support," the king sought more support.

The sage Kanav grew silent, meditated for some time, and observed, "Son, let me be the first to tell you this ancient secret of longevity. You need to know its treasure trove of potential. Believe it or not, man is bound to reduce his life span from over a hundred years to fifty or even less than fifty years if he doesn't filter this fuming and fretting out of his living."

"It really is an alarming situation for the whole humanity and civilisation. What is going to be wrong with the human body?" asked the king.

“There is nothing going to be wrong with the human body, but his over intelligent mind is his biggest enemy. It is much like your horse – if you don’t control it, it will lead you astray. If humans do not stop this frantic pace of living, they are sure to face grave consequences. A line should be drawn for growth if it does not progress equally with moral values. In pursuit of wealth, name, and fame, we live fast and die young. We have entered a world that has become much like a race competition where everyone is selfish and highly-strung minded to surpass the other. Indeed, your basic needs are limited but your desires are unlimited. You exert a hundred times more energy in everything you do that requires much time proportionately. Energy required for days is being consumed in moments, energy worth using for months is being used in days, energy suitable for years is being spent for months and energy worth using for centuries is being used in years. This disproportionate supply of energy and insubstantial consumption of time have resulted in a downfall of age span. Man is consuming excessively to experience everything prematurely. It seems every one down there is too busy to end one’s life as soon as possible,” the sage explained.

“It’s really a trap. We consume our time and do not live it. We are wasting our energy and not using it,” the king summed up.

“Do you know what happens when a sapling is given all the necessary elements like water, manure, and pesticides excessively at a time?”

“Naturally, it gets withered before becoming a giant tree,” the king replied.

“Dear, your situation was just like that of a small child who gets prematurity in everything he does - eating, dressing, thinking and living. He grows old even before his youth comes. Always remember that you can’t savour the taste of food before you feel the hunger. Untimely, excessive and unnecessary facilities cause destruction, not construction,” cautioned the sage.

“I’m fairly relating to my life everything that you are sharing with me. Through abusing my senses over years, I deadened them to feel the pure inside and to see the true outside. I had long lost the ability to choose the right out of many available around my world,” the king confessed. He directed his gaze toward the plains below the high mountains.

“Are you feeling tired?” asked the sage Kanav.

“No, I’m feeling fired up. Please carry on,” requested the king.

“I’m sensing that some queries are going on in your mind. Am I right?” reading king’s mind, the sage Kanav asked.

“Oh, yes master,” the king replied without suppressing his thoughts.

“Do tell me, son,” asked the sage Kanav.

“I’m thinking if maintaining a natural pace is possible in this fast-growing world where everyone is aiming to reach ahead,” the king asked, deeply fascinated by what he was hearing.

The sage Kanav put his hand on the king’s shoulder and said: “Son, you can do it, and I’ll tell you how.”

“Master, please show me the right way to practice it,” the king requested.

“If this lifestyle keeps going, I can clearly see people dying of starvation before they are hungry. Many people make their lives unnecessarily complex for themselves by increasing the speed of their lives. Son, something that you perform in haste with your over-intelligence can productively accomplish the work in less time still you miss the essence in a quick-fix solution. Many important qualities are missed out, which you develop in due course of time,” the sage revealed.

“What’s the essence you are talking about? What are the important qualities that are missed? I’m wondering how that fits into the story of my life?” asked the king.

“Well, in this accelerated pace of life, man has grown impatient with fellow-feelings. He has become indifferent to the real taste of art, insensitive to music, and exhausted by the play. He accepts or rejects persons and things in a rush as he has no time to feel and understand. He rejects a song before its melody soothes his soul; he drops a poem before its verses soften his imagination; he withdraws himself from a sport before playing its final to feel valorous. He misinterprets an event and surrenders before destiny; he cuts short a person before he completes, and remains misunderstood. It is worth remembering that sometimes meanings are hidden in the beginning; sometimes ecstasy lies in the middle; sometimes gist is found at the end. Moreover, in some other cases, the essence is obtained through repetition. Unfortunately, you give in before reaching the right place and finding the secret,” explained the sage.

“What an irony! The chaos of the crowd had made me insensitive to the art, music and literature,” the king wondered aloud.

“Oh, wise one, look back at your life down there and see the trick of mind,” said the sage, pointing to the human settlements down there in the plains. “The never-ending desires to get more so that you could get ahead of others,

made you forget your capacity to feel. On the journey of life, when your companion was left behind, you had no patience to pause, turn back, and wait. Your arrogance made you forget your ability to miss someone who loved and cared for you the most.”

“I can see myself doing all that down there, master,” confirmed the king.

King Veer learnt all the natural practices of sage Kanav and completely devoted himself to the life lessons he was taught. His mental alertness and physical vibrancy made him fully alive, and as a human being, he needed to be on the path of his personal odyssey. Living on those mountains made his life more acceptable to him than the artificial pomp and show of his court life. In the company of the sage Kanav amidst natural surroundings, he was entirely free from greed and the lust for power. It was the first time in his entire life that he was far from the madding crowd and all its distractions. On the Sumer Mountain, he was very happy because he had freed himself from negative emotions. He decided to stay committed to his soul-searching until the end, no matter how terrible his life’s journey had been from the beginning to the middle.

“Dear seeker, I’ve one more insight that will help you realise that what you become is more important than what you achieve while getting to your destination,” offered the sage.

“I think I’m going to love this one,” said the sage.

“And I’m confident you’ll,” replied the sage.

“Master, you’re not uttering words; you’re delivering love, peace and happiness. It feels like listening to you no end,” the king admitted.

“Always remember to live fully, but never forget your death,” the sage introduced his next insight.

“Well, so long as remembering life is concerned, it makes me feel good, but why to remember my mortality every time, which is so distressing?” the king demanded in astonishment.

“Because,” answered the sage, “It helps you value your life.” the sage said.

“But it reminds me of my end,” said the king with complete honesty.

“Actually, it is a technique about living, not dying,” the sage Kanav asserted.

“Remembering my death to learn living, not dying? I can’t understand your point. Please throw some light so that I could see it with more clarity,” the king requested.

“Do you have an idea what is the best way to love your loved ones?” the sage quizzed.

“No idea. I just have a heart heavy with regret. What is the best way, master?” like an innocent child, the king asked promptly.

“By always remembering that one day you are going to lose them forever, or they are going to leave you forever,” the sage replied.

“It means, reminding myself every time that one day I’ll lose my life is the best way to love it profoundly,” the king said.

