

Book Five: Kṛṣṇa

1. The union of Vasudeva and Devakī

Maitreya:

You've described all the royal lineages in detail and duly recounted the deeds of each. ¹

Now I wish to hear about that aspect of Viṣṇu, holy sage, who came to earth and manifested in the Yadu clan. ²

Tell me about the acts performed by Lord Kṛṣṇa, the supreme being, sage, after he appeared in the world as an aspect of Viṣṇu's aspect. ³

Parāśara:

Listen, Maitreya, to this account, about which you've questioned me, concerning the deeds of Kṛṣṇa, who appeared as an aspect of Viṣṇu's aspect to benefit the world. ⁴

Long ago, Vasudeva married Devaka's daughter, fortunate Devakī, great sage, who was the equal of a goddess. ⁵

After their wedding, Kaṁsa, benefactor of the Bhoja people, served as driver of the couple's bridal carriage. ⁶

As they made their way, a loud voice sounded in the sky, rumbling like thunder, and addressed these words to Kaṁsa: ⁷

'Fool! The eighth child born of this woman whom you're carrying with her husband in your chariot will end your life.'⁸

Parāśara:

Hearing this, mighty Kaṁsa drew his sword to strike at Devakī, but Vasudeva intervened, ⁹

‘Don’t kill Devakī, great king! I’ll give you all the children delivered from her womb.’ ¹⁰

Parāśara:

Kaṃsa acceded to this proposal, best of brahmins, and, as he respected Vasudeva, he spared the girl. ¹¹

The Earth complains of her burden

At that same time, the Earth, oppressed by her great burden, approached the thirteen deities assembled on Mount Meru. ¹²

Bowing to the gods with Brahmā at their head, the Earth recounted all her woes, her voice beset with misery: ¹³

The Earth:

Just as fire masters gold and the sun is lord of cattle, Nārāyaṇa is my sovereign, as he is of all the worlds. ¹⁴

He is Brahmā, lord of patriarchs, who arose before the earliest beings. He is formless Time composed of seconds, hours and minutes. ¹⁵

Your entire assembly is just his aspect, best of gods. ¹⁶

The Ādityas, Maruts, Sādhyas, Rudras, Vasus, Aśvins, Vahnīs and the ancestors led by Atri who made the worlds— ¹⁷

All these are forms of Viṣṇu, the immeasurable heart of greatness. ¹⁸

The yakṣas, rākṣasas and Daityas, the piśācas, nāgas and Dānavas, the gandharvas and apsarases are all but forms of mighty Viṣṇu. ¹⁹

The sky with shining planets, constellations, stars, fire, water, wind, myself the Earth, the objects of the senses and all this world consist of him. ²⁰

The forms of this many-formed being annul one another day and night, then are themselves annulled, like waves upon the ocean. ²¹

At this very moment, Daityas led by Kālanemi have overrun the world of men and continually oppress the populace. ²²

The great demigod Kālanemi, slain by mighty Viṣṇu, has been reborn as Kaṃsa, son of Ugrasena. ²³

Ariṣṭa, Dhenuka, Keśin, Pralamba, Naraka, the demigod Sunda and fearsome Bāṇa, son of Bali— ²⁴

I cannot count the number of these and other powerful, evil beings who've taken birth in the homes of men. 25

Many armies of strong and brilliant Daitya kings press down on me, gods of heavenly form. 26

Suffering beneath the weight of this great burden, I can no longer support myself. That's why I'm telling you, immortal lords. 27

Relieve me of this load, you fortunate beings, before I sink in misery to the lower realms. 28

Parāśara:

Having heard the Earth's complaint in full, Brahmā, urged by the thirteen gods, spoke these words to ease the burden that oppressed her. 29

Brahmā:

All the Earth has said is true, you denizens of heaven. Myself, Śiva, all of you and everything consists of Nārāyaṇa. 30

Manifestations of his greatness, overcoming one another and being overcome, are at times more powerful, at other times less so. 31

Come, therefore. Let us proceed to the Milky Ocean. We'll worship Hari on its northern shore and refer all this to him. 32

That universal being, who is at the heart of everything, always manifests an aspect of himself on earth to uphold virtue and to aid the world. 33

Brahmā praises Viṣṇu

Parāśara:

So saying, the grandsire of the world set out with all the other gods, and, having gathered his thoughts, he then praised Viṣṇu, whose emblem is Garuḍa. 34

Brahmā:

You are both kinds of knowledge: that which is handed down in sacred texts and that which isn't. You have two states, formed and formless, Lord. 35

You are two forms of the Absolute, gross and subtle. You are all and you know all. You are beyond the spiritual power of sound, you are the Absolute and that which consists of the Absolute. 36

You are the *Rg, Yajur, Sāma* and *Atharva Vedas*. You are the art of Vedic pronunciation, ritual practice, the explanations, metres and the science of the calendar. 37

You are the histories, myths and grammar, Lord. You are philosophy, logic and the treatises on law, Adhokṣaja. 38

You are the doctrine that investigates the links between the body, soul and qualities. That doctrine is none other than a form of your highest self, primeval Lord. 39

You are unmanifest, indescribable, inconceivable, lacking name and colour, hands and feet. You are Viṣṇu, the eternal highest state. 40

You hear without ears and see without eyes. You are one but have many forms. You move without feet and grasp without hands. You know all but are not to be known by all. 41

Beholding you as smaller than the smallest and having nonexistent form, one's ignorance will vanish. Nothing else beyond your blissful form supports the wisdom of the wise. You are the highest being. 42

You are everything, the beginning and the protector of the world. All beings exist in you. You are all that has existed and all that will exist. You are more subtle than the subtlest. You alone are Spirit, which stands apart from primal Nature. 43

You are one but also fourfold lordly fire, consumer of the sacrifice, which sheds its light and splendour on the world. You are the eye of all. Your forms are endless. You, arranger of the universe, took three steps. 44

Just as fire, kindled in many ways, is always one, and its essential nature doesn't alter with its changing form, you, Lord, have one all-pervading form, though the forms you animate are many. 45

You are the single foremost highest state, whom sages see with the eye of knowledge. There is nothing that has been or that will be, supreme spirit, other than your form. 46

Your form is manifest and unmanifest. You are both totality and individuality, all-knowing and all-seeing, possessor of omnipotence, knowledge, strength and plenitude. 47

You are not subject to loss or gain. You are independent, beginningless and powerful. You are untouched by fatigue, sloth, fear, anger, desire and other faults. 48

Blameless, supreme, tranquil, sovereign, your progress is unalterable, you are lord of all, the ultimate foundation of everything, the indestructible abode of all abodes. 49

Beyond all envelopments, unreached by imagination, the locus of great energy—highest spirit, we bow to you. 50

Not without a cause, not with a cause, but neither with nor without a cause, you are the highest being, taking human form to uphold virtue. 51

Parāśara:

Having mentally perceived this song of praise, Hari, the unborn lord at the heart of all, the bearer of universal form, replied to Brahmā. 52

The Lord:

Greetings, Brahmā. Tell me all that you and the other gods desire from me, and success will be assured. 53

Parāśara:

Then Brahmā, beholding the divine and universal form of Hari, praised him again, while all the gods bowed down in trepidation. 54

Brahmā:

We bow to you and bow again, deity of a thousand forms, a thousand arms and many limbs and faces. We bow to you and bow again, boundless cause of creation, preservation and destruction of the world. 55

Your subtlety is beyond the subtle; your measure beyond measure. You are greater than the greatest. You are at the heart of intellect and senses. You are the supreme heart that lies beyond the root of both. Be merciful to us, Lord. 56

The Earth, whose ranges are oppressed by mighty demons reborn there, has come to you, Lord, hoping that you'll relieve her burden, as you are the final refuge of all the worlds and your limits are unattainable. 57

We're all here: this is Indra, slayer of the demon Vṛtra. Here are the Aśvins, Nāsatya and Dasra. This is Varuṇa, and here are the Rudras, Vasus, Suns and others led by Winds and Fires. 58

These are all the deities, Lord of gods. Tell us all that they and I must do, Lord, as we stand ever ready to follow your commands, faultless deity. 59

Devakī's eight children

Parāśara:

While they praised him in this manner, the lord, the supreme master, plucked two hairs, great sage, one white, one black. 60

‘Having descended to the world,’ he told the gods, ‘these two hairs of mine will ease the burden of the Earth. 61

Manifesting aspects of themselves on earth, let all the gods wage war against the furious and powerful demigods already there. 62

Then all the Daityas in the world will go to their destruction. There’s no doubt that when my gaze falls upon them, they’ll be turned to dust. 63

Vasudeva’s wife is Devakī, the equal of a goddess. One of my hairs, you deities, will be her eighth-born child. 64

Having descended to the earth, this being will slay Kaṁsa, a manifestation of the demon Kālameni.’ So saying, Hari withdrew from sight. 65

The deities bowed before that great unseen being, then returned to the summit of Mount Meru whence they descended to the world. 66

But Nārada, the lordly sage, told Kaṁsa that Viṣṇu, supporter of the earth, would manifest as Devakī’s eighth child. 67

Hearing this from Nārada, furious Kaṁsa imprisoned Devakī and Vasudeva in his palace. 68

As he’d promised previously, brahmin, Vasudeva surrendered every child to Kaṁsa as soon as it was born. 69

It’s said that Hiranyakaśipu’s sons were born as the first six infants. At the command of Viṣṇu, the goddess Nidrā placed them one by one in the womb of Devakī. 70

Lord Hari spoke to Yoganidrā, a form of his own deceptive power, who veils the world in ignorance. 71

The Lord:

Nidrā, go at my command and bring six infants from the depths of Pātāla and place them one by one in Devakī’s womb. 72

When they’ve all been slain by Kaṁsa, an aspect of Śeṣa, and therefore an aspect of an aspect of me, will become the seventh infant in her belly. 73

Another of Vasudeva's wives, Rohiṇī, resides in the cattle camp of Gokula. Before the child is born, goddess, take him to that woman. 74

Folk will say that Devakī miscarried the seventh baby because she feared the King of Bhoja and the stress of prison life. 75

But as he'll be drawn out (*saṃkarṣaṇāt*) from the womb, he'll be called Saṃkarṣaṇa. He'll be a hero as resplendent as the summit of a snowy mountain. 76

I'll then enter the womb of Devakī, fair one, and you will enter Yaśodā's. 77

I'll be born on the eighth night of the dark fortnight of the month of Nabhas during the rainy season, and you'll be born just one night later. 78

With his mind in my control, Vasudeva will bear me to Yaśodā's bed, and he'll take you to Devakī's, blameless goddess. 79

Kaṃsa will seize you, goddess, and dash you on a rock, but you'll escape into the sky. 80

On account of his respect for me, hundred-eyed Indra will honour you and, bowing his head, will accept you as his sister. 81

Once you've defeated Śumbha, Niśumbha and other Daityas by the thousand, you'll adorn the world in many places. 82

You are prosperity, progeny, fame, patience, heaven and earth, firmness, modesty, nourishment, dawn and every other feminine quality. 83

Those who address you as Āryā, Durgā, Vedagarbhā, Ambikā, Bhadrā, Bhadrakālī, Kṣemyā and Kṣemakarī, 84

And who bow down and praise you in the morning and the afternoon, will have all their wishes granted by my grace. 85

Men will worship you with offerings of liquor, meat and various foods and, if you're satisfied, you may grant them all that they desire. 86

By my mercy, madam, it's certain that they'll never be in danger. Go now, goddess, and do as I command. 87

So ends Chapter One in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

2. The deities praise Devakī

Parāśara:

As besought by Viṣṇu, god of gods, Yoganidrā, nursemaid of the world, then placed six infants one by one in Devakī's womb and bore away the seventh. 1

When Devakī had borne that seventh child to Rohiṇī, Hari entered her womb to benefit the threefold worlds. 2

On that very day, Yoganidrā entered Yaśodā's belly, as the highest being had instructed. 3

When Viṣṇu's aspect came into the world, all the planets proceeded in perfect order through the heavens, brahmin, and the weather was delightful. 4

None could set their eyes on Devakī because she shone so brightly, and the minds of those who saw her glowing thus were filled with wonder. 5

By day and night, hosts of gods, unseen by men and women, praised Devakī with Viṣṇu in her womb. 6

The deities:

You were *prakṛti*, the supreme and subtle natural state, in which Brahmā arose in former times. You were the power of speech of the deity who supports the world, and the womb that held the Vedas, splendid woman. 7

You are the womb of creation and creation itself, eternal being, the seed of all and womb of the threefold sacrifice. 8

You are the womb of the outcome, offering, fire and kindling. As Aditi, you are the womb of gods; as Diti, the Daityas's womb. 9

You are light, the womb of day. You are humility, the womb of knowledge. You are prudence, womb of conduct. You are modesty, origin of respect. 10

You are desire, the womb of love. You are satisfaction, contentment's womb. You are intelligence, womb of understanding. You are resolve, the womb of firmness. 11

You are the heavens, womb of planets, stars and lunar mansions. You are the cause of all the world. These are your powers, goddess, and you have others by the thousand. 12

Similarly, at this moment, within your womb, glorious nursemaid of the universe, rests all the world, resplendent with its countless seas, rivers, lands, forests and cities, replete with hamlets, towns and villages. 13

All the fires, winds and waters; the sky providing space for everything, adorned with planets, stars and mansions, and filled with airborne chariots by the hundred; 14

The earthly, aerial and heavenly spheres; the realms of Mahar, Jana, Tapas and Brahmā; and that deity's cosmic egg in full, you splendid woman; 15

And all the beings who occupy these realms: gods, Daityas, gandharvas, cāraṇas, great serpents, yakṣas, rākṣasas, ghosts and guhyakas, 16

Humankind, beasts and all other living things, you best of women—all these comprise the everlasting lord of all, and exist within him, creator of the universe. 17

Viṣṇu, whose every aspect, including forms and deeds, is beyond the realm of comprehension, now lies within your womb. 18

You are *svābhā*. You are *svadbhā*. You are knowledge, nectar and the sky's own light. You came to earth to protect the worlds. 19

Be merciful, goddess, and bless this world. Bear the lord with fondness, gracious woman, as the world is borne by him. 20

So ends Chapter Two in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

3. The advent of Kṛṣṇa

Parāśara:

Thus praised by gods, Devakī bore in her womb heavenly Viṣṇu, the lotus-eyed saviour of the world. 1

Just as the rising sun at dawn wakes the lotus flower, the great eternal Viṣṇu appeared in the womb of Devakī so that the world might blossom. 2

The day of his birth spread great joy in all directions, just as moonlight graces the surface of the earth. 3

Good people experienced deep contentment, cruel winds were stilled and streams flowed with tranquillity when Janārdana was born. 4

Rivers made sweet music with their murmuring, gandharva lords sang praises, while hosts of apsaras danced. 5

The deities, coursing through the heavens, showered flowers upon the earth, and fires burned bright and steadily when Janārdana appeared. 6

At midnight, brahmin, when Janārdana, foundation of the universe, was born, thunderclouds rumbled deeply while shedding flowers like rain. 7

Beholding the newborn infant, as blue as the petal of a waterlily, in four-armed form with Śrīvatsa on his chest, Vasudeva praised him. 8

When that wise man had hailed the infant with lofty words, best of brahmins, fearing Kaṁsa, he added this: 9

Vasudeva:

I recognise you, Lord, god of gods, bearer of the conch, the mace and discus. Be merciful, Lord, and withdraw this heavenly form. 10

This very day, Lord, Kaṁsa will take revenge on me when he learns that you've appeared in my abode. 11

Devakī:

May this god of gods—whose forms are boundless and universal, who embraced the worlds within himself while still within my womb, and who, by his own illusory power, assumed this infant form—be merciful. 12

Withdraw this four-armed form, universal being, so that Diti's grandson Kaṁsa may never learn of your descent. 13

The Lord:

Since you praised me in former times, hoping for a son, today your wish will be fulfilled, princess, as I've been delivered from your womb. 14

Parāśara:

After he had spoken, the lord fell silent, best of sages, and Vasudeva picked him up and carried him through the darkness. 15

The guards at the gates of Mathurā fell under Yoganidrā's spell, and Vasudeva slipped past undetected. 16

The serpent Śeṣa followed Vasudeva, and with his hoods gave shelter to the infant from the deluge falling from the clouds that night. 17

As Vasudeva carried Viṣṇu, the Yamunā, profound and swirling with a hundred varied eddies, reached only to his knees. 18

Nanda and the other cowherd elders assembled on the riverbank with tribute for King Kaṁsa, where Vasudeva saw them. 19

At that moment Yaśodā delivered Yoganidrā in the form of a baby girl, Maitreya, but she and all the others present succumbed to the goddess's spell. 20

Vasudeva of boundless splendour laid the boy in Yaśodā's bed and hastened back with that young girl. 21

When she woke, Yaśodā saw the newborn baby boy, dark as an azure lotus petal, and was filled with greatest joy. 22

Vasudeva took the girl to his abode, placed her in Devakī's bed and waited by her side. 23

When they heard the infant's cries, brahmin, the guards leapt up and told the king that Devakī had given birth. 24

In rushed Kaṁsa to seize the child, but Devakī tried to stop him. 'Let her go! Let her go!' she cried. 25

He sought to dash the infant on a rock, but as soon as she had left his hand, she rose into the air above and assumed a mighty eight-armed form, a weapon in each hand. 26

This furious being laughed aloud and said to him, 'Why throw me to the ground, Kaṁsa? The one who'll slay you is already born. 27

He is the essence of all the gods who caused your death in former times. Consider this, then quickly do what's best for you.' 28

So saying, the goddess, resplendent in divine garlands and perfumes, departed, while the siddhas in the heavens sang her praises and the king of Bhoja stood and stared. 29

So ends Chapter Three in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

4. Kāṁsa plots to kill Kṛṣṇa

Parāśara:

Kāṁsa's mind was troubled, so he summoned all the foremost demons, led by Keśin and Pralamba, and addressed those mighty beings. 1

Kāṁsa:

'Strong-armed Pralamba, Keśin, Dhenuka, Pūtanā, Ariṣṭa and the rest of you must heed my words. 2

Those wicked gods, scorched by my prowess, tried to kill me, but I pay them no regard, you heroes. 3

I scorn that weakling Indra and that lonely yogin Śiva. What can Hari achieve by merely striking at our weaknesses? 4

I scorn the Ādityas, accompanied by the timid Vasus. I scorn the Agnis and all the other deities defeated by my mighty arms. 5

Did I not see Indra, king of gods, retreating from the battlefield with arrows in his back? He couldn't take them on the chest. 6

When Indra stopped the rains from falling on my kingdom, did not the clouds, split asunder by my missiles, release their showers, just as I desired? 7

Don't all the kings on earth—except my father-in-law, Jarāsandha—fearing the strength of my arms, submit to me? 8

I despise those gods, you bulls among the Daitya heroes. I mock them as they make their feeble efforts. 9

Therefore, Daitya kings, I'll strive to worst those base and evil-minded beings. 10

To these ends, let each ascetic and every sacrificer in the world be put to death to disempower the gods. 11

The infant girl, brought forth from the womb of Devakī, told me that the being who caused my death in previous lives is born again. 12

Make every effort, then, to search out all the boys on earth, and be sure to kill those with special powers.' 13

After Kāṁsa gave this order to the Daityas, he returned to his abode and freed Vasudeva and Devakī from confinement. 14

Kaṁsa:

I killed your children for no purpose, as the one who's destined to destroy me has escaped. 15

Forget the woe that you've endured. No other child of yours will die before his natural span expires. 16

Parāśara:

Reassuring Devakī and Vasudeva with these words and having set them free, best of brahmins, Kaṁsa retreated to the inner chambers, filled with doubt. 17

So ends Chapter Four in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

5. Kṛṣṇa slays Pūtanā

Parāśara:

Now free, Vasudeva went to Nanda's wagon, where he saw the joyous herdsman who thought the child was his. 1

Vasudeva hailed him graciously, saying, 'What a lucky man you are, for even in old age, you have a son! 2

You've paid in full your annual tribute to the king (the reason that you came), but wealthy people shouldn't tarry here. 3

When the task that brought you here is done, why stay longer, Nanda? Return as quickly as you can to your own cattle camp. 4

Rohiṇī has given birth to my own son there. Protect him as you would your own.' 5

Hearing this, the sturdy cattle-herders led by Nanda, having paid their tribute, set off with fully laden wagons. 6

Once they'd settled back in camp, the child-killing demon Pūtanā snatched the baby Kṛṣṇa as he slept one night and offered him her breast. 7

Any child that's suckled by that fiend at night will die at once. 8

Kṛṣṇa, however, filled with rage, held her breast and squeezed it tight between his hands, then sucked the life right out of her. 9

Pūtanā screamed, her sinews snapped and that horrid fiend fell dying to the ground. ¹⁰

Startled by the demon's cries, the residents of the camp awoke and found the baby on her lap, but she lay dead already. ¹¹

Frantic Yaśodā picked up Kṛṣṇa, best of brahmins, and waved a cow-tail whisk with one hand to ward off any evil force that might beset the child. ¹²

The cattle-herder Nanda took some powdered dung and sprinkled it on Kṛṣṇa's head to give the child protection, then spoke this benediction: ¹³

Nanda:

May Hari, lord of all creation, protect you. From the lotus at his navel came the world. ¹⁴

May Keśava protect you. In the form of a boar, the deity drew the earth up with his tusk. ¹⁵

May Keśava protect you from everything. In the form of Nṛsiṃha—half-man, half-lion—the lord tore apart the chest of his adversary with his claws. ¹⁶

May he protect you always—he, who, as the dwarf, paced out the threefold world with three heroic strides in just one moment, his weapon glinting. ¹⁷

May Govinda protect your head, Keśava your neck, Viṣṇu your genitals and belly and Janārdana your legs and feet. ¹⁸

May eternal and irresistible Nārāyaṇa protect your head, your upper arms and forearms, your mind and all your senses. ¹⁹

May any ghosts, kūṣmāṇḍas or rākṣasas who trouble you meet their doom when struck by the blast of the conch sounded by the lordly wielder of the bow, the mace and discus. ²⁰

May Vaikuṅṭha protect you at the cardinal points, and Madhusūdana at the points between. May Hṛṣīkeśa protect you in the sky, and Mahīdhara on earth.¹ ²¹

Parāśara:

After the cattle-herder Nanda blessed the child with this benediction, he laid him in a cot beneath a wagon. ²²

1 The commentators do not remark on the apparent incongruity of invoking Viṣṇu in any of the above incarnations to protect Kṛṣṇa—already a form of the deity.

