

Title

THE STORY OF THE GREAT WAR

Some lessons from the Mahabharata

For the use of Hindu students of the schools of India

By

Annie Besant

Bird Publisher, 2015

About this eBook

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THE STORY OF THE GREAT WAR

Some lessons from the Mahabharata

I Introduction

We are going to study the book called the "Mahabharata", one of the greatest books in the world. To do this usefully, we must begin by seeing what sort of book it is that we are going to study, and what sort of mind we are to bring to the reading of it. For the mind of the student has a great deal to do with understanding the book. If his mind be properly prepared he will understand more easily the book he is going to read, than if he comes to it with his mind in a wrong attitude. If you want to see a thing, you must look at it with your eyes open, not shut. You must turn your face to it, not your back. And so with the mind; its eyes must be opened and its face turned to the book. We must know how to read it, and what principles are taken for granted in it. So we will begin by getting our minds ready, and putting them into the right attitude.

We must find out how to read our book. Then we shall take up Parva after Parva (volume after volume), picking out the most important parts and stringing them into an orderly story. We shall try to get a clear idea of the whole book - what it is meant to teach, the kind of people whose story is told in it, what they were doing and trying to do, how the Gods helped or hindered them, and the working of the Gods in the events that took place.

When you go out into the world you will meet people who do not believe that Gods are shaping events, and guiding the worlds. Those who do not believe in the Hindu religion will also attack your Scriptures, your sacred books. It is therefore part of the duty of a Hindu boy to understand a little about the sacred books of his religion, so that he may not be shaken by what ignorant or foolish people may say against them.

The "Mahabharata" has a high value as literature, that is, when judged from a literary standpoint. Every nation has a literature - books - and some stand high and some low in this respect. They have poems, histories, stories, philosophic and religious books. The place that a nation holds in the mind of the world depends very largely on its books. If a nation produces great books, that nation is looked on as great by other nations. If it has no great books, it is despised. There is no nation which has greater books than the Indian.

You read about the Greeks, with their poet Homer who told the story of a ten-years war, and with many splendid writers of philosophy and history. People now read their books and say, what a great country Greece was to produce such writers. People in the West are beginning to read your books written in Sanskrit, and to say what a great nation the Indians must have been in the old days to write such books. The "Mahabharata" is the greatest poem in the whole world. There is no other poem so splendid as this, so full of what we want to know, and of what it is good for us to study. It is so beautiful in its language and tells so interesting a story, that every Hindu boy should know something about it. It is not good to grow up without knowing a little of this greatest poem in the world, written by and for your own fore-fathers. So we are going to begin its study.

There are three things in which its greatness chiefly consists: (a) Its Ethics; (b) Its Philosophy; (c) Its History.

(a) Ethics means morality dealt with systematically - good conduct, and the rules of good conduct. When you learn arithmetic you are given certain rules, and if you follow the rules and apply them properly, the sum comes out right. So it is with ethics, the science of morality. It deals with right and wrong. What it is good to do and what it is bad to do. There are definite rules. Ethics does not say: "You ought to be good," or "You ought not to be bad;" but it gives rules, showing what is good and what is bad, what you should do and what you should

avoid. All these rules and the principles underlying them are called Ethics,

The "Mahabharata" is great as a teacher of Ethics, showing us how to behave ourselves. It teaches everybody. It teaches children, boys and girls, men and women, and it teaches them what to do at each part of life. It teaches Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, and people without caste' as well, so that all may learn how to behave themselves in everyday life. It teaches how to live in business, in the family, as husband, father and son, wife, mother and daughter. It teaches the common things of everyday life, and does this in a very interesting way by means of stories. Instead of saying: "You ought to tell the truth", it tells us a number of stories about people who told the truth and what happened to them. Instead of saying: "You ought not to tell a lie," it tells us a number of stories about people who told lies and what happened to them. In this way we learn how to apply the rules of conduct, and thus to understand them much better. When one of your professors teaches you a rule in arithmetic, he gives you a number of sums to be worked out by that rule, and that helps you to understand it much better than if you had only the rule and no examples.