“Exactly, you related it fairly,” observed the sage.

“Great point. I wish I had heard it before I lost Sarah,” the king said with a deep sigh. He continued, “Is it like remembering that the shortness of life strips away all the distractions of life and keeps my focus centred on what’s the most important? And that if I don’t forget my death, I’ll always remember that there is much more to life than having money, power and possession.”

“You got it without a miss,” the sage confirmed. “The interesting thing about reflecting on your death is that it reawakens you to what’s most valuable about life. Count the total number of years, months and days of your life and then see how much you can accumulate within your limited life-span. Ask yourself how many unlimited desires you can fulfil in your limited lifespan if God showers His grace on you. Insatiable desires chase you from the cradle to the grave. Your ego feeds your greed, which is the central axis around which your whole life revolves from birth to death. Faces are new, but desires are old; weapons are new, but destruction is old. The world is infinite and limitless for making progress, amassing material, satisfying your senses, and searching for a place to attain peace. Shrink your angle of vision from this giant world to see it within your tiny self. Look at a child, how happy he is in his limited world. He is pure in his heart, so he loves from his heart. He lives in present because he is free from the past and future. He enjoys everything but doesn’t accumulate anything. Conversely, how dissatisfied and restless he becomes as he grows old and moves around the world.”

One day, after having an evening meal, the sage Kanav went into the king’s hut. The grateful king made his teacher sit on his bed, and he himself took his seat on the floor mat to listen to him. It was customary at the monastery that a preacher was always made to sit at a higher pedestal than the

place occupied by the disciple. The sage closed his eyes, meditated for some time, opened his eyes slowly and smelled the fragrance that the air carried from the rose garden grown outside. He then began to speak:

“My son, try to find happiness in every place you visit and in every act you perform,” said the sage Kanav.

“Is happiness really available everywhere we go and in everything we do?” asked the king.

“As a matter of fact, you can attain happiness this moment if you search it with a keen eye. Happiness is nearer than your hands and feet,” answered the sage Kanav.

“But how is happiness possible this very moment?” the king said in astonishment.

“Because it is within you,” the sage replied.

“But I’m totally unable to feel it inside,” the king said.

“One of the basic truths to attain happiness is to find out whether you have lost it inside of you or in the world outside,” said the sage Kanav ardently.

The king tried to grasp the last sentence but failed. Afterwards, the sage Kanav stood up unexpectedly and started searching for something. The king got mystified and waited for some time, but the sage kept on searching. The king thought for a while and followed the sage and finally asked, “What are you searching for?”

“My favourite book is lost, and I’m looking for it,” answered the sage Kanav.

“Let’s search together,” extending help, the king insisted.

“You won’t be able to find what I’m looking for because even I’ll barely find it, too,” the sage Kanav replied.

The king also began searching with the master. They both kept searching for the book in the hut, but neither succeeded. Then, after some time, the king again asked his master: “The book must be very small, so firstly let me know where it fell so that we may find it easily.”

“Don’t ask me that question,” the sage Kanav said.

“But it is very difficult to search the book without knowing the exact place where it was lost because the hut is big enough and the book is too small,” the king told the sage Kanav.

“The book is missing inside my hut,” the sage Kanav gave a clue.

“Then what is the logic to search for it in my hut?” the king composed himself and then quizzed with great surprise.

“When I lost my book, I was reading it inside my hut. The sunlight was about to disappear, and when the evening grew in the yard, the darkness grew inside the hut. I came to your hut searching for the book in the light of the lamp. I thought it would be easier to search it in your hut,” the sage Kanav explained.

“How can you find a thing where it isn’t lost? The book must be found in your hut, not inside mine,” the king wondered aloud.

“Hold your horses, my son. I’m looking at you doing the same for searching for happiness. You were searching for happiness where it had never been lost. You are correct; it is necessary to remember the place where I lost something. Search is possible only for what is lost. And the search would be useless if something is within you and you are looking for it outside. Man has invented wine in pursuit of happiness. This is evidence that happiness has disappeared in his life. Man has set up jurisdiction and employed solicitors to discover the truth. This is the evidence that the truth has been lost for man. Had there been happiness and the truth, there won’t be any need for wine and solicitors. Therefore, man looks for happiness, but he doesn’t ask himself if he has lost it inside or outside, and if he has lost it, then where he has to look for,” replied the sage Kanav.

“You mean happiness resides inside of me, and I was mistakenly searching for it in the outside world,” asked the king.

“Exactly. Everything: good and bad lie inside of us,” said the sage.

“I got it. Everything-good or bad lie inside of me, and my outer world is the reflection of my inner world,” supported the king.

“Most of the time, around us, we’ve all that what we actually want, but much like a musk deer, out of greed and ignorance, we keep looking for it over the blue hills. Son, do you see here any relevance?” asked the sage.

“Sounds the story of my life,” accepted the king.

After having some fruits and green tea, one afternoon, the sage Kanav and the king sat under the shadow of a peepul tree - the sacred tree of Hindus that

represents their deities. It was a clear, sun-splashed day; the air was swiftly tossing leaves on the trees. Birds were singing. Life to the king seemed full to the brim there. By that time in the monastery, he had become convinced that the ancient practices, timeless wisdom, and the profound solitude of the Sumer Mountain could shape people blessed with divine grace-people capable of renouncing the world by their own choice.” These ecstatic moments and celestial feelings made him realise as if it was his home before his birth and would be his home after death.

The sage Kanav started his discourse with a constant smile on his face. He said: “One of the most essential of all the virtues for a plethora of peacefulness that I must share with you, my son, is this: you have the whole universe within you.”

“Then why didn’t I find all the answers before I met you, master?” the king gave the sage a quizzical look and asked.

“Because it’s more important to understand the questions of your life than to hastily seek their answers,” replied the sage.

“It means the answer becomes easier when the question receives more attention,” observed the king.

“Exactly. You brought my point home,” encouraged the sage.

“I never thought of the answers, let alone paying proper attention to the questions of my life,” admitted the king.

The sage remarked, “A fish dying of thirst in the ocean,”

“I’m losing you again. Please shed some light on the phrase you have just mentioned. I’m not really familiar with it,” pleaded the king.

“Stop to live for formalities and start to live for a noble cause that resides in you,” suggested the sage.

“An example will make it easier to understand,” requested the king.