The other herdsmen, staring at the giant form of Pūtanā now lying dead, were filled with horror and amazement. 23

So ends Chapter Five in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

6. Kṛṣṇa's childhood

Parāśara:

One day, Madhusūdana, lying beneath the wagon and crying for the breast, kicked his legs about. 1

But when his feet touched its timbers, the wagon tipped and landed upside down, smashing all the pots and other vessels that it carried. 2

All the herding men and women cried in anguish, brahmin, and, rushing to him, saw the infant in his cot. 3

‘Who tipped the wagon?’ asked the herdsmen. ‘That baby,’ said some children in reply. 4

‘We heard him crying, then he kicked the wagon with his feet, but no-one else has touched it.’ 5

The herdsmen were all filled with wonder. Most surprised of all was Nanda, who lifted up the child. 6

Yaśodā then made an offering to the wagon and the broken pots with yoghurt, flowers, fruit and grains. 7

Without the knowledge of the herdsmen, Vasudeva later sent the priest named Garga to carry out the birth rites for both infants in the camp. 8

Prudent Garga, foremost of the wise, chose their names and called the elder Balarāma and the other Kṛṣṇa. 9

Before too long, these two boys were crawling round the cattle camp, brahmin, with scratches on their hands and knees. 10

They roamed about in dung and ashes, but neither Yaśodā nor Rohiṇī could restrain them. 11

First, they played in the cowstall and then in the nursery pen, where they amused themselves by pulling the tails of the day-old calves. 12

Yaśodā couldn't keep those feisty, fun-filled boys in place. 13

So she tied Kṛṣṇa to a heavy wooden mortar with a rope around his middle, and in frustration scolded the lively child: *14*

‘Now let’s see if you’ll escape,’ she said as she resumed her chores. ‘You’re just too active!’ *15*

While Yaśodā was busy with her duties, the lotus-eyed boy dragged the mortar between two *arjuna* trees. *16*

As he pulled the weight along, it lodged between the trunks, whose branches stretched towards the skies. Both trees toppled over! *17*

Hearing the mighty crash, the residents of the camp rushed up and saw the two huge *arjunas*. *18*

Their trunks were broken and branches shattered, lying on the ground. The boy, whose smile was bright with new milk teeth, sat between the fallen trunks, the cord still tied around his middle. *19*

And so they called him Dāmodara, because he had a rope (*dāman*) around his waist (*udara*). *20*

All the elder herdsmen, with Nanda at their head, were troubled and conferred together, fearing some evil presence. *21*

‘We can’t stay here. Let’s find another forest. We’ve seen many evil omens that portend our doom: *22*

The death of Pūtanā, the upturned wagon, now these trees have fallen without a breath of wind. *23*

Let’s move at once from here to Vṛndāvana, before this local evil presence ruins our camp.’ *24*

So saying, all the residents of the camp agreed to leave and instructed every family to depart without delay. *25*

A short time later, the herdsmen left with all their cattle and their wagons, with one child per herd to mind the calves. *26*

Before long, the campsite, strewn with disused chattels, brahmin, was left to crows and vultures. *27*

Untiring Lord Kṛṣṇa, wishing only for the increase of the herd, set his joyous mind on Vṛndāvana. *28*

For there, even in the harshest heat, best of brahmins, fresh grass flourishes everywhere, as in the rainy season. *29*

Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa roam the Vṛndāvana forest

In Vṛndāvana, they set up camp and placed the wagons in a crescent round its edge. ³⁰

Now that Balarāma and Dāmodara were a little older, they tended all the calves together and stayed within the camp itself, intent on childish games. ³¹

They added peacock feathers to their wreaths of forest flowers, playing tunes on rustic flutes, homely tambourines and instruments made from leaves. ³²

Their hair was trimmed in ‘crow’s-wing’ style, and they looked like sons of Agni as they roamed and laughed and played in that great forest.² ³³

At times they joked together, at times they played with others. Roving with the herdsmen’s sons, they led the calves to pasture. ³⁴

With the passage of time, by the age of seven, these two universal lords ruled the calves in the cattle camp. ³⁵

When the annual rains arrived, the sky was filled with thunderclouds, binding together all four quarters as if with torrents of rain. ³⁶

Abounding in fresh green grass and dotted with sturdy herdsmen, the earth resembled an emerald field spread with reddest rubies. ³⁷

The river waters burst their banks and flowed in all directions, like minds of fickle folk overwhelmed by newfound wealth. ³⁸

The unstained moon then lost its gleam, concealed by lowering clouds, just like the words of truthful men amid the din of fools. ³⁹

Indra’s bow, although unstrung, still found a place in heaven, like a worthless hanger-on in the court of a feckless king.³ ⁴⁰

Cranes shone in pure formations against the clouds, just as the ways of well-bred folk contrast with those of rogues. ⁴¹

Fickle lightning flashed inconstant in the sky, like the friendship of a scoundrel with a man of virtue. ⁴²

Paths overgrown with mats of grass were difficult to follow, like the twisted arguments of fools. ⁴³

2 Monier-Williams (1899): ‘*kākapakṣa m.*, “crow’s wing”, sidelocks of hair on the temples of young men (three or five locks on each side left when the head is first shaved and allowed to remain there, especially in persons of the military caste).’

3 There is a nice pun in this verse: *nirguṇa* means both ‘unstrung’ and ‘worthless’.

During that season, in the mighty forest, home to frenzied bees and peacocks, Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma, filled with joy, roamed together with the other lads. 44

At times those two enjoyed a song while wandering happily with the cows; at others, when the days were cold, they'd shelter beneath the trees. 45

At times they wore *kadamba* garlands, at others peacock feathers. Sometimes they daubed themselves with coloured minerals brought from distant mountains. 46

Sometimes, feeling weary, they slept on beds of leaves. At others, on hearing a peal of thunder, they'd cry out in surprise. 47

Sometimes they praised the cowherds' songs, and played their rustic flutes accompanied by peacocks. 48

In these varied states and filled with purest joy, the two boys roamed to their hearts' content while playing in the forest. 49

When dusk approached, these two strong lads returned to camp at leisure together with the herds and other boys. 50

There, like a pair of deities, they romped amid the cowherd folk. 51

So ends Chapter Six in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

7. Kṛṣṇa subdues the serpent Kāliya

Parāśara:

One day, leaving Balarāma in the camp, Kṛṣṇa went to Vṛndāvana. Surrounded by the herding boys and wearing a splendid garland of forest flowers, he roamed about at will. 1

Now, Kṛṣṇa came to the Yamunā, filled with swirling streams. Its banks lay hidden under drifts of foam, and the laughter of its currents seemed to mock the world around. 2

There, he beheld the frightful pool where the nāga Kāliya lurked, with flames and poison rising from its horrid depths. 3

Mighty trees on the riverbank were scorched by fire and venom spewing from the pool. Its waters, whipped up by winds, touched passing birds and scalded them. 4

Seeing that terrifying pool, gaping like a second maw of Death, Lord Madhusūdana reflected: 5

‘This must be the lair of wicked Kāliya, whose weapon is his poison. Last time I beat this evil beast, it left the sea and disappeared.’⁴ 6

He’s so defiled the Yamunā, consort queen of Sāgara, that neither thirsty man nor beast can drink from it. 7

Let me slay this nāga king, so residents of the cattle camp may roam here happily forever. 8

I descended to the world of men to pacify such wicked beings that take the path of evil. 9

That *kadamba* tree with its strong limbs is not too far away. I’ll climb up it, then dive into the serpent’s pool.’¹⁰ 10

Parāśara:

With this thought, he tightened his waistband, then leapt at once into the watery lair of the nāga king. 11

That huge lake was set in motion by his dive, and its waters even splashed the trees standing at a distance. 12

Blasted by the wind and water heated by the energy of the serpent’s virulent poison, those trees burst into flame at once, and the conflagration spread to the horizon. 13

Now Kṛṣṇa was in the nāga’s pool, he clapped his hands. On hearing this, the serpent king then rushed towards him. 14

His raging eyes gleamed like copper, his many hoods ablaze with venom, as other slithering poisonous snakes surrounded him. 15

Hundreds of his nāga wives, adorned with gorgeous strings of pearls, their loveliness enhanced by the shaking of their earrings, swayed their trembling bodies. 16

The serpents coiled themselves round Kṛṣṇa and struck him with their fangs that dripped with fiery poison. 17

4 The commentators explain that this happened during an earlier avatāra when Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa appeared as Garuḍa.

When the other cowherds saw that he had dived into the pool and the serpents' coils now held him, they were filled with terror and ran shouting back to camp. 18

The cowherds:

'Kṛṣṇa's mad! He's jumped into Kāliya's pool! The serpent king has eaten him! Come and see!' 19

Hearing these cries, which struck them like a thunderbolt, the herding men and women, with Yaśodā in the lead, rushed down towards the pool. 20

'No, no! Where is he now?' the herdsmen's wives cried out in anguish. Together with Yaśodā, they stumbled forward in a panic. 21

Nanda, with the other herders and Balarāma of great prowess, rushed towards the Yamunā in the hope of seeing Kṛṣṇa. 22

There they found him, captive of the nāga king, wrapped within the serpents' coils, yet Kṛṣṇa offered no resistance. 23

The herdsman Nanda stood quite still and fixed his gaze on Kṛṣṇa's face, best of brahmins, as did Yaśodā, that most fortunate of women. 24

The other herders' wives looked on and wept in terror, crying out their love for Keśava, their voices choked with fear: 25

'Let's all jump in the nāga's pool with Yaśodā. There's no point in going back to camp. 26

What's the day without the sun? What's night without the moon? What are cows without a bull? What's the camp without our Kṛṣṇa? 27

We won't return to camp without him. Like a lake without its water, the forest has lost its charm. 28

Hari shines with loveliness like the petal of an azure lily. We're amazed that anyone could savour life without him. 29

If we poor creatures cannot see him, his eyes as bright and charming as the petal of a fully opened lotus, how will we survive in camp? 30

We won't go back to Nanda's camp without that lotus-eyed boy who steals the treasure of our hearts with his sweet, sweet words. 31

See his face, you cowherd women. Even though the nāga king has wrapped him in his coils, he's still smiling in our direction.' 32

Parāśara:

Hearing the women's words, Balarāma, sturdy son of Rohiṇī, looked with steady gaze upon the herdsmen, who were stiff with fear, 33

And on Nanda, sunk in deepest misery while staring at his son, and on Yaśodā, who'd fallen in a swoon. Then, conscious of his brother's actual greatness, he spoke these words to Kṛṣṇa. 34

Balarāma:

Why, lordly god of gods, did you adopt this human form? Don't you know your real self is endless and immortal? 35

You are the navel of the world, as a hub is to the spokes. You are the threefold creator, preserver and destroyer of the triple realm. 36

The Ādityas, along with Indra, Rudra, the Aśvins, Vasus and the Winds and Fires, all contemplate you, whose true self is beyond conception, as do all the yogins. 37

For the benefit of all, universal Lord, you descended here among these mortals, because you wished to ease the burden of the earth, and I, your elder brother, am but an aspect of you. 38

While you disport yourself as mortal, Lord, all the other deities imitate your pastimes. 39

First you caused the goddesses to descend here to the cattle camp to join your games, and then you, eternal Lord, appeared. 40

As we've manifested here, these herdsmen are our relatives, Kṛṣṇa, as are their despairing wives. Why disdain our kinfolk so? 41

You've shown the marks of a mortal being, and you've had your boyish fun. Now, Kṛṣṇa, you must destroy this wicked sharp-toothed snake. 42

Parāśara:

Thus reminded of his actual nature, Kṛṣṇa began to smile. He clapped his hands and freed himself from the serpents' coils. 43

Pressing down upon the centre of Kāliya's hood with his two hands, then climbing on its lowered head, that valiant being began to dance upon it. 44

Wounds appeared on the serpent's hood where Kṛṣṇa's feet had struck it, but when Kāliya tried to raise his head, Kṛṣṇa forced it down again. 45

When Kṛṣṇa danced the *recaka*, the nāga swooned and swayed, and when he did the *daṇḍapāta*, the snake began to vomit blood.⁵ 46

Seeing his head and neck both broken as blood streamed from his jaws, Kāliya's women came to Madhusūdana to beg for his protection. 47

The nāga's wives:

We know you, lordly god of gods. You are the peerless lord of all, the highest god, whose aspect is the finest light beyond imagination. 48

Even the deities cannot fully praise the lord who arises from no other. How, then, could women like ourselves describe him? 49

How can we fully praise him, when all the cosmic egg, comprising earth and sky, water, fire and wind, is but one small aspect of one part of him? 50

We bow to him whose form is endless, the highest goal, smaller than the smallest, larger than the largest, whom feckless beings strive in vain to comprehend. 51

No-one brought about his birth, and none will bring him to an end. We bow to him as he's the single author of the world. 52

You are not subject to the slightest anger and are protector of creation. You are the cause of Kāliya's downfall, so listen now to what we say. 53

Wise men should treat all women gently; even fools are kind to animals. Have mercy, therefore, on this miserable being, as you are the most merciful of all. 54

You are the foundation of all the world, and this hooded snake is weak. In half a moment he'll breathe his last, trampled by your feet. 55

What's this poor snake compared to you on whom the world relies? Love and hate are for one's equals or one's betters, eternal Lord. 56

Show mercy to these desperate beings, master of the universe. This nāga's on the verge of death. We're begging for our husband. Please let him go! 57

5 There is much inconclusive discussion in the commentaries about these two dance forms.

Kāliya worships Kṛṣṇa

Parāśara:

After they had spoken and, encouraged by their words, the serpent, his body broken, softly begged the lord to spare him. 58

Kāliya:

Eightfold sovereignty is yours, Lord, self-arisen and supreme. Stripped of my magnificence, how may I presume to praise you? 59

You are supreme and supreme's beginning, and from you supreme arises. You are supreme beyond supreme. How may I presume to praise you? 60

From you arose Brahmā, Rudra, the Moon and Indra, the Winds and Aśvins, the Vasus and Ādityas. How may I presume to praise you? 61

This whole world is but one part of a part of you and is an aspect of just one aspect of your imaginings. How may I presume to praise you? 62

You whose form is both existent and nonexistent: neither Brahmā nor the other thirteen deities know your highest essence. How may I presume to praise you? 63

Brahmā and other divine beings honour you with flowers and lotions from Indra's heaven, Nandana. How may I presume to worship you? 64

Indra, king of gods, always reveres your varied appearances, yet even he knows not your highest form. How may I presume to worship you? 65

Ascetics who've withdrawn their senses from all external objects worship you with thought. How may I presume to worship you? 66

They create your image in their hearts and worship you in meditation with offerings of mental states and flowers. Lord, how may I presume to worship you? 67

I'm unfit to honour or to praise you, blessed god of gods. As your mind is filled with tenderness alone, be merciful to me. 68

I was born in this cruel class of serpents, Keśava. It's my way, eternal Lord, I've done no wrong. 69

This whole world was made by you, and you will absorb it. You are the one who fixed the nature of every class of being. 70

Just as I was made by you, Lord, in this class and form, I was yoked with this same nature and acted as I did. 71

If my conduct were any different, god of gods, then I'd deserve your punishment, just as you commanded. 72

I'd happily endure such trials as the universal lord might wreak on me, as I'd wish for nothing else from you. 73

You've robbed me of my prowess and my venom. You've vanquished me, unfailing Lord. Now spare my life and I shall do your bidding. 74

The Lord:

You may dwell no longer in the waters of the Yamunā, serpent. Go to the ocean and take your minions and your kinsfolk with you. 75

Your enemy Garuḍa will not attack you, nāga, when he sees my footprints on your head. 76

Parāśara:

So saying, Lord Hari freed the serpent king. He bowed to Kṛṣṇa, then set off for the ocean. 77

With his servants, kin and offspring and all his wives in train, the serpent left his pool behind, while all creation looked on. 78

After Kāliya had departed, all the herdsmen hugged Govinda as if he had returned from death, anointing his head with teardrops streaming from their eyes. 79

Amazed to see the waters of the river clear again, the delighted herders all praised Kṛṣṇa, whose actions never tire him. 80

Eulogised by herding women and praised by herdsmen as they walked along, Kṛṣṇa, whose behaviour tends to kindness, approached the cattle camp. 81

So ends Chapter Seven in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

8. Balarāma defeats Dhenuka the Donkey-Demon

Parāśara:

One day while tending cows together, Balarāma and Keśava, wandering in the forest, came to the pleasant grove of Tālavana. 1

A Dānava named Dhenuka had occupied that grove and, taking on a donkey's form, fed on flesh of man and beast. 2

Seeing Tālavana filled with masses of ripe coconuts, the hungry herdsmen urged the boys to fetch some down for them. 3

The herdsmen:

Balarāma! Kṛṣṇa! Because this place is always watched by Dhenuka, the coconuts are ripe. 4

See the fruit on those palm trees that fill the air with scent? We'd love to get our hands on them. Throw some down for us, if you don't mind. 5

Parāśara:

Having heard the herding boys' request, Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa threw some coconuts to the ground for them. 6

But that wicked donkey-demon, dangerous to approach, heard the sound of falling fruit and rushed towards the spot. 7

With his hind legs, that mighty being kicked Balarāma in the chest, but the lad grabbed hold of them. 8

Holding tight, he whirled the donkey in the air and spun the life right out of him. With one last heave, he threw the demon up a tree. 9

Its body struck the palm and caused a shower of coconuts, just as strong winds drive the clouds along. 10

Other donkey-demons, relatives of Dhenuka, then appeared, but Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa playfully threw them on the palm trees, too. 11

Soon the ground was spread with fruit, Maitreya, and was resplendent with donkey-demon corpses. 12

From that day forward, brahmin, the cattle, safe and happy, grazed at Tālavana as they never had before. 13

So ends Chapter Eight in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

9. Balarāma destroys Pralamba the Cowherd-Demon

Parāśara:

When that donkey-demon and his ilk were overcome, the pleasant Tālavana grove regained its splendour and was enjoyed by cattle, herding men and women. 1

Having slain the Daitya Dhenuka, the sons of Vasudeva, filled with joy, next ventured to the banyan tree called Bhāṇḍīra. 2

There they jumped and sang and explored the tree, while grazing their cattle near and far, calling to each beast by name. 3

With spare lead ropes on their shoulders and garlands of forest flowers, those two great beings looked wonderful, like two young bulls with new-grown horns. 4

Their clothes were dusted gold and kohl like a pair of clouds—one white, one black—with a rainbow spread between them. 5

These two lords of all the gods, appearing on the earth, wandered here and there, enjoying common pastimes. 6

Delighting in their mortal state and honouring their humanity, they roamed about the forest, indulging in the games that boys enjoy. 7

These two strong lads exercised by playing on swings, wrestling and heaving boulders. 8

While they amused themselves like this, a demon named Pralamba, disguised as a herding boy, approached to seize the lads. 9

That Pralamba, best of Dānavas, inhuman being in human form, fearlessly joined the boys. 10

He tried to separate the two, but, finding that impossible, decided to kill Kṛṣṇa first and then to kill his brother. 11

The lads arranged themselves in pairs to play a game called ‘Catch the deer’, in which one boy chased another. 12

Govinda took after Śrīdāman, Balarāma chased Pralamba and all the other herding lads joined in. 13

Kṛṣṣṣa caught his quarry, as did the son of Rohiṣṣṣī, till all the ‘deer’ were caught by Kṛṣṣṣa’s team. 14

Then the losers had to bear their captors on their shoulders to the banyan tree and back. 15

The Dānava quickly lifted Balarāma and put him on his shoulders. Pralamba then ran off, resembling a cloud surmounted by the moon. 16

Rohiṣṣṣī’s son was too heavy for that best of Dānavas, so the demon grew in size, like a cloud in the rainy season. 17

Seeing Pralamba towering like a mountain peak burned black by fire, adorned with swaying garlands and a diadem on his head, 18

His fearsome eyes as wide as wagon wheels and shaking the earth with every step, Balarāma called to Kṛṣṣṣa as he was borne away: 19

‘Kṛṣṣṣa, Kṛṣṣṣa! I’ve been captured by some Daitya in a cowherd’s guise. He’s as lofty as a mountain. Look! 20

You killed the demon Madhu, now tell me what to do. This wicked creature’s running off so fast.’ 21

Kṛṣṣṣa reminds Balarāma of his divine nature

Parāśara:

Knowing Rohiṣṣṣī’s son was strong and brave, great Govinda addressed him with a smile. 22

The Lord:

Why do you—the heart of all creation and hidden secret of every mystery—seem to cling to human form? 23

Remember, Lord of all the world, that I, the universal cause, and you, my elder brother, are really one, just as everything is merged when the world becomes one ocean. 24

Don’t you know that you and I are the single universal cause, come down to earth to ease its burden? 25

Your head is sky and your body water. Your feet are earth and your mouth is fire, everlasting being. Your mind is the moon and your breath is wind. The four directions are your arms, eternal god. 26

You are the great being with a thousand faces, hands, feet and bodies. You are the primal source from which a thousand Brahmās rise, and sages praise you in a thousand forms. 27

No-one else can know your heavenly form, the appearance praised by all the gods. Don't you know that, in the end, all things will be absorbed by you? 28

This world, supported by you whose form is endless, bears all things moving and unmoving. In the form of Time, beginning with minutes and divided into Kṛta and other ages, you consume the world. 29

The fires that burn beneath the waves drive off the ocean's water.⁶ This water falls as snow in the Himālaya and melts again beneath the solar rays. 30

In that same way, this world, absorbed by you at the time of dissolution, inevitably becomes the world again through your creative effort, Lord. 31

You and I, universal being, are the single cause of all this world and took on separate forms to benefit it. 32

For this reason, boundless being, remember now your actual self and destroy this Dānava. Lay aside your mortal form and do your kin a favour. 33

Parāśara:

Thus reminded by great Kṛṣṇa, mighty Balarāma gave a laugh, brahmin, and began to squeeze Pralamba. 34

His eyes were red with rage as he struck Pralamba on the head, and the demon's eyes popped out. 35

With his skull cracked open and blood gushing from his mouth, that Daitya hero fell down dead. 36

Seeing Pralamba slain by Balarāma of wondrous deeds, the delighted herdsmen sang his praises. 'Well done, well done!' they cried. 37

Now the demon Pralamba had been defeated, Balarāma, praised by herders, returned with Kṛṣṇa to the camp. 38

So ends Chapter Nine in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

6 Submarine fire, one of the five forms of Agni, remains hidden under the sea and is always ready to destroy the world.

10. Autumn in the cattle camp

Parāśara:

While Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma thus whiled away the time in camp, the rainy season passed and autumn came with lotuses in bloom. 1

The fishes in the smaller ponds began to feel the heat, like selfish householders concerned about their sons, their fields and all the rest. 2

Peacocks stood in silence in the forest, their passion spent, like ascetics who've realised the futility of life. 3

Having shed their showers, pure white clouds then fled the sky, as enlightened beings set out from home. 4

Warmed by the rays of the autumn sun, the lakes dried up, like hearts of selfish beings beset by many cares. 5

The autumnal pools proved fit for silver waterlilies, just as hearts of virtuous folk are ready for understanding. 6

The full moon shone in a star-filled cloudless sky, like an ascetic whose final birth is in a noble family. 7

The water in the reservoirs receded from the banks, just as the wise inevitably withdraw from selfish attachment to wives and sons and others. 8

Wild geese returned to lakes they'd previously deserted, just as troubles come again to haunt false ascetics who are beset with obstacles. 9

The ocean's tranquil waters grew even calmer, like the ascetic's steady heart, which slowly reaches union with the lord. 10

The waters everywhere grew clear, like wise minds realising Viṣṇu's universal nature. 11

The sky grew bright when autumn drove away the clouds, like ascetics' hearts when yogic fire has burned all their defilements. 12

The moon dispelled the sun's hot rays, just as true discernment drives off suffering born of selfishness. 13

Autumn drew the clouds from the sky, the moisture from the soil and the turbidity from the water, just as the practice of withdrawal retrieves the senses from their objects. 14

The waters rose, peaked and fell again as if the lakes controlled their breath each day: inhaling, holding and exhaling.⁷ 15

When the constellations reappeared in the cloudless sky above the cattle camp, Kṛṣṇa beheld the residents planning a great festival for Indra. 16

Seeing the herdsmen keenly preparing for this event, and being curious, that wise being addressed these words to the elders: 17

‘What’s this so-called festival of Indra that is causing such excitement?’ Nanda the herdsman gave this reply as Kṛṣṇa asked politely: 18

‘Indra is the lord of thunderclouds and rains, the king of gods and deity of a hundred sacrifices. Urged by him, the clouds release the essence of life in the form of showers. 19

We and other living things subsist on crops brought forth by rain, and it’s we who feed the gods. 20

These dairy cattle and contented cows with calves are satisfied and nourished with the feed the rain provides. 21

Wherever rain-filled clouds are seen, the earth will not be lacking grain or pasture, nor will people suffer hunger or other woes. 22

Indra, who gives the rain, draws up water from the earth with the sun’s own rays. Parjanya sends it down again as showers to benefit the world. 23

That’s why every joyful king worships the lord of gods with festivals in the rainy season, as do we and other people.’ 24

The herders worship Mount Govardhana

Parāśara:

Hearing the herdsman Nanda praising mighty Indra, Kṛṣṇa then said this to goad the king of thirteen gods: 25

‘We don’t plough the earth, nor do we live by trade. Cattle are our deities, dear father, because we’re forest nomads. 26

7 This is a liberal interpretation. The Sanskrit says: ‘Breath control, consisting of *pūraka*, *recaka*, *kumbhaka* and the rest, was seemingly practised by the waters of lakes.’ *Pūraka* is the filling of the lungs, *kumbhaka* is the holding of the breath and *recaka* is exhalation. Water levels rise during the rains, remain high at the onset of autumn, but fall again as the weather begins to warm up.

