

## CHAPTER 2

### DURYODHANA REMEMBERS

On the same Ashtami night of star Makha, elsewhere in Hastinavathi, Duryodhana is grossly absorbed in endless disturbing thoughts. Past memories come thick, crowding his clouded mind endlessly and the prince is closely checking where his reckonings went wrong and why. He counts the strength of his army again and again for comfort that is now eluding him. He tries to analyse the mind conditions of Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Karna and others, to see how far he can depend on them for their hearty cooperation in the coming war. Who should command his combined forces as the joint general, is a question that is agitating his mind. It was not easy to decide by any means. Seniority, caste, loyalty, prowess, youthfulness, skill were all involved in this most tangled problem. Unanimity was most important, he knew. But consensus was difficult for various reasons. His own choice was difficult without convincing advice. Counsel with Karna, Shakuni and trusted brother Dussahasana had ended yielding no result. He was now alone on his peace-less bed rolling restlessly, and often getting up briskly to walk to and fro to the rhythm of his beating heart. Bodyguards waited outside the bolted doors. Two of his trusted servants lay hid behind the massive pillars of the royal bedroom awaiting unexpected

errands at ungodly hours of haste; he did not notice them; nor did they rest in spite of bouts of sleep in patterns of disturbance by soft feet strolling near about, or rumblings in the soft bed in that stillness of night.



It was a right step by the father to have sent Sanjaya as the royal ambassador to the Pandavas. The message sent was also clear and flawless, clever and crisp - that the cousins should better retire to the forests than wage a war with heavy odds at stake and powerful and invincible warriors on the opposite side. Was not the forest their birthplace, and where they sought comfort in difficult times, again and again? Undisturbed life there was more peaceful and without the expenses of life and blood of elders like Bhishma and Drona, even if these could be eliminated somehow by that cranky, crafty Krishna, at the end of a comfortless war, peace and justice being eternally elusive and ephemeral. Wah! What a diplomatic stroke by the blind father! Duryodhana laughed with a mild body-vibration to seek small comfort. But the reply that Sanjaya had carried back was a boomerang, piercing his brittle heart with sharp words by Krishna, so unexpectedly and firmly, shattering hopes of any easy victory even in that strong moment, as he had thought. He had the numbers, all right. He was sure of the help of the world's mightiest warriors, including Shalya, the maternal uncle of the Pandavas, - all right. But of their single-pointed unity? Of their strict loyalty? Of their integrity? He was not certain. His was a divided camp - Bhishma and Karna did not like each others. Drona's contempt for Karna was well known. Karna's anti-Brahminism had acquired notorious

proportions during the siege of Virata's capital, so as to receive powerful oral snubs from even an otherwise mild mannered Ashvatthama. Kripa's mind was unfathomable, in his endless silence that had no meaning in wartimes and in Duryodhana's impatience.

Sanjaya was expected to break the unity of the five brothers by the message he had taken, if all had gone rightly. The information was that the Pandavas, at the end of their exile, open and incognito, had quarreled amongst themselves all through in two or three groups. Bhima and Draupadi on one side, Yudhishtira and Arjuna on the other side and the twins neutral in this wordy feud. That Krishna of inconceivable cunning had spoilt all his expectations by uniting them for an uncertain war as the only final, irrevocable final settlement. Did he not see which way lay might and usage? Why should he have interfered in a family feud where he had no concern? What were his words? "When Draupadi cried for help in that helpless state seeking succour, praying to me by various names like Govinda, Dvarakavasin and so on, I was unable to avoid that situation, but could only help her regain her honour indirectly; that debt even now remains still in my mind without being discharged with grown up compound interest, as it were!"<sup>1</sup>. Why should he view it so, when I had done him no personal harm or crossed his self-interests? If only that cunning, clever, crooked, crafty Krishna was on his own side! Ah!! He is a traitor to Yayati's race! It was his message back that had now destroyed even the little unity that had prevailed in his

<sup>1</sup> *Govindeti Yadacrandat Krishna Maam duravasinam |  
Rinam pravridham iva me hridayaannaapasarpati ||*



camp till now. Father Dhritarashtra had been felled with one masterstroke of this Krishna! Now this unfirm-minded father and this Krishna were his two undisposable challenges, instead of one only, as earlier. Krishna is for mischief, surely. Father means well, but dares not antagonise Krishna or Bhishma; none can predict how he will ruin all the plans of Shakuni, at the nick of time, in this fickle condition. There is that Vidura, son of a bitch, to add to the accruing difficulties, passing on unwanted advice at odd moments to weaken the resolve of the group-of-four, without being a camp-follower, as he ought to, being in the pay-roll of the King. He is like a cancerous growth from within his own body.

