

PREHLAD¹

A terror both of gods and men
Was Heerun Kasyapu,² the king;
No bear more sullen in its den,
No tiger quicker at the spring.
5 In strength of limb he had not met,
Since first his black flag he unfurled,
Nor in audacious courage, yet,
His equal in the wide, wide world.

The holy Veds³ he tore in shreds;
10 Libations, sacrifices, rites,
He made all penal; and the heads
Of Bramins⁴ slain, he flung to kites,^o
“I hold the sceptre in my hand,
I sit upon the ivory throne,
15 Bow down to me—‘tis my command,
And worship me, and me alone.

No god has ever me withstood,
Why raise ye altars?—cease your pains!
I shall protect you, give you food,
20 If ye obey,—or else the chains.”
Fled at such edicts, self-exiled,
The Bramins and the pundits wise,
To live thenceforth in forests wild,
Or caves in hills that touch the skies.

25 In secret there, they altars raised,
And made oblations^o due by fire,
Their gods, their wonted^o gods, they praised,
Lest these should earth destroy in ire;
They read the Veds, they prayed and mused,
30 Full well they knew that Time would bring
For favours scorned, and gifts misused,
Undreamt of changes on his wing.

*offerings
customary*

Time changes deserts bare to meads,^o

meadows

¹ The legend of Prehlad (Prahlad, Prahlada), from the *Vishnu Purana*, is another tale told by Parasara (the sage who taught the *Vishnu Purana* to Maitreya). It spans Chapters 17-20 in Book One of the *Vishnu Purana*.

² Heerun Kasyapu (Hiranyakasipu) was king of the daityas (demon-giants).

³ The holy Veds refers to the body of works that together constitute the sacred knowledge of Hinduism.

⁴ Hindu society was seen as divided into four main castes, or classes, determined by one's birth. Bramins (Brahmins, Brahmins) are members of the highest caste, made up of holy sages and philosophers.

35 And fertile meads to deserts bare,
Cities to pools, and pools with reeds
To towns and cities large and fair.
Time changes purple into rags,
And rags to purple. Chime by chime,
Whether it flies, or runs, or drags—
40 The wise wait patiently on Time.

Time brought the tyrant children four,
Rahd, Onoorahd, Prehlad, Sunghrad,⁵
Who made his castle gray and hoar,
Once full of gloom, with sunshine glad.
45 No boys were e'er more beautiful,
No brothers e'er loved more each other,
No sons were e'er more dutiful,
Nor ever kissed a fonder mother.

Nor less beloved were they of him
50 Who gave them birth, Kasyapu proud,
But made by nature stern and grim,
His love was covered by a cloud
From which it rarely e'er emerged,
To gladden these sweet human flowers.
55 They grew apace,^o and now Time urged
The education of their powers.

quickly

Who should their teacher be? A man
Among the flatterers in the court
Was found, well-suited to the plan
60 The tyrant had devised. Report
Gave him a wisdom owned by few,
And certainly to trim his sail,
And veer his bark^o, none better knew,
Before a changing adverse gale.

boat

65 And Sonda Marco,⁶—such his name,—
Took home the four fair boys to teach
All knowledge that their years became,
Science, and war, and modes of speech,
But he was told, if death he feared,
70 Never to tell them of the soul,
Of vows, and prayers, and rites revered,
And of the gods who all control.

⁵ The names Dutt offers as that of Prehlad's brothers (not found in the *Vishnu Purana* itself).

⁶ The name Dutt offers as that of Prehlad's teacher (not found in the *Vishnu Purana* itself).

The sciences the boys were taught
They mastered with a quickness strange,
75 But Prehlad was the one for thought,
He soared above the lesson's range.
One day the tutor unseen heard
The boy discuss forbidden themes,
As if his inmost heart were stirred,
80 And he of truth from heaven had gleams.

"O Prince, what mean'st thou?" In his fright
The teacher thus in private said—
"Talk on such subjects is not right,
Wouldst thou bring ruin on my head?
85 There are no gods except the king,
The ruler of the world is he!
Look up to him, and do not bring
Destruction by a speech too free.

Be wary for thy own sake, child,
90 If he should hear thee talking so,
Thou shalt for ever be exiled,
And I shall die, full well I know.
Worthy of worship, honour, praise,
Is thy great father. Things unseen,
95 What *are* they?—Themes of poets' lays!
They *are* not and have never been."