Good behaviour is a more important thing than some people think; success, happiness and prosperity depend on it. There is a story about Prahlada, who, by the merit of his good conduct, took from Indra the sovereignty of the three worlds; then Indra, disguising himself as a Brahmana, went and served Prahlada as his disciple, until Prahlada, pleased with him, offered to grant any boon he desired. Then Indra asked that Prahlada would give him his behaviour; and, though filled with fear as to the consequences, Prahlada gave it, bound by his word. As Prahlada sat, brooding over what had occurred, a flame with a shadowy form issued from his body, and when the king asked, " Who art thou? " the form answered: "I am the embodiment of thy Behaviour, cast off by thee. I am going away to dwell with thy devoted disciple the Brahmana." And another form left the king's body, and, when asked, said: "I am Righteousness; I live where Behaviour dwells." And in the same way went forth Truth, Good Deeds, Might and Prosperity; and the last named said: "O Prahlada, it was by thy Behaviour that thou hadst reduced the three worlds to subjection. Knowing this, the chief of the celestials robbed thee of thy Behaviour. Righteousness, Truth, Good Deeds, Might and myself, O thou of great wisdom, all have our root verily in Behaviour." And then Prosperity went whither Behaviour had gone. (Shantii Parva, § 124.)

Another important principle we learn from many stories in the "Mahabharata" is that morality is relative. This means, that what is right conduct for one person is not always right conduct for another, and that duty depends on what a man is. If you are a boy, it is right for you to do what your teacher tells you. If you are a teacher, it is right for you to tell others what to do. If you are a father, it is your duty to train your sons. If you are a son, it is your duty to follow your father's advice. The usefulness of a man depends on his knowing and doing the duties belonging to his place in life. To you, as boys in school and college, it is not of importance to know the duties of the head of a household. It is very important that you should know and do your duties as students.

The "Mahabharata" lays great stress on this relation between conduct and position.

Further, this book gives all that is needed by everybody in the way of moral teaching. Some books are meant only for special people. A very difficult book is only for a learned man; the ignorant man cannot understand it. A law book is useful to a pleader, useless to a peasant. Some books on religion are only for advanced people. But this book is for everybody, and however little a man may know, there is something for him here. It can be read by everybody, and everybody can profit by it. If they read no other book, they can learn from this all they need in religious and moral knowledge.

(b) Philosophy is addressed to the Intellect, the reasoning and judging power in man. It deals with truths about God, man, the world, and the universe, and arranges these things in an intellectual system. The "Mahabharata" teaches a great philosophy, that which underlies all

the Hindu religion. There is one Supreme Being, God, the one Self in every body and in everything. This God is everywhere, in the sun, moon and stars, in Gods and men, in animals, vegetables and minerals. There is one life in all, and that life is God. Therefore all creatures are one; they are not really separate; what is good for one is good for all; what is good for all is good for one. Because of this, we should be kind to all and love all; there is a common life, and we hurt it in ourselves when we hurt it in another. The life in the ox, in the bird, is your life, is yours. You should take care of it and protect it as your own. Let me tell you the story about king Ushinara and the pigeon who sought his protection. The chief duty of a king is to protect all in his kingdom, and two of the Gods, Indra and Agni, wished to test Ushinara in his discharge of this duty. Indra took the form of a hawk, Agni of a pigeon, and the pigeon, chased by the hawk, took refuge in the king's lap. The hawk demanded the pigeon as his lawful prey, but the king refused, on the ground that the hawk had sought his protection. Then the hawk argued that, deprived of food, he would perish, and that in protecting one life the king failed to protect many. The king, refusing to give up the pigeon, offered other food, but 'all was refused, until at last the hawk offered to give up his claim if the king would give of his own flesh as much as equalled the weight of the pigeon. The king gladly consented, and placed a piece of his own flesh in the balance against the weight of the pigeon; but the scale rose. So he cut off piece after piece, and still the pigeon was the heavier, until at last he placed his own mangled figure in the scale. Then the Gods revealed themselves, and blessed the king who saved a suppliant at the cost of his own flesh. (Vana Parva, § 130, 131.)

(c) The "Mahabharata" is a history, although it is more than a history. This big book in eighteen volumes tells a story about things that really occurred some five thousand years ago. Five thousand years ago Shri Krishna, the Blessed Lord, put off His mortal body. Then began the Kali Yuga. The story told in this book ends soon after He left the earth. That is the first thing to understand. This is not a fairy-tale, but a history. The mighty Kshatriya caste, the warrior-caste of India, was for the most part destroyed in the Great War. Her soldiers that kept her safe, and made an iron wall around her, were slain in this war, and that caste ceased to exist as a powerful order, and was carried on only by scattered families. Its destruction opened the way for India's conquest and fall.