“Society has a big problem. It always follows a rat-race. Society validates the majority, not the fact. If ten people support an unreal fact and a single mind favours the real, then the unrealistic fact will come to pass. Ninety-five percent of people believe in formalities. They always chase society, and society always follows the crowd. On the one hand, when you are alive, your neighbour tries thousands of tricks to defame you, to defeat you, to harm you. On the other hand, the same neighbour takes you to the cremation ground on his back when you die. People believe in formalities even to love, to render cooperation and to show sympathy. You should value those people who treat

you with heart: people who are standing by you in adversity. The person who loves you the most is always underestimated due to his easy accessibility and unconditional submission. It has been your regular practice to ignore the ones who devoted themselves to you, whether it was your loving wife, Sarah, your caring father, or your close friend – Kehar Singh, the loyal minister. Does it make any sense to you?” the sage Kanav demanded.

“More than I had expected. Master, I’d been wandering aimlessly in my life. I really needed to hear that. I never realised all that was missing in my life until I heard from you,” extending his thanks, admitted the happy king.

“If I’m not distracting you from the subject matter, then do tell me - who loves a child the most?” the sage Kanav abruptly asked the king.

“I’m sure a mother does,” the king responded with great confidence.

“Absolutely. There is nothing in this world as pure as a mother’s love,” the sage Kanav resumed his insightful conversation with this thought. “A mother gives birth to her child. She nurtures him with her blood and nurses him with her breath. She feeds him with milk from her breast and stays awake the whole night to render him intensive care. She loves him more than herself. He becomes the dream of her life. She abandons her needs to fulfil his dreams because he is the whole and soul of her life. But as soon as he becomes self-reliant, earns money, and gets married - to him, his mother becomes useless. Now she is compelled to live a lonely life. ”

“Oh yes, this is the same story of most of families. Parents bring up their children, and they get separated when they become independent.” the king said in agreement.

“Remember, you pure soul: a person’s class is not measured by the size of his pocket and the people he is surrounded by, especially when he is at the prime of his achievement, but his ability not to forget those hands and hearts which helped him when his need was the utmost urgent,” observed the sage.

“I can see the strong bond it offers to a relationship,” responded the king.

“Need I continue with the next?” the sage Kanav asked rhetorically.

“Yes, I think I’m going to love the next as well,” the king happily replied.

“Because you liked this, I’m sure you will like the next one as well,” the sage resumed their insightful conversation.

“The ancient sages of the East pioneered this concept. Though it has been around for centuries, its relevance is just as effective today as when it was first developed, and I’m confident that its application will remain effective as long

as human beings exist. My son, this concept constitutes the philosophy that a cause is always greater than action. You must know there is a deep relationship between cause and effect. People invite sufferings when their efforts are not driven by a noble cause. Work for a noble cause, and you will find happiness nearer than your shadow,” explained the sage.

“How does that happen?” The king wondered aloud.

“It’s very simple,” said the sage Kanav. “It being a submissive son, you served your father and began with a noble cause. But after your father, you tried hard to attain happiness, peace and love out of your misdeeds.”

“But, what was it that sidetracked the noble cause of my pursuits?” the king asked.

“In your course of attaining success, your noble cause took the place of greed, which distracted you to grope in the darkness,” the sage Kanav smilingly continued. “This materialistic world has its own statistics and arithmetic to weigh the facts. If you lose, everything you do is wrong; if you gain, everything you do is right. In a nutshell, success - no matter how it is earned is right, and failure is always flawed and faulty.”

“Exactly, this is what I’d been doing since my father died because whatever brought me success seemed right to me,” reflecting on his past, the king admitted.

“But there is no right way to do wrong things, my son,” the wise sage reprimanded the king. “Frauds and formalities may be the order of the world, but not the way to live a happy and peaceful life. It is noteworthy that living for material gains is wrong, even if everyone is practicing it, and living for human values is right, even if no one is practicing it.”

“Well said,” the king nodded in absolute agreement with the minister.

“If you create the cause, the effect has to follow without any excuse. You should work for a noble cause, not only for your benefit but also for the benefit of all those in your part of the world. It is an irrefutable fact that once the goal becomes too important, then means lose all significance,” observed the sage

“What does ‘means lose importance’ stand for?” the king sought.

“When the end becomes all-important, then any means will do - fair or foul, moral or immoral. But one has to attain the end. Unfortunately, when you travel with your eyes focused on the end, the way soon gets over before

you reach the destination, and you feel cheated at the end. It simply didn't matter how much money you made out of trading those fruits and flowers, but it is greatly a matter of concern what you sacrificed to make a lot of money. My son, you earned huge money, but wasted the golden years of your life. If you accumulated massive wealth but lost your love, of what use it was. It hardly matters what money you made, but it greatly matters what money has made you today. You suffered because you did not work for a noble cause; instead, you worked for money, success, power and prestige. You believed that everything was better than anything that could make you happy. Your first wife, with her noble cause, was strongly determined that nothing was better than everything that compromised her integrity. Working for a noble cause was the fuel and force for her happiness, peace and contentment."

"But how would I come to know that each of my actions is rooted in a worthy cause?" questioned the confused king.

"Consider your action worthwhile if it represents your heart; if any of your acts hurt no one and extend everyone care, peace and happiness. A major part of people's lives is wasted in playing roles that they are not meant for. Most people spend most of their lives flaunting their wealth, security, strength, and regular income. It is as if people are in a race to see how much they can seek for themselves without even pausing to think whether they can share what they have with those who have nothing. People have become parallel lines, running very close yet meeting nowhere. Never forget: you have to grow better not to get farther from others, but to help others become better so that they could come closer. Remember, every human act on the earth must be aimed at minimizing competition and maximizing cooperation. After all, when you step out of threshold; you will meet every single soul in the sort of society that you contribute to shape every single day. Don't create sufferings to the sufferers if you are safe; don't cause turbulence to the troubled if you are balanced; don't look down upon the poor if you are rich; don't suppress the weak if you are strong. Rather, use your peace to search for solutions to the sufferers; use your balance to pacify their turbulence; use your money to give food and shelter to those who are hungry and homeless; use your strength in favour of the suppressed and helpless, and you will experience a divine peace, satisfaction, and happiness that you might not have experienced before. Your ego is limitless to flaunt your material, but your life is limited to achieve peace and happiness," explained the master.

"I think Sarah's service and sacrifice became the cause, and I fell in love with her as an effect," the king illustrated.

“Don’t misinterpret it. A great many things happen in our lives without any reason,” observed the sage.

“But earlier you said that there is a relationship between cause and effect, and now you’re saying it’s opposite,” the king lodged his doubt.