Smiling, the boy, with folded hands,
As sign of a submission meek,
Answered his tutor. "Thy commands
100 Are ever precious. Do not seek
To lay upon me what I feel
Would be unrighteous. Let me hear
Those inner voices that reveal
Long vistas in another sphere.

105 The gods that rule the earth and sea,
Shall I abjure^o them and adore
A man? It may not, may not be;
Though I should lie in pools of gore
My conscience I would hurt no more;
110 But I shall follow what my heart
Tells me is right, so I implore
My purpose fixed no longer thwart.

renounce

The coward calls black white, white black,

At bidding, or in fear of death;
115 Such suppleness, thank God, I lack,
To die is but to lose my breath.
Is death annihilation? No.
New worlds will open on my view,
When persecuted hence I go,
120 The right is right,—the true is true.”

All’s over now, the teacher thought,
Now let this reach the monarch’s ear!
And instant death shall be my lot.
They parted, he in abject fear.
125 And soon he heard a choral song
Sung by young voices in the praise
Of gods unseen, who right all wrong,
And rule the worlds from primal days.

“What progress have thy charges made?
130 Let them be called, that I may see.”
And Sonda Marco brought as bade
His pupils to the royal knee.
Three passed the monarch’s test severe,
The fourth remained: then spake the king,
135 “Now, Prehlad, with attention hear,
I know thou hast the strongest wing!

What is the cream of knowledge, child,
Which men take such great pains to learn?”
With folded hands he answered mild:
140 “Listen, O Sire! To speak I yearn.
All sciences are nothing worth,—
Astronomy that tracks the star,
Geography that maps the earth,
Logic, and Politics, and War,—

145 And Medicine, that strives to heal
But only aggravates disease,
All, all are futile,—so I feel,
For me, O father, none of these.
That is true knowledge which can show
150 The glory of the living gods,—
Divest of pride, make men below
Humble and happy, though but clods.

That is true knowledge which can make
Us mortals saintlike, holy, pure,

155 The strange thirst of the spirit slake
And strengthen suffering to endure.
That is true knowledge which can change
Our very natures with its glow;
The sciences whate'er their range
160 Feed but the flesh, and make a show."

"Where hast thou learnt this nonsense, boy?
Where live these gods believed so great?
Can they like me thy life destroy?
Have they such troops and royal state?
165 Above all gods is he who rules
The wide, wide earth, from sea to sea,
Men, devils, gods,—yea, all but fools
Bow down in fear and worship me!

And dares an atom from my loins
170 Against my kingly power rebel?
Though heaven itself to aid him joins,
His end is death—the infidel!
I warn thee yet,—bow down, thou slave,
And worship me, or thou shalt die!
175 We'll see what gods descend to save—
What gods with me their strength will try!"

Thus spake the monarch in his ire,
One hand outstretched, in menace rude,
And eyes like blazing coals of fire.
180 And Prehlad, in unruffled mood
Straight answered him; his head bent low,
His palms joined meekly on his breast
As ever, and his cheeks aglow
His rock-firm purpose to attest.

185 "Let not my words, Sire, give offence,
To thee, and to my mother, both
I give as due all reverence,
And to obey thee am not loth.^o
But higher duties sometimes clash
190 With lower,—then these last must go,—
Or there will come a fearful crash
In lamentation, fear, and woe!

reluctant

The gods who made us are the life
Of living creatures, small and great;
195 We see them not, but space is rife

With their bright presence and their state.
They are the parents of us all,
'Tis they create, sustain, redeem,
Heaven, earth and hell, they hold in thrall,
200 And shall we these high gods blaspheme?

Blest is the man whose heart obeys
And makes their law of life his guide,
He shall be led in all his ways,
His footsteps shall not ever slide;
205 In forests dim, on raging seas,
In certain peace shall he abide,
What though he all the world displease,
His gods shall all his wants provide!"

"Cease, babbler! 'tis enough! I know
210 Thy proud, rebellious nature well.
Ho! Captain of our lifeguards, ho!
Take down this lad to dungeon-cell,
And bid the executioner wait
Our orders." All unmoved and calm,
215 He went, as reckless of his fate,
Erect and stately as a palm.

Hushed was the hall, as down he past,
No breath, no whisper, not a sign,
Through ranks of courtiers, all aghast
220 Like beaten hounds that dare not whine.
Outside the door, the Captain spoke,
"Recant," he said beneath his breath;
"The lion's anger to provoke
Is death, O prince, is certain death."