The Kali Yuga is a time in which people lose belief in the Gods and their work, and become more and more the servants of outer things. They believe in the things that they can see, hear, touch, taste or smell - the things your bodily senses tell you about. You believe in a table, because you can see and touch it. You believe in a house, a person, the objects round you, because you can see and handle them. But many people do not believe in things that they cannot see or touch, in Gods that are round us all the time, in the Supreme Self whose Life is our life. Most people here are half-way. They will not say they do not believe in the Gods, but their lives show that they do not believe in them. The things that are done by the Gods every day among us are not seen as their work. You talk of nature, of the sun rising, the moon shining, the water running, the fire burning. These things are matters of course. But in every one of them a God is at work. When the fire burns - on the hearth, in the jungle - a God is at work, and the fire is his way of showing himself. The fire is not a mere chemical thing, but it is the way the God Agni has of showing himself down here. In other worlds he shews himself in other ways, but here as fire. When the water of Ganga rises, a Goddess is there; in Svarga she shows herself differently, but here as a rushing stream. If you cannot believe this, the "Mahabharata" will always puzzle you; for it relates things as they really happened, instead of in the way in which they look to our eyes. Instead of saying the fire burned the forest of Khandava, it says Agni burned it. It talks always of what the Gods are doing, and people who do not believe in the Gods think that that is a fanciful way of putting things. Few people believe that such things happen now, and yet they do happen as much as ever they did. In other ages the God would often shew himself at work and let people see him. Now the Gods

hide themselves, because the people have become materialistic and do not care for them. Now and then a person who is pure and loving sees them as in the old days, and such a person believes in a book like this, and its stories do not seem strange to him.

Men now often speak of the invisible side of nature as "supernatural." That is a mistake. The greater part of nature is made up of the worlds and the beings that are invisible to our physical senses, but who move this lower world.

In the old days the Gods taught men, sometimes directly, sometimes through great men called Sages, or Rishis. Mantras - that is, a word, or a sentence, of which the sound has power in the invisible worlds-were given to men to use, and great effects were produced by these mantras. Men were taught how to think, so that their thought had power. We read how a man thought of a God, and the God appeared. How he thought of a weapon, and the weapon came to him. Thought has the same power now, and scientific men are beginning to make experiments with it. Everyone could not use it in the old days to call a God, or a weapon, but only great men could use it, who had been taught by the Gods. Now-a-days some Yogis can use thought in this way, for the Gods have not changed, nor have they changed their laws; it is only men who have grown weak, because they are unbelieving.

The Gods guide the world. As a coachman guides his horses, so the Gods guide the world. As you might sit in a carriage and pull the reins this way and that, the horses obediently moving the carriage, so the Gods sit over the world and pull the forces one way or the other, and then the world is moved. They are always trying to drive the world the best way. The world is making a long journey, and there are many side-roads off the main track. We call the main track "evolution", the way of the world from the beginning to the end of it. If you go from here (Benares) to Allahabad, you pass many side-roads, but going along the trunk road you reach Allahabad in the shortest time. The Gods drive the world along the trunk road, evolution, but men often want to turn down side-roads that look pleasant. But the Gods have dug ditches and put up sign-posts along the main road, and, when men wilfully try to leave it, they fall into the ditches and knock up against the posts, and then we say they are suffering pain and trouble. But these pains and troubles are the very best things that can happen to them, for if the Gods had not made the wrong ways full of pain, men would wander away and lose themselves.

Sometimes a whole nation goes wrong. Then the Gods place in its way a great war, or a famine, or a plague. The nation is going wrong and must be driven right, or has gone wrong and must suffer, so as not to go wrong again. And the Great War, the story of which we are going to study, was brought about by the Gods, because it was necessary for the evolution of the nation. We see many men and animals killed in a war, and say: "How terrible! how shocking." But men and animals are only killed when the bodies they are in are of no more use: when a man cannot do any more in a particular body the Gods strike it away, so that the man may have a better one. We call this "death". The body is like a coat that we wear, and when we outgrow it, it is torn up. Instead of regarding a God as cruel when he strikes away a body, you should think of him as kind, setting the man free to grow. Many of the men who were killed in this Great War went from their bodies to sit in Svarga with the Gods.