Now one good thing is that he has the might of the Eleven Divisions of army to his back, in spite of all these shortcomings. What mighty rulers, and what strategists! Those bastards who had paid taxes to Bhima and Arjuna, being chicken-hearted then, and itching for revenge now, were all in his own basket, thanks to the strategies of Shakuni, his uncle! There is no fear of a break up of their loyalties now. Each of them has a grouse against the Pandavas or their mentor Krishna, for one reason or another - first that Bhagadatta of Pragjyotishapura, from the 'eastern most city to receive the sun-rays, as he rises' whose father Naraka was slain by this Krishna in a treacherous and humiliating manner. His elephants and his 'yellow'<sup>2</sup> army - who could defeat them now? Next, there is Bhurishravas, with another division, protected by Tapas, penance-power, in addition

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<sup>2</sup> Yellow, because Bhagadatta was a 'Chinese' and his army had soldiers of that skin-hue; China was part of Bharata Varsha in those days - says the Epic.

to the physical, an unusual combination of two-fold strength. Here is Shalya, prince of Madra<sup>3</sup>, and the uncle of the twins, Nakula and Sahadeva! Perhaps Yudhishtira could never have dreamt of this in his wildest dreams, an uncle deserting him in the moment of his dire need! This adds a third division of army onto his side. Fourthly comes Kritavarma, the Yadava chieftain, with another division of army called Narayana-Sena drawn from Krishna's own den, as it were! What a marvel of strategy to have drawn him on his side! This time even Krishna was deceived for the first time perhaps! Let now Krishna stand alone unarmed on the side of the hapless Pandavas and his hundred tricks will not be of any avail to him. Fifthly, there comes Jayadratha, the great Saindhava, our own son-in-law, a great devotee of Lord Shiva, with yet another division of army. No question or fear of his deserting his side. The sixth warrior is the King of Kambhoja, Sudakshina; he comes from the 'Shaka' clan or dynasty with a formidable division of army. The seventh division is of the Avanti Princes, Vinda and Anuvinda, twins, who have been wronged by Krishna, who abducted their sister Mitravinda, at a selection-wedding, Svayamvara. How can the princes forget or forgive this shameful act of Krishna? Then there is Nila (Dhvaja) of Mahishmati, who has Agni the Fire God for his son in law, with a terrible army, which will be the eighth in his counting. The five Kekaya princes of the northwestern states are there, constituting the ninth division. Minor rulers, forest chieftains, and traditional followers constitute the rest of three more divisions. So the army-position is

<sup>3</sup> Modern Iraq.

great and unassailable. What if Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Ashvatthama have no armies of their own? Bhishma's prowess is a world record; he defeated an Avatari, Parashurama, in single combat, and is blessed with the boon that he shall die of his own will and not be killed by anyone! Drona has the power of penance, of the Vedas, as well as of armours. Kripa is again blessed with long life that can end only when he wills. Ashvatthama is precious and sharp-aimed, even if short-tempered. Each of these is equal to several divisions of army put together. Then comes the most loyal Karna, who is the version of Arjuna on this side; blessed with divine missiles by Bhagavan Parashurama, and whose might is testified to by the entire world.

Let this be; but how could these despicable Pandavas have collected even as many as seven divisions? This was well beyond his own expectations! Mere forest dwellers of one time, to collect so many? Fellows who were out of power for thirteen precious years, and still so many rulers to support them, expecting nothing in return ! This cannot be! This is frankly strategic failure on his own part, not to have isolated these vagabonds completely! But who are these traitors, he must still keep a watch on? - first, the Yadava chieftain Yuyudhana with more than a division, not part of Narayana Sena under Kritavarma; it is a complete army equipped with all latest weapons. Then there is Dhrishtaketu, son of Shishupala, serving the Pandavas under the fear of Krishna, perhaps; next comes Jayatsena, alias Sahadeva, son of Jarasandha, also in this camp under a similar restraint. Each of these has a mighty army amounting to more than a division, as is the report. Should these



