

Episode 24 – A Curse Revealed (Sub Stories a, b, c, and d)

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



24-a The Heroes Dress For War And Their Fighting Assistants Are Called

The little sister is all-seeing and senses that her brothers will not return from their battle against their hunter enemies. Knowing that her brothers are going into battle, she asks that they first let themselves be carried through the streets in royal style so that everyone can say their “goodbyes.” Then they go into the palace dressing room and adorn themselves with fine silks. They also tie on sacred, protective neck threads. Furthermore, even through the sister knows that she will not see her brothers again, she still wants to be double sure she has some sense of what is happening. So she asks them to provide six signs that will indicate the day-to-day state of their well-being: The sister wants her brothers to present her with: a whole coconut, a burning lamp, a ripe mango fruit, fresh flowers, a dish of water, and a small bowl of turmeric. The two brothers supply these on a tray for her to keep close to her side. Next they send their huge assistant ahead to set up a war tent. The fighting men from the 56 “revenue” villages under their leadership gather for the fight.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: These men dress in “battle silks.” Why do you think they would they wear such fine clothes when going into the think of battle?

COMMENTARY: The fine battle clothes serve to “announce” the stature of the heroes. It makes them imposing and also, psychologically, it makes them feel important. The tread is a “protective” that might be likened to a good luck charm. The sister also asks for a parade through the village. For this the brothers sit on a traditional palanquin that is carried on other men’s shoulders. It is a great honor to be carried in a palanquin. The symbolism of the plate of omens is also somewhat obvious. The six items can be interpreted as follows. The cocoanut is like the “head” of the brothers. The mango is like their ripe bodies. The turmeric paste (used for body beauty) probably represents their handsome faces and their good health. The flowers are aromatic jasmine and can be liken to the sweet smell of their bodies. The burning lamp can be likened to their lives or active spirits and the water can be seen to represent their body fluids. If these things wilt, dry up, rot or break open, then she will know that her brothers’ lives have ended.

The reference to 56 revenue villages is a sort of “formulaic number.” It represents the numerous settlements near the brothers’ palace that are expected to pay homage and send periodic gifts. Whether there was actual “revenue” received in the form of taxes from villages like this is unclear. Nothing in this story mentions that the heroes received any revenue payments from their laborers or subordinates. The use of the term “revenue villages” is probably just a sort of honorific phrase. But each household in the area was definitely expected to send one healthy fighting man to any battle undertaken by their leaders. Each “warrior” was expected to bring with him a good fighting stick and a brave dog. Some food for the expedition was also expected (rice or gruel tied in a white sack).

24-b **A Little Dog Sickens The Younger Hero With A Powerful Curse**

As the two heroes ready for departure and stand on the palace porch, their little sister runs towards them. The brothers tell her they are leaving for the war. They ask her to bless their swords. She only cries. Then, with tears in her eyes she bids them goodbye and they take their leave. The two men depart on horseback for the great war. The fighters have taken all the fearsome dogs of the kingdom with them but they have overlooked the tiny little palace dog. She is insulted and now goes to the family goddess. There she begs that a curse be placed on the younger twin. Afterwards she goes and finds a deep hole where she will hide, out of the sight of all who were left behind at the Ponnivala palace. The curse request is passed by the family goddess to a “sister” who is the fearsome and warlike Kali. Then Kali causes it to leave the little dog’s secret den and fly through the forest all the way to the forest camp. Soon the younger twin falls ill in the heroes’ war tent. He can no longer fight. Fear of the boar’s three day ultimatum hangs heavy in the air.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: The little dog’s curse is due to anger. She was ignored and discriminated against for being “too small.” Do you know a modern story about someone who is discriminated against for being physically different? What happens in that story? Compare it with the tale of the little dog told here.