The work of the Gods is to carry out the law of the Supreme Lord, or Ishwara, who is manifested to us as a Trinity, Mahadeva, Vishnu and Brahma. This law is that the universe shall evolve into an image of God, and the Gods work for that end, and not for furthering separate personal aims. This makes their duties different from the duties of men. They have to test people; so they put difficulties and temptations and trials in their way, in order that men may grow strong, and learn wisdom and gain virtue. In this work they must often do things that men ought not to do, and they are not examples for men in conduct, any more than a king, or judge, or magistrate, in punishing a man who has committed a crime, is an example that you are to follow. If a man steals your shoes, the magistrate puts him in prison for breaking

the law, though he has stolen nothing from the magistrate and the magistrate is not angry. But if you, from whom he has stolen the shoes, get angry and lock him up and keep him as a prisoner, you would be doing wrong. When you are older you will learn that all things that are wrong are wrong because they are done from what is called "a personal motive" - that is, from thinking and acting in your own way to please, yourself, instead of doing the will of God.

We also learn from the "Mahabharata" that when a nation goes wrong, it suffers. This is what we call a moral law, and this law is worked out by the Gods. If India is to become rich, strong and free, as she once was, it can only be by Indians becoming pure and religious and good. There is no other way. For the Gods rule the world, and they make national greatness the reward of doing right, because that is the law. If people do wrong, the great nation becomes small, and the small nation that does right grows great.

When the time comes for a vast change in the life of a nation - as it came in India 5,000 years ago great men are born into that nation. Some of these men are great in goodness, some are great in evil - strong, bad, men. These men are born because they are wanted in the nation, and they are men who have prepared themselves in past lives for important work. These great men, good and bad, are not here for the first time. In former lives the good ones had grown good and strong, till they were fit to be born at a critical time to work with 'the Gods. Others, the bad ones, had been selfish, cruel, revengeful, and they had fitted themselves to resist the good law of evolution, and by their resistance to bring on troubles that would teach the nation it was going wrong. Both the good and the bad men had made their own fates, one set to work with the Gods, the other set to work against them. There is no favoritism on the part of the Gods, but suitable men are guided to the places they have earned, and are born in them.

We are told in the *Adi Parva*, the first volume, of the "Mahabharata", about the preparations that were made in Svarga for the Great War. The Gods consulted, and decided that certain men should be born as leaders; four men were chosen, who in the past had filled the office of king of the Gods; the king of the Gods is called Indra, and these four men had all been Indras. The present Indra had one day behaved proudly, and had been condemned by Mahadeva to lose his power for awhile. "Those that are of disposition like thine," said Mahadeva, "never obtain my grace." And He went on to say that he and four other Indras should be born as men, and perform a certain task, and then return to Svarga. Then four of these Indras prayed that they might have divine fathers when they were born of women, and the fifth Indra said that he would create from himself the fifth man who was to fulfil the task. To this Mahadeva agreed. (*Adi Parva*, § 199.) When the time came, the four Indras were born as Yudhisthira, and Bhima, and the twins Nakula and Sahadeva, the Gods Dharma (Justice), Vayu (wind), and the twin Ashvins being their fathers; and Arjuna - who had been Nara, a great Rishi - was born as the son of the present Indra. And these were the five mighty warriors whose deeds we are going to study, and who were the conquerors in the Great War.

And as a new age was to begin after the war, even the great God Vishnu Himself took Avatara as Shri Krishna, accompanied by Shesha, the eternal serpent, as His brother Balarama. (*Adi Parva*, § 199.) An Avatara is a special manifestation of the Supreme Being in a physical form, appearing in order to destroy evil, when it has become so strong that it threatens to stop evolution.

The "Mahabharata" contains the story of a race descended from a powerful king named Bharata. He was the son of Dushyanta and Shakuntala, whose story you must read some day. ("Shakuntala," a drama by Kalidasa.) Bharata means the descendants of Bharata, and maha means great. So our book is "The great story of the descendants of Bharata". One of these descendants was named Kuru, and he was a king who was also an ascetic. He carried out many austere practices in a field that was named after him Kurukshetra, or the field of Kuru, and it was on that field that the great battle took place. Among the descendants of Kuru were three brothers : the blind king Dhritarashtra, whose sons fought on the wrong side in the Great

War; Pandu, the nominal father of the five princes who fought on the right side; and Vidura, a very-wise and just man, holding high office in the kingdom. The story of the lives and deeds of these men is told in this great poem of eighteen volumes, or Parvas. Each Parva takes its name from the part of the story told in it.

