

RAMAKATHA RASAVAHINI

PART II

The Rama Story (Stream of Sacred Sweetness)

by

**BHAGAWAN SRI SATHYA SAI BABA
Rendered Into English By N. Kasturi**



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THIS BOOK

The Rama story, Stream of Sacred Sweetness, has been for millions of men, women and children, for many centuries the perennial source of solace during sorrow, vitality when floored by vacillation, illumination while confounded, inspiration in moments of dejection and guidance while caught in quandaries. It is an intensely human drama where God impersonates as man and gathers around Him, on the vast world stage, the perfect and the imperfect, the human and the subhuman, the beast and the demon, to confer on us, by precept and example, the boon of Supreme Wisdom. It is a Story that plays its tender fingers on the heartstrings of man, evoking lithe, limpid responses of pathos, pity, exultation, adoration, ecstasy and surrender, rendering us transformed from the animal and the human, into the Divine which is our core.

No other story in human history has had such profound impact on the mind of man. It transcends the milestones of history and the boundaries of geography. It has shaped and sublimated the habits and attitudes of generations. The *Ramayana*, the Story of Rama, has become a curative corpuscle in the blood stream of mankind, over vast areas of the globe. It has struck root in the conscience of peoples, prodding and prompting them along the paths of Truth, Righteousness, Peace and Love.

Through legends and lullabies, myths and tales, dance and drama, through sculpture, music and painting, through ritual, poetry and symbol, Rama has become the Breath, the Bliss, the Treasure of countless Seekers and *Sadhakas*. The characters in the Rama Story have invited them to emulation and to be elevated themselves. They have provided shining examples of achievement and adventure. They have warned the wavering against vice and violence, pride and pettiness. They have encouraged them by their fidelity and fortitude. To every language and dialect that the tongue of man has devised for the expression of his higher desires, the Story of Rama has added a unique, sustaining sweetness.

Sai (Isa, God), whose Thought is the Universe, whose Will is Its History, is the Author, Director, Actor, Witness and Appraiser of the Drama that is ever unfolding in Time and Space. He has now deigned to tell us Himself the story of this one epic Act in that Drama, wherein He took on the Rama role. As Rama, Sai instructed, inspired and

invigorated, corrected, consoled and comforted His contemporaries in the Tretha Age. As Sai Rama, He is now engaged in the same task. Therefore, most of what the readers of *Sanathana Sarathi* perused, month after month, (during these years) with ardour and pleasure, as instalments of this narrative—the *Ramakatharasa Vahini*—must have appeared to them “contemporary events and experiences,” and “direct counsel to them in the context of contemporary problems and difficulties.” While reading these pages, readers will often be pleasantly struck by the identity of the Rama of this story and the Sai Rama they are witnessing.

“Science” has moulded this earth into the compactness and capsularity of a spaceship in which mankind has to live out its destiny. “Saience,” is, we know, fast moulding this spaceship into a happy home of Love. This book must have been willed by Sai as a paramount panacea for the removal of the ills that obstruct that Universal Love—the morbid itch for sensual pleasure, the mounting irreverence towards parents, teachers, elders, spiritual leaders and guides, the disastrous frivolity and flippancy in social, marital, and familial relationships, the demonic reliance on violence as a means of achieving immoral ends, the all-too-ready adoption of terror and torture as means of gaining personal and group gains, and many more evils besides.

Sai Rama has recapitulated herein, in His own simple, sweet and sustaining style, His own Divine Career, as Rama! What great good fortune, this, to have in our hands, to inscribe on our minds, to imprint on our hearts, this Divine

narrative! May we be processed by the study of this book into efficient and enthusiastic tools for consummating His Mission of moulding mankind into One Family, of making each one of us realise Sai Rama as the Reality, the only Reality that IS.

Sai has declared that He is the same Rama come again, and that He is searching for His erstwhile associates and workers (*bantu*, as He referred to them, in Telugu) in order to allot them roles in His present Mission of resuscitating Righteousness and leading man into the Haven of Peace. Let us pray, while ruminating over the first half of this story, that we too be allotted roles and may He grant us, as reward, the Vision of that Haven.

N. Kasturi
Editor, *Sanathana Sarathi*

THE INNER MEANING

Rama is the Indweller in every Body. He is the Atma-Rama, the Rama (Source of Bliss) in every individual. His blessings upsurging from that inner Spring can confer Peace and Bliss. He is the very embodiment of *Dharma* of all the Codes of Morality that hold mankind together in Love and Unity. The *Ramayana*, the Rama story, teaches two lessons: the value of detachment, and the need to become aware of the Divine in every being. Faith in God and detachment from objective pursuits are the keys for human liberation. Give up sense-objects; you gain Rama. Sita gave up the luxuries of Ayodhya and so, she could be with Rama, in the period of ‘exile’. When she cast longing eyes on the golden deer and craved for it, she lost the Presence of Rama. Renunciation leads to joy. Attachment brings about grief. Be in the world, but not of it. The brothers, comrades, companions and

collaborators of Rama are each of them examples of persons saturated with Dharma. Dasaratha is the representative of the merely physical, with the ten senses. The three *Gunas*—*Sathwa*, *Rajas* and *Thamas*—are the three Queens. The Four Goals of Life—the *Purusharthas*—are the four Sons. Lakshmana is the Intellect; Sugriva is *Viveka* or Discrimination. Vali is Despair. Hanuman is the embodiment of Courage. The Bridge is built over the Ocean of Delusion. The three Rakshasa chiefs are personifications of the *Rajasic* (Ravana), *Thamasic* (Kumbhakarna) and the *Sathwic* qualities (Vibhishana). Sita is *Brahma Jnaana* or the Awareness of the Universal Absolute, which the individual must acquire and regain undergoing travails in the crucible of Life. Make your heart pure and strong, contemplating the grandeur of the *Ramayana*. Be established in the faith that Rama is the Reality of your existence.

— BABA

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THE DANDAKA FOREST

While Bharatha was thus spending his days at Nandigrama in the constant contemplation of Rama, far away in the forest, on the Chitrakuta Peak, Sita, Rama and Lakshmana were praising his devotion and sense of dedication. They were happy in the peaceful, quiet forest home. One day, a fool named Jayantha sought to measure the valour of Rama, an adventure as foolish and suicidal as the attempt of an ant to discover the depth of the Ocean!

Prompted by sheer mischief, he transformed himself into a crow, and approaching Sita, who was seated by the side of Rama lost in the contemplation of the scenery spread out before them, and with his sharp beak, he pecked at the sole of her tender foot, causing blood to trickle from the wound. Seeing the stream of blood, Rama plucked a blade of dry grass from the ground and threw it at the crow.

Rama will never hurt anyone who has not done any injury. But when it is necessary, and when it has to be done, even Rahu will swallow the Moon, isn't it? So too Rama. He will never hurt the innocent. But that blade of grass became a huge flame of fire and flew towards Jayantha. And when he fled, it pursued him relentlessly wherever he went. Helpless and frightened, the crow returned to its original form and Jayantha fell at the feet of Rama praying for succour. Indra came to know that the culprit was his own son and he too repented for his son's audacity and irreverence.

Jayantha prostrated before Rama and pleaded for mercy. He said, "I am a fool. I did not realise the baseness of my deed. Save me from your anger, from this fire."

Rama pitied the poor fellow, who had so humbled himself. He made one of his eyes ineffective and sent him away alive, as a single-eyed individual. The blade of grass that had become a missile of fire was neutralised by him and it resumed its nature. Jayantha was grateful that he was let off with just a token punishment for the heinous crime he had committed. He lived for a long time on the Chitrakuta Peak, where Sita, Rama and Lakshmana had taken residence. One day, the tenth day of the bright half of the month Margasira, Rama ordered Jayantha to proceed southwards from his habitat.

Sita, Rama and Lakshmana too left Chitrakuta and reached the hermitage of the great Sage, Athri. The sage

came to know in advance of the intention of Rama to visit his retreat, through his pupils. So when Rama was approaching the Asram, he moved far out on the forest track in order to welcome Rama, Sita and Lakshmana. Athri was so overpowered with joy at the sign of Grace, that he shed profuse tears in his ecstasy and declared that the visit had indeed made his life realise its highest aim. He said that his austerities had at last borne fruit that day. That evening, the Sage Athri gathered his pupils and placed a high seat for Rama at the head of the assembly. His consort Anasuya had meanwhile attended to the needs of Sita and brought her too to that place. Then, he described to all present the sacredness of the occasion, the powers of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana, and the Divine Forces that had incarnated as those three. Anasuya also praised the virtues of Sita, and gave her holy counsel on the duties of women and the ideals they should ever hold dear. Sita spoke to the fact that every individual, every being, and every creature had the feminine principle inherent in its composition. She said that though there are masculine and feminine roles, acting on the world stage, all are basically feminine, when their strength, emotions and attitudes are considered. She said that her Lord, Rama, is the incarnation of the One and only Masculine principle in the Universe. In him, she said, there is no trace of duality, of mine and thine, of grief or joy. He is the embodiment of fearlessness. He is strength personified. *Purusha* or the Eternal Masculine has wedded Nature or *Prakriti*, the Eternal Feminine. Though Nature appears manifold and variegated, it is really One

undifferentiated Unity. Thus Sita revealed the truth of the Rama principle to Anasuya, the consort of the Sage Athri.

