

THE LEGEND OF DHRUVA¹

Vishnu Purana. Book I. Chap. XI

Sprung from great Brahma, Manu² had two sons,
Heroic and devout, as I have said,
Pryavrata and Uttanapado,³—names
Known in legends; and of these the last
5 Married two wives, Suruchee,⁴ his adored,
The mother of a handsome petted boy
Uttama;⁵ and Suneetee,⁶ less beloved,
The mother of another son whose name
Was Dhruva. Seated on his throne the king
10 Uttanapado, on his knee one day
Had placed Uttama; Dhruva, who beheld
His brother in that place of honour, longed
To clamber up and by his playmate sit;
Led on by Love he came, but found, alas!
15 Scant welcome and encouragement; the king
Saw fair Suruchee sweep into the hall
With stately step,—aye, every inch a queen,
And dared not smile upon her co-wife's son.
Observing him,—her rival's boy,—intent
20 To mount ambitious to his father's knee,
Where sat her own, thus fair Suruchee spake:
“Why hast thou, child, formed such a vain design?
Why harboured such an aspiration proud,
Born from another's womb and not from mine?
25 Oh thoughtless! To desire the loftiest place,
The throne of thrones, a royal father's lap!

¹ This is the other poem from *Ancient Ballads* that appeared in print during Dutt's lifetime. It was published in *The Bengal Magazine* in October 1876. This legend is, as indicated, from the *Vishnu Purana*, a set of religious texts that promote the worship of Vishnu, the Preserver (one of the gods of the Hindu trinity). It tells the tale of Dhruva, a boy who leaves his life in a palace to live in the forest and devote himself to Vishnu. He is rewarded with a place in the heavens as a star. Significantly, in the original rendition Dhruva does return to his home before assuming his place in the heavens; indeed, his father eventually leaves the kingdom to him.

² Brahma is the first person of the Hindu triad, the Creator. Manu is a title given to each of the rulers of the fourteen parts into which a Kalpa (or, one day of Brahma) is divided; each of these parts lasts for millions of years. The Manu referred to here is Svayambhuva, the first of the fourteen Manus.

³ Pryavrata (Priyavrata) and Uttanapado (Uttanapada) were, as indicated, both heroes famous for their righteousness.

⁴ Suruchee (Suruci) was Uttanapado's first wife and his favorite, the mother of Uttama. She eventually died in a fire.

⁵ Uttama, Dhruva's half-brother, never became king. He died while Dhruva was king, killed by a Yaksha (Yaksha), a supernatural being or demi-god. Dhruva avenged Uttama's death by destroying the entire Yaksha army, after which he assumed his place in the heavens.

⁶ Suneetee (Suniti) was Uttanapado's second wife, the mother of Dhruva. She also eventually was given a place in the heavens as a star.

It is an honour to the destined given,
And not within thy reach. What though thou art
Born of the king; those sleek and tender limbs
30 Hold of my blood no portion; I am queen.
To be the equal of mine only son
Were in thee vain ambition. Know'st thou not,
Fair prattler,^o thou art sprung,—not, not from mine,
But from Suneetee's bowels? Learn thy place.” *foolish talker*

35 Repulsed in silence from his father's lap,
Indignant, furious, at the words that fell
From his step-mother's lips, poor Dhruva ran
To his own mother's chambers, where he stood
Beside her with his pale, thin, trembling lips,
40 (Trembling with an emotion ill-suppressed)
And hair in wild disorder, till she took
And raised him to her lap, and gently said:
“Oh, child, what means this? What can be the cause
Of this great anger? Who hath given thee pain?
45 He that hath vexed thee, hath despised thy sire,
For in these veins thou hast the royal blood.”

Thus conjured, Dhruva, with a swelling heart
Repeated to his mother every word
That proud Suruchee spake, from first to last,
50 Even in the very presence of the king.

His speech oft broken by his tears and sobs,
Helpless Suneetee, languid-eyed from care,
Heard sighing deeply, and then soft replied:
“Oh son, to lowly fortune thou wert born,
55 And what my co-wife said to thee is truth;
No enemy to Heaven's favoured ones may say
Such words as thy step-mother said to thee.
Yet, son, it is not meet that thou shouldst grieve
Or vex thy soul. The deeds that thou hast done,
60 The evil, haply,^o in some former life, *perhaps*
Long, long ago, who may alas! annul,
Or who the good works not done, supplement!
The sins of previous lives must bear their fruit.
The ivory throne, the umbrella of gold,
65 The best steed, and the royal elephant⁷
Rich caparisoned,^o must be his by right *outfitted*
Who has deserved them by his virtuous acts
In times long past. Oh think on this, my son,

⁷ The royal elephant is the Indian Elephant, the chosen mount of kings.

70 And be content. For glorious actions done
Not in this life, but in some previous birth,
Suruchee by the monarch is beloved.
Women, unfortunate like myself, who bear
Only the name of wife without the powers,
But pine and suffer for our ancient sins.
75 Suruchee raised her virtues pile on pile,
Hence Uttama her son, the fortunate!
Sunetee heaped but evil,—hence her son
Dhruva the luckless! But for all this, child,
It is not meet that thou shouldst ever grieve
80 As I have said. That man is truly wise
Who is content with what he has, and seeks
Nothing beyond, but in whatever sphere,
Lowly or great, God placed him, works in faith;
My son, my son, though proud Suruchee spake
85 Harsh words indeed, and hurt thee to the quick,
Yet to thine eyes thy duty should be plain.
Collect a large sum of the virtues; thence
A goodly harvest must to thee arise.
Be meek, devout, and friendly, full of love,
90 Intent to do good to the human race
And to all creatures sentient made of God;
And oh, be humble, for on modest worth
Descends prosperity, even as water flows
Down to low grounds.”

95 She finished, and her son,
Who patiently had listened, thus replied:—

“Mother, thy words of consolation find
Nor resting-place, nor echo in this heart
Broken by words severe, repulsing Love
That timidly approached to worship. Hear
100 My resolve unchangeable. I shall try
The highest good, the loftiest place to win,
Which the whole world deems priceless and desires.
There is a crown above my father’s crown,
I shall obtain it, and at any cost
105 Of toil, or penance, or unceasing prayer.
Not born of proud Suruchee, whom the king
Favours and loves, but grown up from a germ
In thee, O mother, humble as thou art,
I yet shall show thee what is in my power.
110 Thou shalt behold my glory and rejoice.
Let Uttama my brother,—not thy son,—
Receive the throne and royal titles,—all

My father pleases to confer on him.
I grudge them not. Not with another's gifts
115 Desire I, dearest mother, to be rich,
But with my own work would acquire a name.
And I shall strive unceasing for a place
Such as my father hath not won,—a place
That would not know him even,—aye, a place
120 Far, far above the highest of this earth.”

He said, and from his mother's chambers past,
And went into the wood where hermits live,
And never to his father's house returned.

Well kept the boy his promise made that day!
125 By prayer and penance Dhruva gained at last
The highest heavens, and there he shines a star!
Nightly men see him in the firmament.