This poem was recited to a number of ascetics, resting themselves in the forest of Naimisha, by Agrashrava, the son of Lomaharshana, surnamed Sauti. One of these Rishis asked him whence he had come, and he answered that he had come from attending a great sacrifice, the Snake-Sacrifice of king Janamejaya. There he had heard recited the poem called the "Mahabharata," and he had himself learned it. It was composed by a famous Sage, named Krishna Dvaipayana Veda Vyasa - Krishna, because he was so dark; Dvaipayana, because he was born on an island; Veda Vyasa, because he had divided, i. e. compiled and arranged, the Vedas. The Rishis asked Sauti to recite the poem to them, and he did so. That is the story which we shall begin to study in the next chapter.

II The Youth of the Heroes - Adi Parva

We must now begin our story of the Great War by studying some of the events recorded in the Adi Parva, the first volume, of the "Mahabharata". We shall learn something about the youth of the heroes of the story, and something about their parents, their circumstances and their education. Further we shall see, in studying these, the working of some of the great principles spoken of in the Introduction.

Bhishma is the greatest and most heroic figure in this story; he is one of the noblest men of the Aryan race, a perfect example of conduct for men living in the world. He never falls into any of the sins into which most men fall; all through his life he does the right thing at the right time; he never loses his balance; he is never exaggerated; he keeps on the middle line of duty, neither leaning to the right nor to the left. He is a teacher and a counsellor; he is perfect as son, as guardian, as statesman. In every part of his life he does his duty.

Long before Bhishma was born, there was a great festival among the Gods, and a king named Mahabhisha, who had reached heaven by his sacrifices, was present at this festival. Ganga, the queen of rivers, was also there, and the wind blew aside her clothes, exposing her bosom; the Gods bent their heads, so that she might not feel confused, but not so king Mahabhisha. Then Brahma pronounced a curse on the king; that is, He foretold the suffering which he had brought on himself in the future by his wrong thought and act. The future results of our thoughts and acts are called our "karma", and a "curse" from a God or a Rishi is a foretelling of this karma. This king having acted against modesty, Brahma said that he must be re-born on earth instead of remaining in heaven; " Ganga too will be born in the world of men and will inflict injuries on thee. But when thy anger is provoked, then thou shalt be freed from my curse."

The time came for the rebirth of Mahabhisha, and he was born as the son of Pratipa, a very pious king. One day, when the latter was engaged in ascetic practices, the Goddess Ganga took the form of a lovely maiden, and, seating herself on his lap, begged him to marry her. King Pratipa refused, but promised to marry her to his son. She accepted his offer, but warned him that his son would not be able to judge whether her acts were proper or improper. The king then, with his wife, performed austerities (underwent many bodily hardships), that he might have a noble son, and Mahabhisha took birth as his child, being named Shantanu, the son of the Peaceful, because his father had controlled his passions. When Shantanu had grown

into a youth, his father said to him that a celestial maiden had once come to him, and that she would seek Shantanu as her husband; when she comes, said the father, "accept her as thy wife. And, O sinless one, judge not of the propriety of anything she does, and ask not who she is, or whose, or whence, but accept her as thy wife at my command." Then Shantanu was crowned king by his father - who took to the ascetic life - and he reigned happily. One day, wandering along the banks of Ganga, he saw a lovely maiden, and, falling in love with her, begged her to become his wife. The maiden, who was none other than the Goddess Ganga herself, consented to marry him, but told him that he must never interfere with her actions: "Nor must thou ever address me unkindly. As long as thou shalt behave kindly, I promise to live with thee. But I shall certainly leave thee the moment thou interferest with me, or speakest to me an unkind word." The king answered, "Be it so," and they were married, and lived very happily together. Presently a child was born, and the queen took the child and threw it into the river, saying, "This is for thy good." The same thing happened with the second child, and with the third and fourth, up to the seventh. And the poor king grew very troubled and unhappy. He "could not approve of such conduct," says the story-teller. "But he said not a word, lest his wife should leave him. But when the eighth child was born, and his wife, as before, was about to throw it smilingly into the river, the king, with a sorrowful countenance, and desirous of saving it from destruction, addressed her and said: "Slay it not! who art thou and whose? why dost thou slay thine own children? Murderess of thy sons, the load of thy sins is great."