Knowledge has four branches: logical, scriptural, political and practical. Listen while I describe the last: 27

Farming, trade, with herding as the third—these three modes of life comprise the field of practical knowledge, fortunate man. 28

Agriculture is the life of farming people, as trade is that of merchants, but cattle are our main concern. Such are the three forms of this field of knowledge. 29

The branch of knowledge by which one lives should be one's first divinity. That branch alone deserves our praise and honour, as only it will succour us. 30

One who reveres or benefits from a different branch, dear father, will find no prosperity in this world or in the life hereafter. 31

The margins stretch beyond the fields; beyond the margins lie the forests. Beyond the forests rise the mountains, the furthest limit of our realm. 32

We don't live behind closed doors, nor do we own fields or houses, but roam freely across the earth. 33

It's said these mountains can choose any shape at will and, in such forms, disport themselves among the peaks and in this very woodland. 34

If forest-dwelling folk offend them, mountains take the form of lions or some other beast and kill them. 35

That's why we should sacrifice to mountains and to cattle. What does mighty Indra mean to us? Cattle and these ranges are our deities! 36

Brahmins sacrifice with mantras, and farmers worship ploughs. It's natural for folk like us who depend on highlands and forests to worship hills and cattle. 37

For this reason, having sacrificed a fitting beast, you should praise and honour Mount Govardhana in various ways according to the precepts. 38

Take the milk produced by this whole herd without delay and offer it to brahmins and others who desire it. 39

When oblations have been made and brahmins fed, then decorate the herds of cows with wreaths of autumn flowers and circumambulate them. 40

That's my suggestion, and, if you herdsmen do this gladly, you will please the cattle, mountains and myself.' 41

Parāśara:

Hearing this, brahmin, Nanda and the other herdsmen in the camp cried, ‘Good idea, good idea!’, as their faces beamed with joy. 42

‘My dear boy, you’ve made a wonderful suggestion. We’ll do all that you’ve put forward. Let’s conduct a mountain sacrifice!’ 43

Parāśara:

And so the residents of the camp performed a mountain sacrifice and made an offering of yoghurt, milk and meat. 44

They also offered food to brahmins by the hundreds and the thousands. 45

Next, they walked around the mountain and the cows that had been worshipped, while all the bulls began to bellow like rain-filled thunderclouds. 46

On the mountain summit, Kṛṣṇa himself declared, ‘I’m this mountain in bodily form’, brahmin, and joined the splendid feast offered by the herding women. 47

In that very form, Kṛṣṇa, accompanied by the herdsmen, ascended to the summit, where he worshipped his second self. 48

After he withdrew from sight, the herders then received great boons, and, when the festival was over, they all returned to the cattle camp. 49

So ends Chapter Ten in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

11. Kṛṣṇa raises Mount Govardhana

Parāśara:

Mighty Indra, furious that his festival had been abandoned, Maitreya, addressed a host of rainclouds called Saṃvartakas. 1

‘Come, come, you clouds, and listen to my words. You must follow my instructions without question or delay. 2

The herder Nanda is a fool and, along with other herdsmen, has a bloated sense of his importance, protected as he is by Kṛṣṇa, and now he’s stopped my festival. 3

Those cattle are their treasured means of livelihood, and that’s what makes them herdsmen. I order you to strike their cattle with a tempest. 4

Riding on my elephant, towering like a mountain peak, I'll help by bringing wind and rain.' 5

Parāśara:

Thus commanded by the king of gods, brahmin, the clouds released a dreadful storm to annihilate the cattle. 6

In an instant, heaven, earth and all between, sage, were beset by a mighty deluge and became as one. 7

The clouds roared out as if they feared a whipping from the lightning bolts, filling all directions with their thunder and hurling down their torrents. 8

The earth grew dark as endless showers fell. Above, below and on all sides, this whole world was inundated. 9

Stricken by the sudden gale that fell on them, the cattle's hips and legs and necks gave way, and some of them then breathed their last. 10

Others stood in anger with their calves beneath their bellies, sage, yet others lost their young when swept away by floods. 11

Miserable calves, bellowing piteously and shivering in the wind, seemed to softly cry to Kṛṣṇa, 'Save me, save me!' 12

Seeing the cattle and the herding men and women of the camp in chaos, Maitreya, Hari was deeply troubled and reflected: 13

'This must be Indra's doing. He's irked because his festival was abandoned. Now it's up to me to save them all. 14

I'll raise this mountain steadily, a mass of solid rock, and hold it above the cattle pen like a huge umbrella.' 15

Parāśara:

With this thought, Lord Kṛṣṇa raised Mount Govardhana with just one finger, holding it aloft with ease. 16

The lord of all the world, with the mountain above his head, said to the herdsmen: 'Come to the shelter I've provided. 17

Sit here in comfort. It's not windy. Come in. Don't worry. There's no chance the hill will fall.' 18

Hearing this, the herders sheltered with their cattle and their laden wagons, as well as all the women who'd been drenched. 19

Kṛṣṇa held that mountain steadily while all the cattle camp looked on; their eyes were filled with pleasure and amazement. 20

The joyful herding men and women, thrilled and wide-eyed with affection, praised Kṛṣṇa's efforts as he held that mountain high. 21

For seven nights, those giant clouds rained down on Nanda's cattle camp to annihilate the herdsmen, brahmin—all at Indra's urging. 22

But as the camp was safe beneath the lifted mountain, Indra, destroyer of the demon Bala, failing to fulfil his promise, then told the clouds to cease. 23

When the sky grew clear again and Indra's threat was proven hollow, the whole delighted cattle camp left the shelter of the mountain and returned to their locale. 24

Kṛṣṇa then placed Govardhana on its old foundations, as the residents of the camp looked on with wonder in their eyes. 25

So ends Chapter Eleven in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

12. Indra praises Kṛṣṇa

Parāśara:

After Kṛṣṇa raised the hill and saved the cattle camp, Indra, subduer of the demon Pāka, now desired to see him. 1

Mounted on Airāvata, his mighty elephant, the lord of thirteen deities and conqueror of his foe found Kṛṣṇa on Govardhana. 2

There, mighty Kṛṣṇa, herdsman of the universe in the form of a common herding boy, grazed his cows alongside other lads. 3

Far above, Indra also saw Garuḍa, chief of birds, invisible to mortals, brahmin, shading Hari's head beneath his wings. 4

Mighty Indra descended from the regal elephant and, standing to one side, smiled as he spoke to Kṛṣṇa, slayer of the demon Madhu, with affection in his eyes. 5

Indra:

Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa! Hear why I have come to you. Otherwise, blessed being, you'll never guess the reason. 6

A powerful Daitya known as Kaṁsa, one called Ariṣṭa and others such as Keśin, Kuvalayāpīḍa and Naraka— 21

When all these demons have been slain, king of gods with a thousand eyes, there will be a mighty conflict, during which, you'll understand, the burden of the earth will be relieved. 22

Go now, worry not about your son. No enemy will prevail while I stand before him. 23

For the sake of Arjuna, when the Bhārata war is ended, I'll restore to Kuntī all her sons unharmed, with Yudhiṣṭhira at their head. 24

Parāśara:

Hearing this, Indra, king of gods, embraced Janārdana, mounted his elephant Airāvata and ascended to heaven. 25

Kṛṣṇa, together with the cows and other herdsmen, then returned to camp along a path rendered pure by the herding women's gaze. 26

So ends Chapter Twelve in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

13. Kṛṣṇa delights the herding women

Parāśara:

After mighty Indra had departed, and having witnessed Kṛṣṇa, untouched by deeds, holding Govardhana aloft, the herdsmen addressed him lovingly: 1

‘When you lifted up the mountain, fortunate being, you saved us and our cattle from disaster. 2

You made it look like child's play, but it was no deed a cowherd boy could do. It was a supernatural feat! You must explain all this to us, dear boy. 3

Kāliya was killed in the lake, Pralamba was cast down and Mount Govardhana was raised. Our minds are filled with consternation. 4

Truly, truly, we swear an oath at Hari's feet, since we witnessed your prowess, we no longer consider you, whose courage is immeasurable, to be an ordinary mortal. 5

This whole camp, including all the women and the children, love you, Keśava. Even the thirteen deities couldn't do what you have done. 6

The bliss she felt in doing so released her from the faults that she'd acquired; her anguish at not seeing Kṛṣṇa freed her from her sins. 21

Contemplating the creator of the world in the form of the highest Absolute, another of the herders' girls won liberation just because she sighed so deeply. 22

Surrounded by the herding women, Govinda, eager to experience the joy of dancing in a ring, paid homage to the night rendered lovely by the autumn moon. 23

When Kṛṣṇa had slipped away, groups of women, acting out his movements with their bodies, roamed about the forest of Vṛndavāna. 24

'I'm Kṛṣṇa, so elegantly am I walking. Watch my gait!' said one, 'and listen to me sing his song.' 25

'Wicked Kāliya, stay where you are, for I am Kṛṣṇa!' another cried, waving her arms while acting out his encounter with that serpent. 26

Another said, 'Come, herdsmen, don't be frightened. You stay here. Don't fear the tempest. I'm holding up Govardhana.' 27

'I've defeated Dhenuka, now graze your cattle where you wish,' said another herding girl while aping Kṛṣṇa's deeds. 28

Thus, the herding women, intent on Kṛṣṇa's various acts, roamed together through Vṛndavāna's lovely woodlands. 29

One of the foremost herding girls looked at the ground, then cried aloud, as the hairs on every limb stood up and her lotus eyes grew wide: 30

'See this line of footprints marked with banner, thunderbolt, goad and lotus? They were made by Kṛṣṇa, his paces rendered lovelier by his games. 31

Some lucky girl, drunk with passion, has gone with him. Her steps were short and stumbling. 32

Here's where great Dāmodara picked some flowers while standing on his toes. 33

She was seated over there when Kṛṣṇa placed the garland on her. In another life she must have worshiped Viṣṇu with all her heart. 34

Once honoured with the garland, she grew proud. Look! The herder Nanda's son deserted her and set off by another path. 35

Tiring of the circle dance, one herding girl, her bracelets tinkling, laid her slender arm on Madhu's slayer's shoulder. 52

Another of the herding girls, slyly pretending to sing his praises, grabbed him by one arm and kissed him. 53

Beads of sweat from Hari's limbs, falling on the cowgirls' faces, caused the down upon their cheeks to rise, just as rain brings forth the crops.⁸ 54

While Kṛṣṇa sang the song of the circle dance in a clear, clear voice, the women cried out twice as loud, 'Well sung, Kṛṣṇa! Well sung!' 55

When he led, they followed; when he turned, they moved to face him. When he danced to left or right, the women matched his every step. 56

While Madhu's slayer played among the herding girls, one moment seemed ten million years without him. 57

Even though their husbands, fathers and brothers forbade it, that night the girls enjoyed themselves with Kṛṣṇa; they all loved making love. 58

Madhusūdana, a being beyond all limits and descriptions, enjoyed himself without restraint in youthful guise among the cowgirls on those nights. 59

In his universal form, the lord pervaded them, their husbands and all creation, just as air is everywhere. 60

This whole world consists of fire and space, earth and air and water. In that same way, he is all-pervading and ubiquitous. 61

So ends Chapter Thirteen in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

14. Kṛṣṇa slays Ariṣṭa the Bull-Demon

Parāśara:

As Janārdana enjoyed the circle dance one night, the furious bull-demon Ariṣṭa came to terrorise the camp. 1

As dark as rain-filled thunderclouds, his horns were sharp, his eyes ablaze like the sun itself and, with his hooves, he rent the earth. 2

He smacked his tongue against his lips and flicked his tail in fury, his shoulders strongly knit together. 3

8 This verse required a considerable amount of reworking. The original reads: 'Hari's arms, coming into contact with the girls' cheeks, attained the condition of sweat-rainclouds that bring forth body-hair crops.'

The great hump upon his back was tall beyond any measure, his hind limbs were covered with muck as he terrorised the cows. 4

His dewlap hung below his mighty jaw and his face was scarred from butting trees. In bovine form, this Daitya caused the cows to cast the young ones from their wombs. 5

The peerless beast laid waste to forests with his energy as he roamed. 6

Beholding this creature with such terrifying eyes, the herders and their womenfolk, overcome with fear, cried, 'KṚṣṅa! KṚṣṅa!' 7

Keśava gave his lion's roar and clapped his hands. Hearing this, the beast raced forward to face Dāmodara. 8

The wicked bull-demon lowered his horns, fixed his eyes on KṚṣṅa's belly and charged towards him. 9

Seeing the Daitya bull approaching, mighty KṚṣṅa stood his ground and smiled at him with playful disrespect. 10

Madhu's slayer, like a crocodile, seized the bull as he drew near and, holding him steady by the horns, kneed him in the abdomen. 11

KṚṣṅa pinned him down, snapped the pride and strength of his two horns, then wrung Ariṣṭa's neck like some wet rag. 12

KṚṣṅa then tore out one horn and beat the Daitya with it. The bull fell down and died at once, blood gushing from his mouth. 13

When this Daitya had been slain, the herdsmen all praised Janārdana, as in former times the hosts of gods praised Indra of a thousand eyes for killing the demon Jambha. 14

So ends Chapter Fourteen in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṅu Purāṇa.

15. Kaṁsa sends Akrūra to the cattle camp

Parāśara:

After Ariṣṭa the hump-backed bull was slain, Dhenuka overthrown, Pralamba led to death and Mount Govardhana raised, 1

The nāga Kāliya vanquished, the tall trees felled, Pūtanā killed and the wagon overturned, 2

Nārada informed Kaṁsa of all of these events in order, and that the infants of Yaśodā and Devakī had been exchanged. 3

Hearing this from Nārada, the sage with divine perception, wicked Kaṁsa was furious with Vasudeva. ⁴

At a meeting of the Yādava clan, filled with fury, he threatened and reproached the clansmen, then pondered his next move: ⁵

‘I’ll kill Balarāma and his brother while they’re young and weak, because it won’t be possible when they’ve come of age. ⁶

Mighty Cāṇūra and powerful Muṣṭika are here. I’ll have them kill those two young fools in a wrestling match. ⁷

Under the pretext of some great tournament, I’ll invite them from their cattle camp, then I’ll do what’s needed to send them to their doom. ⁸

I’ll dispatch Śvaphalka’s son Akrūra, that bull among the Yādavas, to their camp to fetch them here. ⁹

Then I’ll send an order to Keśin, the terrible beast who roams Vṛndāvana. He’s strong enough to kill the two boys there. ¹⁰

If those sons of Vasudeva make it here alive, the elephant Kuvalayāpīḍa will trample them to death.’ ¹¹

Parāśara:

With this thought, wicked Kaṁsa resolved to kill Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa. He then addressed heroic Akrūra: ¹²

Kaṁsa:

Come, my generous man, and do as I command. You’ll be doing me a favour. Take a chariot and ride to Nanda’s cattle camp. ¹³

Both of Vasudeva’s evil sons, Viṣṇu’s aspects born for my destruction, are maturing there. ¹⁴

On the fourteenth day this month, I’ll hold a tournament here. Go to the camp and invite them to a wrestling match. ¹⁵

My two wrestlers, Cāṇūra and Muṣṭika, are skilled in combat. I want everyone to watch the two boys fight with them. ¹⁶

If they fail, the elephant Kuvalayāpīḍa, urged forward by his driver, will crush Vasudeva’s two young wicked sons. ¹⁷

I’ll kill them first, then I’ll get rid of Vasudeva and that wicked-minded herder Nanda, as well as Ugrasena, my own father, who’s just as bad. ¹⁸

Next I'll seize the herders' cattle and all their other property. Those upstarts want me dead. 19

Except for you, my generous man, all these evil Yādavas detest me, so I'll kill them one by one. 20

With your assistance, I'll then rule this whole domain, rid of the prickly Yādavas. Your love for me will take you there, brave man. 21

And tell the herdsmen to bring me all their yoghurt and buffalo butter. 22

Parāśara:

On hearing this command, Akrūra was filled at once with love for Kṛṣṇa, brahmin, knowing that the next day he would see him. 23

Akrūra, assenting to the king's request, mounted a splendid chariot. Then that friend of Madhu set out from the city of Mathurā. 24

So ends Chapter Fifteen in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

16. Kṛṣṇa slays Keśin the Horse-Demon

Parāśara:

At the urging of a messenger sent by Kaṁsa, mighty Keśin approached Vṛndāvana with the aim of killing Kṛṣṇa. 1

Rending the surface of the earth with his hooves, scattering the clouds with a flick of his mane, at each leap, he transcended the orbits of the sun and moon as he charged towards the herdsmen. 2

At the sound of the neighing of that horse-demon, the herders and their womenfolk, filled with terror, fled to Govinda for protection. 3

Hearing their cries for help, Govinda reassured them with a voice as deep as thunder from a rain-filled cloud. 4

The Lord:

'Have no fear of Keśin, herdsmen. Have you cattle-folk, overcome with terror, lost your valour? 5

Enough of this weakling who relies on whinnies, a steed with a Daitya's strength, a wicked prancing pony! 6

Come here, you wretch. I'm Kṛṣṇa and I'll knock the teeth right out of your jaw, just as Pināka-wielding Śiva did to Pūṣan.' 7

So saying, Govinda clapped his hands and advanced on Keśin. The horse-demon charged at him, his mouth agape. 8

Janārdana bent his arm and thrust it down the throat of Keśin, that evil steed. 9

Kṛṣṇa's arm, now deep inside the horse's mouth, smashed his teeth, which tumbled out like wisps of snowy cloud. 10

Inside Keśin's body, Kṛṣṇa's arm began to grow, brahmin, like a plague that's in its early stages, in order to destroy the demon. 11

Keśin's lips were split in two, foaming blood gushed from his mouth, his eyes rolled back and both popped out, and then his ligaments gave way. 12

Shitting and pissing, he pawed at the earth with his hooves. His limbs were drenched with sweat and, at last, when quite exhausted, he gave up the fight. 13

That terrible demon, his mouth rent open by Kṛṣṇa's arm, fell to the ground like a tree that's struck by lightning. 14

Each half of Keśin's body, torn in two, had one pair of legs, half a back, half a tail, one ear, one eye and a single nostril. 15

After Kṛṣṇa killed the demon, the delighted herdsmen gathered round him as he stood there smiling, unwearied and unscathed. 16

The herding men and women, amazed at Keśin's death, praised lotus-eyed Kṛṣṇa, whose affection brought them pleasure. 17

Then spoke the brahmin Nārada, unseen while riding on a cloud. Having seen the death of Keśin, his heart was filled with pleasure. 18

'It's excellent, excellent indeed, that you, eternal lord of all, slew this Keśin so easily. He brought such woe to denizens of the threefold heavens. 19

I always love a spectacle, especially a contest between man and horse. Such a match has never taken place before, so I came from heaven just to see it. 20

I'm amazed by the feats that you've performed since coming down to earth, Madhu's slayer, but this one gave me greatest satisfaction. 21

Even Indra and the other gods all feared this beast, Kṛṣṇa, when he shook his mane, neighed and looked down from the clouds. 22

Because you slew this wicked Keśin, Janārdana, you'll be called by the name of Keśava throughout the world. 23

May all be well with you. I'll be on my way, but we'll meet again when you battle Kaṁsa in two days' time, Keśin's slayer! 24

When Kaṁsa son of Ugrasena and his ilk have all been killed, you, foundation of the universe, will ease the burden of the earth. 25

I'll witness many varied contests, Janārdana, between you and other kings. 26

I'll be going, Govinda. Your great deeds befit the gods, and I am pleased with you. All the best. I really must be off.' 27

After Nārada had departed, Kṛṣṇa, unsurprised, returned to camp with the other herders—sole object of the cowgirls' gaze. 28

So ends Chapter Sixteen in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

17. Akrūra arrives at the cattle camp

Parāśara:

Akrūra set off on his swift chariot for Nanda's camp, eager for the sight of Kṛṣṇa. 1

'No-one is luckier than I,' he thought, 'as I'll behold this being's face, an aspect of discus-wielding Viṣṇu come to earth. 2

Today, my life is now worthwhile and night has dawned as day, because I'll see the face of Viṣṇu, whose eyes are like a full-blown lotus petal. 3

I'll behold the face of Viṣṇu, who dispels the sins of those who call the lotus-eyed being to their hearts. 4

I'll behold his blessed face, supreme abode of all the gods, from which the Vedas, Vedāṅgas and their supplements arose. 5

I'll behold the universal lord, who is praised by men as the spirit of every sacrifice, the highest spirit and foundation of the world. 6

I'll behold Keśava, who has no start or finish, and to whom Indra made a hundred sacrifices and thereby came to rule the gods. 7

Hari, whose true form is known to neither Brahmā, Indra, Rudra, the Aśvins, Vasus, Ādityas, nor the host of Maruts, will touch my body. 8

He who is at the heart of all, knows all, is all, abides in all and is extensive, unchanging and pervasive will speak to me. ⁹

The birthless being, who took the form of fish, tortoise, boar, horse, lion and the others to preserve the world, will speak to me today. ¹⁰

And now the everlasting master of the universe, who adopts all forms at will, has taken on a mortal body to undertake the duty closest to his heart. ¹¹

That eternal being, who placed the universe upon his crest, has come to earth to benefit the world and will call on me by name. ¹²

I bow to him who appears in forms of father, son, friend, brother, mother and kin—an illusion all the world cannot dispel. ¹³

When Viṣṇu fills his heart, the ascetic abandons deepest ignorance and delusion. I bow to the immeasurable being, the heart of knowledge. ¹⁴

I bow to him whom sacrificers call the spirit of the sacrifice; whom devotees call Vāsudeva. Those who know the Vedāntas call him Viṣṇu. ¹⁵

Just as all the world abides in its creator as a refuge, by that same truth, may the existent and nonexistent being be merciful to me. ¹⁶

I take refuge in the birthless, everlasting Hari, the spirit in whom every joy arises when remembered. ¹⁷

Parāśara:

With these thoughts of Viṣṇu, and bowing in devotion with his heart and soul, Akrūra reached the cattle camp just as the sun was setting. ¹⁸

There he beheld Kṛṣṇa, as the cows were being milked, wandering among the calves, as beautiful as the petal of an azure waterlily in full bloom. ¹⁹

His eyes were unstained lotus petals, his bosom displayed Śrīvatsa, his arms were long, his chest was broad and muscular and his nose was high. ²⁰

A pleasant smile graced his handsome features, his fingernails were long and rosy, his feet were planted firmly on the ground. ²¹

He wore two yellow garments and adorned himself with forest flowers. His arms resembled smooth dark vines, and he wore a circlet of silvery waterlilies. ²²

9 This mention of a horse avatāra is curious. Usually the fourth avatāra is said to be Vāmana the dwarf. On the Hayaśiṛṣa/Hayagrīva avatāra, see *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (2.7.11 and 5.18.6).