“The law of cause and effect is applicable to everything that takes place on the earth except love. To understand it, you need to step up or set aside,” suggested the sage.

“Point well taken, master. But, if my feelings are without any reason, then what are these for?” asked the king.

“I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. Tell me if you think they are for her service and sacrifice, then what was it that made her fall in love with you? When you met her, she even didn’t know much about you,” said the sage.

“I give up,” surrendered the king.

“Son, I’m sorry, you’re still unable to see the unseen at play behind everything you are going through. No string was attached to her sacrifice and service. Yet even her supreme sacrifice could not humble your ego and greed until you misbehaved and were disowned by your own people,” simplified the sage.

“How come results are possible without any reason? It’s difficult to digest,” the king showed his helplessness.

“Reasons are rooted in the results of human endeavours. However, if you are adamant about believing that feelings have reasons at their roots, they are beyond the limit of human intellect, only known to the unknown and unseen. For now, I leave it to you to choose between stepping up and stepping aside,” explained the sage.

“I’ll step up rather than stepping aside, master,” the king conceded kindly.

“I’m really happy to hear that. Before I explain how many great things happen without having a cause and effect relationship, let me help you level up a little more. Do ask me something that you think will take your understanding beyond what you have mastered so far,” the sage suggested.

“Master, please tell me if happiness is so simple, then why do we make it so complicated?” inquired the unsure king.

“My child, many people are not really unhappy, but they become unhappy to see others happy. Many people are not really poor, but they become poor to see others rich. People are not unhappy because they lack in wealth, but they

are unhappy because others are happy and rich. People always curse themselves for what they don't have, but appreciate others for what they have," explained the sage.

"It is everywhere, yet hardly ever understood", pronounced the king.

"My son, what do you think - stories are true or false?" the sage Kanav asked.

"So far, I know, they are false," the king responded, his voice confident.

"Dear, a story is half fantasy and half fact," the sage Kanav said.

"I don't understand- half fantasy and half fact. It's confusing," the king questioned.

"See, all the characters in a story are fictitious, but the message they convey is true," the sage Kanav illustrated.

"Oh yes! That's why we listen to them with great interest," the king said approvingly.

"I have another small story. Would you like to listen?" the sage gauged his interest.

"I'm sure it's going to offer a big message too," said the king with a smirk.

"Once upon a time, there was a shrewd person who was extremely envious of his elder brother, who was famous for his honesty and handiwork. The younger brother had an illusion that he was a great devotee of God. One day, God decided to show him his true devotion. God appeared before him and asked him to ask any three wishes, but placed one condition. As per the condition, his elder brother was entitled to get twice of whatever he had to get. The younger brother got perplexed and expressed his resentment to know the reason behind this discrimination. God told him that his elder brother was far ahead in his devotion to HIM that's why he was at liberty to have twice more. Once again, God asked him for three wishes. The younger brother thought for some time and asked for a house for himself. At the blink of his eyes, his wish was granted with a one room-house, and his elder brother got a two room-house. Having seen the two-room house, the younger brother felt very bad. The merciful God again asked for his second wish. This time, he asked for a well to be dug in front of his single-room house. God granted his second wish, and as per the condition, his elder brother received two wells in front of his two-room house. Now, the younger brother asked God to crush one of his eyes."

“How wicked the younger brother was! That’s a great story with a great point. Now, I can see, we are jealous of others because we don’t count the blessings God has bestowed on us,” the king admitted and said.

It was the last day of the king with the sage Kanav. It had been about a month since the king had been learning the timeless wisdom from the sage. Those days were, without a doubt, the most important days of his life. The sage had fundamentally changed his outlook towards life with age-old wisdom and timeless techniques.

“No doubt, I’m happy with you as you have been a sincere learner. Before you leave, I must reveal the final element to live a blessed existence,” offered the sage Kanav.

“My pleasure, I’m dying to hear it, master,” nodded the king.

The sage showered one of the noblest and the most beautiful utterances ever delivered by an earthly man on this earth: “The journey through this greater universe is aimed at helping yourself realise your immortality and eternity. The purpose of life is not eating and drinking, but raising your senses to such a level where your eyes become capable of seeing in darkness; where your ears are capable of hearing in silence.”

“Strikingly plausible, but again difficult to imagine,” remarked the king.

The sage Kanav called him closer, gave him a tight hug and said: “The secret is to manifest the invisible through imagination- here it’s your beloved wife Sarah who has turned into a tree. Son, if you can see her in your dreams, she can see you in reality as well. If you can speak to her, she can listen to you as well. Between both of you, the universe is communicating, but you’re unaware that you’re manifesting it through your emotions and feelings. This moment onward, imagine it with complete awareness” , revealed the sage Kanav.

“Because it’s going to be the gist of all the wisdom I got from you all these days, it’s crucial for me to request you elaborate on how to do it with complete awareness,” requested the king.

“I’m glad you asked me to have more clarity on this. Dear, to my wit, it reflects your distinction in the learning outcome you achieved till now. Here are the cosmic forces at play,” offered the sage Kanav.

“Master, here is the crucial point that lessens the load of labour,” offered the king.

“You wise one, listen to this with all your attention and let it sink into your blood, flesh and bones because it’s going to be the finale,” the sage Kanav set the stage.

“Master, I find no distinction between your words and my keenness,” confirmed the king.

“When you visualize anything and give it all your heart, the emotions send the command which the universe obeys. Your feelings that you release send the vibrations that the universe receives, and the deep faith that you show connects you with the unseen. And then you become the cause, and manifestation will become the effect,” revealed the sage Kanav.

“But why didn’t you explain it all earlier?” asked the king.

“Because at that phase of learning, you had not levelled up your understanding to believe in the unseen,” explained the sage.

“Was it all occurred to me because I gave all my time, energy and emotions to it all?” questioned the king.

“Precisely. Let me put it another way, it’s noteworthy that up to now you attracted not what you wanted, but what you were: lust, greed, power and pride. Do you agree?” asked the sage Kanav.

“Agreed,” replied the king.

“In retrospection, have you ever wondered what happened after you met with Sarah?” asked the sage.

“I don’t know what answer you are expecting from me, master,” the king showed his helplessness.

“When your paths first crossed, how strange it was that you discovered your selfishness mirrored in a loving and gentle soul like Sarah, while she found love in a man as shrewd as you,” remarked the sage.

Undoubtedly, we were quite different from each other,” vented out the king.