fellows now join the murderers of their father, instead of using this occasion for a revenge ! Fools !! That way, his calculation had gone completely wrong ! Strange psychology ! Fourth comes the southern chief of Pandyas, while all the rest of southerners were on his own side. He is the sworn enemy of Nila of Mahishmati, in addition. It is too late and difficult to win him over. Besides, he is a blood relation of the Pandavas too. Virata and Drupada have two formidable divisions too. Then there are Chekitana, Kasi King, Purujit, Kuntibhoja, Shaibya, Yudhamanyu and other terrible warriors with considerable mighty armies behind them. Now this combination was against all his expectations ! Had he been able to finish off these sons of Kunti while in forest, as exiles, this situation of today would not have arisen. Krishna came in his way every time ! Every time!!

One consolation even in this desolate plight is that Krishna will not wield any weapons; but still what tricks he will be upto, none can predict in advance. If only Bhishma can finish off the war quickly, all will be well. He can, if he wills, destroy all this ill-assorted army of the Pandavas in a day. But the cunning old man has his own unreasonable reservations. He seems to have vowed not to destroy them and Karna from within his own camp ! What shall he do with such internal enemies? Duryodhana went on remembering all these bitter memories and odds against him.....



No doubt, Bhishma did not object to Karna being crowned as King of Anga, during the exhibition of

prowess of the Kaurava and The Pandava princes on the Arena. Perhaps he was taken by surprise and there was no time to think or protest. He would not have consented to it in a cooler moment, with advance information. That act might well have been one of the reasons for the old man's Karna-hate. The grandsire also knows well how much Karna is his trusted friend, and a close adviser; he knows perhaps that his trust in Karna is deeper than that in the old man himself. Could that jealousy, by any means, be a second reason for his Karna-hate? Karna has also added to it, off and on by his braggart nature and Brahmin-hatred as instanced often, in his own presence.....Duryodhana now remembered that aggressive scene on the outskirts of the Matsya capital in that 'Cattle-Capturing' cursed episode called 'Go-grahana'. It happened like this : First Arjuna appeared as 'Brihannala', the Eunuch, as the charioteer of Prince Uttara. Drona identified him and beamed ecstasy, out of love and partiality for his disciple. Even Bhishma shared that moment of Drona's bliss. They talked to each other in a codified language<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This is a koota sloka reading as follows:

*Nadi jalam keshava nariketuh nagahvayo nama nagari sunuh|  
Esho anganaveshadharah kiriti jitvava yam neshyati chadya  
gavah ||*

This way of reading yields no meaning, as River, Water, Keshava, etc are not mutually connected. For a coded way read as :

*Nadija ! Lankesha vanari ketuh ! nagahvayo..... (rest as before)*

Meaning: "Oh river-born Bhishma, here is Arjuna, with his monkey-banner, come to the rescue the cows. Let us be protected from him.

Virata Parva (39-10)



whose meaning was known only to the two ! Karna could observe that there was some treachery, some backbiting in this and flared up against Drona, quite justifiably:

**Duryodhana :** “Grandsire ! Wherefore are you hilarious?

This is no time or occasion for private jokes, or relaxation; even if the God of Death were to appear before us, we are going to fight and not be frightened or flattered by jokes or diversions. No question of returning without a fight.”

**Karna :** “Dear friend ! Why worry when I am here with you ? Let us keep out this Acharya and fight in his own presence. He is our internal enemy, always sprinkling cold water on our war efforts and enthusiasm to win. At the mention of Arjuna’s name, he gets mesmerised, and forgets the entire world around him. The neighing of a horse, the sound of a gusty wind or any other natural phenomenon is enough for him as a superstition to discourage us, and dissuade us from our forward, noble efforts. What other silent or latent desires he nurtures in his heart, God only knows, or else he is suffering from some unknown fear, or, complex. After all, he is the common preceptor of both branches of the family and loves our enemies for his own reasons, best known to himself. Who can dive into the hearts of crooked Brahmins, or trust them ? Especially when one is in danger ? These parasites shine well in so called assemblies of scholars disputing the inessentials in grammar, semantics, philosophy, or in telling stories and fairy

tales to ignorant audiences who can be thrown into bewilderment by wonderful memory-exercises or in wordy-duels that only among themselves, some few can understand or in such other idle prattles. They are no good on war-fields. Ask them to find faults with faultless men, they are ready and exercised ! Ask them to flatter the unpraiseworthy, they are ready with stuff by heart, made in advance ! And to the occasion !! They may even be good at rearing cattle or cooking and eating; but war is not their field for praise or action!"