Rama, Sita and Lakshmana spent a very happy time at the Ashram of the Sage Athri. They gave good counsel to the residents and pupils on various problems of right conduct. Then, taking leave of the Sage, they resumed their journey through the jungle. The Asramites shed tears of sorrow when they parted company. Despite their determined attempts to accompany Rama during the subsequent stages of his forest life, they had to stop and resume the life for which they had dedicated their lives. They had to witness helplessly the departure of the Divine Master of their hearts.

The jungle echoed with the roar of ferocious beasts that wandered about in search of prey. Manifold varieties of plumaged birds sang melodiously on the trees. Each had a peculiar beauty and melody. Their coos and cries were balm for the ear. It appeared as if they had entered a new world of thrills. While passing through this region of awesome grandeur, suddenly their eyes fell upon a lovely hermitage, which had at its centre a picturesque temple. Lakshmana moved forward, and cleared the track, pushing back the bushes that stood across. He broke off the thorny creepers that hung overhead and threatened to harm wayfarers. Rama and Sita could walk safely along the track he cleared. When they came to the precincts of the hermitage a charming garden presented itself before them. Well-fostered and affectionately looked after, the fruit trees and flowering trees rose beautifully from the ground, with their

charming crowns of beauty. The branches were drooping under the weight of ripe juicy fruits. Sita was filled with delight. She forgot all exhaustion. She was lost in the heavenly peace and joy that she had come into. She walked behind Rama, imbibing the thrill of the Nature that surrounded her. When some residents noticed their approach, they ran in haste to their Preceptor. He hurried forward to the main gate to welcome Rama, Sita and Lakshmana. His eyes were streaming tears of joy. Appropriate hospitality was offered to the guests. They were taken in and given cool refreshing drinks. Tasty fruits and tubers were placed before them. The guests accepted their attention and regard with great pleasure. They partook of the simple repast. In the evening, they took bath and performed due rites. Rama spoke to the residents on ideal modes of conduct and behaviour. He permitted them to ask questions on the doubts that might be puzzling them and the knotty points of interpretations of the scriptures. They welcomed the opportunity most enthusiastically. Rama, too, offered convincing and clear explanations, in simple and satisfying words. Without doubt, the dwellers of the Asram experienced a very Heaven on earth. They spoke among themselves with great delight that the Presence of Rama was as elevating an experience as contact with God Himself in Heaven.

When dawn broke, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana bathed and went through the matinal rites. In spite of the plaintive prayers of the Asramites, they started on their journey,

expostulating that people should not stand in the way of their vows and resolutions. They had resolved, they said, not to stay in one single hermitage or place for more than one single night.

When they resumed their journey, and passed through the forest, a monstrous form, being the frightful ogre Viradha, appeared all of a sudden and rushed menacingly towards them. Sita was naturally frightened at the apparition; but, soon, she mustered courage knowing that, when she had the Lion Rama to protect her, she had no need to be frightened at the "lame fox" that had presented itself! "Let it roar its worst," she consoled herself. She stood behind Rama and watched developments. Meanwhile, Lakshmana shot at the monster a sharp arrow from his bow. Soon, he showered many missiles on it. When it was wounded by the arrows, Viradha transformed into a blazing fury of anger and appearing like the very embodiment of death and destruction, pounced upon Lakshmana. Rama saw that his brother was getting exhausted by the struggle. He fixed a crescent headed arrow to his redoubtable bow and shot at the ogre. The arrow shattered to pieces the formidable three-pronged spear that the ogre was flourishing. It then sliced off the head of the monster. At that very moment, a bright heavenly form emerged from the fallen corpse!

Viradha had been born as an ogre on earth in consequence of a curse that he had invited upon himself from his divine Master, Kubera. He was one of a group of

heavenly angels, *Gandharvas*, who were serving Kubera. Kubera had, later, taken pity on him and declared that his demonic career would come to an end the moment he met his death through an arrow from the bow of Rama. He could then return as a *Gandharva* to the Presence of Kubera, it was said. So, the *Gandharva* fell at the feet of his Saviour, and extolled him with high praise, before leaving for his permanent abode.

Rama interred the huge body of the demon that lay on the ground. He also went through the rites prescribed for such disposal. Just then a shower of rain fell on the spot, as if the gods above were showering tears of joy at the compassion that Rama was evincing.

Next, Rama entered the famous hermitage of the sage Sarabhanga. Even while he was nearing the Asram, the ascetics and monks were talking among themselves of the havoc caused by the inroads of Ravana, the demon King. When Rama, Sita and Lakshmana appeared before them in the midst of their conversation, they sensed the meaning of their visit and knew that their fears would soon come to an end. When the sage Sarabhanga saw the divinely charming figure of Rama, he could scarce believe his eyes. He wondered whether it was a dream, or an illusion, or some strange experience caused by meditation mania. But soon, he realised the genuineness of his good fortune. He was overwhelmed with the ecstasy of winning his long-desired goal. He knew that his asceticism had at last been blessed

by the fruition of his yearning. He offered them profuse hospitality.

He extolled Rama to his heart's content. "Rama! You are the Heavenly Swan moving majestically on the waters that fill the minds of the sages. Ah! This day, I have realised the Goal of Life," he said. "Rama! I am unaware of any spiritual discipline worth the name. It was possible for me to win you through just one path, the path of Love. My eyes have seen you now. They need look on nothing else. And you have given word that day that you would fulfil the wishes of the sages. Well, now you have to stand by that word. My wish is this: Stand before me in this most charming form, until my breath leaves this body. I wish to cast off this body even while my gaze is fixed on you," he appealed.

Within minutes, a pyre was set up. He ascended it and it was lit, with Sarabhanga sitting unconcerned on top, with eyes shining in joy at the ecstasy of looking on at Rama. The eyelids did not quiver. The gaze did not slacken. With the forms of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana imprinted on his heart, Sarabhanga reduced his body into a handful of ashes. The blue placid waters of his heart reflected the blue form of Rama, whom he had adored until the very last. His soul merged in the Universal that was before him.

Though at first the asramites were grieving over the departure of their Preceptor and Master, they soon realised that he had the unique fortune of a rare blessing. God himself

had come in human form and blessed him with mergence in his majesty and glory. They felt that they too had shared in that gift of Grace. They adored Rama and extolled him in various ways. They shouted “Hail! Victory! Victory!” and taking the ashes of their Master, they applied it on their brows in reverent gratitude.

The news of the immolation of Sarabhanga soon brought to that hermitage residents from other asrams as well. They fell at the feet of Rama and praised him and his mission of compassion. “Lord! How fortunate was Sarabhanga,” they cried, “Many a sage has fallen prey to the voracious ferocity of the Rakshasa tribe of demons in this area. But Sarabhanga was blessed by the Lord Himself. He offered his body and life to the Lord Himself. “Lord! Save us from these rapacious enemies. Let us progress in our spiritual exercises and disciplines, without these demonic raids. And at the end of it all, O Lord, bless us with the fruit we strive for: Your Presence before our Vision,” they pleaded.

Meanwhile, a sage Sutheekshna by name, came forward and prostrated before Rama. He was the pupil of the renowned Agastya. He was an incomparable devotee and his mind was saturated with love for Rama. He had steady faith that God can be won by Love alone. He could not picture before his mind’s eye any form of God other than Rama. He gazed upon Rama, without winking an eyelid, lest even that fraction of time should go waste. His heart melted into adoration at the sight of Rama.

He said, “Lord! Did you come so far into this region just to bless me? Can you not merge me into the Lord you are? Having come upon the earth with this visible form, do you still wish that I should adore, as hitherto, the Formless Absolute? No. I love this Form, and this Name. I do not know any rite or ritual. I know only that you, the embodiment of Love can be attained through love. Yearning is the only earning I have accumulated. That is the only asceticism I have subjected myself to. Tell me, is that not enough? Oh, Saviour from the travail of Birth and Death! No form of worship is so effective as service of the Lord through Love, isn’t it? Singing your glory, meditating on it, and deriving unspeakable bliss in the process—can anything else yield greater joy?” he said. Sutheekshna danced about, unaware of where he was or what he was doing. Tears flowed in streams down his cheeks. He appeared insane for all who could not gauge the inner joy he was experiencing. Rama knew the urge within the Sage. He drew him near himself, and embraced him most lovingly. He spoke soft and sweet, to bring him round to a consciousness of his surroundings. While Rama was holding his hands, the great sage entered the supreme state of *Samadhi*. He became a doll, unmoved and immovable. Rama brought him back into consciousness. As soon as he came to, he fell at the feet of Rama, falling flat on the ground.

