

Episode 22 – A New Challenger (Sub Stories a, b, and c)

Resource Materials: Individual comic books, a graphic novel set, or 26 videos
VISIT our SHOP: Choose the retelling that works best for you



22-a An Artisan Develops a Secret Plan To Make His Family Wealthy

A few artisans (family rivals from day one) have successfully hidden themselves from the heroes until now. But one foolish survivor wants to take revenge. He develops an elaborate scheme to deceive the heroes. First he cuts down a very venerable and large tree in his back yard, something his ancestors have honored for generations. His wife questions his decision but the artisan ignores her. Then he makes a very large measuring vessel made from the lovely wood. Asking his wife to buy a small amount of gold from the market, he then thinly covers the huge dish with gold foil. Now there are many bad omens. The artisan hits his head on the door frame of the house when leaving, he sees a black cat cross his path, and more. Again his wife begs him to stop and to at least wait for a more auspicious day. Again the artisan ignores her advice.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: What are the many bad omens the wife ‘sees.’ What do you think noticing an omen really about?

COMMENTARY: Omens are a traditional way of trying to see into the future. They reflect specific beliefs important in specific cultural settings. But some of them can also be pretty universal, like hitting one’s head on a door frame. Omens are “seen” when people are in a certain frame of mind.... When they are scared or anxious. One could say that they point to a kind of “folk psychology.” It would be wrong to speak about omens as simple superstitions. They can be useful, even helpful signs, providing insight into a person’s frame of mind in certain situations.

Considering the matter described here a wider level, we can say that the artisan is clearly ill-intentioned. He is deceitful from the start. This man villainized and stereotyped. He is insensitive to family tradition and to the destruction of a core asset (the old tree). He won’t share his idea with his wife and he is mean when he speaks to her. She (with her female insight) notices many bad omens as her husband sets out. He ignores these as well. In these many ways this episode is not very subtle. It clearly paints the artisan as a “villain.” This

craftsman also appears to be a goldsmith by profession. This one profession has been villainized in South Indian literature from ancient times (see the famous and very old Tamil story called Silappadikaram where a goldsmith is also a villain). A goldsmith also bears the brunt of ignominy in some European folktales too. And there is “overlap” here, as well, with an old South Indian confrontation between right (the farming) and left (the craftsmen) communities. Suffice it to say that the “artisan” anger at the farmer kings starts with episode 1-b and their resultant antipathy towards the farmers provides an undercurrent which then flows beneath this entire legend.

22-b The Greedy Artisan Makes a Mistake While Planning To Steal The Heroes’ Wealth

After walking quite a distance with a large bowl on his head, the artisan finally reaches a temple near the twin kings’ palace. The older (and more gullible) twin is sitting there. After a short conversation this brother takes pity on the artisan (alone with an expensive vessel on his head at the end of the day) and invites him to spend the night. He warns him that he may encounter thieves if he proceeds any further after dark. The artisan accepts this offer of hospitality and asks to leave his vessel in the palace storeroom. There he carefully places it next to a small lighted oil lamp. He goes to sleep in the palace room. But a big incident erupts in the middle of the night. The artisan tries to sneak into the palace armory and steal one of the heroes’ swords. Being careless, he ends up cutting himself with it instead. Then he cries out in pain. Still the gullible elder brother is tolerant and trusting He merely asks the artisan to go back to sleep after the maids give him a balm for his wounds.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Why is the hero so tolerant of the artisan’s suspicious behavior? Is being so trusting a good personality trait for a king?

COMMENTARY: This episode again makes the artisan out to be a bumbling fool. But it doesn’t do much for the reputation of the elder brother either. He is clearly too trusting, too naïve, too kind. By implication the sub-episode is building up and reinforcing a general character contrast between the elder brother in the story and his younger sibling (whose role in all this we will see later).

22-c The Elder Hero’s Honesty Is Tested By Having To Swim Through Fast Moving Waters

The next morning, when the artisan and he go to the storeroom to get the golden vessel they find it has been “replaced” by a simple wooden one. (In reality the gold foil has melted from the heat of the lamp). The artisan then accuses the elder hero of having stolen his vessel. Of course, the mild-mannered king denies having done anything of the sort. Now the artisan demands proof of his honesty in the form of several supernatural

feats. Twice the elder twin is asked to swim through an irrigation sluice where the water is running at high speed. On the second attempt the artisan tries to hit him on the head with a stature of Lord Ganesh. The sister awakes from a dream and calls her younger brother, warning him that the elder twin is in grave danger. He rushes to the irrigation tank on horseback. Just then Lord Vishnu comes to the rescue and the hero is saved. The younger hero, meanwhile, arrives at the scene and angrily attacks both the artisan and a group of allied warrior-hunters who have also appeared and are ready to attack. As usual, the heroes' side is victorious and both brothers come through this mini war unharmed. The artisan and his hunter friends are all killed. For the moment life at the palace returns to normal.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: The hero has to undergo an awesome set of tests. Finally, with Lord Vishnu's help, he succeeds and his life is saved. What traditional folk story can you find where a hero has to under a similarly difficult (but essentially peaceful) test, one that does not involve his having to fight?

COMMENTARY: Now we see the full extent of the contrast between the elder and the younger brother. The younger twin arrives on horseback with his sword. He fights all of his brother's attackers off and emerges as a brave hero. But the elder brother has a story of his own. He has passed two very difficult tests by swimming in both directions through a dangerous current that flows in a dark funnel. Lord Vishnu has come to his rescue, giving him special status as the honored (and protected) one. He does little to advance the fight his brother undertakes. So here we see the familiar contrast between these two heroic brothers grow ever stonger. One is peaceable and blessed. The other is violent and wins status by virtue of his skills as an awesome fighter. The bond between the two brothers remains strong, but the younger is definitely the one "in command."