Duryodhana, at that time, neither restrained Karna, nor comforted Drona ! This diplomatic behaviour on his part was too costly to be borne later on, as this was a kind of encouragement for Karna to continue with Drona-baiting, as and when opportunities arose. Karna, then continued :

"These people have no mind for war. I shall alone face Virata ! Am I inferior to Arjuna ? I shall get you his dead body now and fulfill my promise to you ! I can conquer even Indra with weapons granted by my teacher Parashurama. Drive ye away, Virata's cattle fearlessly to our capital or stay in your chariots and silently watch, what goes on here after. I shall end up the war in a few minutes."

**Kripa :** "You ! Radheya ! What do you know of the ways of war, its contexts, consequences and experiments ? This is murder in the last analysis and so not elevated as a way of living, anyhow. If you jump into it without weighing the consequences or studying its antecedents, you will

ruin yourself and all of us too ! Arjuna is far superior to you and is unique among world warriors. He faced Indra alone and offered the Khandava forest to the God of Fire, and alone ! Have you done a similar feat in your life ? He engaged himself in a straight dual fight with Lord Shankara, won and obtained the Pasupata missile; can you dare repeat a similar act of daring ? He caught the villainous Saindhava, when he was running away after molesting Panchali, privately, like a coward, and taught him an unforgettable lesson. Have you anything to match this in your life ? He carried away Subhadra and faced the wrath of Baladeva and the Yadava forces; he married her later in his own presence and got his applause. Can you show me one such instance in your life like this ? During the fake 'Counting-the-cattle' ceremony (Ghosha Yatra) when Chitrasena, the Gandharva chief took your friend Duryodhana for hostage and kidnapped him in your own presence, what were you doing? Monkey-watching ? Was it not Arjuna that rescued him and saved the honour of the royal family? Tell me in which war you have won, alone or as leader, assisted by any army ? Do not rush forward and be killed by Arjuna : Let us all jointly attack him and see what best can be done." That was mild Kripa !

Ashvatthama, the firebrand, exploded, without containing Karna's gross insult to his father and the community of Brahmins :



**Ashvatthama** : “Thou Sutha<sup>5</sup>, we have not yet won the war, and taken possession of the cattle; in fact we are yet to start it; win it, and return to our capital victoriously; are you wagging your tail in advance? Even victors with justification cannot brag like you! Fire burns, the Sun shines, and the Earth carries us all silently. Nature is not given to bragging like you ? The Varna order, or the Ashrama-order criticised by you, in a foul-tongued manner, is neither my creation, nor yours. Is it not God ordained ? You and your wicked friend here, Duryodhana, assisted by the deceptive Shakuni, imposed an unfair defeat on the innocent Yudhishtira - let me ask you, to which of the duties of Varna or Ashrama, does this ‘noble’ act, belong? Even butchers do not brag like you, after killing innocent animals ! Hunters are better than you in modesty and humility, silently carrying on their inherited vocations, without norm-violations like you. Will you tell me, in which battle you have vanquished Nakula and Sahadeva, let alone Bhima or Arjuna ? Let alone Yudhishtira’s ! When you suggested to your ‘esteemed friend’ Duryodhana, that Panchali shall be exposed naked before all - tell me, at the end of which victorious war, you wanted this shameful trophy ? And for what brave end ? Do you think Arjuna will forgive you for this barbarous act, - that too in her helpless state?

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<sup>5</sup> This refers to a caste, (product of Brahmin mother and Kshatriya father) in which Karna was brought up, though son of Kunti in reality. They were inferior in status to warriors and priests, but still respected otherwise.