He raised his hands above his head and joining palms in adoration, he expressed his joy and took delight therein. He said, “Lord! You are the Conflagration that destroys the

Forest of Delusion in which man has lost himself. You are the Solar Orb that makes it possible for the Lotuses of the Hearts of Good Men to bloom in beauty and fragrance. You are the King of Beasts, come to destroy the brood of Demonic Elephants. You are the Eagle come to hunt down and destroy the bird that flits into birth and flits out of life, in a recurring cycle of joy and grief. Lord! Your eyes are as charming as Lotuses. My two eyes cannot drink in all the beauty of your effulgent Form. You are the Moon that sheds cool light to enrapture the twin Chakora birds, namely, the eyes of Sita. You swim happily as the Celestial Swan in the placid lakes that shine in the hearts of sages. You are the Garuda Bird that preys upon and destroys the serpents that breed in the minds of doubters and unbelievers. All cruelty, confusion and calamity will be burnt away when a tiny glance from your eye falls on them.” He extolled Rama thus and in various other forms, and derived great joy at getting the chance. He also utilised the chance to gaze upon the Lord, and to have His Image imprinted on his heart. He was not conscious of the passage of time or the needs of the body. He did not wink once while looking on and drinking deep the glory of Rama.

Rama watched him for a while and then he raised him up with his hands upon his shoulders. He said, “Sutheekshna! You are endowed with all desirable virtues. Ask from me anything you wish, for I shall bless you as you desire.” The sage replied, “O, Friend and Kinsman of the Distressed! My wish is this: Reside ever in the depths

of my heart, with Sita and Lakshmana.” Rama said, “So be it.” Then, with him as companion, Rama moved forward towards the asram of Agastya, with Sita and Lakshmana following him.

A short distance later, they heard the murmur of a river flowing by. When they walked towards the sound and neared the river, they could see a mountain peak beside the flowing water. In the middle there were beautiful flower gardens; and like a lotus shining in the centre of a tank, there could be seen the lovely hermitage of Agastya on a carpet of fragrant flowers.

Word cannot adequately describe the exquisite nature of that scene. Sita, Rama and Lakshmana stood petrified for a few moments at the captivating splendour. The atmosphere was so astoundingly spiritual. There, animals that are enemies of each other by their very nature, aquatic animals and land animals, beasts and birds of every type, sported and lived together, free from fear or enmity. They could see many monks and ascetics lost in meditation sitting on the river bank.

When they neared the asram, Sutheekshna ran forward to convey the tidings to his Master. He fell at his feet and declared, “Oh Teacher Great! Oh Embodiment of Mercy! The prince of Ayodhya, the very Sustainer of this Universe, has just come into our Asram with Sita and Lakshmana. The very person whom you were seeking to know and visualise through your spiritual practices for years, without

regard to whether it is day or night, he has come to you, near you. Ah! What a great good day is this! What great good fortune!" Sutheekshna forgot himself and was filled with immeasurable ecstasy.

At this, Agastya rose suddenly from his seat and walked fast into the open. He saw the three, coming towards him. Tears flowed freely from his eyes. He ran forward, shouting, "Lord! Lord!" He clasped Rama to his bosom. He had no mind to release Rama from the embrace. He stood with his arms around Rama, clinging to him, as a creeper clings to the trunk of a tree.

Agastya could not contain the joy that welled up within him when he led Rama, Sita and Lakshmana into his hermitage. He invited them to rest on elevated seats. He had fruits and sweet tubers brought and he offered them for their repast. Then, he enquired about the journey they had gone through. When Rama was answering his queries, Agastya listened with eyes closed in deep delight, tears of joy streaming down the cheeks. There was a happy smile hovering on his face. At last, he spoke, "Lord! I am convinced that there is no one more blessed than I am. The Lord, Narayana, has Himself come to me. He is staying in my hermitage! Is this true? Is it a dream? No. It is clearly a fact of experience. He gave expression to his joy in grateful and devotional words.

Rama said, "Oh Monarch among Monks! I have nothing to hide from you. You know too well the reason why I have come into the forest. Direct me, how I can

destroy the brood of demoniac persons, the Rakshasas, who obstruct the austerities of sages and monks, and how I can protect and preserve from danger the dedicated servants of God. I shall act accordingly. I am awaiting your advice. In the cold Hemantha season lotuses shrivel up and die. The season has approached for the shrivelling of the Rakshasas."

Hearing these words of Rama, Agastya smiled. He replied, "Lord! You are omniscient. I do not know why you require me to tell you how. I am unable to decide whether you are blessing me or testing me. Nevertheless, through the effect of your Grace, the *Darsan* (sight), *Sparsan* (contact) and *Sambhaashan* (speech) that you have just now blessed me with, I am able to grasp the significance of your question. That too is your grace. *Maya* which is your creation and your puppet, your slave, lying at your feet, is watching ever, for the slightest raising of your brow, to carry out your commands. Through the skill endowed by you, *Maya* is creating all beings on earth and in heaven.

"Your *Maya* is unconquerable. It is harassing beings endlessly, that is to say, those who fall a prey to its machinations. That is a fact that is known to all. Your *Maya* is like the ficus, spreading far and wide. The orbs in the Cosmos are as the fruits of that tree. The beings and things that exist in this Cosmos are like the worms and larvae that creep inside the fruit. The fruit might appear lovely outside; but when it is opened, hundreds of worms can be seen wriggling inside.

“Those attached to this exterior world and its transitory treasures are afraid of you, since in your aspect as Time, you cause inexorable ruin of their plans. The Cosmos itself is an appearance on your Reality. Rama! You are adored by all the worlds. You ask me for directions, just as a common man would. You praise me as men do. This raises a laugh in me. I am not concerned with anything now. I desire that you stay in this hermitage, with Sita and Lakshmana. That is the only boon I ask for. I prefer always to worship your Attributeful Form, not your Attributeless Principle. That is what I believe in and teach. That is my Ideal, my favourite Goal, my Aspiration.

“Therefore, grant me this boon. It is your sport, to elevate your servants, and yourself to slide into the background as if you are innocent of anything and ignorant of everything! But do not elevate me. Do not ask me for directions. My duty is to assent and accept your wishes and to follow your footsteps. Father! Do not inveigle me into your Maya, and delude me into egoism, making me the target of your sport.”

At this Rama said, “Oh Venerable Sage! This region is well known to you. So, what harm is there if you tell me which place I can select for my stay? This is what everybody would expect of you, isn’t it?” Agastya replied, “Master! Since you have commanded me I shall obey implicitly and give answer. Very near this place, the sacred river Godavari is flowing. Since ages, that great river has been flowing full and free. Adjacent to it, we have the Dandakaranya.

When you sanctify it by residing in it you would have conferred upon the monks and sages that live therein all content and happiness. For, that forest region and its guardian ruler are under a curse and afflicted thereby.”

At this, Rama intercepted the sage with the words. “Master! Sita is anxious to learn the story of that curse. Tell us about it in detail.” Agastya saw through that request and so he addressed Rama as “Oh, Director of the Eternal Play. Once upon a time famine raised its head in Panchavati area. All the monks and ascetics who lived there took refuge in the hermitage of Sage Gouthama. He gave them all they needed through the powers he had acquired as a result of his austerities! When the famine was over, the monks decided to return to their old dwellings.

“But there were some pseudo-monks among them, who conspired against him, and planned to bring him to disrepute. They brought a cow that was in the throes of death and made it enter the hermitage garden, on a particular green and attractive patch. Gouthama saw it was about to bite a beautiful flower away from its stem. He attempted to drive it away. But at his very first push, the cow breathed its last! The conspirator monks immediately laid on him the dreaded sin of “go-hathya” (boycide)! They condemned him as an outcast and a heathen. Gouthama desired to discover whether the cow died as a result of his push or because its allotted span had ended. He sat in deep meditation exploring an answer to this vital question. Soon it was revealed to him that it was but a trick played by

inimical monks. He was disgusted at their despicable nature. He said, ‘May this forest polluted by such low-minded persons be out of bounds for the good and the saintly. May it become the haunt of demonic *yakshas*.’

“Another incident too added to the effects of this curse. The ruler of this region, Danda by name, violated the chastity of the daughter of his own preceptor, Bhrgu. Bhrgu listened to the pathetic story as related by his daughter; and in the extremity of his anger, he overwhelmed the region with a downpour of dust. Therefore, this area was sodden deep with mud, and in course of time, it was a thick jungle from end to end. The region is named Dandakaranya, after that infamous ruler. Rama! Crest-jewel of the Raghu Dynasty! I am certain that when you take residence in that forest, the Rakshasas will be decimated and the curse will be lifted. Monks and *Sadhaks* can once again dwell there and progress in their austerities. Humanity everywhere will benefit by this cleansing and this consummation. I may tell you that the sage who said the curse will also be rendered happy by you, for he is sad at the consequence of his anger.”