Akrūra, delighter of the Yadus, saw Balarāma, snowy as a wild goose, jasmine flowers or the moon, brahmin. Clad in blue, he stood at Kṛṣṣṣa's side. 23

His arms were long and his shoulders broad, his face like a lotus in full bloom. Balarāma was a second Kailāsa wreathed in clouds. 24

Seeing these two, wise Akrūra, whose face was like an open lily, spoke, while the hairs on his whole body bristled with excitement, sage: 25

‘This is that supreme abode. This is that highest state. This is the twofold manifestation of Lord Vāsudeva. 26

Now that they've beheld the foundation of the world, my two eyes are here fulfilled in the highest measure. Would not this body of mine be satisfied, if, by the mercy of the lord, he were to touch me? 27

Would not this being who appears in endless glorious forms place his lotus-hand upon my back? The touch of his fingers removes all stains and imparts unending perfection. 28

That hand laid down his cruel and dreadful discus, wreathed with the brilliance of lightning, fire and sun combined, which destroyed the forces of the Daitya lord and robbed the makeup from their women's eyes. 29

Having made an offering of water to that hand, Bali experienced exquisite pleasures in this world, as well as immortality and sovereignty over thirteen gods, unchallenged, for a whole Manvantara. 30

But won't this being regard me as an object of contempt, stained with infamy, on account of my relationship with Kaṃsa, even though I'm blameless? A curse on the life of virtuous men unfairly treated! 31

And yet, what in this world is unknown to him who is knowledge itself, the totality of pure truth, untouched by faults, always manifest and who dwells in all men's minds? 32

With a heart that's filled with faith, I'll approach the universal lord of lords, Viṣṣṣṣu's aspect come to earth, the highest spirit who has no start, no middle or conclusion.' 33

So ends Chapter Seventeen in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṣṣu Purāṇa.

18. Kṛṣṇa sets out for Mathurā

Parāśara:

With these thoughts, the Yādava approached Govinda. ‘I am Akrūra,’ said he, and bowed his head at Hari’s feet. 1

Kṛṣṇa touched Akrūra with his hand marked with banner, thunderbolt and lotus, drew him close with love and hugged him warmly. 2

Akrūra duly honoured Balarāma and Keśava. The happy youths then led him to their own abode. 3

Accompanied by the pair, Akrūra received their reverence and accepted food to eat. He then duly spoke with them. 4

Akrūra told them how their father, Vasudeva, and Princess Devakī had been abused by Kaṁsa, the wicked Dānava, 5

And how that evil being had mistreated his own father, Ugrasena. Akrūra then explained the reason Kaṁsa sent him. 6

Having listened carefully to his report, the lord, Keśin’s slayer, said, ‘All this is known to me already, you generous man. 7

I’ll do what I regard as fitting in this case, you fortunate being. Don’t think it could be otherwise. Understand that Kaṁsa is already slain by me. 8

I’ll go with you and Balarāma to Mathurā tomorrow, and the elder herdsmen will follow us with many offerings. 9

Spend the night here, hero. Do not worry. Within three days, I’ll vanquish Kaṁsa and his ilk.’ 10

Parāśara:

Having told the other herdsmen of this plan, Akrūra, Keśava and Balarāma retired to sleep in the home of the herdsman Nanda. 11

In bright morning light the following day, wise Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma, accompanied by Akrūra, prepared to leave for Mathurā. 12

Seeing this, the tearful herding women, their bracelets slipping from their arms, with deep sighs and wracked with pain, cried to one another: 13

‘Once Govinda reaches Mathurā, why would he return to camp? His ears will love the city women’s sweet and artful talk.’ 14

‘Once he’s heard the brilliant conversation of the ladies in the town, will his mind return to rustic cowgirls?’ 15

‘Robbing us of Hari, the pride of all the camp, accursed Fate has dealt us herding women a cruel blow.’ 16

‘The city women’s banter is graced with telling smiles, their gait is elegant and charming, and they always make those amorous sidelong glances.’ 17

‘Once this Hari, a simple rustic youth, is ensnared by their elegance, what reason would he have to return to us?’ 18

‘This—this Keśava has climbed into a chariot to go to Mathurā, deceived by cruel and desperate Akrūra.’ 19

‘That callous being is carrying off our Hari, who brings such pleasure to our eyes. Does he not know how much we love him?’ 20

‘It’s heartless of Govinda to mount this carriage and leave with Balarāma. Quick, let’s stop him!’ 21

‘We should tell the old folk first.’ ‘What would you say?’ ‘We can’t do that.’ ‘What can elders do for us, burning with the pain of separation?’ 22

‘The herdsmen led by Nanda are preparing to depart. Not one of them is trying to stop Govinda.’ 23

‘This day dawns bright for the womenfolk of Mathurā, as their eyes as black as any row of bees may imbibe the lotus-face of that eternal being.’ 24

‘Fortunate are those who follow Kṛṣṇa unhindered on the path. Beholding him, their bodies will bristle with delight.’ 25

‘The sight of Govinda’s limbs today will provide a feast for the eyes of Mathurā’s inhabitants.’ 26

‘What dreams will greet those lucky girls when they rest their lovely almond eyes on Kṛṣṇa unimpeded?’ 27

‘Sadly, having shown this greatest treasure to the gaze of us cowherd women, hard-hearted Brahmā, arranger of the universe, deprives us of this sight again.’ 28

‘Just as Hari’s love for us is cooler now that he is leaving, our bangles are slipping from our arms.’ 29

‘As cruel Akrūra urges the horses forward, does no-one feel compassion for us women in distress?’ 30

‘See the dust thrown up by Kṛṣṇa’s chariot wheels.’ ‘We can’t even see the dust. He must be far away.’ 31

Akrūra’s vision of Viṣṇu in the river

Parāśara:

So Keśava and Balarāma left the region of the camp, while the broken-hearted herding girls looked on. 32

Proceeding in the chariot drawn by swiftest horses, Balarāma, Akrūra and Janārdana reached the Yamunā’s banks at noon. 33

There Akrūra said to Kṛṣṇa, ‘You two wait while I perform my daily ritual for the river in its waters.’ 34

With their agreement, wise Akrūra bathed and rinsed his mouth, then waded into the Yamunā, brahmin, where he meditated on the highest Absolute. 35

Below the surface of the waters, Akrūra beheld Balarāma in the form of Śeṣa, circled by a thousand shining hoods, his body white as jasmine and his ruddy eyes like petals of a newly wakened lotus.¹⁰ 36

Flanked by Vāsuki, Rambha and other powerful serpents, he wore a chaplet of forest flowers, while gandharvas sang his praises. 37

Clad in two dark garments, a necklace of lovely waterlilies and a pair of gorgeous earrings, he appeared beneath the waters, drunk with joy. 38

Reclining on the serpent’s lap, Akrūra beheld Viṣṇu, dark as thunderclouds, his almond eyes like copper and his noble four-armed form resplendent with his discus and other weapons. 39

Clad in golden garments and decked with varied garlands, he resembled a cloud adorned with Indra’s bow and a diadem of lightning. 40

With Śrīvatsa on his chest, Kṛṣṇa shone with splendid bracelets, crown and lotus wreaths, as he appeared to be at rest. 41

Sanandana and other sages, accomplished in yoga and free from faults, their eyes fixed on their noses, stood about him contemplating. 42

10 Balarāma’s ultimate form is the divine serpent Śeṣa, Viṣṇu’s attendant. I have added and reordered some phrases for clarity.

Seeing Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa in these forms, Akrūra was astonished and wondered how they got there from the chariot so quickly. 43

Before he was able to say a word, Janārdana silenced him, so Akrūra left the river and went back to the carriage. 44

There he beheld Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa in mortal form still seated in the chariot as before. 45

Akrūra plunged back in the river, where he saw them underwater, still worshipped by the gandharvas, sages, siddhas and mighty serpents. 46

Realising the actual nature of the everlasting lord, all knowledge's embodiment, generous Akrūra eulogised him: 47

Akrūra:

I bow to you, whose form is existence alone, whose greatness is beyond conception, the all-pervasive highest spirit, whose forms are one and many. 48

I bow to you, being beyond all contemplation, in the form of truth and essence of the sacrifice. I bow to you, Lord, whose form is inconceivable, and who lies beyond primeval nature. 49

You are at the heart of all creation, the senses and primal matter. You are the Self and the highest Self. You are one in fivefold form. 50

Take pity on me, universal heart of all, the deity who embodies both the permanent and the transient, whether you are addressed as forms of Brahmā, Viṣṇu or Śiva. 51

Your true form cannot be named, nor can your purpose be described. Your true name cannot be spoken. I bow to you, almighty Lord. 52

You, Lord, have no name, no birth or other attributes. You are *tat*—‘that’, the highest Absolute, eternal, unchanging and unborn. 53

Because we cannot reach our goals without conceptions, you are worshipped with the names of Kṛṣṇa, Acyuta, Viṣṇu and Ananta. 54

You are every object, birthless deity, of these conceptions. You are the beginning, all the world and everything. The heart of all, you are beyond all changes and existence. There's a part of you in all this world. 55

You are Brahmā, Śiva, lord of beasts, and Aryaman, arranger, disposer, Indra lord of thirteen gods, Wind and Fire. You are Varuṇa, lord of waters, and Kubera, god of wealth. You alone are Death who brings an end to all. For varied goals, you protect the world with all these different powers. 56

In the form of a solar ray, you brought forth the universe. This whole world consists of your own qualities, birthless deity. Your highest form is signified by the everlasting syllable *sat*—‘existence’. I bow to that being at the heart of knowledge, who exists and is yet beyond existence. 57

Om! I bow to you as Vāsudeva and as Balarāma. I bow to you as Pradyumna and as Aniruddha.¹¹ 58

So ends Chapter Eighteen in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

19. Kṛṣṇa slays the washerman and blesses the garland-maker

Parāśara:

Having thus praised Viṣṇu appearing in the waters, Akrūra, scion of the Yādavas, made a mental offering to the universal lord with flowers and with incense. 1

Free from all distractions, his mind set on the deity, he tarried long in the presence of the Absolute, then drew his meditation to a close. 2

Having done the necessary, that prudent individual rose from the waters of the river and walked back to the chariot. 3

Seeing Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa seated as before, his eyes filled with astonishment. Kṛṣṇa then said to him, 4

‘You must have seen some prodigy in the waters of the Yamunā, Akrūra, since your eyes are wide with wonder.’ 5

Akrūra:

The prodigy in the waters that I beheld, eternal Lord, I now see standing here before me in mortal form. 6

Now I’ve met you, Kṛṣṇa, the greatest prodigy of all, the mighty being whose wondrous form fills all the world. 7

But enough of this. Let’s proceed to Mathurā, Madhusūdana. But I’m afraid of Kāṁsa, as the life of one who lives on charity is cursed. 8

11 This is the fourfold emanation or *caturvyūha* of Pañcarātra theology (Austin 2019: 14, 27).

Parāśara:

So saying, Akrūra urged the horses forward, faster than the wind, and they reached the city late that very night. 9

Seeing Mathurā, the Yādava said to them, ‘You two brave boys proceed on foot. I’ll ride the chariot alone. 10

But don’t approach the home of Vasudeva, as Kaṁsa banished that old man on your account.’ 11

Parāśara:

With these words, Akrūra entered Mathurā, while Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa followed him on foot along the royal road. 12

Men and women, filled with joy, beheld the heroes as they strode along with ease, entering the city like a pair of youthful elephants. 13

While wandering, they came upon a washerman dyeing clothes and, with a smile, they asked for something nice to wear. 14

The startled washerman was arrogant because of Kaṁsa’s favour and loudly cursed the lads. 15

With a single blow, Kṛṣṇa, enraged, struck off that wicked dyer’s head, which fell upon the ground. 16

Having slain him, the two boys helped themselves to clothes. Kṛṣṇa in yellow and Balarāma in blue, filled with joy, then approached a garland-maker’s home. 17

That person’s eyes were widened with astonishment as he wondered whose sons they were and whence they came, Maitreya. 18

Seeing the handsome lads in blue and yellow, he thought that they were deities come down to earth. 19

When the boys, whose faces shone like blooming lotuses, asked him for some flowers, the garland-maker placed his hands upon the ground and pressed his forehead to the earth. 20

‘I’m fortunate that you two gracious masters have visited my home. I worship you,’ said the florist to the boys. 21

Then, with a cheery smile, to please the boys, he gave them each the finest flowers that they chose. 22

Again and again, the garland-maker bowed down to those two outstanding beings and gave them garlands, fresh and fragrant. 23

Kṛṣṇa was pleased with the florist and granted him a boon: ‘Prosperity, which flows from me, will never leave you, my good man. 24

Nor, my friend, will you lack strength or prosperity. As long as one day follows another, your lineage will endure. 25

After you’ve indulged in every pleasure and your end is nigh, by my mercy, recalling me, you’ll attain a heavenly realm. 26

Your mind will always dwell on virtue, good fellow, and all your offspring will enjoy long lives. 27

Those born in your family will not endure disease or other woes, you lucky man, as long as the sun will shine.’ 28

Parāśara:

So saying, Kṛṣṇa, worshipped by the garland-maker, best of sages, left his house with Balarāma. 29

So ends Chapter Nineteen in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

20. Kṛṣṇa in Mathurā; The wrestling bout; Kāṃsa’s demise

Parāśara:

Approaching on the royal road, Kṛṣṇa then saw a young woman with a crooked spine bearing a jar of massage oil. 1

‘Who are you carrying this lotion for, young girl with lotus eyes? Tell me truly,’ Kṛṣṇa asked in fun. 2

Thus addressed affectionately, the girl warmed to Hari at first sight, and light-heartedly replied, 3

‘Don’t you know, you handsome man? I’m called Naikavakrā. I’m employed by Kāṃsa as his masseuse. 4

He doesn’t like the lotion mixed by anybody else, and I’ve made a lot of money thanks to him.’ 5

Glorious Kṛṣṇa:

This fine and fragrant lotion suits the king, you pretty girl. But it's also good for us, so give us some. 6

Parāśara:

Hearing this, the girl replied, 'Help yourself', and respectfully gave them enough for two. 7

Having then applied the oil, these two bulls of men, whose bodies bore the marks of gods, glowed like rain-filled clouds—one white, one black—both graced with rainbows. 8

Śūra's scion Kṛṣṇa, master of flattery, then took the girl by the chin and lifted her with his two fingertips. 9

Pressing down her feet with his own, Keśava drew her up, thus stretching out her spine. As soon as her back was straight again, she became the handsomest of women. 10

With amorous flirtations and languor born of love, she took hold of Govinda's robe and said, 'Come back to my place.' 11

'Some other time,' replied Hari with a smile, and sent her on her way. Seeing the look on Balarāma's face, Kṛṣṇa laughed aloud. 12

With marks of godhood on their bodies and wearing garments of blue and gold, still adorned with finest garlands, the two young men next reached the hall of archery. 13

There they asked the guards about a mighty bow called Āyogava, the 'Iron Cow'. On being told about it, Kṛṣṇa then raised the bow and drew it to its full extent. 14

On account of his great strength, when he did so, the bow snapped in two and that retort filled all of Mathurā. 15

The guards reproached the boys for what they'd done, but ignoring them, the two youths left the hall behind. 16

Kṛṣṇa defeats the elephant and the wrestlers

When Kaṃsa heard that Akṛūra had returned and learned the bow was broken, he summoned his two wrestlers, Cāṇūra and Muṣṭika. 17

Kaṃsa:

‘The cattle-herder’s sons are here. I want them killed in a match before my eyes, as they’re my mortal enemies. 18

I’d be pleased if you can kill them in a contest. I’ll give you anything you want, you mighty wrestlers, but not otherwise. 19

Destroy those enemies of mine, by any means foul or fair, and, when they’re dead, I’ll share this realm with you.’ 20

After he’d given this order to the wrestlers, he summoned his elephant-driver and shouted this instruction, ‘Take the elephant to the entrance of the wrestling arena. 21

When the two herding boys reach the gate for the contest, I want Kuvalayāpīḍa to trample them to death.’ 22

Having given this command, and seeing all the seating was in place, Kaṃsa, whose death was near at hand, now waited for the sun to rise. 23

The residents of the city filled the stands, and the king and his ministers took the dais reserved for them. 24

Kaṃsa sent the referees to the middle of the arena, while he himself sat high on the viewing platform. 25

Separate seating was arranged for palace women, for courtesans and townsmen’s wives. 26

Nanda and the herders were given other seats, while Akrūra and Vasudeva sat at the end of the benches. 27

Among the townsmen’s wives sat Devakī, who yearned for Kṛṣṇa: ‘Even if he’s killed, I’ll see my son’s fair face again.’ 28

When the music first began and Cāṇūra leapt up, the crowd let out a roar as Muṣṭhika clapped his hands. 29

The mahout drove Kuvalayāpīḍa towards the boys, but they slew the beast. With limbs now smeared in musth and blood, they armed themselves with tusks. 30

Balarāma and Janārdana then strode into that arena, looking round with proud and jaunty glances, like a pair of lions amid a herd of deer. 31

The astonished crowds in all the stalls at once let out a mighty cry: ‘That’s Kṛṣṇa, and that’s Balarāma!’ 32

The onlookers:

‘He’s the one who killed that fearsome night-ranging Pūtanā, overturned the wagon and snapped the *arjuna* trees. 33

He’s the boy who danced on the serpent Kāliya and held up Mount Govardhana for seven nights. 34

He’s the great being who easily slew wicked Ariṣṭa, Dhenuka and Keśin. Look! He’s Acyuta, the imperishable deity. 35

And that’s strong-armed Balarāma, his elder brother, proceeding with ease in front of him, delighting the hearts and eyes of all the girls. 36

The wise who know the gist of ancient texts say the herdsman KṚṣṅa will raise the declining clan of Yādava once more. 37

He’s Viṣṅu’s aspect, the ultimate origin of all creation, descended to the world to ease the burden of the earth.’ 38

When people spoke of Balarāma and KṚṣṅa in this way, Devakī’s bosom swelled with pride and her two breasts flowed with milk brought forth by love. 39

For Vasudeva, seeing the faces of his sons was cause for celebration and, shrugging off the years, he grew young once more. 40

The palace women couldn’t draw their eyes from KṚṣṅa, nor could the crowd of townsmen’s wives: 41

‘Look at KṚṣṅa, friends, whose eyes are red, whose face is flecked with beads of sweat from the effort of fighting off the elephant. 42

It’s like a blooming autumn lotus, bejewelled with drops of dew. Give your present life some meaning and look at him!’ 43

‘Look, my dear, at that young man’s broad chest marked with Śrīvatsa, and those two arms with which he crushed his enemies.’ 44

‘Can’t you see Balarāma approaching, dressed in blue, his face as white as jasmine, the moon or fibres of a lotus stalk?’ 45

‘See, my friend, how Balarāma laughs in the face of prancing Muṣṭika and Cāṅūra.’ 46

‘Look, friends, Hari approaches Cāṅūra for a fight. Are no elders here to referee the match? 47

On one side is Hari, whose tender form is on the verge of youth, while on the other is this mighty demon, with a muscled body, hard as diamonds.’ 48

‘These two lovely lads are already on the field, and the demon wrestlers led by Cāṇūra will show no mercy. 49

The judges of the spectacle have made a big mistake in permitting referees to oversee this match between an adult and a child.’ 50

Parāśara:

While the palace women and townsmen’s wives were saying this, Lord Hari tightened his waistband and jumped upon the ground, causing it to tremble. 51

When Balarāma clapped his hands and leapt about in play, it was a miracle the earth didn’t crack beneath his feet. 52

Then Kṛṣṇa, whose prowess was immeasurable, fought Cāṇūra, while the demon Muṣṭika, himself a skilful wrestler, battled Balarāma. 53

Hari and Cāṇūra fought together, each seizing then releasing the other, with throws and blows of elbows, fists and forearms. 54

Dire indeed was the bout between them, kicking one another, their bodies intertwined. 55