She was in her periods, dressed in a single saree, and you showed no chivalry, which was expected of even a mean warrior, whose duty was to rush to her help! You ignoble fellow ! Do you not know that God has brought down Arjuna on earth to destroy foul fellows like you ? After destroying all the Kauravas, will Arjuna spare you ? What should he spare you for ? For another gambling ? For another exposure of Panchali ? For another bragging? My father did no more than give the due when he praised Arjuna ! It was neither partiality nor praise of the unworthy - take it from me, the son of that noble teacher. When I am not jealous of him, why should you feel so, and with what merit or worth in you ? Arjuna is equal to only Krishna in bravery, archery and prowess. If my father loves him, after me, for his virtues, why do you suffer from heartburns ? Do you still want to go to war with Arjuna, right now? Hear, you, Duryodhana : Tell your uncle Shakuni and command him to defeat or kill Arjuna ! Don't you think your uncle is the greatest warrior on this earth knowing all the duties of a Kshatriya, to the minutest details ? Let the world know, and you shall know too - that Arjuna does not throw dice; he only delivers arrows; and arrows unlike dice, do not have digital markings on them to deceive anyone; they fly straight into the hearts of the enemies openly; they will decide your fate like fatal planets in your horoscope, with your full knowledge, without playing foul behind your backs, or contrivances cooked up in secretive plans; understand? Gods like Agni, Yama and

Varuna, might know some mercy - not the arrows of Arjuna ! Understand ? Brahmins are brave in words - let me grant; should not a true Kshatriya be brave in acts ? in fight ? and in valour? Tell me Karna, whether you are a Brahmin or Kshatriya? Let all the world know you in your true colour and mettle !”

Duryodhana could not endure this bolt from the blue any longer. He was in no mood to appeal to either party or appease either; he had to swallow his words.

It was now Bhishma’s turn to join issue with Karna:

**Bhishma :** “You fool! Why do you blame the Acharya? He has measured the skills and abilities of Arjuna, properly, after all ! Remember, that this is time for war, not waste of words. Ashvatthama, swallow your justified anger and forgive Duryodhana for his helpless muteness. Drona, Acharya Sir, you are a living embodiment of true Brahminhood and Brahmastra as all the world knows. What if an ignorant person of jealousy backbites ? You can vanquish the enemies both by your Vedic enchantments and arrows aimed in bows at the same time and you are unmatched in this. Duryodhana, know thou that your Acharya is no braggart but a man of action, unlike your friend Karna. Who can excel him in archery on this earth, other than Drona’s teacher Parashurama ? We shall all fight together and keep out this Karna, if he is not interested in war, as he seems not to be. Let us not kill Karna, by pushing him, unwillingly on his part, as fodder for Arjuna’s arrows or missiles!



Come, come, let us not quarrel amongst ourselves and be laughed at by our opponents.”

Duryodhana had now to apologise to Drona and Ashvatthama, to the dislike and discontent of Karna. How could Duryodhana forget all this at this hour?



On Sanjaya's return from Upaplavya carrying Krishna's thunderbolt-like reply-message, again there was a wordy clash between Karna and Bhishma. The old fire was not still extinguished; how could it be ? the fire of mutual hate ? Bhishma had advised Duryodhana for a peaceful and honourable settlement, even at that late hour, much to the chagrin of Duryodhana. The advice was passed on to Dhritarashtra also for proper initiative and peace with the Pandavas ! Duryodhana was non-plussed, as never before and fumbled for words of retaliation then and there, in helpless anger. Bhishma had gone on a long discourse on his favourite Vedantic theme that Krishna was Vishnu, Narayana, Vasudeva, who came on the earth, to relieve its burden. Arjuna was his counter-part, Nara, complimenting that task, as the Vedas say. He had warned that Duryodhana would certainly remember these warning words when he would see Narayana and Nara appearing in the same chariot before the world, Narayana leading Nara to annihilate all the evil fellows, sparing none. He had told Duryodhana, without mincing words : “Your brothers will not transgress you in thoughts, words or action - all the ninety-nine of them. If you agree for peace, you will spare all of them and millions of innocent lives too - warriors, horses, elephants,

and would-be widows! Why do you not take this healthier second look at your own now wicked decision? You seemed to be innocent at one time to me; but let me tell you that it is this Karna, Sutaputra, and your brother Dusshasana who are egging you on for this misadventure. There is that Shakuni also to add to this sum total of evil woe.”