When Agastya finished his account of the story of Dandakaranya, Rama said, “Well. So be it. I shall reside there.” He took leave of the Sage Agastya, and proceeded to the Dandaka forest, with Sita and Lakshmana. Before they left his hermitage, Agastya brought forth certain weapons that he had acquired by asceticism from Divine Sources, and placed them in the hands of Rama saying that he had no wish to use them. They had now a wielder who

deserved them and who could utilise them for a holy purpose. “Rama,” he said, “You are my shield, my strength, my prowess. These weapons cannot save me, but You can. Your Grace is the most powerful weapon I possess. You are my refuge, my fortress, the impenetrable armour for my breast.”

Even as Sita, Rama and Lakshmana entered the thick jungle-ridden area of Dandaka, trees that had gone dry were thrilled into greenery and were covered with tender, whispering clusters of leaf. Weak, enervated creepers and vines suddenly felt alive, alert and active. They gave birth to bunches of fragrant flowers. The forest hastened to clothe itself in lovely green, speckled all over with multicoloured floral dots. They sought a spot where they could reside therein and soon arrived at the place known as Panchavati, which Agastya had indicated.

They saw there the old Eagle Chief, Jatayu. He was a great friend of Dasaratha accompanying him on his spatial expeditions to help the denizens of Heaven. Rama related to the Eagle the sad news of the death of Dasaratha and alleviated his sense of loss and bereavement. Rama told him about himself, and spoke to him about Sita and Lakshmana, and of his other brothers. They were set on rigging up a thatched hut on the banks of the Godavari. Jatayu became a close friend, and through him they could acquire a clearer picture of the region. That night, they spent the hours under a tree in sound and refreshing sleep.

PANCHAVATI

Rama wished to stay at Panchavati on the Godavari for some length of time. So, reclining under the cool shades of a spreading tree Rama called his brother near and said, "Lakshmana, brother, fix upon a beautiful and comfortable spot in this area and build thereon a nice little cottage, as charming as you wish."

Lakshmana received this order as a dagger-thrust! He could not bear the agony. He fell at the feet of Rama, crying out in anguish: "Tell me what crime I committed to deserve this cruel command." Sita and Rama were struck with amazement at this behaviour. Rama said, "Lakshmana, I cannot understand what makes you so sad. Have you heard any day a single cruel word from my tongue? Have I become so insane as to utter harsh, unpleasant words to you or anyone else? You attend to my needs and wishes and serve me as the very breath of life. How then can I speak in cruel

terms to you? Your grief is meaningless, mistaken. After all, what did I tell you now? I told you only this: Choose any spot you like and build thereon a hut for us to live in. Isn't it so?"

At this, Lakshmana closed his ears with the palms and protested sadly, "Rama! Rama! I cannot bear to hear these words." Rama was surprised at this gesture of grief. But Lakshmana stood before him with folded hands, supplicating with the words: "Lord! There is no one in me to say "I." My only treasure, my only possession is Sita and Rama. I have no wish of my own. I have no will of my own. My wish, my will, is Rama's wish, Rama's will, Rama's command. Obeying it is my wish, my will. I am the slave who cares for none else, nothing else. How then can I bear to listen to words which indicate that I have to choose according to my wishes a spot for the cottage? As if I have the capacity and inclination to choose! Had I preferences of my own, how can I be a fit servant of Rama? How can I deserve this privilege and pleasure? It would mean I am unfit to be alive on earth, and my life is but a burden and a shame." Lakshmana stood, sobbing aloud, unable to stifle his grief.

Rama saw his plight. He consoled him with kind words. "Brother! Your heart is highly sanctified. I used those words in the ordinary worldly sense, but do not be under the impression that your brother is unaware of your innermost quality of dedication. Do not grieve."

Rama showered His smiles on Lakshmana and continued, "Brother, I am delighted at the purity of your devotion and the genuineness of your service. Your intentions are innocent and elevating. I will not pain you by such words hereafter. I spoke to you the language of common usage, that is all. Do not take them so much to heart. Come! Let us go and choose!" Saying thus, He took Sita and Lakshmana with him. After traversing some distance, Rama stopped and said, "Well! Erect the *Parnasala* (cottage) here!"

When he heard those words, Lakshmana exclaimed in great joy. "Ah, I am blessed indeed. My duty is to carry out such commands not exercising my wish or will, to do anything on my own." He fell at the feet of his elder brother. Rising happy and content, he entered on the task of collecting branches and twigs for the hut that was to be their home.

Sita and Rama realised that Lakshmana had a highly sensitive mind, a delicately subtle intellect. They derived great joy within themselves at the recollection of the depth of his faith and devotion. Sita confessed to Rama on many occasions that life for her in the forest was even more delightful than life at Ayodhya, for the reason that a brother like Lakshmana was accompanying and serving Rama.

When Sita and Rama saw the hermitage constructed by Lakshmana, they were charmed by its beauty, its captivating simplicity and comfort, and the inspiring setting

in which it shone. Sita entered the cottage, and was immediately struck by the skill and artistic taste of her brother-in-law. She praised him for finishing it so quickly and with useful adjuncts and parts.

The three of them spent their days happily in that cottage. News that Sri Rama had made the Panchavati his home and that he was residing there in a house of leafy thatch like their own, spread far and wide. So every day, groups of ascetics trekked thither in order to offer their homage. They brought with them their pupils too. They had their fill of Darshan and they had the great good fortune of speaking to Rama and being spoken to, by Him. Thereafter, they left most unwillingly, praising Rama all the way back to their own hermitages.

Many others came, with the intention of solving the doubts that pestered them, while trying to understand the scriptures, and while attempting to define and interpret the Codes of Morality or the texts on Rituals. Others prayed to Rama and sought to clarify from Him whether the ascetic practices they were following were correct and beneficial. Since Rama was master of all Dharmas and since He knew full well all the scriptures, they derived the fullest satisfaction from His answers and directives. Each one was filled with joyous contentment.

While on the subject of questions and answers, it is best that the four grades of questions be clearly understood. Questions are generally classified into four groups: (1)

Trivial, (2) Low, (3) Passable and (4) Praiseworthy. Questions that are raised in order to drag another into a controversy and later, to inflict a humiliating defeat on him, are trivial. Questions that are put in order to demonstrate one's own cleverness and skill are "low." Questions which announce the intellectual equipment and reasoning faculty of the questioner are "passable," and belong to the third class. Questions that are asked with the sincere desire to remove one's doubts are "praiseworthy" and belong to the highest class. It needs no mention that the sages, monks and ascetics came to Rama with the fourth type of questions only.

Rama and Lakshmana were filled with delight when they saw the ascetics. Many among them were overcome with admiration and gratitude when they listened to the ideals propounded by Rama, so simple, so easy to grasp and realise, so truly conforming to the dictates laid down in the Sastras and Scriptures, and so free from complexity. They burst into paeans of praise and adoration. "Oh Master Supreme!" they exclaimed, "Oh, Omniscient One, who knows the past, present and future! Who else can be our Lord and Liberator? You reside in the hearts of Sages. We have secured you in our midst as a result of the austerities we have gone through. Oh, How fortunate are we! How have our wishes been fulfilled!" They departed from the Presence, most unwillingly, with tears of joy mingled with tears of grief streaming down their cheeks.

A few of them laid themselves under the shady trees a little distance from the cottage where Rama was, and were determined not to return to their hermitages. They gathered fruits and tubers from around the spot, and watched out for Rama, eager for additional chances of Darsan. When sometimes Rama came out of the cottage and walked around, they filled their eyes with the unforgettable picture, from behind some tree or bush. Thus they spent the days in full contentment.

Rama stole the hearts of all who came into His Presence. They became mad in their single-pointed devotion to Him. They felt that contemplation of His Face and repetition of His Name were all the austerity that they had to practise thereafter. He discoursed on Dharma and spiritual disciplines during both day and night, to those who gathered around Him.

Often, He called Lakshmana to His side and told him, "Brother, having come for this holy task, how can I stay on at Ayodhya? How can I enact the further chapters of the *Ramayana* from there? This is the purpose for which I have come. The fostering and protection of the good and the godly, the destruction of the wrong and evil that threaten the peace and welfare of the world, the promotion of righteous behaviour and activities—these will proceed from now on." Thus, He informed his brother about what he had resolved upon and about the intent and meaning of His Incarnation as Man on earth.

Off and on, he raised Lakshmana to the role of a vehicle for spreading his teachings, intended for the uplift of humanity and instructed him on the ideals of morality and progress. “Lakshmana,” he said once, “Affection for the body, attachment towards possessions of any kind, egoism that breeds the conflict of ‘You’ and ‘I,’ the bonds that grow between the individual and his wife, children and property—all these are the consequences of the Primal Illusion, Maya. That Illusion is basic, mysterious, and wondrous. Maya establishes her domain over all beings and things, all species of living creatures. The ten *indriyas* (five senses of perception and five senses of action) have each its presiding deity and Maya perceives the objective world and derives pleasure therefrom, through their instrumentality. Every item and particle of such pleasure is Maya-produced and therefore illusory, evanescent and superficial.