"Thanks," said the prince,—"I have revolved
225 The question in my mind with care,
Do what you will,—I am resolved,
To do the right, all deaths I dare.
The gods, perhaps, may please to spare
230 My tender years; if not,—why, still
I never shall my faith forswear,
I can but say, be done their will."

Whether in pity for the youth,
The headsman would not rightly ply
235 The weapon, or the gods in truth
Had ordered that he should not die,

240 Soon to the king there came report
The sword would not destroy his son,
The council held thereon was short,
The king's look frightened every one.

245 "There is a spell against cold steel
Which known, the steel can work no harm,
Some sycophant with baneful^o zeal
Hath taught this foolish boy the charm.
It would be wise, O king, to deal
Some other way, or else I fear
Much damage to the common weal."^o
Thus spake the wily-tongued vizier.^o

destructive

*well-being
important personage*

250 Dark frowned the king.—"Enough of this,—
Death, instant death, is my command!
Go throw him down some precipice,
Or bury him alive in sand."
With terror dumb, from that wide hall
Departed all the courtier band,
255 But not one man amongst them all
Dared raise against the prince his hand.

260 And now vague rumours ran around,
Men talked of them with bated breath:
The river has a depth profound,
The elephants trample down to death,
The poisons kill, the firebrands burn.
Had every means in turn been tried?
Some said they had,—but soon they learn
The brave young prince had not yet died.

265 For once more in the Council-Hall
He had been cited to appear,
'Twas open to the public all,
And all the people came in fear.
Banners were hung along the wall,
270 The King sat on his peacock throne,
And now the hoary Marechal^o
Brings in the youth,—bare skin and bone.

high-ranking officer

275 "Who shall protect thee, Prehlad, now?
Against steel, poison, water, fire,
Thou art protected, men avow^o
Who treason, if but bold, admire.
In our own presence thou art brought

assert

280 That we and all may know the truth—
Where are thy gods?—I long have sought
But never found them, hapless youth.

285 Will they come down, to prove their strength?
Will they come down, to rescue thee?
Let them come down, for once, at length,
Come one, or all, to fight with me.
Where are thy gods? Or are they dead,
Or do they hide in craven fear?
There lies my gage.^o None ever said
I hide from any,—far or near.”

challenge (to fight)

290 “My gracious Liege, my Sire, my King!
If thou indeed wouldst deign to hear,
In humble mood, my words would spring
Like a pellucid^o fountain clear,
For I have in my dungeon dark
Learnt more of truth than e’er I knew,
295 There is one God—One only,—mark!
To Him is all our service due.

translucent

300 Hath He a shape, or hath He none?
I know not this, nor care to know,
Dwelling in light, to which the sun
Is darkness,—He sees all below,
Himself unseen! In Him I trust,
He can protect me if He will,
And if this body turn to dust,
He can new life again instil.

305 I fear not fire, I fear not sword,
All dangers, father, I can dare;
Alone, I can confront a horde,
For oh! my God is everywhere!”
“What! everywhere? Then in this hall,
310 And in this crystal pillar bright?
Now tell me plain, before us all,
Is He herein, thy God of light?”

315 The monarch placed his steel-gloved hand
Upon a crystal pillar near,
In mockful jest was his demand,
The answer came, low, serious, clear:
“Yes, father, God is even here,
And if He choose this very hour

320 Can strike us dead, with ghastly fear,
And vindicate His name and power.”

“Where is this God? Now let us see.”
He spurned^o the pillar with his foot,
Down, down it tumbled, like a tree
Severed by axes from the root,
325 And from within, with horrid clang
That froze the blood in every vein,
A stately sable warrior sprang,
Like some phantasma of the brain.

kicked

He had a lion head and eyes,
330 A human body, feet and hands,
Colossal,—such strange shapes arise
In clouds, when Autumn rules the lands!
He gave a shout;—the boldest quailed,
Then struck the tyrant on the helm,
335 And ripped him down; and last, he hailed
Prehlad as king of all the realm!

A thunder clap—the shape was gone!
One king lay stiff, and stark, and dead,
Another on the peacock throne
340 Bowed reverently his youthful head.
Loud rang the trumpets; louder still
A sovereign people’s wild acclaim.
The echoes ran from hill to hill,
“Kings rule for us and in our name.”

345 Tyrants of every age and clime
Remember this,—that awful shape
Shall startle you when comes the time,
And send its voice from cape to cape.
As human, peoples suffer pain,
350 But oh, the lion strength is theirs,
Woe to the king when galls the chain!
Woe, woe, their fury when he dares!