That terrible hand-to-hand combat was vicious and, as the excited crowd looked on, both life and strength were jeopardised. 56

The longer Cāṇūra fought with Hari, the more his initial strength began to ebb. 57

But Kṛṣṇa, the essence of the world, wrestled him as if in play. The wreath on Cāṇūra’s head began to slip as weariness set in, yet still he fought. 58

Seeing Cāṇūra weaken as Kṛṣṇa grew ever stronger, furious Kaṃsa brought the music to a stop. 59

The instant that the drums and other instruments fell silent, all kinds of heavenly music sounded in the sky. 60

‘Victory to Govinda! Defeat the demon Cāṇūra, Keśava!’ cried the joyous gods unseen. 61

Having toyed with Cāṇūra for a while, Madhu’s subduer raised him in the air, spun him round and prepared to end his life. 62

Victorious Kṛṣṇa whirled the demon wrestler round a hundred times then dashed him to the ground, and Cāṇūra's life force ascended to the sky. 63

The demon's body, cast down by Kṛṣṇa, broke into a hundred pieces and made the earth a red and bloody mire. 64

Balarāma, at that same time, fought the mighty demon wrestler Muṣṭika, just as Hari wrestled Cāṇūra. 65

Balarāma struck his rival on the head, kneed him in the chest, threw him to the ground, then crushed the life right out of him. 66

Next, with a blow of his left hand, Kṛṣṇa struck mighty Tośalaka, king of wrestlers, felling him to the ground. 67

When Cāṇūra had been slain, Muṣṭika overthrown and Tośalaka put to death, all the other wrestlers fled. 68

Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma then pulled other boys their age on to the field, where they danced for joy. 69

Kaṃsa is overthrown

Kaṃsa's eyes were red with rage as he shouted to his lackeys, 'Take those herding boys away where the public cannot see them, using force if necessary. 70

Bring that wicked Nanda here in iron chains and put Vasudeva to death—a fate too good for that old man. 71

Confiscate the cows and any other property belonging to the herders who are dancing here with Kṛṣṇa.' 72

As Kaṃsa was issuing these commands, Madhu's subduer gave a laugh, leapt up on the dais and smartly seized the king. 73

Kṛṣṇa knocked the crown from Kaṃsa's head, dragged him by the hair, then threw him to the ground and jumped on top of him. 74

When Kṛṣṇa leapt on Kaṃsa with the weight of the universe, Ugrasena's royal son gave up the ghost. 75

Mighty Madhusūdana then took Kaṃsa's body by the hair and dragged it to the middle of the field. 76

Because of its great weight, the corpse, when drawn along by Kṛṣṇa, left behind a channel as if cut by the current of a mighty river. 77

When Kṛṣṇa first seized Kaṁsa, his brother Sunāman rushed forward angrily, but was dispatched with ease by Balarāma. 78

Seeing the king of Mathurā killed with such contempt by Kṛṣṇa, everyone in the arena let out a cry of anguish. 79

Strong-armed Kṛṣṇa, accompanied by Balarāma, immediately touched the feet of Vasudeva and of Devakī. 80

Lifting up Janārdana, his parents recalled what he had said to them at birth and bowed before him. 81

Vasudeva:

Lord, be merciful. You grant the wishes of the gods when they're despondent, Lord. So, too, through your mercy for us, Keśava, you became upholder of the world. 82

Because the blessed lord appeared for the destruction of the wicked in my home, our family has been purified. 83

You are at the heart of every creature and abide in them. Both past and future emanate from you, the heart of everything. 84

You are always honoured with the sacrifice and embody all the deities, eternal being. You alone are the sacrifice and sacrificer, highest lord of sacrifices. 85

My mind was playing tricks when Devakī and I loved you like a son—a grave misjudgement. 86

How improper that my mortal tongue might call you, creator of all creatures with neither start nor finish, 'son'. 87

How can it be fitting, other than by illusion, that he from whom this world arises, the universal lord, was born to us? 88

How can he, in whom this world of moving and unmoving things abides, first lying in a womb, then be born to mortals? 89

Be merciful, highest Lord. Protect the world by manifesting aspects of yourself. You're no son of mine. Why delude this whole world, from Brahmā down to the merest tree, Lord, when it comes from you, heart of the highest spirit? 90

Because my eyes were clouded by illusion, I regarded you as my own son. Fearing Kaṁsa, and overcome by dread, I took you to the safety of the cattle camp where you grew up. Lord, I no longer claim you as my own. 91

The deeds of yours we witnessed could not be done by Rudra, the Maruts, the Aśvins or by Indra, for you are Viṣṇu, Lord, come for the benefit of the worlds. Now we understand this, our delusions are dispelled. 22

So ends Chapter Twenty in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

21. Ugrasena is reinstated

Parāśara:

Now that Devakī and Vasudeva's insight had been awakened, having seen the exploits of the lord, Hari covered them again with his illusion to deceive the Yadu clan. 1

'Dearest mother, dearest father,' said he, 'Balarāma and I have always looked on you with love, but we were fearful of Kaṁsa. 2

Decent folk regard the lives of those who live without respect for parents as deficient and in vain. 3

But, father, the lives of those who respect their guru, gods, the twice-born orders and their parents are fulfilled. 4

Forgive us, therefore, for all that we have done in error, father, as we were subject to Kaṁsa's will on account of his temper and his power.' 5

Parāśara:

So saying, both Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma duly honoured the Yadu elders according to their station, then paid respects to all the other townsfolk. 6

Kaṁsa's wives, surrounding his corpse upon the ground, bewailed him, and pain and grief overwhelmed his mothers. 7

Hari, filled with deep regret, sought to comfort them, as tears were streaming from his eyes. 8

Madhu's subduer then set Ugrasena free, and, now that his son Kaṁsa was no more, he was anointed sovereign of the realm again by Kṛṣṇa. 9

After Kṛṣṇa had enthroned him, the lion of the Yadu clan then held funerals for his own son and the others who'd been slain. 10

When the rites had been completed and Ugrasena returned to his lion throne, Hari said to him, 'Your majesty, surely you should tell us what to do. 11

Because of Yayāti's curse, this clan deserves no sovereignty, but while I'm at your service, you may rule the gods, not to mention other kings.¹² 12

Parāśara:

After he had spoken, Kṛṣṇa summoned Vāyu with a thought, and the wind god came at once. Lord Keśava in human guise addressed him: 13

‘Go to Indra, Vāyu, and tell that chief of Vasus to set aside his pride. He should give his assembly hall that’s known as Sudharmā to Ugrasena. 14

Tell him Kṛṣṇa says Sudharmā is a peerless gem that suits a king. It’s fitting that the hall becomes the Yadu clan’s.’ 15

Parāśara:

Hearing this, the wind god went to Indra, Śacī’s husband, and relayed to him the message. Accordingly, Indra, destroyer of his rivals’ cities, gave the hall to Vāyu. 16

Vāyu then delivered it, sparkling with jewels of every kind, to the Yadu heroes, who enjoyed it, thanks to the might of Govinda’s arms. 17

Sāndīpani’s son is rescued

Those two peerless heroes of the Yādavas, who grasped each branch of knowledge and possessed all wisdom, wished to demonstrate the bond between the teacher and his pupil. 18

Accordingly, Balarāma and Janārdana called on Sāndīpani—born in Kāśī, but now residing in the city of Avantī—to learn the use of weapons. 19

Those two heroes became disciples and, intent upon the service of their guru, displayed the finest conduct in the presence of everyone. 20

Brahmin, it was a marvel that they mastered secret weapons, the science of archery and its use in battle in four and sixty days. 21

Sāndīpani, who thought such superhuman feats impossible, felt as if the sun and moon had come to him. 22

As they mastered every class of weapon as soon as they’d been taught, they asked what fee their guru might expect. 23

12 Yayāti’s son Yadu refused to exchange his youth for his father’s old age, so Yayāti cursed him that his descendants, the Yādavas, would never achieve sovereignty (4.10.7).

That wise man, having seen their supernatural feats, asked for his son who'd drowned at Prabhāsa in the ocean. ²⁴

The heroes took up their weapons, but the mighty Ocean, greeting them hospitably with water for their feet, said, 'It wasn't I who took the son of Sāndīpani. ²⁵

A Daitya named Pañcajana, appearing as a conch, has seized the boy. He still resides below my waters, demon slayer.' ²⁶

Parāśara:

Hearing this, Kṛṣṇa dived into the ocean, slew Pañcajana and seized his wondrous shell, as hard as bone. ²⁷

(When that conch is sounded, Daityas lose their strength, the ardour of the gods increases and evil is destroyed.) ²⁸

Hari blew a note on Pāñcajana, then, entering the city of the dead, accompanied by mighty Balarāma, defeated Yama, the Sun's own son. ²⁹

Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma, foremost of mighty warriors, saved the boy from that place of torment and gave him to his father in his original body. ³⁰

To the delight of Mathurā's men and women, they returned to that very city, now ruled by Ugrasena. ³¹

So ends Chapter Twenty-One in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

22. Kṛṣṇa battles Jarāsandha

Parāśara:

Mighty Kaṁsa married two of Jarāsandha's daughters, Maitreya: Asti and Prāpti. ¹

Jarāsandha, the powerful king of Magadha, was furious when Hari slew his daughters' husband, and set out with a mighty force to slay that scion of Yadu. ²

Reaching Mathurā, the lord of Magadha besieged the city with a force of twenty-three divisions.¹³ ³

13 One division or *akṣaubhīni* consists of 21,870 elephants, 21,870 chariots, 65,610 cavalry and 109,350 foot soldiers (Monier-Williams 1899).

Powerful Balarāma and Janārdana set out with a retinue to confront the force of Jarāsandha. 4

Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa made the wise decision to deploy their ancient weapons, best of sages. 5

That instant, Hari's bow, Śārṅga, and two inexhaustible quivers descended from the heavens, brahmin, as did his mace, Kaumodakī. 6

As soon as Balarāma called his blazing plough to mind, it, too, descended from the sky, brahmin, with his mace, Saunanda. 7

The pair of heroes overcame the king of Magadha and his army in that battle, then returned to Mathurā. 8

Wicked Jarāsandha had been vanquished, sage, but as he had escaped alive, Kṛṣṇa did not consider him defeated. 9

In fact, Jarāsandha returned with another force, best of brahmins, but was overcome again by Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa and escaped once more. 10

The doughty king of Magadha fought eighteen such battles with the Yadus led by Kṛṣṇa. 11

In each encounter, Jarāsandha was beaten by a smaller force of Yādavas, even though outnumbering them, but he always managed to escape. 12

The army of the Yādavas, unconquered by Jarāsandha in every clash, relied on Kṛṣṇa's greatness—an aspect of discus-wielding Viṣṇu. 13

To launch his varied weapons at a foe was just a game for the universal lord in mortal form. 14

How little effort is the conquest of an enemy for one who brings about creation and destruction of the universe through thought alone? 15

Nevertheless, he followed the usual practices of mortals, such as allying with the strong and waging war against the weak. 16

He also practised conciliation, bribery, punishment and subversion, and sometimes even took to flight.¹⁴ 17

Adopting all these strategies of mortal men, the universal lord engaged in games like these at will. 18

So ends Chapter Twenty-Two in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

14 These are seven traditional forms of warcraft described in works such as the *Artha Śāstra*.

23. Kṛṣṇa leads the Yādavas to Dvārakā

Parāśara:

At a public gathering one day, in the presence of the Yadu clan, the brahmin Gārgya's brother-in-law accused the man of impotence, and everybody mocked him, brahmin. 1

Gārgya was filled with rage and journeyed to the southern lands, where, desiring a son who could wreak revenge on the Yādavas, he undertook austerities. 2

To propitiate Lord Śiva, he lived on iron filings for a dozen years. That great god, being gratified, then granted him a boon. 3

The king of Yavanas, who also had no children, received Gārgya hospitably. The latter had intercourse with the king's own consort and she gave birth to a son as black as a bee. 4

Kālayavana or 'Black Yavana' was that child's name, and his chest was as hard as the tip of a thunderbolt. The Yavana lord anointed his son as king of the realm and then retired to the forest. 5

Maddened by pride in his own prowess, Kālayavana asked Nārada which were the mightiest kings on earth. 'The Yādavas,' was his reply. 6

Flanked by barbarians in the thousands of millions, in train with elephants, horses and chariots, and sparing no effort, 7

He advanced each day on Mathurā—tiring his transport, but not himself—indignant on the Yādavas's account, Maitreya. 8

Kṛṣṇa feared that if the Yādava force were weakened by the Yavanas in battle, they might then be defeated by the Magadha king. 9

But if the Yādavas were reduced by the Māgadhas, then the powerful Kālayavana might defeat them. Thus, the Yādavas faced a twofold threat. 10

'I'll build a stronghold for the Yadus that's difficult for their enemies to attack. It will be defensible by womenfolk alone, to say nothing of the heroic Vṛṣṇi tribe. 11

If I'm careless, asleep, abroad or drunk, even a mighty horde of wicked enemies won't be able to defeat them.' 12

With this in mind, Govinda asked the Ocean for twelve leagues of land, on which he built the city known as Dvārakā. 13

With extensive parks and lofty ramparts, it shone with a hundred reservoirs. Filled with residences and courtyards, it resembled Indra's city Amarāvātī. ¹⁴

Janārdana led the residents of Mathurā to Dvārakā, then returned to Mathurā, just as Kālayavana drew near. ¹⁵

When the latter's army was camped outside the city, Govinda came forth unarmed and saw the Yavana king. ¹⁶

The strong-armed monarch recognised Vāsudeva and pursued him, but Kṛṣṇa travelled faster than the greatest yogins' thoughts. ¹⁷

With the Yavana in pursuit, Kṛṣṇa entered a deep cavern where Mucukunda, that powerful hero and king of men, was sleeping. ¹⁸

The wicked Yavana entered the cave and saw the sleeping figure. Mistaking him for Kṛṣṇa, he gave the man a kick. ¹⁹

As soon as Mucukunda set eyes on him, the Yavana was burned by fire born of fury, Maitreya, and was reduced at once to ashes. ²⁰

(Long ago, Mucukunda had helped the gods defeat the mighty demigods in battle and, being fatigued, he asked the gods for the boon of a long repose. ²¹

The gods then promised that anyone who disturbed his rest would be burned at once to ashes by fire from his body.) ²²

After the wicked king was consumed by flames, Mucukunda beheld Madhu's subduer and asked him who he was. 'I was born in the Lunar Dynasty, as the son of Vasudeva, in the lineage of Yadu,' he replied. ²³

King Mucukunda worships Hari

Mucukunda then recalled an ancient prophesy of Garga. ¹⁵ ²⁴

With that recollection, he threw himself upon the ground and addressed these words to Hari, the universal lord of all: 'I know that you're an aspect of Viṣṇu, highest Lord. ²⁵

Long ago, Garga foretold that Hari would be born in Yadu's lineage at the end of the twenty-eighth Dvāpara age. ²⁶

You are the one who's come, no doubt, for the benefit of all mortal beings. ²⁷

15 A Garga was also the *purohita* or family priest of Vasudeva (5.6.8).

That's why I can't withstand your brilliance. That's why your voice is deeper than the rumbling of a rain-filled thundercloud. That's why the earth subsides when pressed beneath your feet. 28

In the great war between the gods and demigods, the mighty warriors of the Daitya army could not withstand my ardour, but even I'm unable to withstand yours. 29

You alone are the highest refuge for every being who has come into this world. Be merciful, ease the pain we suffer and deliver us from evil. 30

You are the oceans, mountains and the rivers. You are forests, earth and sky, wind and fire and water. You are mind. 31

You are intellect, the primal substance of the universe. You are breath and lord of life, the spirit and that which lies beyond, all-pervading, unchanging and unborn. 32

You transcend sensations such as sound, undecaying, immeasurable, imperishable, ageless and indestructible. You are that which is the Absolute, without a start or finish. 33

From you arise immortals, ancestors, yakṣas, gandharvas, kiṁnaras, siddhas and apsarases. From you arise humanity, birds and animals. 34

From you arise the serpents and other wild creatures, all the plants that grow upon the earth, all that has existed and all that's yet to come and everything in this world, both moving and unmoving. 35

Formed and formless, gross and subtle—all this is you, creator of the world. Nothing lies beyond you. 36

Always wandering in the cycle of existence, Lord, overwhelmed by threefold suffering, I cannot find release. 37

Mistaking pain for pleasure, like thirsty deer confused by a mirage, I grasp at indulgences, Lord, but they only bring me further pain. 38

A kingdom, lands, power, wealth, allies, children, wives, servants, pleasant sounds and other sensations, Lord— 39

I acquired all these, thinking they would bring me joy, changeless deity. But in the end, Lord, they only brought me misery. 40

Even hosts of gods in heaven wanted help from me, Lord. Whence comes eternal liberation? 41

Without worshipping you, the cause of the existence of all the worlds, highest Lord, who can achieve lasting freedom? 42

Their minds are clouded by your illusory power and, having felt the pain of birth, old age and death and so on, people then face Yama. 43

They meet with terrifying tortures in the realms of hell as wages for their former deeds, because they failed to recognise your actual form. 44

Hooked on sensual pleasures and beguiled by your illusion, highest Lord, I stagger round the pit of pride created by my sense of self. 45

I come to you for refuge—limitless, praiseworthy Lord, the highest state beyond which there's nought. My heart is wearied by the travails of life and I yearn for nirvāṇa, the perfect rest.' 46

So ends Chapter Twenty-Three in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

24. Balarāma returns to the cattle camp

Parāśara:

Thus eulogised by prudent Mucukunda, Lord Hari, beginningless master of all creation, replied, 1

'You'll proceed to the heavenly realms you wish for, king. Your sovereignty will not be challenged by another, and you'll be nourished by my mercy. 2

After you've tasted the delights of heaven, you'll be born in a noble family and, remembering your former lives, you'll win liberation through my grace.' 3

Parāśara:

Hearing this, the king bowed down before the unfailing universal lord. When Mucukunda emerged from the mouth of the cave, he noticed that the people were much shorter than they were before. 4

Realising that the age of Kali had begun, the king set out for Mount Gandhamādana to undertake austerities in the ashram of Nara and Nārāyaṇa. 5

Kṛṣṇa, meanwhile, destroyed his rival with a stratagem, then returned to Mathurā, where he seized his rival's army with its splendid elephants, chariots and steeds. 6

He led all these to Ugrasena in Dvārakā, and there informed the Yādu clan that they need no longer fear defeat. 7

Now that the war was over, Balarāma wished to see his family again, Maitreya, and so set out for Nanda's cattle camp. 8

The victorious warrior met the herdsmen and their women as before with love and great respect. 9

Some hugged him and he hugged others, while he and the herding people laughed together. 10

The herdsmen had many kind words for Balarāma, the wielder of the plough, but some of the women spoke sulkily because of their affection, while others expressed their envy. 11

Yet other herding women said, 'I hope the darling of the city girls is happy. But Kṛṣṇa's fickle love will only last for half a second.' 12

'I hope he doesn't mock our manners with the women of Mathurā. He'll make them feel so special, but he'll only love them for a minute.' 13

'I hope that Kṛṣṇa remembers how we used to sing so softly with him. Will he come back just once to see his mother?' 14

'Why bother mentioning him? It's a different story now we live without him, and he no longer lives with us.' 15

'Didn't we leave our fathers, mothers, brothers, husbands and relations to be with him? That man is the standard-bearer of ingratitude.' 16

'I hope that Kṛṣṇa spoke of coming back. Tell us truly, Balarāma.' 17

'Govinda is still Dāmodara, the toddler with the cord tied round his middle.'
'The city girls will set their hearts on him. He doesn't love us anymore. I doubt we'll see him further.' 18

Parāśara:

The herding women even called Balarāma 'Kṛṣṇa' and 'Dāmodara' as they wept aloud, since Hari stole their hearts. 19

Balarāma comforted them with kind, sweet, affectionate, modest and charming messages from Kṛṣṇa. 20

He also swapped amusing tales of interest with the herdsmen as before and enjoyed himself in their company in the lands around the camp. 21

So ends Chapter Twenty-Four in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

25. Balarāma diverts the Yamunā River

Parāśara:

While the mighty serpent Śeṣa, upholder of the world, in the mortal form of Balarāma roamed the forest with the herding men, ¹

And achieved great deeds through his actions as he wandered through the world, Varuṇa, most anxious for amusement, addressed his consort: ²

‘You, Madirā, liquor goddess, pleasant and delightful, are always agreeable to mighty Śeṣa, so go now and amuse him.’ ³

Thus addressed, Varuṇa’s consort hid in the hollow of a *kadamba* tree that stood in the forest at Vṛndāvana. ⁴

Balarāma, wandering nearby, caught a tempting whiff of liquor and his old hankering for wine returned. ⁵

When the bearer of the plough saw the stream of liquor trickling from the tree, Maitreya, he was as happy as can be. ⁶

The herding men and women gathered round while Balarāma drank his fill, and those who were skilled in song and music entertained him sweetly. ⁷

Drunk and moody, Balarāma, agleam with pearls of perspiration, said to the river, ‘Come here, Yamunā. I want a bath.’ ⁸

Because he was drunk, the river ignored him, but when she failed to do his bidding, furious Balarāma grabbed his plough. ⁹

Addled by wine, he caught the riverbank with his weapon and dragged her towards him, saying, ‘You wicked river! You won’t come? You won’t come? Now try to get away!’ ¹⁰

Dragged with force by Balarāma, the river left her usual course and flowed into the forest where he sat. ¹¹

Appearing to him in human form, Yamunā came to Balarāma with terror in her eyes and begged the wielder of the plough to be merciful and let her go. ¹²

‘You disrespect my courage and my strength, you river, so I’ll dash you into a thousand pieces with my plough!’ ¹³

Parāśara:

Yamunā was terrified by these threats, but convinced Balarāma to show her mercy and, after the river gave her waters to all the land, he released her. ¹⁴

Mighty Balarāma took a bath, and Lakṣmī, goddess of beauty, then appeared with a lovely azure waterlily as an ornament for one of his ears and an earring for the other. ¹⁵

She also gave him gifts from Varuṇa: a garland of fresh lotuses and a pair of sea-blue garments. ¹⁶

With the lily and the earring, clad in blue and wearing flowers, Balarāma shone like loveliness itself. ¹⁷

Thus adorned, he amused himself in the cattle camp for the next two months, then returned to Dvārakā. ¹⁸

There he married Revatī, daughter of King Raivata, who bore him two sons, Niṣaṭha and Ulmuka. ¹⁹

So ends Chapter Twenty-Five in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

26. Kṛṣṇa abducts Rukmiṇī

Parāśara:

Bhīṣmaka, king of the Vidarbha lands, who lived in Kuṇḍina, had a son named Rukmin and a beautiful daughter, Rukmiṇī.¹⁶ ¹

Kṛṣṇa fell in love with Rukmiṇī, and that sweetly smiling maiden loved him in return. But her brother loathed the discus-wielder and wouldn't let her go to Kṛṣṇa as requested. ²

Brave Bhīṣmaka, urged on by Jarāsandha and with Rukmin's agreement, gave Rukmiṇī instead to Śiśupāla. ³

All the monarchs led by Jarāsandha, desiring Śiśupāla's felicity, assembled in Bhīṣmaka's capital for his daughter's wedding. ⁴

Kṛṣṇa also came to Kuṇḍina to see the nuptials of the Cedi king, surrounded by a host of Yādavas including Balarāma. ⁵

¹⁶ For more on Rukmiṇī, see Austin (2014).