“Maya has two forms: One type is called *Vidyamaya* and the other *Avidyamaya*. The Maya named *Avidya* is very vicious. She causes boundless misery. Those drawn by it will sink into the depths of flux, the eternal tangle of joy and grief. The Maya known as *Vidya* has created the Cosmos, under the prompting of the Lord. For, she has no innate force of her own. Only while in the Presence of the Lord can she create the three-stranded Cosmos (*Prapancha*). (The three strands are *Sathwa*, *Rajas* and *Thamas*, each of which separately or in some kind of combination is characteristic of beings: *Sathwa* meaning

the equal balanced temper. *Rajas* the sanguinary or the emotional, active temper, and *Thamas*, the dull, inert temper).

“The truly wise, the *Jnani*, who has realised the Reality, is the person who has given up the rights and obligations of caste and society, of age and status and lives in the constant awareness that all is Brahman. He has understood that there is no manifoldness or diversity here. It is all One. (*Sarvam khalu idam Brahma; Na iha naanaa asthi kinchana*). He knows that the entire Cosmos is constituted of the same Brahman, that there can be no second entity apart from Brahman.

“Oh Lakshmana! You must know that the Trinity (Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra) are but the reflections of the one Brahman in each of the three strands or attributes—*Sathwa*, *Rajas* and *Thamas*. The *Rajas* attribute is personified as Brahma, the *Sathwa* aspect as Vishnu and the *Thamas* aspect is known as Rudra or Siva or Iswara. The entire Cosmos, including the world is the manifestation of the One Brahman through one or other, or some combination or other of these three attributes. So, the wise man will go beyond and beneath these three strands and seek the Origin in the One. He alone deserves the name, monk or *Vairagi*—for he has no *raga* or likes and dislikes.”

Sometimes, Rama had Sita and Lakshmana near Him and explained to them that so long as the Individual *Jivi* does not understand aright the affinities it has to Maya and

to the Supreme Brahman, it can never liberate itself and merge in the Supreme. It has to remain a particularised Individual only, bound by the coils of illusion to the limits of the name and form. But Rama said, the instant the Individual discovers and knows that It is but the image of the Supreme, and that the distinction between the Supreme and Itself has no basis in Truth, Maya will disappear, like fog before the risen sun. This is the genuine *Atmajnana*, for the Supreme is *Paramatma* and the Individual is the same Paramatma seen as an Image in the Body-with-name-and-form, the *Upadhi*.

“Act in accordance with the rules of conduct laid down for the status you have risen to and the call that has come to you (*swadharma*-one’s natural duties). You derive detachment thereby. Practise *Yoga* or the Search for Union with the Supreme. You derive *Jnana* thereby. This *Jnana* is the very last step in spiritual progress. It leads to Consummation. Adoring the Supreme with the greatest possible Love is called *Bhakthi*, Devotion. I shower Grace on such a one. *Bhakthi* will grant him full prosperity. *Bhakthi* emanates from the heart, spontaneously. It does not depend on extraneous things or persons. *Bhakthi* can confer *Jnana* too on the person who has dedicated Himself to the Supreme. The joy that *Bhakthi* endows on a man is unique and immeasurable. How does a person first decide to walk on the path of *Bhakthi*? It all begins with the compassion of some one good and godly sage or realised soul. This path leads men quickly to Me.” Listening to such

discourses, Sita and Lakshmana forgot where they were and under what conditions. Rama too seemed unaware of all that happened in the enthusiasm with which He dilated on the attractions of the spiritual path. They spent long periods in introspection and exploration of inner delight.

One day, Lakshmana was ruminating on these deep Truths and precious directives while he was keeping watch around the cottage. His eyes fell on a tiny sapling of lime, struggling upwards under the shade of a huge tree. He desired to plant it nearer the cottage and help it grow vigorously under his care. So, he was digging it up by the roots with intense love and attention, when the wicked and vicious sister of Ravana, Surpanakha by name, rushed into the scene!

As soon as her eyes fell on Lakshmana, she was allured by the halo of goodness and the splendour that illumined his body. She was struck dumb at the unexpected vision. She suddenly transformed herself into a charmingly pretty damsel and approached Lakshmana with amorous gestures. But Lakshmana paid no heed. He continued his task, unaffected by the apparition. Surpanakha could not bear inattention any longer. She came close to him and with a pathetic voice, she appealed, “Lord! Why are you plunging me into despair? Cool my unbearable ardour. Cast on me your loving happiness-conferring eye.” Lakshmana did not react to her call. He heard her words, but he only smiled within himself at her audacity. He continued with his attempt to pluck the plant safely from the shade. Surpanakha lost

patience. She prepared to draw him to herself. But Lakshmana drew back, saying, "Mother! I am the bondslave of Sri Rama. I am not a free man. Whatever I do, however small a job it may be, is done only as He commands," as a prelude to the advice he planned to give her. Hearing his words and curious to know with whom he was talking, Sita and Rama came out of the cottage into the garden. Rama noticed Surpanakha and recognised that she had changed into the damsel before him. He prepared himself for all eventualities. Meanwhile, Surpanakha pelted harsh abusive words at Lakshmana like, 'coward,' and 'villain' and laughed loudly in scorn at his irresponsible behaviour. She had not noticed Rama, all her attention and anger were fixed on Lakshmana alone. She pleaded before him, "Oh Most Charming! Wed me and be happy. I can delight you and serve you most loyally." Lakshmana tried to ward her off by saying, "Pretty woman! I am a slave. If I wed you, you will have to live as a slave," and continuing the jocular retort, he said in fun. "Well, there is my master, Rama. If you wed him, I will be your slave." Surpanakha took him at his word. She believed that it was good strategy. She turned to the cottage which Lakshmana had pointed to her; and there, standing near the door, laughing together at her, she found a very beautiful woman and beside her, the embodiment of masculine charm!

Surpanakha was smitten with passionate love. She ran forward to Rama and weeping out her distress, she prayed, "God of Love! God of Beauty! Accept me as yours." Rama

too decided to treat her to a homily and derive some fun out of the ludicrous situation before him. He said with a chuckle. "Oh Beauteous Woman! I cannot wed you, for I am under the vow of monogamy. I have my wife here. My brother, Lakshmana there, has a wife, but she is not here. So, wed him and derive fulfilment. He is the proper person for you, approach him." At this, the woman hastened to where Lakshmana was and started her appeals once again. She said, "Your brother has agreed to the wedding. So, do not delay, accept me." Her attitude now was very humble and gentle. Lakshmana grasped the absurdity of her plight and wanted to heighten the fun. He sent her to Rama and Rama sent her back to Lakshmana several times, until she grew so desperate, and blinded by passion, she relapsed into her demonic nature! Her crooked intelligence told her that it was Sita that stood in the way of her success in this adventure of lust. Rama could not wed her, since Sita was by His side. If she were removed, Rama would certainly yield to her solicitations. So, she fell upon Sita in order to kill her and swallow her; for, she was a demon to the core. At this, Lakshmana stood ready, watching the face of Rama for orders. Rama realised that the woman was far gone and she had to be stopped. Feeling that an axe need not be used when the nails are enough. He raised his hand up, and counted four on his fingers, looking at Lakshmana.

Lakshmana immediately grasped the meaning of that command! By counting four, Rama indicated the Four Vedas, which are collectively called Sruthi, that is to say,

“The Heard,” which means the Ear. Lakshmana had a sharp vigilant intellect and so, he could rightly interpret the slightest gesture of Rama. Rama had held his hand up, towards the sky. The sky or *Akasa* is the fifth elemental force, characterised by Sound. Sound is the symbol for Brahman, known as *Sabda* Brahman, or God. God resides in heaven, and heaven is also indicated by the raised pointing hand. Heaven is known as ‘*naaka*’ in Sanskrit. It has also another meaning, ‘Nose!’ No sooner did Rama make those two gestures, Lakshmana rushed towards the demoniac woman with his sword drawn. He dragged her down to the ground; and shouting that her effrontery must be punished, he slashed off her ears and nose! Surpanakha raised such a loud wail that the forest quaked and quivered. She assumed her real shape as an ogress and yelled, “Is this just? How can you deform, so cruelly, a woman who has come to you? I shall bring my brother Ravana here and inflict retribution for this cruel act.” With this, she disappeared quickly into the forest.

She went straight to the demon chieftains, Khara and Dushana in the Dandaka forest and wailed, “How can you bear silently this insult and injury dealt to your sister? For what purpose have you stored so much of valour and might? It is better you burn them into ashes. Are you masculine? Can you call yourselves so? Shame on you and your boast of heroism.” They could not understand what had happened to her, and who had deformed her so piteously. They asked her, “Sister! Who inflicted this injury? Tell us. We shall wreak vengeance with all our might.”