This adverse reference to himself was not liked by Karna; he could pocket this open insult neither before all nor swallow his pride and anger privately. He retorted and rebuffed the grandsire in the foulest words of his life:

**Karna :** “Grand sire ! You are going out of bounds, you are the real braggart; you let no chance slip in blaming me, and discouraging my innocent friend here, Duryodhana, who trusts you so much. Time will tell the world who is his real friend and who else foe. It is true that I deceived Guru Parashurama about my caste, in order to learn archery. It was by no means foul or for a bad cause; I had no selfish motive though ambitious of becoming a world-class hero. My Guru forgave me too; he gave me special missiles and taught me inner secrets of archery as a vidya. Those are with me, still. My teacher has been highly pleased with me for service, devotion and valour and also dedication. If he has cursed me, it is on a different account and it shall not affect me seriously.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Prasaditam hyasya maya monobhut |*  
*Shushrushaya svena cha paurushena |*  
*Tadasti chastram mama savishesham |*  
*Tasmat samartho'smi mamaisha Bharah ||*

**Bhishma :** “Fellow, let me tell you and the world in advance, that even the Shakti which you obtained from Indra, in exchange for the ear-rings and coat-of-arm born with you, will not remain in your hands for proper use at the proper time because of your thoughtlessness, unguardedness and lack of foresight. Not only this, even the Sarpasra (the Naga missile) still being worshipped by you, will leave your hands in vain, in untimely excesses and your stupid vows serving no one. I am sure Krishna knows every way of protecting Arjuna from you and your weapons; you will surely die at Arjuna’s hands. What use are you to your friend Duryodhana, whom you have egged on to this unwanted war ?”

Karna walks out of the council hall in fury protesting in loud and uncontrollable voice :

“Grand sire. Let the world know this for once - I shall not participate in the war, until you die; this hand of mine will not lift up my bow or arrows as long as you live ! Friends, ye all, know this firm vow of mine!”

Everyone, including Bhishma, had been stunned, by this, each in his own way for different reasons - Bhishma for Karna’s barbarity and lack of manners, his aggressiveness and deep hate; Duryodhana for fear of its consequences, and the short temper of Karna, who had so spoilt all his efforts for unity, in one stroke of thoughtlessness. He wouldn’t call it ingratitude however, in his partiality for his friend, which could not be rationalised even in cooler moments; even Karna’s friendly courtiers had been upset by this loss of temper by Karna at so crucial a meeting requiring one voice, one resolve, and one determination.



At the end of this session Bhishma loomed large in Duryodhana's mind as a big question mark, whose loyalties, intentions or commitments he could not find out or trust. "Two so called 'well-wishers' fighting so shamelessly or aimlessly - how could they be of positive use ?" - The prince was lost in this dilemma into the bottomless quagmire, never again, to rise up till after all the war was over !



Later still, the latest episode also had revealed cracks in the fabulous might and 'unity' of the Kaurava forces. Duryodhana, for his own personal satisfaction, had wanted to know who were the Rathis, Ardharathis, Maharathis, Atirathis and Rathathirathis and so on. The scale, measured in those terms in those days, to show how many one could kill in the war, how many days one took to see the end of it; what divine weapons and missiles one had, to achieve this end etc. The count included plus points in the hero's life and achievements, as well as minus points, so that a balance-sheet would show where one stood. Though subjective by nature, the measurement was inevitable to build self-confidence, as well as count the real stakes waged in the war's unpredictable nature. Not all knew all modes of fight, all weapons, and none possessed all the skills in totality. There was nothing unusual in Duryodhana asking his grandsire to tell him these confidential details. Was not Bhishma the grand commander of the combined forces?

It was a confidential meeting from which Karna could not be precluded, even for tactical reasons. Not that Duryodhana had possessed the much needed tact

at that time, as never before. Wisdom and impetuosity rarely go together! The question resulted in an unmitigated disaster : For Bhishma, though in truth, highlighted the virtues of all others and pointed to Karna's weaknesses and lapses to count him as less than an Ardharathi , without including him in higher grades. That inclusion, even hypothetically, would not have altered the situation either. Bhishma was not given to cajoling or peroration; Karna was not used to truth being told without embellishment, and Duryodhana was not accustomed to hearing unpleasant truths. The three conjointly produced a conflagration that not all waters of Varuna would have quenched or brought down. Bhishma went on :