But the day before the wedding, Hari carried the girl away, leaving Balarāma and his other kin to fight against their enemies. 6

Paunḍraka, Śrīmant, Dantavakra, Vidūratha, Śiśupāla, Jarāsandha, Śālva and the other kings were furious. 7

They made every effort to conquer Hari but were overcome in battle by Balarāma and the other Yadu heroes. 8

Rukmin swore he'd not return to Kuṇḍina until he'd vanquished Keśava and set off in pursuit to do so. 9

But the bearer of the discus had no trouble in defeating Rukmin's army with its elephants, horses, infantry and chariots; then he struck Rukmin to the ground. 10

After Madhu's subduer had completely vanquished Rukmin, he married Rukmiṇī, whom he'd forcefully abducted. 11

She bore him the hero Pradyumna, an aspect of Madana, god of love. The demon Śambara abducted Pradyumna, but Pradyumna slew him in the end. 12

So ends Chapter Twenty-Six in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

27. Kṛṣṇa's son Pradyumna is taken by a demon

Maitreya:

How was this hero Pradyumna taken by Śambara, sage, and how did Pradyumna kill that fearless being? 1

Parāśara:

Śambara snatched Pradyumna from his nursery, sage, when the child was only six days old, because that demon, as terrible as Death, believed the infant would one day slay him.¹⁷ 2

After Śambara seized Pradyumna, he threw him into the frightful salty sea, the crocodiles' abode, with its terrifying monsters and whirlpools whipped up by waves. 3

17 For a full account of the cycle of Pradyumna narratives, see Austin (2019).

As he fell into the water, the child was swallowed by a fish, but, warmed by the fire in the fish's belly, the baby didn't die. 4

That fish, along with its kin and others, brahmin, were caught in time and delivered to the demon. 5

Śambara's blameless wife, Māyāvātī, was mistress of all his household and supervised the cooks. 6

When the fish's belly was opened, she beheld the lovely baby boy, like a fresh green shoot on the once charred tree of love. 7

That slender woman was filled with wonder about the child's identity and how he came to be there, till Nārada enlightened her: 8

'This is the son of Viṣṇu, creator and destroyer of the universe, taken from his nursery by the demon Śambara. 9

He was cast into the ocean and swallowed by this fish. Now this treasure of humanity is in your care, and you, fair-browed and fearless woman, must nurture him.' 10

Parāśara:

After Nārada gave Māyāvātī this explanation, she cared for the child from the time he was young with deep affection, beguiled by his wondrous beauty. 11

When he acquired the handsomeness of youth, great sage, Māyāvātī, her gait as stately as a she-elephant's, began to desire him. 12

Blind with love, she conferred all her illusionary powers on Pradyumna, sage, her heart and eyes set on him alone. 13

Pradyumna, son of Kṛṣṇa, rebuked that lotus-eyed woman who lusted after him, 'You've abandoned normal motherly affection. Why are you acting differently with me?' 14

'You're not my son,' she said, 'but are the son of Viṣṇu. Śambara, as terrible as Death, abducted you. 15

He threw you in the ocean and I saved you from the belly of a fish. Your natural mother weeps for you because she loves you deeply.' 16

Parāśara:

Hearing this, mighty Pradyumna challenged Śambara to battle and, with fury in his heart, waged war against his foe. 17

Madhu's scion destroyed the Daitya's army, leaving nothing, and seven times foiled the phantoms conjured by that demon. 18

He tamed the eighth and sent it back to kill the Daitya Śambara, as terrible as Death. With the aid of that same being, a form of Māyāvātī, Pradyumna rose up in the air and flew to the residence of Kṛṣṇa, his natural father. 19

When the women saw Pradyumna descending to the inner chambers with Māyāvātī, they mistook him for his father. 20

The eyes of blameless Rukmiṇī were filled with tears as she said tenderly, 'Any woman would be glad to have a son like you on the threshold of maturity. 21

Pradyumna, my own son, would be about your age, if he were still alive. Some lucky mother has you as an ornament, dear boy. 22

And yet, such is the love I feel for you and such is your own beauty, my dear, you must be Hari's son.' 23

Parāśara:

At that very moment, Nārada appeared, accompanied by Kṛṣṇa, and addressed the princess Rukmiṇī, resident of the inner chambers, gladdening her heart: 24

'This is indeed your son, you fair-browed woman. He was taken as a child from his nursery by Śambara, but Pradyumna slew that demon and now he has returned. 25

This good woman is Māyāvātī, the wife of your own son, not Śambara. Listen while I explain: 26

After Manmatha, the god of love, had been destroyed,¹⁸ the goddess of beauty, Rati, intent on seeing him reborn, took illusory form and enchanted Śambara. 27

She appeared to the Daitya as a seductive phantom, her eyes as intoxicating as wine, and they enjoyed themselves in many ways together. 28

The god of love has been reborn as your son Pradyumna, and Māyāvātī is his beloved Rati. Have no doubt that she's your splendid daughter-in-law.' 29

Both Rukmiṇī and Keśava were filled with joy, and all the city cried in jubilation. 30

18 Manmatha disturbed Śiva's meditation and the deity burned him to ashes.

The denizens of Dvārakā were all amazed to see her reunited with her long-lost son. 31

So ends Chapter Twenty-Seven in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

28. Pradyumna's son Aniruddha; Balarāma slays Rukmin

Parāśara:

Cārudeṣṇa, Sudeṣṇa, brave Cārudeha, Suṣeṇa, Cārugupta, Bhadracāru, 1

Cāruvinda, Sucāru and Cāru, strongest of the strong, were the sons of Rukmiṇī. She also bore a daughter, Cārumatī. 2

Kṛṣṇa had seven other splendid wives: Kālindī, Mitravindā, Nagnajit's daughter Satyā, 3

Divine Jāmbavatī, shape-changing Rohiṇī, the king of Madra's decorous daughter Suśīlā and Satrājita's daughter Satyabhāmā. 4

The discus-wielder also wedded sweetly smiling Lakṣmaṇā and sixteen thousand other women. 5

Mighty Pradyumna fell for Rukmin's lovely daughter at her *svayaṃvara*, the tournament for suitors, and she chose that son of Hari as her husband. 6

She and Pradyumna had a son named Aniruddha, brave and strong, a sea of courage when met in battle, a destroyer of his enemies. 7

Keśava chose Rukmin's granddaughter for his grandson Aniruddha, even though Rukmin advised against it. 8

On the occasion of their wedding, Hari, Balarāma and the other Yādavas came to Rukmin's city, brahmin, Bhojakaṭa by name. 9

After the marriage of Pradyumna's powerful son, several monarchs led by the king of Kālīṅga gave this advice to Rukmin: 10

‘Plough-wielding Balarāma is a gambling addict but doesn't have much skill. Why don't we beat him in a game of dice, your majesty?’ 11

Parāśara:

Mighty Rukmin agreed to this, and a match with Balarāma was held in the assembly hall. 12

In the first round, Rukmin won a thousand pieces of gold from Balarāma and, in the second, another thousand. 13

Balarāma then staked ten thousand pieces, but Rukmin, an expert gambler, won that as well. 14

The king of Kaliṅga laughed so loud that you could see his teeth, brahmin, and unwise Rukmin, puffed up with excitement, said, 15

‘I’ve beaten foolish Balarāma in this match. Blind with pride in gambling, he vainly insulted all the experts.’ 16

When the wielder of the plough saw the monarch’s teeth and heard Rukmin’s slander, he was filled with rage. 17

Balarāma, mad with fury, then staked ten million pieces, and Rukmin rolled the dice. 18

Balarāma won the throw and called, ‘It’s mine!’, but Rukmin cried aloud, ‘No, it’s mine, Balarāma. Don’t lie!’ 19

It’s true you staked the bet, but I did not accept it. If you won like this, then am I not a winner, too?’ 20

Parāśara:

At that moment, a deep voice sounded in the heavens, further stirring mighty Balarāma’s wrath: 21

‘Balarāma won this fairly. What Rukmin said is wrong. Even though he didn’t accept the challenge with his words, he accepted with his actions.’ 22

That mighty warrior Balarāma leapt up; his eyes were red with rage. He struck Rukmin with the game-board, killing him. 23

Furious Balarāma then seized the trembling king of Kaliṅga and smashed the very teeth that he’d revealed before. 24

He grabbed a massive golden pillar and slew the other royals who sided with the Kaliṅgan king. 25

All the monarchs cried aloud, brahmin, as they tried to flee from Balarāma’s fury. 26

When Madhu’s subduer heard that Balarāma had slain Rukmin, Maitreya, he said nothing as he feared both Rukmiṇī and his brother. 27

Keśava then led newly married Aniruddha and the Yadu clansmen back to Dvārakā, best of brahmins. 28

So ends Chapter Twenty-Eight in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

29. Kṛṣṇa slays the demon Naraka and retrieves Aditi's earrings

Parāśara:

Maitreya, in Dvārakā, mighty Indra, lord of threefold worlds, came to Kṛṣṇa, Śūra's grandson, riding on his raging elephant Airāvata. 1

Entering the city, he met Hari and told him of the Daitya Naraka's wicked deeds: 2

'Subduer of Madhu and leader of the gods, even though you've appeared in human form, you bring all suffering to an end. 3

You slew Ariṣṭa, Dhenuka and Keśin and all those who tried to harm ascetics. 4

Kaṃsa, Kuvalayāpīḍa, child-killing Pūtanā and all the other blights on earth were led to their doom by you. 5

When the threefold worlds are protected by your prowess and your wisdom, the denizens of heaven are nourished by the portions of the sacrifice received from worshippers. 6

When you've heard the reason for my present visit, Janārdana, you must try to help me. 7

The son of Earth named Naraka, lord of the city of Prāgjyotiṣa, is wreaking havoc on all creation, slayer of your enemies. 8

This demon carried off the daughters of the gods and siddhas, demigods and kings and locked them in his palace. 9

He stole wise Varuṇa's umbrella from which the waters flow, and carried off the gem-laden peak of Mount Mandara. 10

That demon stole the heavenly earrings, source of nectar, from my mother, Aditi, Kṛṣṇa, and now he wants my elephant Airāvata. 11

Now I've told you of his mischief, Govinda, you must think of retribution.' 12

Parāśara:

Hearing this, the lord, son of Devakī, smiled, took Indra by the hand and rose from his splendid throne. 13

Kṛṣṇa mounted sky-ranging Garuḍa, whom he summoned with just a thought, and, helping Satyabhāmā up, flew to the city of Prāgjyotiṣa. 14

Mighty Indra then set out on Airāvata for the thirteen gods' abode, Maitreya, while the residents of Dvārakā looked on. *15*

The land around Prāgjyotiṣa for a hundred leagues was filled with razor-nooses laid by the demon Muru, best of brahmins. *16*

With one blow of his discus, Sudarśana, Hari cut them all. Muru then sprang forward, but Keśava killed him, too. *17*

With his flaming weapon, Hari burned Muru's seven thousand sons like so many moths. *18*

After he had slain the demons Muru, Hayagrīva and Pañcajana, brahmin, wise Hari swiftly marched on Prāgjyotiṣa. *19*

There he battled Naraka and his great army, and Govinda slew the Daityas by the thousands. *20*

The Earth's son Naraka sent forth showers of missiles and other weapons, but the mighty discus-wielder and destroyer of demon hordes cast Sudarśana at the Daitya, cutting him in two. *21*

When Naraka had been slain, the Earth brought forth Aditi's earrings. She approached the universal lord and said: *22*

'After you lifted me, Lord, in the form of a boar, I produced this son, arising from your touch. *23*

You presented him to me, but now you've killed him, so take these earrings and guard his children. *24*

Your aspect, Lord, beneficent and handsome, has come into this world to ease my burden. *25*

You are creator, transformer and destroyer, the origin and dissolution of the world. You are the world's own form. What's praise to you, eternal Lord? *26*

You, Lord, are pervader and pervaded; action, act and agent. You are at the heart of all creation. What, then, is praise to you? *27*

As you are the highest spirit, the very spirit, creation's heart, eternal Lord, what, then, is praise to you? *28*

Be merciful, heart of all creation. Pardon Naraka for his deeds. He died, but may your son be free from sin.' *29*

Parāśara:

The lord, cause of creation, granted all the Earth's requests, best of sages, and recovered various treasures from the realm of Naraka. 30

In the women's quarters, Kṛṣṇa of unequalled prowess found sixteen thousand girls, great sage, and one hundred more. 31

He also saw six thousand awesome four-tusked elephants and twenty-one million Kambojan steeds. 32

Govinda sent the girls, the elephants and the horses to Dvārakā at once, along with Naraka's servants. 33

Hari also found the umbrella of Varuṇa and the jewelled peak of Mount Mandara and placed them on Garuḍa. 34

Mounting the king of birds himself, Kṛṣṇa then flew with Satyabhāmā to the thirteen gods' abode to return Aditi's earrings. 35

So ends Chapter Twenty-Nine in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

30. Aditi praises Kṛṣṇa

Parāśara:

Garuḍa flew easily with Hṛṣīkeśa and his consort, the umbrella of Varuṇa and the jewelled mountain peak. 1

When Hari reached the gates of heaven, he blew his conch. The deities then welcomed him with bowls of water to wash his feet. 2

Honoured by the gods, Kṛṣṇa entered their mother's residence, resembling the summit of a snowy cloud, and there beheld Aditi. 3

In company with mighty Indra, Janārdana bowed to her, handed her the splendid earrings and informed her of the death of Naraka. 4

Aditi, mother of the world, was pleased with Hari, foundation of the universe, and, setting her heart on him, lauded him without distraction: 5

Aditi:

I bow to you, lotus-eyed protector of devotees, eternal, universal, essence of creation and origin of the world. 6

Author of the intellect, the mind and senses, you are the heart of all three qualities, yet lie beyond them. You are pure and free from all dualities, abiding in every heart. *7*

You are beyond all conceptions such as appearance and dimension, untouched by birth and other processes, free from sleep and other limitations. *8*

You are twilight, day and night, earth and sky, wind and water, fire and mind, intellect and all the rest, Acyuta. *9*

You are the agent of creation, preservation and destruction, and the master of creators, in three forms known as Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, Lord. *10*

The deities, yakṣas, Daityas, rākṣasas, siddhas, nāgas, kūṣmāṇḍas, piśācas, gandharvas and humans, *11*

Wild and domestic animals, birds, insects, snakes, trees, shrubs, vines, creepers and every kind of herb— *12*

You are every individual entity, large, medium and small, and smaller than the smallest, as well as everything that takes a concrete form. *13*

This, your illusion, beguiles all those who do not know your true condition. The deluded person is restrained by this, misplacing recognition of the spirit on to something that it's not. *14*

Conceptions such as 'I' and 'mine' that arise in folk from this illusion, Lord, which is itself the mother of the world, are all your doing. *15*

Those men intent on their own duties while praising you, Lord, transcend all this illusion and liberate themselves. *16*

Brahmā and the other gods, humankind and animals are all enveloped by this darkness and blinded by this error in the whirlpool of Vaiṣṇava illusion. *17*

Having worshipped you, some desire to fulfil their wishes and bring their own existence to an end—this is simply your illusion, Lord. *18*

Others worship you as they want a son or desire to conquer enemies, but not for liberation—this, too, is just the play of your illusion. *19*

Like asking for a humble loincloth from a wish-fulfilling tree, to do so is an error made by those who have no merit; it arises from their own deficiencies. *20*

Be merciful, therefore, eternal cause of this illusion that seduces all the world, Lord of creation, and destroy that ignorance masquerading as true knowledge. *21*

I bow to you, wielder of the discus. I bow to you, bearer of Śārṅga. I bow to you, Viṣṇu, holding mace and conch. 22

I see your form that's marked with signs, but your highest form still lies beyond my comprehension. Show us your mercy, highest Lord. 23

Parāśara:

Thus praised by the deities' mother, Aditi, Viṣṇu laughed and said, 'Mother goddess, may *you* be merciful to *us* and grant a boon.' 24

Aditi:

So be it. As you wish. You will never be defeated by god or demon in the mortal world, you tiger of a man. 25

Parāśara:

Satyabhāmā, with Śacī, wife of mighty Indra, at her side, bowed at once to Aditi and asked repeatedly for her blessing. 26

Aditi:

By my mercy, fair-browed woman, you'll be never old or ugly, always retaining your flawless form. 27

Satyabhāmā desires the Pārijāta tree

Parāśara:

With the permission of Aditi, Indra, king of gods, first honoured Janārdana, then duly praised him. 28

Then Kṛṣṇa, accompanied by Satyabhāmā, visited the other lovely pleasure gardens of Nandana and the deities, best of sages. 29

There, Keśava, universal lord and Keśin's slayer, beheld the Pārijāta tree, richly scented, bearing flowery masses, bestowing pleasant coolness and resplendent with reddish sprouts. 30

The Pārijāta, which first appeared when the ocean was churned for nectar, had bark that shone like gold. 31

When Satyabhāmā saw it, best of brahmins, she said to Govinda, 'Kṛṣṇa, why don't we take it back to Dvārakā?' 32

If what you say to me is true and you really love me, let's take it for the pleasure grove at my residence. 33

Kṛṣṇa, you've often said with fondness, "Neither Jāmbavatī nor Rukmiṇī are as dear to me as you are, Satyā." 34

If that's true, Govinda, not mere flattery on your part, then this Pārijāta tree should become a feature in my residence. 35

With its flowers in my hair, I want to shine amid the other queens.' 36

Parāśara:

Hearing this, Hari smiled at Satyabhāmā and put the Pārijāta on Garuḍa's back. But the keepers of the grove admonished him: 37

'Excuse me, sir, but that belongs to Śacī, consort of the king of gods. You can't just take the Pārijāta tree, Govinda. 38

Brought forth for decorative flowers for Śacī when the gods first churned the ocean, it cannot be removed! 39

It belongs to Śacī, whose face the king of gods delights to see. It's folly to desire it. Who could ever take it? 40

The king of gods will surely want revenge for this, Kṛṣṇa, and the other gods will side with mighty Indra with his thunderbolt in hand. 41

Don't provoke these deities, Acyuta. The wise do not commend an act that leads to bitterness.' 42

Parāśara:

After they had spoken, furious Satyabhāmā then replied, 'What does Śacī have to do with the Pārijāta tree? And who's this Indra, king of gods? 43

The tree was brought forth at the churning of the nectar as the property in common for all the worlds, you gods, so why should Indra keep it for himself? 44

Like the nectar, moon and Śrī, you keepers of the grove, this tree belongs to all the peoples of the world. 45

Śacī's very proud of her husband's mighty arms, and so she wants to keep it. Tell her she need no longer look for it, as Satyā's had it taken somewhere else. 46

Go at once and give this weighty message to Puloman's daughter, and say to her that Satyabhāmā sent it: 47

"If your husband loves you and obeys you, then let him try to stop *my* husband carrying the tree away. 48

I know your husband, Indra, and I know he's lord of thirteen gods. All the same, I, a mortal woman, am taking this Pārijāta away from you.” 49

Parāśara:

Hearing this, the keepers went to Śacī and delivered Satyā's message. Śacī spurred into action her husband, that lord of thirteen deities. 50

Accordingly, he set out to battle Hari for the tree, brahmin, flanked by armies of all the gods. 51

The thirteen deities, armed with finest weapons, such as bludgeons, swords, clubs and spears, prepared themselves, while mighty Indra stood with thunderbolt in hand. 52

When Govinda saw Indra mounted on the king of elephants and advancing with his retinue of deities to do battle, 53

He blew his conch, filling all directions with its sound, and loosed a flight of arrows numbering tens of millions. 54

Seeing each direction and the sky itself beset with arrows by the hundreds, all thirteen gods unleashed their varied weaponry and missiles. 55

But Madhu's subduer, lord of worlds, easily reduced to a thousand fragments each weapon and each missile the deities released. 56

Garuḍa, serpents' devourer, dragged aside the noose that Varuṇa, king of oceans, cast, and, like the body of a tender snake, ripped it with his bill. 57

With a blow of his mace, Lord Kṛṣṇa, son of Devakī, broke Yama's staff and knocked it to the ground. 58

Next, the lord, Śūra's scion, shattered Kubera's weapon, Śibikā, with his discus and, with a glance of just one eye, robbed the Sun of brilliance. 59

He cut Agni, god of fire, into hundreds with his arrows, and caused the Vasus to flee in all directions. He felled the Rudras to the ground, their lance blades shattered by his discus. 60

With arrows loosed from his bow, Śārṅga, he scattered the Sādhyas, Viśvas, Maruts and gandharvas in the air, like fluff that blows from cottonwood trees. 61

Garuḍa tore the deities with his bill, beat them with his wings and ripped them with his blade-like talons. 62

The king of gods and Madhu's slayer showered arrows on each other by the thousand, like a pair of rain clouds shedding torrents. 63

Garuḍa took on Airāvata in that battle, and mighty Indra, with all the gods, engaged Janārdana. 64

When all their arrows, missiles and other weapons had been cut down, the Vasus' leader, Indra, swiftly seized his thunderbolt as Kṛṣṇa raised his discus. 65

Seeing the king of gods and Janārdana with their weapons, best of brahmins, the threefold worlds cried out in anguish. 66

But Lord Hari caught the thunderbolt hurled by Indra and, holding back his discus, called on Indra to desist. 67

Now the king of gods had lost his weapon, his elephant was wounded by Garuḍa and he was on the point of fleeing, Satyabhāmā said to Indra, that heroic god: 68

'It ill befits you, lord of all three worlds and Śacī's husband, to run away. May Śacī approach you with a wreath of Pārijāta flowers. 69

What's the good of your heavenly kingdom if you can't see Śacī with such a garland, and if she doesn't love you as before? 70

Let's stop this battle, Indra. Don't be ashamed. Keep this Pārijāta tree and tell the deities not to worry. 71

Śacī's proud of her husband and didn't show me courtesy or look on me hospitably when I came to visit her. 72

As a woman, I'm no deep thinker. My husband's reputation is my only care. That's why, Indra, I began this war with you. 73

I've had enough of this Pārijāta. It's someone else's property, yet we tried to take it. Śacī's proud of her good looks, and what woman isn't proud of her own husband?' 74

