KARNA AND KUNTI

The Pandava Queen Kunti before marriage had a son, Karna, who, in manhood, became the commander of the Kaurava host. To hide her shame she abandoned him at birth, and a charioteer, Adhiratha, brought him up as his son.

Karna. I am Karna, the son of the charioteer, Adhiratha, and I sit here by the bank of holy Ganges to worship the setting sun. Tell me who you are.

Kunti. I am the woman who first made you acquainted with that light you are worshipping.

Karna. I do not understand: but your eyes melt my heart as the kiss of the morning sun melts the snow on a mountain-top, and your voice rouses a blind sadness within me of which the cause may well lie beyond the reach of my earliest memory. Tell me, strange woman, what mystery binds my birth to you?

Kunti. Patience, my son. I will answer when the lids of darkness come down over the prying eyes of day. In the meanwhile, know that I am Kunti.

Karna. Kunti! The mother of Arjuna?

Kunti. Yes, indeed, the mother of Arjuna, your antagonist. But do not, therefore, hate me. I still remember the day of the trial of arms in Hastina when you, an unknown boy, boldly stepped into the arena, like the first ray of dawn among the stars of night. Ah! who was that unhappy woman whose eyes kissed your bare, slim body through tears that blessed you, where she sat among the women of the royal household behind
the arras? Why, the mother of Arjuna! Then the
Brahmift, master of arms, stepped forth and said, "No
youth of mean birth may challenge Arjuna to a trial of
strength." You stood speechless, like a thunder-cloud
at sunset flashing with an agony of suppressed light. But
who was the woman whose heart caught fire from your
shame and anger, and flared up in silence? The mother
of Arjuna! Praised be Duryodhana, who perceived your
worth, and then and there crowned you King of Anga,
thus winning the Kauravas a champion. Overwhelmed
at this good fortune, Adhiratha, the charioteer, broke
through the crowd; you instantly rushed to him and laid
your crown at his feet amid the jeering laughter of the
Pandavas and their friends. But there was one woman
of the Pandava house whose heart glowed with joy at
the heroic pride of such humility;—even the mother of
Arjuna!

Karna. But what brings you here alone, Mother of
kings?

Kunti. I have a boon to crave.

Karna. Command me, and whatever manhood and
my honour as a Kshatriya permit shall be offered at your'
feet.

Kunti. I have come to take you.

Karna. Where?

Kunti. To my breast thirsting for your love, my son.

Karna. Fortunate mother of five brave kings, where
can you find place for me, a small chieftain of lowly
descent?

Kunti. Your place is before all my other sons.

Karna. But what right have I to take it?

Kunti. Your own God-given right to your mother's
love.
• Karna. The gloom of evening spreads over the earth, silence rests on the water, and your voice leads me back to some primal world of infancy lost in twilit consciousness. However, whether this be dream, or fragment of forgotten reality, come near and place your right hand on my forehead. Rumour runs that I was deserted by my mother. Many a night she has come to me in my slumber, but when I cried, "Open your veil, show me your face!" her figure always vanished. Has this same dream come this evening while I wake? See, yonder the lamps are lighted in your son's tents across the river; and on this side behold the tent-domes of my Kauravas, like the suspended waves of a spell-arrested storm at sea. Before the din of to-morrow's battle, in the awful hush of this field where it must be fought, why should the voice of the mother of my opponent, Arjuna, bring me a message of forgotten motherhood? and why should my name take such music from her tongue as to draw my heart out to him and his brothers?

Kunti. Then delay not, my son, come with me!

Karna. Yes, I will come and never ask question, never doubt. My soul responds to your call; and the struggle for victory and fame and the rage of hatred have suddenly become untrue to me, as the delirious dream of a night in the serenity of the dawn. Tell me whither you mean to lead?

Kunti. To the other bank of the river, where those lamps burn across the ghastly pallor of the sands.

Karna. Am I there to find my lost mother for ever?

Kunti. O my son!

Karna. Then why did you banish me—a castaway up-rooted from my ancestral soil, adrift in a homeless current of indignity? Why set a bottomless chasm
between Arjuna and myself, turning the natural attachment of kinship to the dread attraction of hate? You remain speechless. Your shame permeates the vast darkness and sends invisible shivers through my limbs. Leave my question unanswered! Never explain to me what made you rob your son of his mother’s love! Only tell me why you have come to-day to call me back to the ruins of a heaven wrecked by your own hands?

Kunti. I am dogged by a curse more deadly than your reproaches: for, though surrounded by five sons, my heart shrivels like that of a woman deprived of her children. Through the great rent that yawned for my deserted first-born, all my life’s pleasures have run to waste. On that accursed day when I belied my motherhood you could not utter a word; to-day your recreant mother implores you for generous words. Let your forgiveness burn her heart like fire and consume its sin.

Karna. Mother, accept my tears!

Kunti. I did not come with the hope of winning you back to my arms, but with that of restoring your rights to you. Come and receive, as a king’s son, your due among your brothers.

Karna. I am more truly the son of a charioteer, and do not covet the glory of greater parentage.

Kunti. Be that as it may, come and win back the kingdom which is yours by right!

Karna. Must you, who once refused me a mother’s love, tempt me with a kingdom? The quick bond of kindred which you severed at its root is dead, and can never grow again. Shame were mine should I hasten to call the mother of kings mother, and abandon my mother in the charioteer’s house!

Kunti. You are great, my son! How God’s punish-
ment invisibly grows from a tiny seed to a giant life! The helpless babe disowned by his mother comes back a man through the dark maze of events to smite his brothers!

Karna. Mother, have no fear! I know for certain that victory awaits the Pandavas. Peaceful and still though this night be, my heart is full of the music of a hopeless venture and baffled end. Ask me not to leave those who are doomed to defeat. Let the Pandavas win the throne, since they must: I remain with the desperate and forlorn. On the night of my birth you left me naked and unnamed to disgrace: leave me once again without pity to the calm expectation of defeat and death!