At this, Surpanakha started retelling her story. She began with an elaborate description of the charm and captivating beauty of Rama and Lakshmana. Hearing this, the brothers got wild and inquired why she was wasting her time and theirs with that superfluous prologue, “Tell us, who injured you? Who defaced you?” Then, she informed them all what had happened in the forest.

Khara and Dushana were highly incensed at the plight of their sister whose ears and nose had been slit. They collected an army of fourteen thousand ogres and marched in hot haste towards Rama and Lakshmana, the brothers who had punished her in that manner. The ogre warriors were so indomitable that they could not be defeated even in dreams. They knew no retreat or defeat. They were invincible in battle. Like winged mountains, they moved fast along the valleys in terror-striking groups, while the earth shook under their feet. Each of them was armed to the teeth with a variety of deadly weapons.

The earless, noseless widow, Surpanakha, with her bleeding face walked in front of the entire force, eager to take revenge. She was leading them to the patch of green where she had met the brothers.

But she spelt an inauspicious beginning for the campaign. Hers was the bad omen for the expedition. A bleeding face, a widow, a defective—these are considered bad omens. Surpanakha was all these. The Rakshasas were not aware of the pros and cons of the signs and omens for starting on a march towards the battlefield. They relied on

their physical and material might, and their nefarious stratagems. It is for this very reason that they are always unable to stand before the might of Divine and *Dharmic* forces.

For, who can withstand the power generated by the observance of *Dharma* and the Grace of God? They never paid attention to Righteousness or Divinity. They concentrated all their energies and skills on equipping themselves with physical might. Proud of their weapons, their muscles and their wickedness they strode forward into the forest, blowing their trumpets, roaring like lions, bellowing like wild elephants, yelling about their exploits and gyrating wildly in their wild dances. They never realised that their onslaught was comparable only to the onslaught of a sparrow on an eagle!

From a distance, Surpanakha pointed out to her brothers the hermitage where Rama was. To arouse the ogres into a final frenzy the army shouted, in unison. “Kill, catch, murder,” and ran forward. When they approached the hermitage, the brothers challenged Rama, crying out at the top of their voices, “Oh Most Wicked, Oh Most Unfortunate! You dared deform our sister, did you? Now, try if you can, to save your life from extinction!”

Rama was already aware of their approach. He directed Lakshmana to keep Sita away, in a cave, and be on guard. “Do not worry about me in the least! Nothing ill can ever happen to me,” Rama said. Lakshmana knew the might of

Rama and so, he obeyed implicitly. He had no doubt at all about Rama’s victory, He led Sita into the cave and stayed there itself, with his bow and arrow ready for any emergency.

Rama stood before the hermitage, a smile lighting up his face and his Kodanda bow, well stringed, ready for the fray. Rama passed his hands gently over the matted hair on his head. At this, the ogres saw billions of blinding flashes emanating from the crown of hair. His arms appeared to their eyes as huge multi-hooded serpents. As a lion glares at an elephant, and bares its teeth relishing the victory that was already assured, Rama, the Lion, stood defiant and terrible before the pack of frightened elephants. The cries, “Here is the person who deformed her,” “Hold him,” “Catch him,” “Kill him,” rose over the tumult. But no one dared come forward to put that cry into action. However much they were prodded and encouraged, not one of them could muster enough courage to approach Rama.

The curses and cries of the ogres filled the forest, and wild animals in panic ran helter-skelter seeking shelter. A few ran into the cave where Sita was. Lakshmana sympathised with their agony, and allowed them in, so that they might rid themselves of fear and anxiety. He gave them refuge and welcomed them in. For, he knew that they were in dire distress.

The ogres who surrounded Rama were so overcome by his beauty and charm that they did nothing but stare at

the glory and the splendour. Many revelled in descriptions of his grace. Many were lost in admiration and appreciation. All were bound to Rama through love and reverence. Not one of them could or did raise a weapon against him or cast an angry look!

Surpanakha too joined in the praise. She said to Khara and Dushana, who were standing wonder-struck near her, "Brothers! What incomparable beauty is standing before us! I have never seen till now such charm, such grace, such pure harmony, such melodious physique. Do not kill him, but catch him just as he is and present him to me."

The brothers too were similarly entranced. They replied, "Sister! We too have never set eyes on such an embodiment of beauty. The nearer we approach him, the faster he binds himself to us, the more we are fascinated by his charm. We do not have even an iota of anger or hatred towards him. The longer we look upon him the more profuse the joy that wells up within us. Perhaps, it is this feeling that is called *Ananda* by the sages living here."

Khara did not like to converse with Rama, himself. So he sent a messenger to him, to find out from him who he was, what his name was, where he came from, why he entered the forest and took residence therein, etc.

The messenger neared Rama and asked him the questions he was directed to place before Rama. Rama smiled at this behaviour. He said, "Listen fellow! I am a *Kshatriya*, come into this forest to hunt wild animals like

your master. I am not afraid even of the God of Death. If you feel you have the capacity, come, give me battle and win. Or else, return home, every one of you, and save yourselves from destruction. I shall not kill those who run away from the field." This statement was carried by him back to Khara and Dushana, and it was related to them correctly. At this, the brothers took up their arms, the spears, axes, pestles, bows and arrows, and yelled until the skies were booming with the echo. They showered their missiles upon Rama. Rama cut them into pieces with a single arrow from his bow. Other arrows flighted amongst them by Rama did as much havoc as fire or lightning could do. The ogres retreated before the onslaught, crying out in pain, "Oh Mother," "Oh Father," "Alas," "Save us" and so on in sheer agony and despair.

Seeing them fleeing, Khara, Dushana and their youngest brother Thrisira, called out, "Rakshasas! Do not flee from the fight. Whoever is found running away will be killed on the spot, by our own soldiers." At this, they planned within themselves, and said, "Well, it is far better to die at Rama's hand, than at someone else's or anywhere outside his Presence."

So, they came back to their ranks and moved forward towards the place where Rama stood. But they were in no mood to give battle. They were so fascinated by the personal charm and splendour of Rama that they stood entranced gazing at the Divine Beauty.

Meanwhile, Rama let loose the arrow called Sammohana, which had the effect of deluding the enemy and confounding them. As a result, each soldier saw his neighbour as the person he had been deputed to destroy. Khara and Dushana had exhorted them to kill Rama, and so each one fell upon the other, shouting, "Rama is here," "Here is Rama." They killed each other in great glee. The entire place was cluttered up with the severed limbs of the ogres. Blood flowed in streams through the forest. Vultures and crows flocked around, eager to fill themselves with the carrion. Fourteen thousand ogres faced one person on that day in that field! The ogres died, every one of them, crying, "Rama," "Rama" when they fell. Khara and Dushana too died, along with their loyal henchmen.

The ascetics and sages who witnessed this scene of terror realised the unique valour of Rama and felt happy that the end of Ravana too was certain at the hands of this redoubtable hero. They were confirmed in their belief that Rama was the Almighty Providence who had come to wipe out from the face of the earth the entire race of ogres or Rakshasas, and thereby ensure the peace and prosperity of mankind.

As soon as the fierce engagement ended, Sita and Lakshmana came near Rama and prostrated before him. Rama raised Lakshmana gently from the ground and described to him the fate of the fourteen thousands and their masters, during the battle that lasted barely half an hour. He detailed the incidents with evident joy and interspersed the narration with many a smile and chuckle.

Meanwhile, the eyes of Sita were roaming over the body of Rama in order to assure themselves that he was unhurt, and had not suffered even a scratch. The next day, groups of ascetics and sages with their disciples and pupils visited the Panchavati Ashram of Rama, for they had heard of the destruction of the ogre army, achieved single-handed by the Prince from Ayodhya. They extolled Rama for his bravery and bowmanship. Some among them who had acquired the power of forward vision approached Rama in all humility and said, "Oh Master! You have to be vigilant and alert in the coming days. The Rakshasas are opposed to all limitations and regulations that justice and uprightness impose. Their daily routine is to cause harm to all and sundry. Their highest goal is to fulfil their selfish desires. They do not care how they fulfil them and by what means. They have an elder brother named Ravana who possesses vastly greater powers. His army is many millions strong. This termagant will certainly go to him and bewail her fate. And he won't desist from taking up her cause and trying to wreak vengeance on those who disfigured her."

Thus they forewarned Rama and Lakshmana, giving them such information as they had with them. Rama listened to them with a smile playing on his face. He said, "Yes, yes, I am not unaware of this. I have come on this particular mission." He nodded his head, as if he was eagerly looking forward to the happy event of the encounter with Ravana himself. But he did not speak more. He sat as if he was innocent of any knowledge of the future.

He turned his eyes on Lakshmana, and with a twinkle in the eye, he told him, "You heard it, didn't you?" Turning to the sages, Rama said, "Please do not become anxious or worried. I am prepared to meet all situations." They were consoled and comforted by that assurance and promise. Rama instilled faith and courage into them and allowed them to return to their hermitages, confident that they can continue their studies and practices in peace and tranquillity undisturbed by the Rakshasa hordes.