Parāśara:

Hearing this, the king of gods turned and said, 'Enough of these upsetting words, my ardent friend. 75

I feel no shame in being beaten by the god of universal form, the agent of creation, destruction and preservation of all the world, 76

In whom this universe abides, who has no middle or beginning, from whom the world arises, the universal being who'll bring it to an end. How can one who is defeated by the cause of the origin, dissolution and preservation of the world feel shame, good woman? 77

He takes the form of the origin of the world, as subtle as an atom, which only those who understand all things can understand, and no-one else. Who could defeat the birthless, uncreated, eternal lord, who appears in mortal form of his own accord to benefit the world?' 78

So ends Chapter Thirty in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

31. Kṛṣṇa plants the Pārijāta tree in Dvārakā

Parāśara:

Lord Keśava, thus praised by Indra, best of brahmins, smiled and made this profound reply: 1

The Lord:

You are Indra, king of gods, and we're mere mortals, universal lord. Forgive us our transgression. 2

The Pārijāta should be returned to its proper place. I only took it, mighty Indra, because Satyā told me to. 3

Here's the thunderbolt I took when you hurled it at me. Please accept your rival-slaying weapon, mighty god. 4

Indra:

Why do you deceive me, Lord, claiming to be mortal? We're fortunate that we recognise you, even though we cannot grasp your subtlety. 5

You are who you are, Lord, bent on the task of universal liberation. You, demon slayer, remove all thorns from the flesh of the world. 6

Take this Pārijāta to the city of Dvārakā, Kṛṣṇa, where it should remain till you leave the mortal realm. 7

Parāśara:

'So be it,' said Hari to the king of gods. He then returned to earth, while attendant siddhas, gandharvas and sages sang his praises. 8

Arriving over Dvārakā, Kṛṣṇa blew his conch, brahmin, delighting the city's residents. ⁹

He alighted from Garuḍa and, with Satyabhāmā's help, planted the mighty Pārijāta in her pleasure garden. ¹⁰

All who approached that tree recalled their previous existences, and the scent of its flowers perfumed the world for three leagues all around. ¹¹

Then all the Yādavas, showing their faces to the tree, beheld the original heavenly forms that each of them embodied. ^{19 12}

Kṛṣṇa then took possession of the booty that he'd seized from Naraka: elephants, horses and other valuables, as well as women, all carried thither by the demon's servants. ¹³

At an auspicious season, Janārdana married all the girls whom Naraka had abducted from elsewhere. ¹⁴

At one and the same moment, Govinda duly took the hand of every girl in marriage with proper rites, great sage, each in her own residence. ¹⁵

The lord then manifested one form of himself for each of the sixteen thousand and one hundred women. ¹⁶

Every girl believed that she alone had married Madhu's subduer. ¹⁷

Keśava, creator of the world, spent the nights in all of their abodes, brahmin, as he may take on many forms at will. ¹⁸

So ends Chapter Thirty-One in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

32. Uṣā dreams of Aniruddha

Parāśara:

I've mentioned Pradyumna and the other sons of Rukmīṇī and Hari. Satyabhāmā bore Bhānu and Bhaimarika. ¹

Rohiṇī's sons with Hari included Dīptimanta and Prayakṣa. Jāmbavatī had Sāmba and others who relied on their own strong arms. ²

Nāgnajitī's mighty sons included Bhadravinda. Chief among Śaibyā's sons was Saṃgrāmajit. ³

¹⁹ The gods descended to earth to become the hundred and one branches of the Yadu clan (4.15.24).

Mādrī had Vṛka and other sons. First among the sons of Lakṣmaṇā was Gātravant. Kālindī had Śruta and others. 4

The bearer of the discus had one hundred and eighty thousand sons with his other wives. 5

Rukmiṇī's son Pradyumna was the eldest of them all. His son was Aniruddha. His son was Vajra. 6

Mighty Aniruddha, victorious in battle, won Uṣā, daughter of Bāṇa and granddaughter of Bali, best of brahmins.²⁰ 7

On that occasion, there was a great and terrible contest between Hari and Śiva, in which Hari severed Bāṇa's thousand arms with his discus. 8

Maitreya:

How did this battle over Uṣā come about, brahmin, and how did Hari cut off Bāṇa's limbs? 9

Please describe all this to me, fortunate sage, as I'm very keen to hear this narrative of Hari. 10

Parāśara:

Bāṇa's daughter Uṣā saw Pārvatī and Śiva making love one day, brahmin, and conceived a great desire to do the same. 11

Fair Pārvatī, who could read the minds of all, said to that lovely woman, 'Why torment yourself? Just find a husband.' 12

Hearing this, Uṣā wondered when this might happen and who might be her husband. Pārvatī continued: 13

'The man who sweeps you away in a dream on the twelfth night of the bright fortnight in the month of Vaiśākha, princess, will be your husband.' 14

Parāśara:

Just as the goddess had foretold, a man appeared in a dream that night and Uṣā fell in love with him. 15

But when she woke, she couldn't see him anymore, Maitreya, and within hearing of her companion anxiously cried out, 'Where have you gone?' 16

20 Both forms, Ūṣā and Uṣā, are used interchangeably in the following verses. I have standardised on Uṣā.

Now, this companion, Citralekhā, daughter of Bāna's minister Kumbhāṇḍa, asked Uṣā whom she was addressing. ¹⁷

Thrown into confusion, Uṣā at first said nothing, but after Citralekhā reassured her, she explained it all. ¹⁸

Now that Citralekhā understood the matter, Uṣā asked her to find a way to fulfil the goddess's prediction. ¹⁹

Parāśara:

Accordingly, Citralekhā painted on a canvas the portraits of the foremost deities, Daityas, gandharvas and men, and showed them to her friend. ^{21 20}

Uṣā passed over the gandharvas, nāgas, gods and demons, but her eyes were drawn to the men of the Andhaka and Vṛṣṇi clans. ²¹

Seeing Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma, that fair-browed woman was overcome with shyness, brahmin, and, at the sight of Pradyumna, she modestly dropped her gaze. ²²

The moment she saw Pradyumna's lovely son, brahmin, that wanton woman cast off all restraint. ²³

'That's him!' she cried, 'That's him!' Citralekhā reassured her friend and, as she possessed the yogic power of flight, she set off for Dvārakā. ²⁴

So ends Chapter Thirty-Two in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

33. Aniruddha is bound by Bāna and freed by Kṛṣṇa

Parāśara:

Some time earlier, the Daitya Bāna bowed to three-eyed Śiva, Maitreya, and spoke these words to him, 'Lord, in the absence of a war, my thousand arms are an embarrassment. ¹

I hope there'll be a battle to afford these limbs some use, as, without a fight, they're just a burden. What purpose do they serve?' ²

²¹ The apsaras Citralekhā's name, which itself means 'portrait', suggests her artistic talents.

Śiva:

When your peacock banner breaks, Bāṇa, you shall have a war to delight flesh-eating ghouls. 3

Parāśara:

Filled with glee, Bāṇa bowed to Śiva and went back home, where, seeing his broken banner, his excitement was redoubled. 4

At that very time, the exquisite apsaras Citralekhā, employing the power of her yogic knowledge, returned from Dvārakā, bringing Aniruddha with her. 5

When the palace guards found Aniruddha making love with Uṣā in the inner chambers, they went to the Daitya king to report the matter. 6

That mighty being sent his servant army, but Aniruddha, destroyer of his doughty foes, seized an iron bar and killed them. 7

After they had been subdued, Bāṇa himself, mounted on his chariot, resolved to kill the interloper. Bāṇa battled Aniruddha with all his might, but was driven back by his rival's heroism. 8

At the urging of his ministers, he set on Aniruddha a second time and, deploying his magic powers, bound the Yādus' hero with a serpent-weapon. 9

The Yādavas in Dvārakā asked where Aniruddha was, and Nārada informed them that he was Bāṇa's captive. 10

When they heard that he'd been taken to the city of Śoṇita by a woman with yogic powers, they were reassured he hadn't been abducted by the gods. 11

Hari, mounted on Garuḍa, whom he summoned with a single thought, advanced on Bāṇa's city with Balarāma and Pradyumna. 12

Coming to that city, Hari battled the Pramathas, Śiva's demon minions, and, having overcome them all, he entered Bāṇa's capital. 13

There, a mighty Fever, in the form of a three-legged, three-headed emanation of Śiva, fought valiantly with Hari, Śārṅga's wielder, in defence of Bāṇa. 14

Scorched by contact with the Fever's embers, Balarāma closed his eyes and hid behind his brother. 15

While fighting the divine wielder of Śārṅga, the Śaiva Fever was quickly driven off by a Vaiṣṇava Fever that rose from Kṛṣṇa's body. 16

When divine Brahmā, grandsire of the world, saw the Śaiva Fever enduring the blows of Nārāyaṇa's arms, he begged the god to pardon him. *17*

Lord Madhusūdana duly forgave the Śaiva Fever and withdrew the Vaiṣṇava sickness to himself. *18*

'Those who recall the battle I fought with you will never suffer our disease,' the Śaiva Fever declared to Kṛṣṇa as he left. *19*

Lord Viṣṇu then overcame and crushed the fivefold Fires and broke with ease the army of the Dānavas. *20*

All the Daitya forces, Bāṇa, son of Bali, Śiva and his scion Kārttikeya then fought with Kṛṣṇa, Śūra's offspring. *21*

The battle Hari fought with Śiva was terrible indeed, and all the worlds were trembling as the deities' flaming weapons scorched them. *22*

As that awful conflict raged, the thirteen gods all feared the world would surely be destroyed. *23*

With the weapon known as Jṃbhāṇa, Govinda made Śiva yawn, then destroyed the Daityas and Pramathas on all sides. *24*

Yawning uncontrollably, Śiva sank down on the chariot seat, unable to fight Kṛṣṇa, the being untouched by deeds. *25*

Kārttikeya's mount was downed by Garuḍa, as Pradyumna's missiles pierced him. His strength undone by Kṛṣṇa's thundering bow, Kārttikeya fled. *26*

Kṛṣṇa fights the demon Bāṇa

With Śiva yawning, the Daitya army vanquished, Kārttikeya beaten and the Pramatha forces destroyed by Śārṅga's wielder, *27*

Bāṇa mounted his great chariot, to which Śiva's bull, Nandīśa, had been harnessed in place of steeds, and advanced to fight with Kṛṣṇa, his son Pradyumna and Balarāma. *28*

The mighty hero Balarāma tormented Bāṇa's army with his arrows repeatedly and, having stripped it of its honour, forced it to retreat. *29*

Bāṇa saw his army dragged away on the tip of Balarāma's plough and beaten with his hammer, while discus-wielding Kṛṣṇa showered it with arrows. *30*

Thus, the battle between Kṛṣṇa and Bāṇa unfolded on all sides. *31*

Each warrior split the other's brilliant armour-piercing arrows with missiles of his own. Bāṇa split each of Keśava's, and the bearer of the discus did the same to Bāṇa's. 32

Bāṇa and Kṛṣṣṣa, both impulsive warriors, striving for the upper hand, intent upon destruction, brahmin, then loosed their shafts at one another. 33

When all their arrows had been cut down and their missiles almost spent, Hari turned his mind in full to Bāṇa's annihilation. 34

Hari, bane of the Daitya host, raised his discus, Sudarśana, whose brilliance equals that of a hundred blazing suns. 35

That enemy of Madhu cast his discus to fell Bāṇa, but the naked demoness Koṭavī, conjured by the Daitya's secret knowledge, appeared in front of Kṛṣṣṣa. 36

Seeing her before him, unblinking Kṛṣṣṣa loosed his discus to fell his rival Bāṇa's forest of arms. 37

Cast by Acyuta and famed for its destruction of the demons' serried weapons, it severed one by one the limbs of Bāṇa. 38

When Bāṇa's mass of arms had all been amputated, Śiva, assailant of Tripura city, knew that Madhusūdana would launch the discus in his hand for Bāṇa's final doom. 39

Seeing Bāṇa bleeding freely from the wounds where his limbs were missing, Umā's husband came with words to soothe Govinda: 40

Śiva:

Kṛṣṣṣa, Kṛṣṣṣa, universal Lord! I know you as the highest spirit, highest lord, highest Self and highest being with neither start nor finish. 41

Appearing in this bodily form among the gods and beasts and mortals is just a game for you, universal being, and is but a minor mark of your activity. 42

Be merciful, therefore. I've vouched for Bāṇa's safety, Lord. Don't let my word prove hollow. 43

He grew up under my protection and hasn't wronged you, eternal god. I granted him a boon, now I beg you to forgive him. 44

Parāśara:

Hearing this, Govinda's visage softened. He shed his anger with the Daitya and spoke to Umā's husband, who held a trident in his hand: 45

The Lord:

As Bāṇa received a boon from you, Śiva, I'll spare him and, because I respect your words, I'll recall my discus. 46

I'll uphold in full the guarantee you gave him, Śiva. Regard yourself as being one with me. 47

I'm all the world, including mortals, gods and demigods, and so are you. Only those confused by ignorance see a difference between us. 48

Parāśara:

So saying, Kṛṣṇa proceeded to the place where Pradyumna's son was held. There, the serpents binding Aniruddha were blasted by Garuḍa's breath and fled. 49

Placing Aniruddha and his wife on Garuḍa's back, Balarāma, Kṛṣṇa's son Pradyumna and Dāmodara himself returned to the city of Dvārakā. 50

So ends Chapter Thirty-Three in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

34. Kṛṣṇa burns Vārāṇasī

Maitreya:

Performing mighty deeds in mortal form, Śūra's scion defeated Indra, Śiva and all the other gods with ease. 1

Tell me what other deeds were done by that being capable of supernatural feats, fortunate sage, as I'm very curious. 2

Parāśara:

Listen closely, brahmin sage, while I recount how Kṛṣṇa in mortal form burned the city of Vārāṇasī. 3

There was once a man named Pauṇḍraka Vāsudeva. Folk misled by ignorance told him he was the actual Vāsudeva, Viṣṇu's avatāra in this world. 4

He began to think he was indeed that being come down to earth. Forgetting his own true nature, he made himself a set of Vaiṣṇava insignia. 5

He sent an emissary to mighty Kṛṣṇa, saying, 'Give up your discus and other emblems, and renounce the name of Vāsudeva, 6

Shed your pride and come to pay me homage, fool, if you value life.' 7

Hearing this, Janārdana gave a laugh and said, ‘Take this message back to Pauṇḍraka: “I’ll surely send my discus-emblem to you. 8

I understand the import of your words: what must be done will indeed occur. 9

With my emblem in my hand, I’ll come to your city and present it to you without a doubt. 10

Just say the word, and I’ll appear to you on time tomorrow. 11

Once I receive your protection, sire, I’ll do what’s needed so I need not fear you.” 12

Parāśara:

Hearing this, the emissary departed. Hari then mounted Garuḍa, whom he summoned with a thought, and proceeded swiftly to the city where Pauṇḍraka resided. 13

When the king of Kāśī learned of Keśava’s intention, he set out to act as Pauṇḍraka’s rearguard with all his troops. 22 14

Pauṇḍraka Vāsudeva advanced to counter Keśava with his own extensive force accompanied by the royal army. 15

Hari saw Pauṇḍraka in the distance, riding in a splendid chariot, with discus, mace, sword and lotus in his hands. 16

He wore a garland, held a bow like Śārṅga and his banner showed Garuḍa. Hari noticed that he even had a mark like Śrīvatsa on his chest. 17

Seeing Pauṇḍraka clad in yellow garments with a diadem and earrings, the Garuḍa-banner’s rightful owner laughed aloud. 18

Kṛṣṇa battled Pauṇḍraka’s army with its elephants, cavalry and foot soldiers, brahmin, armed with swords and lances, clubs and pikes, spears and bows. 19

In a trice, he routed it with enemy-cleaving arrows loosed from Śārṅga and blows of mace and discus. 20

Janārdana sent the king of Kāśī’s army to its doom, then spoke to foolish Pauṇḍraka, who still displayed his Vaiṣṇava insignia. 21

22 Kāśī is an alternative name for Vārāṇasī, a famous centre of Śaiva worship.

The Lord:

Paunḍraka, your emissary said I must renounce my emblems, so now I'll let you have them. 22

I'll send this discus and this mace, and here's Garuḍa. Put him on your standard! 23

Parāśara:

So saying, Hari cast his discus, cutting Pauṇḍraka to pieces. He struck him with his mace, while Garuḍa downed the bogus emblem on his standard. 24

People cried in anguish as the mighty king of Kāśī fought with Vāsudeva to avenge his ally. 25

With shafts he loosed from Śārṅga, Hari severed the royal head and flung it into Kāśī, spreading panic among the populace. 26

After slaying Pauṇḍraka, the king of Kāśī and his followers, the scion of Śūra returned to Dvārakā, where he indulged in heavenly pleasures. 27

Seeing the king of Kāśī's head that landed in the city, the bewildered residents wondered what had happened and who had done the deed. 28

When the prince learned that his father had been killed by Vāsudeva, guided by his family priest, he propitiated Śiva. 29

At the sacred site of Avimukta, the royal scion gratified that deity, who then offered him a boon. 30

The prince replied: 'By your grace, Lord Śiva, let a phantom rise to bring about the death of Kṛṣṇa, my father's murderer.' 31

Parāśara:

'It will be so,' replied the god, and from the fire in the southernmost of the prince's sacrificial hearths arose at once a monstrous phantom. 32

Her gaping maw blazed with fire; her hair was a mass of flames. Crying Kṛṣṇa's name repeatedly, the raging ghoul set out for Dvārakā. 33

When the people saw her, sage, their eyes began to dart with terror and they fled for protection to Madhu's subduer, the refuge of the world. 34

The discus-wielder understood that this great spectre had been conjured forth by bull-bannered Śiva when the king of Kāśī's son had worshipped him. 35

In the middle of a game of dice, Kṛṣṇa casually released his discus with the order to destroy the frightful apparition whose locks were a mass of blazing fire. 36

Viṣṇu's weapon Sudarśana set off at once towards the dreadful fire-belching spectre, her hair a fiery garland. 37

Confounded by the discus's blow, that phantom born of mighty Śiva fled as quickly as she could, but the weapon in pursuit was just as fast. 38

As she hastened into Vārāṇasī, best of sages, Viṣṇu's discus sapped her strength. 39

The king of Kāśī's army, with a mighty force of Pramathas, armed with every kind of weapon and with missiles, met Sudarśana. 40

Hari's discus burned the armies with its energy, even though they knew the use of weapons. Then it burned down all of Vārāṇasī, source of the apparition, 41

Along with its king, his minions, subjects, horses, elephants, men and all its stores and granaries such as even deities rarely see. 42

Until every residence, square and rampart was engulfed by flames, Hari's discus burned it all. 43

Sudarśana, ablaze with splendour, then returned to Viṣṇu's hand with undiminished energy and a thirst for further missions so easily accomplished. 44

So ends Chapter Thirty-Four in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

35. Balarāma threatens Hastināpura

Maitreya:

I'd like to hear some more about wise Balarāma's prowess. Kindly tell me, brahmin. 1

I've heard how he dragged the Yamunā and other feats, master, but tell me, fortunate sage, what other things he did. 2

Parāśara:

Listen, Maitreya, to this feat performed by Balarāma, who in truth is Śeṣa, the eternal, immeasurable upholder of the earth. 3

Jāmbavatī's son, the hero Sāmba, seized the daughter of Duryodhana as she was preparing for her *svayaṃvara*. 4

The mighty warriors Karṇa, Duryodhana, Bhīṣma, Droṇa and the rest were furious. They worsted Sāmba in battle and imprisoned him. 5

Hearing this, the Yādavas were all enraged by Duryodhana and his friends, Maitreya, and devised a scheme to slay them. 6

But Balarāma butted in and, slurring his words in drunkenness, exclaimed, 'I'll go alone to the Kauravas and make them set him free.' 7

When he reached Hastināpura, the city named for elephants, he didn't enter, but waited on its outskirts in a grove. 8

When Duryodhana and the other princes heard that he'd arrived, they presented him with cattle and some water as a gift. 9

Balarāma duly accepted these, but then addressed the Kauravas: 'Ugrasena orders you: set Sāmba free at once.' 10

Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa, Duryodhana and the others heard his words, best of brahmins, and flew into a rage. 11

All the furious Kauravas, Bālhīkas and the rest, who considered Yadu's lineage unworthy of a kingdom, said to the wielder of the plough: 12

'Hey! Hey! What's this you say, Balarāma? Who among the Yādavas gives orders to Kuru clansmen?' 13

If Ugrasena commands the Kauravas, we might as well give up our white umbrellas, the symbols of our sovereignty. 14

Go or stay, Balarāma, but we won't release ill-mannered Sāmba just as you or Ugrasena wish it. 15

You Kukuras and Andhakas have never shown the respect that we deserve, but what's this order from a servant to a master? 16

Just because you sit and eat with us, you've grown arrogant. We didn't think it wrong to show you kindness, because of our affection. 17

We sent you gifts of welcome because we liked you, Balarāma, but it doesn't really suit your clan to receive a gift from ours.' 18

Parāśara:

So saying, the Kauravas refused to release Sāmba, son of Hari, and, being in agreement, they returned at once to the city named for elephants. 19

Mad with fury at this insult, plough-wielding Balarāma spun around, leapt up and kicked the earth. 20

The earth, struck by that mighty being, split asunder, and the sound of the fracture spread in all directions. 21

With reddened eyes and knitted brows, he shouted, ‘Ha! Such is the haughty arrogance of these worthless, wicked people. 22

The sovereignty of the Kauravas and ours is the gift of fate, as is the fact they think today they can ignore the command of Ugrasena. 23

Śacī’s husband and other gods duly follow Ugrasena’s orders, and he holds court in Sudharmā, Indra’s assembly hall. 24

I curse their pride in a royal throne that has been occupied by a hundred men! Is not Ugrasena, whose servants’ wives wear garlands from the Pārijāta tree, lord of the earth? 25

May Ugrasena remain the master of every monarch. Before I enter his city today, I’ll rid this world of Kauravas. 26

This very day, I’ll kill Karṇa, Duryodhana, Droṇa, Bhīṣma, Bāhlika, Duḥśāsana and his brothers, Bhūri, Bhūriśravas, 27

Somadatta, Śala, Bhīma, Arjuna, Yudhiṣṭhira and the twins Sahadeva and Nakula, as well as the other Kauravas, along with their horses, chariots and elephants. 28

Then I’ll rescue brave Sāmba and his wife, and bring them back to Dvārakā, where I’ll see Ugrasena and my other kin once more. 29

Better still, I’ll take the Kauravas’ capital, the city named for elephants, along with the Kurus themselves, and throw them in the Gaṅgā River.’ 30

Parāśara:

