

prepared to try anything. The next morning, she got up early, took a bath and collected the white flowers for her visit to the temple.

While combing her hair, Anupama looked into the mirror and shivered with shock. A small white patch had appeared on her arm. It was the death knell for her happiness; a sign that she should abandon all hopes of a cure. She felt as if she had caught a thief stealthily entering the house. The patches would spread rapidly over the rest of her body. . . and the doors of her mother-in-law's house would remain shut forever.

Tears blurred her vision as sorrow welled up in her heart. What was the point in going to the temple now? She started sobbing, but there was not a soul to console her. She was like a lonely traveller on a long and arduous road.

Anupama heard her father stir. She didn't want him to know that she was crying, so she took the flowers that she had plucked, and silently walked out of the house.

The temple of the goddess of the village was on top of a hillock two kilometres from the house. At that hour of the morning, the only people out were the devotees who were going to the temple. Exhausted, Anupama slowly made her way up the path, completely oblivious of her surroundings. It was a while before she noticed the two women walking ahead of her. They were talking so loudly that Anupama could hear them without any difficulty.

'Sharada, why did you take this vow?' the older woman asked her companion.

'My husband had some problems at office. His boss is very strict and wants to transfer him. Someone told me that if I prayed to the goddess and offered her a sari, the transfer would be cancelled.'

'Oh, I never knew the goddess was so powerful.'



Even in her present state of dejection, Anupama smiled ruefully. Could the goddess satisfy everyone's wishes—cure her white patches, cancel a transfer, grant children to the childless, and who knew what else? How could the goddess fulfil such endless desires?

The conversation went on.

'Indira, by the way, you never told me anything about the wedding.'

'Oh, it was fabulous. Girija looked like the goddess Lakshmi herself. And the groom. . . he is so handsome! He works at a very high position in his office. Radhakka is truly blessed, but for one thing.'

'They have Lakshmi's blessings, what problems can they possibly have?'

'Life is never perfect, Sharada. God gives everyone their share of woes, otherwise they'll stop thinking about Him. In Radhakka's case it is her son, Anand.'

Anupama's breath caught when she heard Anand's name and, for a moment, she forgot her own worries as she waited for the older woman to continue.

'It seems he fell in love with and married a very poor but beautiful girl.'

'Have you seen her?'

'No. I couldn't go for the wedding as there was some problem at home. It seems Anand liked the girl so much that her father took advantage of it, and Radhakka had to perform the wedding at her own expense.'

'How fortunate for the girl's family!' sneered the younger woman.

'The story does not end there. The girl had white patches, which she had hidden from everyone. The moment Radhakka found out, she sent the daughter-in-law packing. Now she is searching for a new bride for Anand.'