Poor king Shantanu! the trial was a very severe one, and he forgot his father's command. His wife answered: "I shall not slay this child of thine. But according to our agreement, the period of my stay with thee is at an end. I am Ganga, the daughter of Jahnu." Then she explained to him that the eight Vasus, celestial beings, had, a long time before, stolen away from a great Rishi the cow of plenty, Nandini, one of them, named Dyau, being the actual thief. The Rishi was very displeased, and declared that the Vasus should be born upon earth, as the result of their sin. They begged his pardon very humbly, so the Rishi said that they should be set free again from human life within a year of their births, with the exception of Dyau, who, "for his sinful act, shall have to dwell on earth for a long time." Then the Vasus went to Ganga, and begged her, when she became a woman, to let them be born as her children, praying her to throw them into the water as soon as they were born, and thus to free them from the physical body of punishment. "I did as they desired," concluded the Goddess, "in order to free them from their earthly life. And, O best of kings, because of the Rishi's curse, this one only, Dyau himself, is to live for some time on earth." Then the Goddess disappeared, taking with her the eighth child, the Vasu Dyau, afterwards named Devavrata. (§ 96-99.)

People are often very much afraid of dying. But you see when a God is born here, he feels as if he were put into prison, and looks on death as a friend who opens the gate of the prison. Down here we rejoice when a child is born, and we weep when a person dies. It is as if people made a festival when a friend is put into jail, and wept when he is set free. In every death, it is a God who sets free the soul, just as Ganga set free the Vasus. Only, this story shows us the Gods at work, so that we may learn to see their kind hands, in all the things that make us sorry because we do not understand.

Ganga took away her son, as we have seen, but, when he had grown to be a youth, she brought him to his father, trained in knowledge and the use of arms; and in "all branches of learning, spiritual and worldly, his skill was very great. His strength and energy were extraordinary." And his filial piety was as great as his knowledge. This he shewed in a very striking way. One day his father was wandering on the banks of the Yamuna, and saw a lovely

girl whom he desired to make his wife. She was only a fisherman's daughter, but the fisherman would not give her to the king unless he would promise that the son born of her should inherit the throne. This the king would not do, as he would not put aside the son he already had, and he returned home very sad. Devavrata lovingly enquired the reason for his father's grief, and as his father would not tell him, he went for advice to an old minister, devoted to the king. This minister told him about the fisherman's daughter, and Devavrata went, with a noble escort of warrior chiefs, to ask the fisherman to give his daughter as wife to the king. The fisherman said that he could not give the maiden Satyawati to the king, because the king had a son who would be the rival of any son of Satyawati. Then Devavrata said before all the chiefs: "Listen to my vow. I will do all you wish. The son that may be born of this maiden shall be our king." Thus he threw away the crown, that he might gratify his father's wish. Still the fisherman was not content, but said that while he felt sure Devavrata would keep his promise, he had some doubts whether his children would keep it as well. Then spoke out Devavrata: "I have first relinquished my right to the throne. I shall now settle the question of my children. O fisherman! from this day I adopt the vow of Brahmacharya (celibacy). Though I die sonless, I shall yet attain to regions of perpetual bliss in heaven." Then flowers rained down from the sky on the son who sacrificed himself to please his father, and divine voices cried out: "This is Bhishma!" (the Terrible.) Yes! this was Bhishma, beginning a stainless life of duty by renouncing what men hold most dear. And turning to the maiden, he said sweetly: "O mother, ascend this chariot and let us go home." So he brought her to his father, who blessed him, saying: "Death shall never come to thee as long as thou desirest to live. Truly, death shall only approach thee, O sinless one, having first obtained thy leave." (§ 100.)

King Shantanu died, leaving two sons, and Bhishma became their protector, placing the elder, Chitrangada, on the throne. Chitrangada fell in battle, and his younger brother Vichitravirya, still a youth, became king, and it was necessary to find him a wife. At that time, king's daughters were often won in marriage at what was called a Svayamvara, a "self-choice." Many kings assembled and took part in games, feats of strength, and fights, and, out of them all, the princess chose as her husband the one who was most successful and pleased her best. She showed her choice by throwing a garland of flowers round the neck of the chosen. Vichitravirya, being only a youth, could not enter into such a contest, so Bhishma, who was ruling the kingdom under the queen-mother, went in his stead. There were three princesses, sisters, and Bhishma quietly took them up on his chariot, and, addressing all the kings, reminded them of the custom that a maiden, at a Svayamvara, might be carried off by force, the captor fighting all his rivals for her possession. "Ye monarchs! I bear away these maidens by force. Strive ye, to the best of your might, to vanquish me or be vanquished!" A great fight followed, in which Bhishma, single-handed, fought all the assembled kings and carried off the maidens in triumph, bringing "the daughters of the king of Kashi unto the Kurus as tenderly as if they were his daughters-in-law, or younger sisters, or daughters." The eldest princess, however, told him that in her heart she had chosen another king as her husband, and he yielded to her wish, marrying the two other sisters, Ambika and Ambalika, to his young brother. The youth, however, died, leaving no children, and that greatest of misfortunes to a kingly race, the extinction of the family, threatened the line of Shantanu. (§ 102.)