“Son, nothing different happened. You both just multiplied what already was lying hidden inside of you. Your royalty and her qualities just fanned the fire, but you never realised how riches she reaped out of her honesty and fidelity,” added the sage.

“My lord, I was very bad in the past, but now my heart and soul have completely changed,” pleaded the king.

“I know that. And for the same change, you can attract not what you were but what you are now- love and purity. Pour your wishes with emotions because when feelings blend in your cravings, the universe responds to materialize the unseen in the physical world. Fill your prayers with faith in the unseen because when logic stops, faith moves the mountains,” established the sage Kanav.

“Master, since I realised my mistake, there has never been a single moment when I haven’t remembered my wife with all my heart,” admitted the king.

“When I ask you to do it with complete awareness, you imagine it with all your emotions, feeling and faith. Emotion is the bridge between seen and unseen. Feelings are the thread connecting the tangible with the intangible, and if you pray with faith, not doubt, it brings shapeless into shape,” emphasized the king.

“It makes a lot of sense. I think this is similar to what some people call a prayer or meditation,” added the king.

“The good news is -you’ve finally found the missing link that kept you entangled for decades. Son, in search of dirt, you put at stake all that you had. To its contrary, you didn’t put at stake even a single thing in search of love and happiness. Sarah was peaceful, submissive and loving. See, how strange it was that you deployed even peace, submission and love in the service of greed and pride. How strange it was that you used your time, wealth and energy so that you could suffer more effectively,” observed the sage.

“It’s painful, master. I abused all my resources until all my senses got numb,” said the king in a throaty voice.

“Son, it’s not going to last long. You brought Sarah into your life, but you could not take into your life what she thought and felt. And for that, you had to experience all this for yourself. All your abilities relied on how much you could feel. It was your capacity to delve deep into experiencing the highest that resided inside of you. Now you’re a pure soul. The ego that did not let you understand her words is now gone. The greed that prevented you from feeling your heart has now vanished. The heaven has opened up out of dark clouds. The air and the water are purer now – the dust has finally settled at the bottom. In the final analysis, you will be able to feel the touch of truth, hear the voice of love, and have the sight to see happiness in every little thing that you do every day,” assured the sage.

“And what about the secret that can turn the tree back into Sarah?” asked the king.

“Wait a beat, I’m almost there,” the sage assured. He asked the king to come closer, poured some words into his ear and then asked him to whisper the same words into his ear to get confirmation. He then demanded more brashly:

“Always remember not to forget that the secret I’ve just shared with you is merely a pair of verses and will be ineffective if not practiced with faith, emotions and feelings. Today, I’m very glad that you stayed with us for over thirty days and are eligible to have this secret mantra that is effective even if it’s practiced in public. I hope it’ll probably help you reunite with your first wife, Sarah providing that you don’t misuse it.”

“Master, I owe you for my new life. You showed me the right path like my own father. Words are failing to show my gratitude for your support. How can I repay you for the love you have showered upon me?” showing his gratitude, the departing king offered. He felt moved, and his motionless eyes broke into tears.

“Just live each of your moment so happily as it turns into one minute; live each of your minute so peacefully as it turns into one day; live each of your day with total contentment as it turns into one month; live each of your month so meaningfully as it turns into one year and finally, live each of your year so lively as it turns into hundred years. My son, this is all what I want from you. Apart from this, I will be glad if you share this wisdom with others to transform their lives. On a practical note, you will at times forget these lessons. Similarly, you can remember anytime you wish. Remember to remember, and the choice is yours,” the sage made his closing comments.

As a token of affection, Sage Kanav placed in the king’s hands the very book they had once searched for together. Although, the king bade a tearful adieu to the sage Kanav, yet he was feeling exhilarated, inspired and, yes, even liberated. On his return journey, when the king got back, across the wooden bridge, he saw his horse grazing. Having seen his master back, the horse plodded towards him. Indeed, the faithful animal had tried hard to climb up the mountain, but, after a series of failures, it preferred to stay there, and waited until his master returned. On the way, the king realised that he had begun to explore the reaches of his human potential. He realised the true callings of his life. The long experience in the Sumer Mountain made him clear how he had been squandering the daily gifts that life had thrown at his every step. The wisdom he had learnt in the mountains allowed him the opportunity to heal the wounds that were keeping him away from living with laughter, serenity and fulfilment he didn’t know he deserved.



The Final Ritual

Kehar Singh - the loyal minister, on the other hand, was sparking revolution among the countrymen. He knocked door to door and held secret meetings with people at different locations. Far away from the city, he built an arsenal in a dense jungle where his intimates forged weapons. The minister enrolled tall and healthy volunteers and raised an army against the anarchy. Every night, he trained his soldiers in warfare so that they could fight the royal army using guerrilla techniques. Knowing the cause for fighting against a force was unavoidable, and to meet this purpose, the minister was determined to address his fellow citizens and brief his fearless soldiers. He had many admirers. Some of his intimates had set the stage for a revolution; only a spark was needed. After making all the necessary preparations, one day, he stood on a high porch, stretched his arms, and vigorously appealed to his men. He delivered a powerful speech that moved people's hearts and stirred their minds. He began saying:

“Dear friends, the time has come to reassess our relationship with our motherland. We must reaffirm our roles as creators and saviours of our future and help future generations stand for a good cause. Don't think as a husband because you may hesitate; don't think as a father because you may feel weak. Instead, ask yourselves a question - what should a free man do? Let everyone know that our love for the service of humanity is much like fire - everyone who follows it will bask around it, and its flames will burn those who will

ignore it. Every person on this land can contribute towards changing the face of this kingdom, because every person is an integral part of it. No one can do everything, but everyone can do something to achieve everything. Let me remind you that our departed king wrote the history of this kingdom with his blood, sweat, and tears. And if our kingdom exists, if this land is like our mother who feeds us with bread and milk, then we must stand together to protect it.”

On the concluding lines, his eyes were moist and motionless, and soon after he proclaimed with a shrill throat which might well have been boldness: “Finally, being a duty-bound soldier, I declare a war against treason and treachery, and appeal to you to join hands to restore our king to his rightful throne. And if fighting for the motherland is treason in your authority, then I’m guilty of the crime and surrender myself before you to hang me right away, because execution kills instantly, but cowardice kills everyday.”

The city-square echoed with wave after wave of uproar under the flying royal flag. Hundreds of soldiers hooted, and thousands of civilians roared in unison to support Kehar Singh. The whole place thundered with immeasurable voices, and countless hands waved in approval for his words.