As the sages foretold, Surpanakha lost no time to appear before her brother, Ravana, rending the air with her weeping. Hearing it the Rakshasas of Lanka were frightened that some calamity had overtaken their land. They came out into the streets and started discussing in groups what the reason could possibly be. Surpanakha barged into the Audience Hall of Ravana, the Rakshasa Emperor, and spouted angry invectives, to the astonishment and anxiety of everyone present.

Her appearance was monstrous. Her body was covered with blood, her words were poisoned by anger. Ravana understood that someone had inflicted great injury on her. Ravana was shocked at her plight. He roared from his throne, "Sister! Tell us in full what happened."

Surpanakha replied, "Brother, if you are a genuine Rakshasa, if the superhuman powers gained by you after years of asceticism are real, then come, the moment has arrived to use your valour, your courage and your heroism.

Arise, do not ignore the calamities that await you and let things go by, lost in the intoxication that drink provides.

"You have paid no attention to events that are taking place at Panchavati, who has come there, for what purpose, and for what task. Princes determined to destroy the Rakshasas have entered the Dandaka Forest. They are felling to the ground *lakhs* (100,000) of Rakshasa soldiers. They have cut to pieces the brothers, Khara and Dushana. They have wiped out of existence, in the wink of an eye, thousands launched against them. Their heroism is beyond description. Their personal beauty—Ah!" Here, Surpanakha halted and stood silent, contemplating the splendour that had enraptured her. Hearing her story, Ravana became uncontrollably furious. He gnashed his teeth. He slapped his thighs as if in a burst of challenge. "What? Did those vile persons kill Khara and Dushana? Perhaps they did not know my name, that I am behind them as their support. Perhaps they have not heard of my might and vengefulness."

Ravana continued to boast aloud retailing to the people present his exploits. Surpanakha interrupted him, saying, "Oh Mass of Wickedness! When your arch enemy is dancing on your head, you are sitting here like a coward, extolling yourself and your invincibility! This is no sign of an emperor worthy of his throne. Perhaps, you do not know that *sanyasins* are ruined by the company they keep, emperors are ruined by the ministers they employ, wisdom is ruined by desire for appreciation, and the sense of shame is destroyed by imbibing drink. Well brother, do not neglect fire, illness, an enemy, a

snake and a sin on the ground because it is small and insignificant. When they grow big, they are bound to inflict great harm. Therefore hasten, do not hesitate.”

These words of Surpanakha poured the poison of hatred into the ears of Ravana. At this, Kumbhakarna, the other brother who was present, asked Surpanakha with a smile on his lips, “Sister, who sliced your ears and nose?” With a loud wail, she replied, “Alas! This wicked deed was done by those very Princes.”

Ravana then consoled her, to some extent. He then asked her, “Sister, the nose is on the face. The ears are on the sides of the face. They cannot be sliced at one stroke. Now, tell me, were you sleeping soundly, when they cut them off? This is indeed surprising.” The people present also wondered how it could have happened. Surpanakha replied, “Brother, I lost all awareness of my body, why, of the region where I was when those soft sweet hands touched me. When my eyes were drinking the charm of their beautiful faces, I was not conscious of what they did. The very sight of those princes rendered me so entranced that I lost all awareness of myself and the surroundings. What shall I say of the ecstasy I derived by conversing with them! They bubble over always with joyful smiles. They know no other attitude or reaction. Even masculine hearts will surely be fascinated by their charm. They are really enrapturing representations of the God of Love. I have never so far set eyes on such beauty. Fie upon our Rakshasa prowess, our vile stratagems, our abnormal figures, our ugly

appearance! We are indeed disgusting. Look upon them but once. You will swear I am right. Why? Khara and Dushana who died in the battle were reluctant to fight with them. They were protesting and pleading with me: ‘How can we feel enmity and fall upon these embodiments of auspiciousness and paragons of beauty?’”

The courtiers and ministers assembled in the Hall listened to this description with awe and delight. Her words confounded even Ravana. The picture of Rama that she drew was something that gave him great joy and peace, when he contemplated on it. Deep within him, he felt an urge to cast eyes on that inspiring embodiment of divine charm. As he listened to his sister, the anger that had raised its hood within slowly slithered away. He decided to investigate calmly what really happened at Panchavati.

So, he addressed his sister thus: “Sister, tell me, do those two brothers live at Panchavati all alone? Or, are there others with them? Have they no followers, companions or courtiers?” Surpanakha replied “No. They have no band of bodyguards or kinsmen or warriors. The elder of the two, named Rama, has a woman with him, who is endowed with superlative beauty. She is even more charming than they. She is the very Goddess of Love, in human form. The two brothers are resident at Panchavati, with this woman. They roam about freely and without fear in the forest glades and valleys. In fact, I have never so far set eyes on such perfect feminine beauty. The like of her does not exist on heaven or earth.”

THE WILY VILLAIN

Listening to the words of Surpanakha, the lusty passion of Ravana was aroused, and he became the bond slave of ruinous foolishness. He wriggled out of the feeling of hatred towards Rama and Lakshmana and started planning stratagems to bring Sita away from their presence. He sank in thought and was plunged into anxiety and restlessness, without any effort to quench hunger or thirst. Such was the fatal fascination that haunted him. While Surpanakha was describing the beauty and splendour of the brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, there was one person in the Audience Hall, Vibhishana, who gave ear to the story with joy in his heart and tears in his eyes. He installed those Divinely charming figures in the temple of his heart and yearned deeply for the chance of being in their Presence and falling at their feet. "Will they receive me? Can I be saved? Do I deserve to be blessed by them?"

he asked himself. He told himself: "They are Divine, for certain. They have appeared on earth in human form, in order to destroy the wicked brood of Rakshasas." He offered in his mind all that he had and was. He began living in the constant meditation of their glory from that very moment.

Ravana had fallen from the Yogic heights he had reached in his previous lives, and so he was roaming about as a Rakshasa. Really speaking, he was a great devotee of God. He was aware, deep within his consciousness, of the Universal Absolute, named Narayana. He was not aware of the fact that Rama was Narayana Himself come in human form in order to confer joy and peace on the gods and in order to destroy all traces of demonic wickedness on earth. However, since there was no other route for him to reach Narayana, he had to cultivate wanton wickedness and violent hatred, and invite Rama to kill him. Of course, this might be called a type of devotion that is stupid and infamous. But his inner aim was to cross the ocean of birth-death, through that act of self-abnegation and surrender to Narayana.

Meanwhile, since his body and mind had grown out of Rakshasa urges and developed with the help of demonic sustenance, he ignored the Divine in him, which was calling for merger in the Divine Rama. He relied on his Rakshasa nature and awakened its sinister possibilities and powers. The Divine and the Demonic facets of his personality rose and sank alternately, moment after moment. So he convinced himself at last that the two brothers were Royal

Princes and no more. He resolved that he would kill them both and bring away the lady of whom he was so enamoured. He promised his sister that he would avenge the injury inflicted on her in that manner. He announced that the Assembly was adjourned. He ordered his aides to bring to the Audience Hall the imperial chariot for his journey. He took his seat in the chariot with no companion beside him. He hurried to the “seashore dwelling” of Maricha, and sat by his side, detailing to him the events that had happened. He ordered Maricha to play his part in the execution of his plan. But Maricha said that he had borne the brunt of the might of both Rama and Lakshmana, once already. He told Ravana that they are not of the common run of Princes. He advised him against such wild enterprises. He argued long and lovingly with Ravana, to dissuade him. But passion had made Ravana blind to the dictates of duty and morality. So, he threatened to punish Maricha if he did not yield to his will. Maricha decided within himself that it was better to die at the hands of Rama than of the Rakshasa that Ravana was. He agreed to the proposal that Ravana laid before him, and got ready to play his part in the conspiracy.

Ravana proceeded to the Dandaka Forest, with Maricha following him closely. On the way, Ravana explained to his companion the strategy he had conceived. He directed Maricha to transform himself, by means of his demonic powers, into a lovely golden deer. He wanted him to frisk about, in that alluring form, before the hermitage where Rama, Sita and Lakshmana were. Maricha had to

assent, since he had no way of escaping from his ire. Ravana told him: “Rama will try to capture you, and will follow you and you should lead him far into the distance, and from thence, you must yell in painful agony, ‘Oh Sita! Oh Lakshmana,’ in a voice exactly like that of Rama.” Then, keeping the chariot afar, both moved towards the hermitage.