“This Kritavarma is an Atiratha. Shalya is one too. Bhurishravas, surely is one other. Saindhava is twice as mighty as the Rathis. Kambhoja King, Sudhakrishna is a mere Rathi. Your son Duryodhana, and your brother's sons are allowed as Rathis by me; Kripa is an Atiratha. Shakuni is mere Ratha; the five Trigarta princes can be counted as Rathis, along with Nila of the South. Ashvatthama is, no doubt, a Maharatha . But there are drawbacks in him. He loves life more than death, which is a disqualification for a Kshatriya ! Here is a Brahmin playing that role by a twist of destiny that renders him ill-qualified for the description I mentioned and so I can count him neither as a Maharatha, nor as an Atiratha or even as a Ratha. Drona is in a different category; though Brahmin by birth he excels even Atirathas. Though aged he has the skill of youth and the enthusiasm for war, unusual for his age. But he loves Arjuna more than he loves his own son ! Yet he can

give his own life too for his son. It can be a weak point on his side in this war. Karna's son, Vrishasena is an excellent warrior too. Now this Karna here ! How shall I describe or count him ? It is he who is always egging you onto war. He is very uncouth in words and manners; very rough and unpolished; impolite and impetuous. He is a braggart of the first order and is ready for any mean act unbecoming of a noble warrior. He is now your unofficial counsellor, minister and guide, commander-in-chief also in a way ! You have honoured him more than he deserves, and elevated him to posts unworthy of him. He cannot be classified as a Ratha or Atiratha either. For, he is dispossessed of the divine ear-rings and armour on his chest, which he had by birth. He is too unthoughtful in generosity and can give anything to anyone, anytime. His compassion is thus a drawback in him. Added to it is the curse of his preceptor Parashurama, so that he cannot remember the proper 'mantras' for the right missiles at the hour of his need. What use is he for you now ? At the most you can count upon him as half a Ratha."

There was nothing factually, analytically wrong in this estimate. But Karna's pride had been deeply hurt, touching his psyche. The tone of Bhishma, the way he had thrown those words at him, and the context and company had all given Karna a totally different import. Truth can hurt more than falsehood, can it not ? Karna had retorted most violently :

"Pitamaha ; I have never wronged you in my memory. Search your own heart too; but you hate me with no reason; I can only call it malice. I had tolerated your tauntings all these days, for the sake of my friend,



Duryodhana. For that matter, you are that Ardhharathi, of which you are accusing me. Being partial to our enemies, the Pandavas, you have always been unfair to Duryodhana and he does not know it yet. He trusts you too much, in spite of your treacheries. When you so abuse me and others on Duryodhana's side, loyalists in truth, what can be your real intent other than pull our legs, meanly ? Is this not a traitor's real characteristic? Do you think that one becomes Maharatha only by age or blood-bond? For a warrior, might is the only measure of standards. You have become too senile and infirm to be trusted or honoured anymore. Have you not heard that the seniority of Brahmins depends on learning, character and the power of manthras, just as for Vaishyas, it is capacity for trade and the wealth amassed that determines priority ? It is only for Shudras that age or seniority by birth is considered proper. By bringing this unjust standard into our midst, you are causing confusions and confoundments. You are an agent of the Pandavas in disguise, in our midst. Rest for a while and see with your own eyes, how I shall destroy the might of the Pandavas and settle this war in my friend's favour, without your participation."

Karna then throws a side-glance at Duryodhana and vows : "My friend, let this old hag die first, doing you no more harm. Only then, I shall fight to finish this war. That he shall die soon is a truth in my view."

**Bhishma :** "Get out you fool ! I have defeated my own Guru in war, unlike being cursed by him like you! The world knows who is who."

Duryodhana had to ask for Bhishma's pardon, to the chagrin of Karna.

It was a past episode, with pregnant significance for the present and the future. Duryodhana could not know where this disunity would lead him. He stopped moving to and fro and lay down on his bed.

The night was slowly giving way to daylight in its tireless war, in the scheme of time also ! The star at day break was Purva Phalguni, and had been thought proper for the choice of a leader for war on his side, by consensus. His servants were reciting the usual praises as he was still in bed, in musical voices, to the tunes of instruments, pleasantly in harmony. He got up and honoured them with jewels and ornaments as usual.

An errand boy came to him, on his way to the bath, to tell him that his brother Dushshasana was waiting to be closeted with him.