King Veer reached the sage hut where Saumya was waiting for him. As soon as she saw the king, some heavy, sensational feelings swung like a pendulum deep down her heart. She gladly ran to the front gate and welcomed the returnee with a broad smile. Her eyes over-brimmed with endless questions. She was stunned to see a different person standing before her. His sojourn on the Sumer Mountain had turned him into a different person. He radiated a lineless face with a tall, muscular frame. However, there was something more to that changed person than his youthful good looks. The underlying silence and stillness gave him a divine presence. Nearby the sage hut, the intense shade under the giant pine trees offered an open spot to stroll. They sauntered by, looking as if they had all the time in the world to spare. The miraculous change, especially a deep calmness adorned with an incessant smile on the king’s glowing face, defeated her patience to hold the stream of questions that was flowing through her mind. The younger sister was dying to know what had transformed the skeleton-turned king into a rising sun.

The duty-bound disciple of the sage Kanav began sharing his teacher’s lessons with Saumya. Her questions outnumbered the steps they took at each moment. Something attracted their attention. At a distance, two foxes were scampering about on the velvety grass, while the king spotted a comfortable place to sit and share his newly awakened heart. They kept walking on the

overgrown path, and when the playing animals saw the approaching humans, they ran past the green grove. Before the stretching enclosure ended and dense green foliage started, they sought shelter under an enormous pine tree. With their legs bending, both the king and his first student sat against a round stem, which offered support to their backbones. The king busied himself making nosegays with saffron-coloured flowers that grew wild in the grass. A dark cloud came over the sun, the sky was overcast, and the air grew chilly until the sun appeared again. Saumya pointed to the sky and said excitedly:

“Look at yourself! God is with you after all.”

“My little angel, I actually don’t want to attain God in this world,” the king said with a smile.

“Then what is it in this world that you are looking for?” Saumya asked curiously.

“The ultimate love,” the king declared.

“I wonder! How is it possible that love stands above the Almighty?” Saumya asked incredulously.

“Before I leave this place for a noble cause, I must let you know about a secret which nobody in the heaven above, or on the earth, or in the ocean under the water, will ever reject,” the king announced.

“I’d love to hear that, Sir,” said Saumya.

“Everyone desires love, and without experiencing love, no one can attain the omnipresent God,” the king began to explain. “Just help me get Sarah back in my life, and I’ll find myself beside God. Love is a natural way to reach God. Feelings happen first, and supreme manifestation happens later. Therefore, it is said that ‘Love is God.’ The beginning of everything on this earth starts with love. Love comes first, and food comes later. A mother brings her child up out of love, not out of selfishness to get something in return. And whatever starts with selfishness, becomes extinct. If you ask me, I’ll tell you to forget God, to forget peace and to forget success; I’ll simply suggest you to seek only love. Let it be understood once and for all: give a person happiness, he’ll forget heaven; give a person love, and he will forget God. And remember: in serving others with love, you become the host and God becomes the guest.”

“Superlatively beautiful!” interjected Saumya.

“After spending these days with the sage Kanav, I can manifestly see that something good died inside of me as my work became less of a happiness and more of a trade, because the cause behind my actions was not deeply rooted in

a noble cause. Would that my father had followed the advice of my mother! I wish I had trusted the words of your sister,” reflecting on his life, the king conceded.

“Impressive! How dramatically you’ve changed in a few days!” clapping with both her hands, Saumya applauded.

“Little sister, knowledge and wealth give us power, but striving for a noble cause gives us satisfaction, peace and happiness. It is a breath of fresh air in the time that we spend every moment. I had greed, but all I direly needed was peace; I had lust, but all I direly needed was love,” accepted the king.

“How can I nurture this virtue in my life?” asked Saumya.

“It’s quite simple. Stay focused on your noble purpose, not on the outcome. Wealth is only an instrument, and happiness is the sole purpose that a person mistakenly wants to gain with wealth. Comparatively, wealth is not happiness but an instrument to earn, not to buy happiness. Money is meant for man, but man is not meant for money. And remember, the purpose is invariably bigger than the instrument. You should not sacrifice your noble purpose if you lose the instrument, and if you find the instrument, never cling to it for the rest of your life. People unfortunately, mistake means for purpose; consequently, they mistake wealth for happiness.” the king hit the point.

“How tricky the deception of life is!” interjected Saumya. Listening to the girl, the king couldn’t help his laughter. The loud laugh of the king confirmed his relaxation, his eyes were bright, and his face was glowing radiantly. But in the very next moment, like sunlight dimmed by a passing winter cloud, he fell silent and sank into deep thought.

“What are you thinking?” demanded Saumya compassionately.

“I was just counting the days, months, and years since I had laughed wholeheartedly with your elder sister. The Almighty blessed me with a life worth a hundred years, and Sarah’s love turned my every day into a year, but my greed ruined my thousands of years merely to moments.”

“Do you have any understanding why all that happened?” asked Saumya.

“Now, I’ve got a clear vision to see everything that happened in my life,” replied the king with great confidence.

“May I know what it was that reduced your years to moments?” inquired Saumya.

“To my eyes, today it’s quite clear to see what was never seen before. I’m both happy and fortunate to be the first to share this with you,” the king established prophetically.

“I’m much grateful, Sir” , obliged Saumya.

“We don’t know that we don’t know. Most of the time, we live unconsciously. Everyday there are many things we think we know, but we actually don’t know. It’s much like sleep-walking. Relatively, there are many things we think we don’t do still we repeatedly do,” said the king.

“For instance,” demanded Saumya.

“It’s a widely misunderstood notion that we live every day, but living hardly happens.” The king made a little pause, had a long and deep breath and then began to speak, “You just take joy out of your daily pursuits, and you become a daily wager. You take love out of your life, and you become the tenant of life. When set for a daily routine for days, months and years, you follow a vicious circle and lose the lustre of life. Time spent without investing love and happiness shifts your life from living to earning. Since the beginning, it’s been the greatest deception of the human mind to its body to mistake working for living. They are not the same but are worlds apart. Is there any point to live one day for eighty or ninety years and calling a daily routine a life? People having no hope, no love, no happiness and no true relations die in their twenties or thirties, they are just cremated in their eighties or nineties” .

“Plausible. I can see myself as a beast of burden doing it all. I wish I had heard it twenty years back” , regretted Saumya.

“Don’t regret. Better make sure you don’t have to say so twenty years later” , suggested the king.

“I promise I won’t” , assured Saumya.