Satyavati, broken-hearted, implored Bhishma to take the throne and to marry the widowed princesses. Friends and relatives begged him to do as the queen wished, and again throne and family joys were placed within his reach. Only his vow stood between him and the crown with wedded happiness. Only his vow! But to Bhishma truth was more than anything the

world could give. Read his answer, all Hindu boys, that you may understand what kind of men once made India great, "O mother I what thou sayest is certainly sanctioned by virtue. But thou knowest what my vow is in the matter of begetting children. Thou knowest also all that happened in connection with thy dower. O Satyavati! I repeat the pledge I once gave. I would renounce the three worlds, the empire of heaven, or anything that may be greater than that, but truth I will never renounce. Earth may renounce its scent, water may renounce its moisture, light may renounce its power of showing forms, the air may renounce its perceptibility to touch, the sun may renounce his glory, fire his heat, the moon his cool rays, space its capacity to generate sound, the slayer of Vitra his prowess, the God of justice his impartiality, but I renounce not truth!"

The weeping Satyavati still urged her plea, but Bhishma could not be moved. "O Queen! take not thine eyes from virtue. Oh! destroy us not. Breach of truth in a Kshatriya is never applauded in our religious books. I shall soon tell thee, O Queen, what is the established Kshatriya usage to which recourse may be had to prevent Shantanu's line from becoming extinct upon earth. Hearing me, reflect on what should be done, consulting learned priests and those that are acquainted with practices allowable in times of emergency and distress, forgetting not at the same time what is the ordinary course of social conduct." (§ 103.)

Bhishma then advised that some great Rishi should be asked to be the father of children who, being borne by the two widows, would be regarded as the sons of the dead man. Satyavati told him that there was a Rishi, who had been born of her with Parashara as his father, and who, having been a mighty ascetic in the past, had gone away with his father immediately after his rebirth. This was Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa. He had promised his mother that he would come to her if she thought of him when she was in a difficulty. "I will now recollect him, if thou, O Bhishma of mighty arms, so desirest." She then thought of the Rishi, and, on his coming, the difficulty was laid before him and his help was asked. He consented, and even gave up the year of purification that he at first imposed on the princesses, saying: "If I am to give unto my brother children so unseasonably, then let the ladies bear my ugliness. That of itself shall, in their case, be the austerest of penances." With great difficulty Satyavati won her daughters-in-law to consent, for the sake of the family, to receive the great Rishi. But the elder princess, "seeing his dark visage, his matted locks of copper hue, his blazing eyes, his grim beard, closed her eyes in fear," and would not open them while he was there. Hence she drew to her, for her son, a soul whose karma it was to live in a blind body, and Vyasa foretold that her son would be blind. This child was Dhritarashtra, who became the blind king of the Kurus. The second princess, Ambalika, "beholding the Rishi, became pale with fear;" hence her son, born with a pale complexion, was named Pandu, the Pale; he was the father of the famous Pandavas, the five heroic brothers who were the conquerors in the Great War. A third child was desired by the queen, but Ambika refused to do her mother-in-law's bidding, and sent her maid, a Shudra woman, to the Rishi instead; she, thinking of his spiritual greatness instead of his ugly body, behaved to him with deep respect and sweetness, and the Rishi blessed her, and the God of Justice was born to her as a son, and was named Vidura. These were the three brothers, Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidura V. ho played so prominent a part in the Great War - two of them being the fathers of the opposed princes, and Vidura, the third, the wise councillor of the blind king. (§ 104-106.)

Bhishma took charge of the three boys and brought them up as if they were his own children. "And the children, having passed through the usual rites of their order, devoted themselves to vows and study. And they grew up into fine youths, skilled in the Vedas and in all athletic sports. And they became well skilled in exercises of the bow, in horsemanship, in