So saying, his eyes still red with drunkenness, plough-wielding Balarāma laid his weapon, blade down, upon the city wall and pulled. 31

Seeing Hastināpura abruptly start to topple, the Kauravas’ hearts all trembled and they cried aloud, 32

‘Balarāma, Balarāma! Forgive us, mighty warrior, forgive us. Don’t be angry. Be gracious, plough-wielding hero. 33

Here are Sāmba and his wife. We’ll set them free for you, Balarāma. We didn’t know how strong you were. Forgive us our offence.’ 34

Parāśara:

The Kauravas immediately came out of the city, best of sages, and handed over Sāmba and his wife. 35

Balarāma, bowing, spoke to Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Kṛpa and the other Kauravas as they tried to calm him. ‘I forgive you,’ said that best of heroes. 36

Even to this very day, brahmin, Hastināpura seems to list, such was the power of Balarāma, as shown by his strength and courage. 37

The Kauravas then paid respects to Balarāma and sent off Sāmba and his wife with wedding gifts. 38

So ends Chapter Thirty-Five in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

36. Balarāma defeats the giant monkey Dvidida

Parāśara:

Listen, Maitreya. Now you’ll hear about another feat performed by mighty Balarāma. 1

There was a monkey, Dvidida by name, a powerful warrior and ally of Naraka the demon king and rival of the deities. 2

After Kṛṣṇa, at Indra’s urging, had slain Naraka, that mighty beast then became the gods’ sworn enemy, saying: 3

‘Because of this, I’ll take revenge on all the gods by disrupting every sacrifice and destroying the world of men.’ 4

Accordingly, misled by ignorance, he prevented acts of worship, overstepped the limits of the wise and wrought destruction on living beings. 5

That wanton creature burned the land, the cities, towns and everything between them. Here and there he crushed the villages and other settlements by hurling mountains down on them. 6

He picked up massifs and dropped them in the seas and rivers, and churned the ocean while standing in its waters. 7

Stirred by Dvidida, brahmin, the ocean broke its banks and swiftly flooded towns and cities and other places on its shores. 8

That monkey, who could take on any shape at will, appeared in monstrous form and ruined all the crops by rolling, roaming and trampling on them. 9

This whole world, ravaged by that evil beast and deprived of Vedic recitation with ritual cries of *vaṣaṭ*, Maitreya, was filled with misery. 10

One day, plough-wielding Balarāma was drinking in the garden of Raivata with fortunate Revatī and some other lovely women. 11

While they sang his praises, that foremost of the Yadu clan enjoyed himself, surrounded by a splendid throng of girls, like Kubera on Mount Mandara. 12

But then Dvidida appeared and, snatching Balarāma's plough and club, he mocked the Yādava to his face. 13

That monkey laughed at Balarāma in front of all the women and kicked the wine-filled vessels over, smashing all of them. 14

Furious Balarāma cursed the monkey, but Dvidida, ignoring him, just chattered back. 15

Balarāma leapt up and seized his club in fury, but the magic monkey grabbed a boulder of enormous size and hurled it. 16

The hero of the Yādavas smashed that rock into a thousand pieces with his club and brought it to the ground. 17

The monkey flew up in the air, dodged the club and, rushing forward, beat his paws against his chest in anger. 18

Raging Balarāma struck Dvidida on the head; the monkey dropped down to the ground, spewing blood, his life force spent. 19

Dvidida's body fell on a mountain and smashed its peak in a hundred pieces, Maitreya, as if struck by Indra's thunderbolt. 20

The deities caused flowers to fall like rain on Balarāma and, descending from the heavens, praised him, saying, 'Excellent indeed is this feat that you've accomplished. 21

All the world was troubled by this wicked monkey doing favours for the Daityas, hero. Luckily he's dead.' 22

Parāśara:

Many peerless deeds like this were done by prudent Balarāma, who was really Śeṣa, supporter of the earth. 23

So ends Chapter Thirty-Six in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

37. The destruction of the Yādavas

Parāśara:

Thus Kṛṣṇa, helped by Balarāma, destroyed the Daityas and the evil kings to benefit the world. ¹

With Arjuna's assistance, Lord Hari eased the burden of the earth by destroying many armies.²³ ²

After he'd accomplished this and brought down all the monarchs, he then annihilated his own clan, the Yādavas, owing to a brahmin's curse. ³

Kṛṣṇa then abandoned Dvārakā and left his mortal body. This self-born being, with all his manifested aspects, then resumed his natural state as Viṣṇu. ⁴

Maitreya:

Why did he destroy his clan owing to the brahmin's curse, and how did Janārdana leave his mortal form? ⁵

Parāśara:

One day, at the sacred site of Piṅḍāraka, some young boys of the Yadu clan spied Viśvāmitra, Kaṇva and the great sage Nārada. ⁶

These fine lads, impelled by fate, dressed Sāmba, son of Jāmbavatī, as a woman. ⁷

They then approached the sages and, bowing with respect, said, 'This is Babhru's wife, and she desires a son. Will her baby be a boy or girl?' ⁸

Parāśara:

The sages, endowed with divine perception, felt insulted by the boys and angrily declared, 'She will bear a pestle, which will end the clan of Yādavas!' ⁹

Thus addressed by the sages, the youths told Ugrasena what they'd done, and Sāmba later brought forth a pestle from his belly. ¹⁰

Ugrasena had that iron pestle ground to dust. This was thrown into the ocean, where it grew as reeds. ¹¹

23 This is a reference to the Mahābhārata war.

When the Andhaka clansmen destroyed the pestle, brahmin, there remained one blade-like splinter they couldn't crush. *12*

This they also cast into the sea, where it was swallowed by a fish. The fish was caught by fishermen, and a hunter known as Jaras found the fragment in its belly. *13*

Although the slayer of Madhu foresaw the final outcome, the lord had no desire to change the course of fate. *14*

The gods dispatched a messenger to Keśava, who bowed before him, saying, 'Lord, I'm an envoy sent in secret by the deities. *15*

Mighty Indra with the Vasus, Aśvins, Maruts, Ādityas, Rudras, Sādhyas and the others wish to tell you this, so listen carefully, Lord. *16*

It's more than a hundred years since you, Lord, propitiated by the thirteen gods, descended to the earth to ease her burden. *17*

The wicked Daityas have been destroyed and the burden of the earth relieved. May we thirteen deities in threefold heavens always have you as our leader. *18*

More than a hundred years have passed, universal Lord. Now, if it pleases you, return to heaven. *19*

The deities also said that, if you're happy here, then you should remain as long as your dependants need you.' *20*

The Lord:

All you've said is known to me, messenger, and I've already begun the Yādavas' destruction. *21*

Even now, the burden of the earth will not be eased until the Yādavas are destroyed. Before I leave, I'll annihilate them all in seven short nights. *22*

When the ocean has reclaimed the land I took for Dvārakā, and I've destroyed the clan, I'll then return to the abode of the thirteen deities. *23*

Tell the king of gods and others that, when I've left this mortal form, I'll come back with Balarāma. *24*

Jarāsandha and the other kings who were a burden on the earth have all been killed, yet even a single Yādava boy is no less a load than they. *25*

Tell the gods that I'll return to guard their realm when I've removed this weighty burden from the earth. *26*

Parāśara:

Thus addressed by Vāsudeva, the heavenly envoy bowed to him, Maitreya, and, with the speed of the deities, returned to Indra's presence. 27

By day and night, the lord observed bad omens in the sky, on the ground and in the air, portending the ruin of Dvārakā. 28

Noting these, he then addressed the Yādavas, 'Behold these dreadful portents! We'll go at once to Prabhāsa to ward them off.' 29

Parāśara:

Uddhava, his foremost devotee, said to Hari with a bow, 'Tell me, Lord, what I must do, as I suspect you'll reabsorb the clan. 30

Signs portending its destruction have been seen, eternal Lord.' 31

The Lord:

Go with the speed of deities, which you'll acquire through my mercy, to the auspicious ashram of Badarīka on Mount Gandhamādana, residence of Nara and Nārāyaṇa, whose existence purifies the world. 32

Contemplate me there and, with my blessing, you'll achieve perfection. I'll return to heaven when I've reabsorbed the clan. 33

The moment I depart from Dvārakā, the ocean will reclaim it. 34

Parāśara:

Hearing this, Uddhava bowed to Hari and left for Nara and Nārāyaṇa's abode as suggested. 35

Mounted on swift chariots, the Yādavas then all set out for Prabhāsa, brahmin, with Kṛṣṇa, Balarāma and the rest. 36

On reaching that location, the Kukura and Andhaka clansmen bathed and then, encouraged by Vāsudeva, began to drink in earnest. 37

Friction rose among them as they drank. This friction sparked an argument, and a fight flared up, which led to their destruction. 38

Victims of their destiny, they struck each other with weapons and, when the weapons were exhausted, they seized the reeds that grew nearby. 39

The reeds were thunderbolts in their hands, with which they slew each other in that terrible affray. 40

Led by Pradyumna and Sāmba, Kṛtavarman, Sātyaki, Aniruddha, Pṛthu and Vipṛthu, *41*

Cāruvarman, Cāruka, Akrūra and many others, brahmin, they fought with bolts of lightning in the form of reeds. *42*

Hari tried to stop them, but the Yādavas all thought he'd come to their assistance, so battled on regardless. *43*

Furious Kṛṣṣa grabbed some reeds, which became a club of iron for the Yādavas' destruction. *44*

Wielding this weapon, he slew the murderous clansmen, leaving none alive, while others clashed together and slaughtered one another. *45*

Jaitra, the discus-wielder's chariot, best of brahmins, was swept into the ocean with its steeds as its driver, Dāruka, looked on. *46*

Hari's discus, club and bow, his quivers, conch and sword all circled him respectfully, then departed by the solar path. *47*

Soon, great sage, not one Yādava remained alive, except for mighty Kṛṣṣa himself and Dāruka. *48*

Balarāma and Kṛṣṣa abandon their mortal forms

As they wandered, Dāruka and Kṛṣṣa saw Balarāma seated by a tree with a giant serpent coming from his mouth. *49*

That massive coiling creature emerged from Balarāma and set off for the ocean, worshipped by the siddhas and other nāgas. *50*

The Ocean came to welcome him with gifts of hospitality, and he slid into its waters while foremost serpents sang his praises. *51*

Seeing Balarāma had withdrawn, Keśava said to Dāruka, 'Report all this to Vasudeva and to Ugrasena: *52*

Balarāma has departed and the Yādavas are no more. I'll repose in yoga, then I'll leave my mortal form. *53*

Tell Āhuka and Dvārakā's inhabitants that the ocean will soon reclaim their city. *54*

They should prepare for Arjuna's arrival, as they cannot stay in Dvārakā. When the son of Pāṇḍu leaves, *55*

They must follow that Kuru scion wherever he may lead. *56*

Go and repeat my words to Arjuna, son of Kuntī: he must protect these folk, my kin, with all his might. 57

Accompanied by Arjuna, you must lead them all from Dvārakā, and Vajra will become the Yadus' king.' 58

Parāśara:

Hearing this, Dāruka bowed to Kṛṣṇa many times, circled him respectfully, then set out as instructed. 59

When the prudent driver had departed, he did as Kṛṣṇa ordered him in Dvārakā, leading Arjuna to the city and setting Vajra on the throne. 60

Lord Govinda, who maintained the highest form of Vāsudeva among the living, now merged into the Absolute.²⁴ 61

Respecting the words of the brahmin Durvāsas, Kṛṣṇa engaged in yoga, best of sages, seated with one foot upon his knee.²⁵ 62

The hunter known as Jaras appeared at that location. His arrow bore the remnant shard of iron from the pestle at its tip. 63

Standing at a distance, he mistook the foot of Kṛṣṇa for a deer, best of brahmins, and, with that very missile, he shot him in the sole. 64

Drawing closer, Jaras saw the four-armed being. He threw himself upon the ground and begged repeatedly for mercy: 65

'I didn't know what I was doing and mistook you for a deer. Forgive me. I'm consumed by shame, so please don't punish me anymore.' 66

Parāśara:

'Have no fear,' the Lord replied. 'Go with my blessing, hunter, to the heavens where gods reside.' 67

Parāśara:

As soon as he had spoken, a celestial chariot appeared. The hunter climbed aboard and departed for the heavenly realms, with Kṛṣṇa's blessing. 68

24 The commentators and my fellow translators have all struggled to make sense of this verse. This is the clearest version I can offer.

25 According to the *Mahābhārata* (CE 13.144), the sage Durvāsas was once a guest in Kṛṣṇa's abode. The sage told Kṛṣṇa to smear himself with leftover rice porridge, while Durvāsas applied it to Rukmiṇī. Kṛṣṇa's soles were left uncovered and so became vulnerable.

After Jaras had set off, the lord merged with the highest, eternal, inconceivable, purest form of Vāsudeva, ⁶⁹

Which is birthless, ageless, indestructible, immeasurable and universal. He then transcended the threefold state and abandoned his mortal form. ⁷⁰

So ends Chapter Thirty-Seven in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

38. Arjuna leads the women from Dvārakā

Parāśara:

On finding the remains of Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma, Arjuna performed the rites for them and the other Yādavas in turn. ¹

Kṛṣṇa's eight consorts, whom I mentioned, led by Rukmiṇī, embraced the corpse of Hari and ascended his funerary pyre. ²

Revatī embraced Balarāma's body, best of sages, and entered the blazing fire, which seemed cool to her on account of her joyous union with her husband. ³

Hearing of this, Ugrasena, Vasudeva, Devakī and Rohiṇī also entered the flames. ⁴

After Arjuna had duly carried out rituals for them all, he led the people, including Vajra, from the city. ⁵

Watching over Kṛṣṇa's myriad consorts, with Vajra and the others as they abandoned Dvārakā, the son of Kuntī set forth slowly. ⁶

When Kṛṣṇa left this mortal realm, Maitreya, the assembly hall Sudharmā and the Pārijāta tree both rose to heaven. ⁷

On the very day that Hari left the earth for heaven, this dark and potent Kali age descended on the world. ⁸

The mighty ocean flooded empty Dvārakā, sparing just the Yādu god's abode. ⁹

Even now, the ocean cannot take it, brahmin, as Lord Keśava always dwells there. ¹⁰

Having seen that place of great good fortune, where Viṣṇu, who removes all wickedness, disports himself, one is freed from sin. ¹¹

In the land that's watered by five rivers and abounds in grain, Arjuna, son of Pṛthā, made a home for all the people, best of sages. 12

Seeing women bereft of husbands, led by the archer Arjuna alone, the cupidity of certain bandits was aroused. 13

Those wicked men whose hearts were filled with avarice met with fierce Ābhīra tribesmen and conferred with them: 14

'Here, the single archer Arjuna, having overrun us, is leading widowed women through our lands. Shame upon your army! 15

Slaying Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Jayadratha, Karṇa and the others, Arjuna grew proud, but he doesn't know how strong we villagers can be. 16

Come! Come! Take up your staves! This fool looks down on us. What use are your strong arms?' 17

Parāśara:

Thousands of plundering bandits armed with staves then fell on the defenceless throng. 18

The son of Kuntī checked the tribes and, with a laugh, he said, 'Retreat now—ignorant of virtue—if you do not want to die.' 19

But they ignored his warning and seized the women—once the wives of mighty Kṛṣṇa—Maitreya, along with their possessions. 20

When that hero Arjuna tried to string Gāṇḍīva, his heavenly bow that never failed in battle, he found it was impossible. 21

He strove to tighten up the string, but it came undone again. The son of Pāṇḍu tried to summon magic weapons, but his memory also failed him. 22

Impatient Arjuna, wielder of Gāṇḍīva, loosed arrows at his foes, but they barely scratched their skin. 23

Arjuna's unfailing shafts, gifts from Agni, were destroyed in battle with the herdsmen, and now his very life was threatened. 24

The son of Kuntī recalled how Kṛṣṇa's power had let him vanquish hosts of earthly kings with showers of arrows. 25

While Pāṇḍu's son looked on, some splendid women were seized by Ābhīras, while other women ran towards them lustily. 26

When all his arrows were exhausted, Dhanamjaya struck the brigands with his bow, sage, but they merely mocked his blows. 27

Parāśara:

Arjuna, son of Pṛthā, sighed and said, ‘Listen’, then explained to Vyāsa how he’d been defeated. 42

Arjuna:

Hari, who was our strength, energy, courage, prowess, glory and lustre, has abandoned us and gone away. 43

Without that great being, sage, who was one of us and always addressed us with a smile, we’re merely men of straw. 44

The highest spirit, who was the power invested in my missiles, arrows and my bow, Gāṇḍīva, has left. 45

As long as we could see him, our glory, victory, fortune and prosperity never failed, but Lord Govinda has deserted us and gone away. 46

Kṛṣṇa—by whose prowess Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa, king of Aṅga, Duryodhana and the other Kauravas were consumed—has left this world. 47

The earth, like me, has lost its youth, deprived of glory, robbed of beauty. Neither I nor the rest of the world, dear Vyāsa, will shine again without that discus-wielding Kṛṣṇa. 48

Because of my faith in him, Bhīṣma and the others were drawn like moths to my flame, but, in Kṛṣṇa’s absence, I’ve been beaten by some cattle-herders. 49

With my faith in Kṛṣṇa, Gāṇḍīva, my bow, was famed in all three worlds, but, without him, it’s no match for tribal staves. 50

Despite my efforts, mighty sage, the women in my charge were carried off in thousands by brigands armed with sticks. 51

All of Kṛṣṇa’s dependants have been seized by Ābhīras, who defeated me with blows of staves and robbed me of my strength, Vyāsa. 52

It’s no surprise that I am pale—it’s amazing that I’m still alive! Heaped with abuse by inferior men, grandsire, I’ve no shame left. 53

Arjuna and the other Pāṇḍavas retire to the forest

Vyāsa:

That’s enough of modesty, Arjuna. Grieving doesn’t suit you. You need to understand no being is immune from the vagaries of Time. 54

Time brings all things into being, son of Pāṇḍu, then destroys them. Once you understand the world is ruled by Time, Arjuna, hold on to strength while it endures. 55

The rivers, oceans, mountains and all the world with gods and mortals, animals, trees, insects and reptiles were all brought forth by Time. 56

And Time will bring them to an end again. When you see that Time is at the heart of this, you'll find peace. 57

Kṛṣṇa's greatness is just as you've described it, Dhanamjaya. He came to earth to ease the burden of the world. 58

In former times, the Earth, oppressed by weight, approached the assembly of the gods, and Janārdana, who also takes the form of Time, descended to the world on her behalf. 59

That task has been accomplished, Arjuna, as all the kings are slain and the race of Andhakas and Vṛṣṇis is no more. 60

In this world, the lord has nothing more to do and, hence, his task completed, he has departed in accordance with his desire. 61

At the moment of creation, the god of gods brings forth the world; while it exists, he keeps it and, in the end, he is capable of its destruction, as he has shown just now. 62

Don't dwell on being beaten, Arjuna, as men have prowess only for a fraction of their lives. 63

Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa and the other kings were slain by you alone, but their death was really brought about by Time. Wasn't your defeat by lesser men the same? 64

Just as you defeated them with your faith in Viṣṇu, your defeat by bandits is, in the end, attributable to Time. 65

That deity, master of the universe, assuming different forms, preserves the world and finally destroys creation. 66

During your own lifetime Janārdana was your ally, son of Kuntī, but now your life is drawing to a close, your enemies are overseen by Keśava. 67

Who'd believe that you would slay the Kauravas, including Bhīṣma, son of Gaṅgā? And who'd believe the Ābhīras defeated you? 68

That you, the son of Pṛthā, beat the Kauravas but were yourself defeated by Ābhīras is just the playful sport of Hari, the universal being. 69

You're grieving for the women seized by bandits, Arjuna, but I'll tell you why this happened. 70

Long ago, a brahmin known as Aṣṭāvakra vowed to live in water, son of Pṛthā, and he spent many years in worship of the everlasting Absolute. 71

When the armies of the demigods had been defeated, a great celebration was held on the foothills of Mount Meru. Some heavenly womenfolk saw that brahmin as they journeyed to the festival. 72

Hundreds and thousands of apsarases, Rambhā and Tilottamā among them, son of Pāṇḍu, extolled that great ascetic and sang his praises. 73

Intent upon their eulogies, they reverently bowed before the sage as he stood neck-deep in water, with his matted locks piled upon his head. 74

All those apsarases, best of Kauravas, sang the praises that they thought would please that foremost brahmin. 75

Aṣṭāvakra:

'You've pleased me, blessed women. Ask for anything you desire, and I shall grant it, even if it's hard to come by.' 76

Rambhā, Tilottamā and other apsarases, celebrated in the Vedas, replied to him, 'Isn't it sufficient, brahmin, that you're pleased with us?' 77

But some among them said, 'Brahmin, if indeed you're gratified, we'd like to have the best of mankind for our husband.' 78

Vyāsa:

'As you wish,' the sage replied, emerging from the waters, but then the apsarases saw that he was very ugly, as his body was deformed (*vakra*) in eight respects (*aṣṭa*). 79

Seeing this, some tried to hide their mirth, but others burst out laughing, joy of Kurus, and the sage in fury cursed them: 80

'Because you think I'm ugly and you mock me, I pronounce this curse on you: 81

Through my blessing, Kṛṣṇa, the best of men, will be your husband, but cursed by me, you'll all be ruined and fall into the hands of bandits.' 82

Vyāsa:

Hearing this, the apsarases soothed the sage to some extent, so he promised in the end that they'd attain the realm of Indra, king of gods. 83

That's why, on account of Aṣṭāvakra's curse, those splendid women first had Keśava as their husband, but were later seized by brigands. 84

For this reason, son of Pāṇḍu, you shouldn't grieve for them at all. All this ruin was brought about by the universal lord. 85

And now your own demise is near at hand, as he has withdrawn your strength and glory, your courage and your greatness. 86

Death is certain for every being that's born, just as falling is assured for those who've risen. Union ends in separation, and all that's gathered will be scattered. 87

Knowing this, wise people neither grieve nor cheer, and others who learn their habits become like them. 88

For this reason, knowing this, you should leave behind this tangled life, outstanding man, and retire to the forest with your brothers to undertake austerities. 89

Go and give my orders to Yudhiṣṭhira, king of virtue, and prepare to set out with your brothers—not tomorrow, but the following day. 90

Parāśara:

Hearing this, Arjuna met the other sons of Pṛthu, Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīma, and the twins Nakula and Sahadeva, and told them all he'd seen and done. 91

Hearing Vyāsa's words conveyed by Arjuna, the five sons of Pāṇḍu set Parīkṣit on the throne and departed for the forest. 92

Thus, Maitreya, I've described for you at length the deeds of Vāsudeva when he was born in Yadu's lineage. 93

So ends Chapter Thirty-Eight in Book Five of the glorious Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

End of Book Five.

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