COMMENTARY: This is an important sub-story that can be understood at many different levels. First and foremost it describes a weak, small female who is also rather ugly (the dog has no ears). She wants to be like all the other dogs that got to go to war but she is ignored when the call goes out. So she finds a way to take revenge (and hopefully get noticed). At another level the dog serves as a kind of “metaphor” for the sister herself. She is, after all, the sister’s main pet. The sister didn’t want her brothers to go to war. She didn’t bless their swords, although they asked for this. She knows they will die. The future she can look forward to is even lonelier than the condition she is in now. Implied (but not restated openly) is the fact that her brothers have promised both to “look after her” and to get her married. They have left without considering either of these responsibilities. The relationship between the brothers and their sister has now further “broken” down. This is a turning point. From now on the fearsome and warlike goddess Kali begins to intervene. And Kali is allied with the forest enemies. Eventually (but not just yet) the sister herself will become a Kali-like figure. The little dog is a sort of “harbinger” of these changes.

24-c **The Heroes’ Assistant Offers To Lead The Fighting Men Himself**

The heroes' huge assistant now offers to go and locate the boar's hideaway by himself. After finding the beast he plays his horn to the boar, tricking him into a deep sleep. The brave assistant then sneaks into the boar's lair and pulls out nine of the great enemy's back hairs. Then he quickly returns with these to the war camp of the heroes. When these are burnt in a small fire the smell proves that he has indeed carried back boar to prove his success. He now knows where the enemy is hiding.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Could you put a huge and aggressive boar to sleep playing a simply lullaby on a horn? Would you be brave enough to go into his lair and pull out some of his hairs? Do you know another story where an assistant returns to the hero with evidence that he has located the enemy?

COMMENTARY: This is a "teasing" incident. The assistant is seen "playing" with the boar" by blowing a lullaby on his horn. The banter between the boar and the assistant heightens the tension, and makes the story fun. It also builds up an appreciation of the great power of the adversaries on both sides of the battle to come. This is one of the favourite sub-stories of the entire epic. It is one that local audiences ask to hear over and over again. As you can imagine it gives a lot of scope to the story teller to imitate the sounds of the boar, the sound of the horn and the words of the rather scared assistant. You could ask students to experiment with telling this sub-story themselves and inventing appropriate sounds to go with it.

24-d **There Is A Wartime Disaster. All The Support Fighters Are Lost**

The brothers are still too sick to fight so the assistant offers to lead the attack by himself. He takes all of the fighters and all of the dogs with him. This becomes a miserable failure. All the dogs, and all the fighters except the assistant himself, are killed by the monstrous boar. Lord Vishnu then descends to earth to help. He takes the disguise of a fortune teller. Then he approaches the heroes' war tent and is welcomed inside. Reading from a traditional palm leaf manuscript he carries with him, the fortune teller reveals that the sickness the one brother is suffering has been by the little palace little she dog. It is what hangs over their tent and has caused them so much ill-fortune. He advises the men to apologize to the tiny creature and invite her to join them in the war effort.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Can you think of another story where (one or more) heroes suddenly learn something new, something they hadn't thought about that has the potential to "turn all their bad luck around?" If you can't think of such a story can you make one up? A story where the hero has to apologize to someone with a disability, or someone who looks different, would work especially well.

COMMENTARY: This sub-story is another turning point. Lord Vishnu, in the form of a fortune teller, reveals a key fact. The heroes have been cursed, and it is a curse due to their own insensitivity. But if they back off, forget some of their pride, and behave in a humble manner, the situation can be remedied. Of course the situation is embarrassing. They, two great war heroes, have to apologize to a tiny dog, and a female at that. And it is the more aggressive and more insensitive of the two men who has to take the lead! A heartfelt apology will turn the entire situation around. This is a sub-story where this legend shows real insight and conveys some significant wisdom, albeit through a kind of extended metaphor.

Another view of the episode is to suggest that the heroes (and particularly the younger one) made a big mistake by letting his assistant talk him into taking all their fighting men and all their dogs to meet the great boar by himself. This was not an appropriate ‘delegation of responsibility’ and the result is that 11 of the fine fighting men of Ponnivala are now dead. Their wives are now widows. The brothers themselves understand this and feel their honor has slipped away. How can they return to the palace with this kind of news? This incident adds much weight to argument that this story is really about responsibility, and the heroes’ increasing failure to shoulder the wide variety of social commitments that rest with them as family men and as rulers.