“Young lady, I’ve got much to share with you, but we’ve a shortage of time. I’ll share the timeless wisdom of the sages of the Sumer Mountain some other time. For now, I’d like to take your leave” , the king showed his helplessness.

“One more question, please. The last one on lasting happiness,” implored Saumya.

“In today’s world, where everyone is living a fast and frantic life, the one who speaks less but listens more is extraordinary; the one who stops running the never-ending rat race for gaining more and slows down is phenomenal” , suggested the king.

“Each word that you shared is utterly true, but the world turns deaf and blind to the ones who are not outspoken. Those who do not keep up with the pace of society lose the lead in life and are left behind,” countered Saumya.

“What is the rush for? Where to reach? Without love and happiness, there is no progress in life; it’s just living your life on lease. With growing in age and time, we all are progressing towards the cemetery ground,” corrected the king.

“It’s quite serious. Everything looks gloomy,” Saumya shocked.

“It’s not if you bother to make a little pause to observe what is happening to your life. It will turn bright if you slow down and give yourself some time to listen to your heart. If you procure silence, you will come to know that the real question of life starts with happiness and its answer ends with love. In life, if there is anything worth taking and carrying along beyond your cemetery ground, it’s only good feelings that you have while you are alive,” the king said sagely.

“Yes, now it’s bright and uplifting. I’m happy to hear that,” laughed Saumya.

The king promised Saumya to carry all the dry branches of the dead tree to its actual source before the auspicious day. He suggested her to stay at the hut until he somehow managed the dead parts of the flower tree put into its actual source. Before the king’s departure, the sage Kanav had poured a secret mantra into the king’s ear, and now he was impatient to carry out the process to test the new mantra. So, he again went to the spot where the logs of the flower tree were piled. It was quite difficult to steal even a single straw from the timber shed in broad daylight as the place was always crowded with timber merchants. The king intruded into the wooden shed and hid behind a wooden stock that was arranged near the wooden stack of the flower tree. Meanwhile, he overheard a bargain that was just struck between two timber merchants over that pile of the flower tree. That news came as a bolt from the blue and pierced his heart. It was like another stroke to the stricken king. Food lost its taste, and sleep, its comfort. Day after day, he walked five miles to the timber shed where the logs were piled. Sometimes he would sit there for a long time and talk to Sarah- the dry logs. When the wind would howl through the forest, driving the straws before it, he would cry, saying that he could not bear to see the storm beating down upon the parts of her body.

Finally, the king decided to remove all the logs before it was too late. It was the beginning of freezing January in the winter season, so nights had to

be long. Though the winter season was at its peak with biting cold yet the strong-willed king was warm with an undying desire to steal every single log. One day, he felt extremely regretful and ashamed of his ignorance as he realised that he had become a figure of fun in searching for love in adultery, richness in possession, and peace in wars, but ignored the person who was available with all that for him. He was the same aristocratic king, wearing beaded gauntlets and a crown studded with jewels, and now he was walking vigorously without bothering about his rags and dented looks. On his every nocturnal expedition, he would break into the boundary wall and remove a bundle. Long journey through the mist and snow in the dense forest left him lame, yet he stumbled from dawn to dusk and accomplished his job by dint of his untiring valour. Through mist, darkness and snow, the king spent his days hoping and nights labouring. The unstoppable king carried the dry logs through the valley when it was growing dark, and all the birds were flying up and down, returning to their nests. With a bundle of logs on his back, he hustled along the riverside where he saw the large herds which were bidding goodbye to the setting sun. He forgot his struggle when he heard fishermen singing under the lights of lamps hanging from the poles of their boats returning to the shore. And finally, this way, perhaps his stubbornness, more than his hope, removed all the parts of the tree one by one. As per the guidelines, the king restored the tree at its origin with all its dry trunk, twigs and limbs. The auspicious night descended after some days, and the king took Saumya to the glade in Sundervan. At the view of the structure of the tree, Saumya's heart soared sky-high. She had already prepared all the required incense to perform the final ritual. She took a bath in the nearby lake. Daring and determined little younger sister sat before the dead tree. The king whispered the new mantra into her ear and asked her to make all the necessary arrangements to begin the process.

The crucial situation made it necessary for the loyal minister to create a slogan that would change his fate on the battlefield. He was about to lead his soldiers against a powerful enemy whose forces outnumbered his own. Addressing his troops before the ferocious battle, he gave his soldiers a slogan:

“We will do it or die while doing it.”

The word of mouth spread the news of turning a tree into a human being like wildfire, drawing an endless crowd. People from far and wide flocked to Sundervan to witness something otherworldly- an experience never before seen by human eyes. Until that day, it had only been read about, heard, and

imagined in fairy tales. Soon, the same news reached the palace as well. Every little missing part of the secret fell into its proper place for the curious Rudra.

Taking security measures along the first defence line, Kehar Singh himself stood guard while the king protected the younger sister. The loyal minister had already deployed his soldiers, who circled around the massive gathering surrounding the lifeless tree. Rudra led her close aides and elite soldiers to Sundervan and surrounded the gathering. The aggressive soldiers of Kehar Singh gave a tough time to the royal soldiers. In the middle of the battle, Dilawar Singh got some key information through his secret agents and relayed it to Rudra. In spite of going through crucial moments; they had a brief discussion. Under her eyelid, she sneakily directed her gaze to her secret agents and nodded her head, signalling her approval of their secret plan. Rudra and her husband spurred their horses without shouting and left their soldiers fighting behind. With the intention to sabotage the process of transformation, the duo headed towards the focal point of everyone's attention. To the villainess, everyone who was assisted in turning the tree back into an ordinary woman was sure to meet his dreadful destiny that day. Once and for all, the tree had to become her wish-fulfilling tree when it got its life back with all its leaves, flowers, and fruits so that she could exploit the riches it offered to King Veer. Saumya, by her natural instinct, sensed the approaching enemy. Suddenly, she ran to a nearby cedar tree and embraced its rough trunk with her long arms. Then she laid on her front with her ear firmly pressed to the ground. She held her breath and kept lying there like a dead body for some moments. All she heard was a horse galloping in the deepest core of the earth. The younger sister sensed the unavoidable jeopardy that was hovering over the last rite she had just started, but she did not stop her proceedings. The tired king could not sleep since the sage Kanav had given him the secret mantra, so the drowsy lover fell asleep under the lifeless tree. Saumya did not disturb the sleeping king as she was told that human presence was not a threat to the flower tree any more. At midnight, as soon as the blue moon appeared on the horizon, Saumya closed her eyes and silently started reciting the secret mantra. The stars had something to do with auspicious and inauspicious moments. They directed good and bad forces to exercise their control over a certain period of time. The younger sister kept reciting the new secret mantra unless the blue moon disappeared beyond the high mountains. Around the tree, gathered young and old, men and women and rich and poor. Everyone present was excited to witness the historic event, but no one was confident that the secret mantra would work a miracle. Reaching the centre of attraction seemed like a herculean task for Rudra and

her husband. Among the crowd, it was difficult to hide, so they preferred to blend in with the people. They dismounted their horses and moved with evil intention, without attracting observation or appearing out of place. Instead of trying to force a path, they spotted natural gaps that opened up among the onlookers. They maintained natural expressions and avoided eye contact to match the crowd's vibe. After some struggle, they made it to the front line. By that time, they were very close to their target, almost at stone's throw away from stealing the show.

Soon after the younger sister was done with the first phase of her offerings, the sympathy in the hearts of onlookers for her elder sister gave way to their devotion as the dry structure came back to life with its long branches and twigs covered with thick bark. The crowd became lifeless, and everyone stood glued to the tree. Closing her eyes to concentrate more on her recitation, the worshipper increased her pace to accomplish her final phase of the process without any undesired intervention. Before people could doubt their eyes, the tree got its terrestrial existence back again with its natural shape, size and colour. Moss on the tree followed leaves; leaves followed flowers, and in the final stage, the tree was laden with the fruits again. Everyone present there was lost to the world, and then Sarah stood before them, alive. A silence cast its spell all around because something inconceivable had happened. With eyes like marble, people stood still like statues. Rudra and her husband did not know when they were swept away by the miracle before their eyes. Both stood strikingly still, glued to the wonder like children watching their first magic show. All present fell as silent as the forest. Her presence was one of the highest experiences for the pure souls in their human bodies. She was no longer a physical being. Her very existence was the sublimity of love. To every human experience there, her lineless face portrayed a meditating Buddha, her gaze radiated contentment, and her presence exhibited life then and there. Old men afraid of death and young men leading loveless lives gazed at her, feeling as though they were given a new lease of life. After a short while, every witness recovered their senses when they felt a loving melody in their hearts. Among the crowd, most placed their hands on their hearts. People wore long smiles, and their eyes overflowed with awe and wonder. Every part of their bodies seemed to dissolve into the air, just as smoke disappears in the sky, living only a beautiful state of being. Each woman closed her eyes when she sensed something beautiful beneath her bosom; every man witnessing the miracle put his hand on his chest to touch the epicentre of a thin heart-pleasing ache inside that gradually surged and grew more intense until it subdued all other pulses within. Sarah, that time,

came as if an angel had descended from the sky, and everyone began crying out of gratitude for their goddess only who could redeem them from their sins. The massive crowd bowed before her and hit their foreheads with crossed hands in the sincerest greeting they had ever made. To draw her attention to spot him, every man and woman, beating his chest, cried hard: “Look! It’s me; look! It’s me.”

When someone elbowed Rudra to get past her, a hard nudge made her aware of the actual seriousness of the situation. She had already noticed every minor and major detail. The poor and ordinary woman had transformed not only into a human, but also into a goddess of love and sacrifice to everyone present there. When Rudra looked back, her soldiers were bowing to Kehar Singh, whom they regarded more highly than the king. Then, as she looked ahead, everyone was bowing before Sarah. It was hard for the vain villainess to bear the brunt. People started staring at them. They retreated, but in no time, every single eye haunted them. In the silence and stillness, there was uproar in the air. Rudra’s desire for her desire-tree was overpowered by the death-bell lurking overhead. Both Rudra and her accomplice mounted their horses and rode until the ground beneath them ended.

When Sarah looked down to see the king, everyone observed a dead silence to see his reactions. A tear drop fell on the king’s head as he lay fast asleep. Then other drops fell on his head and made it drenched. He woke up with an unusual feeling, as if he had come out of a dark cave after ages. The roots under his head were missing. He was amazed to see the green grass beneath him, birds flying in the sky, and the blue hills across the river, as though he were seeing the earth for the first time. As he rose to his feet, a beautiful light illuminated his face. In confusion, he rubbed his eyes to make his vision clear and was dazzled by what he saw - Sarah, his first wife, standing alive before him and shedding tears. His happiness knew no bounds. For a while, the king could not believe his eyes, and rubbing them again, he mused: “Someone knock me down with a feather. Is she the real one? Or am I having a dream like before?” Then, he touched Sarah on her shoulders, and when his strong fingers felt a human body, he moved his fingers to his left cheek and then to his right to confirm his state of consciousness. One day, Sarah’s transformation into a flowering tree had been even a miracle to him, and that morning, her transformation into a human being was even more miraculous to the same king. Though the poor girl had always been sweet and kind, after her sacrifice, she had become divine, like those rose petals which become more beautiful and sacred after devotees offer them before God. The crazy king tried hard to cry, but his voice failed; only tears succeeded in

rolling down. He stretched his arms to touch her again, but life in him gave up on his human efforts. The king, who had once been greedy, arrogant, and sensual, found himself close to God as he was filled with love, peace and contentment. Seeing her husband helpless, she hugged him tightly, and the king, with all his heart, thanked the universe for listening to his prayers and sending his wife back. To him, the whole world transformed into heaven, and she looked like the most beautiful woman on the earth. Both lovers were sobbing, and tears trickled from their eyes.

“Where have you been for so long, and why didn’t you meet me like this before?” Sarah complained, looking meaningfully into the eyes of the king. Everyone present was earnestly listening to their conversation without any interference.

After a short while, the happy king looked into her eyes and said in a soft and sober voice: “My love, I never truly existed before this moment. I was nowhere. It seems as if I’ve just opened my eyes for the first time, and I see your love prevailing. You made me discover my true existence; your love helped me measure the depth of my heart, and your sacrifice guided me to soar in the heights of my thoughts. Your existence is breath to my heart, and your presence has made my blood run through my veins.”

“What had you been doing all these years, my love?” inquired Sarah.

“What precious thing did I do in life before you?” It was all useless and a waste of the years I lived without you. If I were offered a chance to change one thing in the past, I’d meet you sooner,” regretted the king.

“Will you kiss me on my hand?” Sarah expressed her wish; her soft, wishful eyes glistened with tears.

“No, my sweetheart; I’ll kiss you on your forehead, for I love you,” replied the king, his eyes full of happiness.