While this web was being woven, at the hermitage in Panchavati, Sita and Rama suddenly felt that the moment of fulfilment of their task had come. Rama sent Lakshmana to collect tubers and fruits for the day. Noting that the proper hour had come, he told Sita thus: “Companion! You know all. Both of us are aware why we have come on earth, and what our task is. That task is now calling us. We have to enter upon it, in right earnest now. Your nature and characteristics are noble and holy beyond measure. We both have assumed these human bodies through rites associated with the Fire Principle. My body arose from the Offering brought out of the flames of the sacrificial Fire by the God Agni Himself. You rose from the earth that was furrowed by the sacred plough in order to consecrate it for a Fire-Altar, where a *Yajna* (sacrifice) had to be performed. Our bodies are born in fire and are being sustained by the warmth of fire. Therefore Sita, deposit all your Divine attributes and splendour in Fire, and act as an ordinary human being hereafter. I too shall move and act as an ordinary human being, and exhibit sorrow and anxiety on your account, the pangs of separation and the pain of loneliness. The world would keep in mind only these modes of behaviour, and

take us as human. They will accept them as worldly conduct and natural reaction. Remember that the smallest act of ours has to be an ideal for the householders of the world. We have to hold forth models in the relationship between the husband and the wife. They have to be quite in consonance with the principles of Truth and Righteousness. Our activities have to be in conformity with the guidelines laid down in the Sastras, the spiritual texts. We have to shape our lives, in an exemplary manner, so that common men can be inspired thereby and prompted to follow the ideals elaborated therein. We have to enact this drama until the final consummation, namely, the destruction of Ravana and the Rakshasas.

“Therefore, place your Divine Splendour in the keeping of the God of Fire, Agni, and move about as an ordinary woman caught in the coils of illusion, Maya. For, there can be no effect without a cause. We must consummate the effect, namely, the destruction of Ravana and the Rakshasa brood. So, we must manipulate a cause to justify it or bring it about. Ravana has a basic fault in his structure, namely, his lustful passion. We have to highlight it before the world. So, we have to so prepare such a situation that it would appear as if he kidnaps you in a fit of passion. The world has to realise that his ‘dedication and devotion to God’ are not of the highest order, for of what use is that sense of surrender if it is tarnished by the craving for sensual pleasure and immoral yearnings? Activities and behaviour emanating from a consciousness that is not pure are

tarnished. The devotion to God that is polluted by lust is as foul as dirt—these truths have to be emphasised now, for the benefit of mankind.

“It is also imperative to announce for the benefit of mankind that any spiritual *sadhana* or asceticism, or religious rite or ritual undertaken with the intention of gaining superhuman powers are paltry and pernicious. We have to hold forth Ravana as a warning to mankind that however many divine rites and acts one may do, if one does not give up one’s demonic passions and impulses, they add up to only one result: rendering them unholy and sterile.

“Over and above all this, Sita, there is one overwhelming consideration we have to place before ourselves. There is a curse that has been pronounced on Ravana and he has also been assured of a means by which he could end its consequence. We have to see that the means is fulfilled. The beginning of his end has arrived. Today or tomorrow, we have to be separated from each other. Of course, we are inseparable entities and nothing can keep us apart. Yet, we have to pretend that it has happened, in order to render the make-believe effective. Go now, and deposit your Divine Form in the keeping of Agni (Fire). It is time for Lakshmana to return with the fruits and tubers. And Ravana is ready with his perverted intelligence.

“I have to inform you of another secret, too. You have to perform your part in the destruction of the Rakshasas. Though you might be apparently under the surveillance of

Ravana, since your Power is immanent in Fire, you will have to burn Lanka to ashes emerging from the Fire where your Self is dormant from now on. Lanka has to be turned to ashes, not by Fire, but by you as Fire. And Rama has to kill Ravana. That is the Divine Will. This truth has to be proclaimed. This mystery is to be kept from Lakshmana also. He is our instrument in this endeavour. When this task is accomplished and we have to re-enter Ayodhya, I shall accept you again from the Fire where you reside. That act too I will transform into a lesson for the world. The drama starts now," Rama said. Both Sita and Rama decided on their plan of action and awaited the unfoldment of Ravana's strategy.

From that moment, every act and behaviour of Sita and Rama, the pangs of separation, the gasps of anxiety, the sighs of pain, the groans of grief—were gestures and reactions in the drama decided upon. They were not genuine at all. For, how can Sita and Rama ever be separated? Through their conduct, they only willed to teach mankind some valuable lessons.

At this moment, Lakshmana made his entrance, with his hands full of fruits and other eatables. They partook of the simple meal and drank the cool limpid water of the river nearby. Then, they sat, admiring the charming landscape and bringing to mind the atrocities of the Rakshasas which fouled the peaceful atmosphere of the forests. They talked exultingly about the sweetness and sanctity of sylvan life.

Not far from them, Ravana and Maricha were arguing how best to enter the hermitage to execute their nefarious design. Maricha was disgusted at the passion and perversity of Ravana, but he did not have the courage to deny him his own complicity. He had no inclination to die at the hands of such a wicked person. So, he accepted the role Ravana granted him and agreed to do as he wanted. Maricha changed his form into a fascinating golden deer, a form that was certain to attract the admiration of Sita and Rama. He thought within himself; "Ah, what an auspicious day is this that has dawned! I am about to be blessed in a few moments with the vision of the three most charming individuals on earth! On me will fall the looks of Sita. Then, Rama will follow me, with bow and arrow in hand. Ah, how fortunate am I! I am the servant, who has to tread on the footsteps of Rama; but my Master will follow me now. Of course, I know that I am engaged in a most heinous action; but I am forced into it. I do not act according to my will. I am being forced into it, and so, I am free from sin. Whatever sin I have perpetrated, when Rama's arrow shot by Rama's hand strikes me, this artificial form will disappear. That will be my happy destiny. Can all aspire for such an end, can all people achieve it? And I will have another piece of good fortune. When I draw my last breath, my eyes will be fixed on Rama! That Divine Beauty will be in front of me. The sweet Name will be on my tongue! Ah, how fruitful has my life become! I do not find anyone luckier than I."

Maricha dwelt on these sweet thoughts, as he walked slowly towards the hermitage. The all-knowing Rama and the all-knowing Sita were both awaiting his appearance. The deer approached, hesitatingly and with evident trepidation, the precincts of the cottage. It fixed its looks on Sita and Rama and stood for a while. Then, it frisked and skipped a few paces and peering into a bush of creepers, it entered it out of sheer curiosity, only to come out of it in a trice. Sita, Rama and Lakshmana noticed its antics and admired its appearance. Seeing that it had a golden skin, they decided that it was a strange species of deer. They noted its special characteristics and were fascinated by its charm. Sita said, "If only I could have this deer with me, I could spend time happily in its company. When you two are engaged in things concerning you alone, I could be happy playing with this unique pet. Please catch this bright little animal for me. Can you not fulfil this tiny wish of mine, so that I can entertain myself when alone, fondling it and watching it play about?" Sita appealed thus, exhibiting great attachment to the mysterious deer.

Noticing this, Lakshmana rose from his seat, saying, "Mother! I shall get it for you." Rama stopped him. He knew that 'it will fall only into his own hands.' Lakshmana did not know the drama that was being enacted with this as the prologue. He said, "Lakshmana!, it has to be caught, without inflicting any wound or injury. So, I have myself to pursue it and catch it. I have myself to fulfil this wish of Sita." At this, Lakshmana was silenced and he sat down, as directed by Rama.

Moreover, since the subsequent scenes of the drama were known to both Sita and Rama, Rama kept it to himself, while he said: "Lakshmana, this forest is the dwelling place of Rakshasas. Remember what happened two days ago, when their leaders, Khara and Dushana fell upon us. Their kinsmen and comrades might come in force and attack us. So, it is necessary to have arrow on bow always and watch all the four quarters with utmost alertness. Guard Sita with great care. Do not leave Sita alone, under any circumstance. This deer might escape me and flee into the distance. I have to catch it alive; so, it may take some time for me to accomplish this task. Or use your intelligence and physical prowess as suits the occasion, and save Sita from any danger that might threaten her while I am away."

Rama then stalked the strange deer and went beyond sight. The deer did not cast its looks forward, but ran fast with its head bent backwards, its eyes cast on Rama, the pursuer! Seeing this behaviour, Rama was delighted. Rama knew that the deer was Maricha himself, his great devotee who had experienced and realised the Rama Principle and the Rama Power. So Rama too fixed his eyes on the deer and followed its gait with great interest. The deer came within reach one moment, but it sprang afar with one leap, to attract Rama to a little more distance. Rama seemed to be enjoying this tantalising pursuit. But after some time spent thus, Rama fitted an arrow on his bow and aiming at the deer he released it straight on the target.

When the fatal arrow struck him, Maricha exclaimed in agony, "Ha! Sita! Ha! Lakshmana!" and collapsed on the ground. The cry fell on the ears of Sita and Lakshmana. Even before the sound reached him, Sita said, "Lakshmana, did you hear? That is the voice of your brother. He is calling you for help. Go, go immediately. Do not delay. These Rakshasas are experts in magical transformations and tricks. They cause profuse calamities, changing their shapes and natures." She wanted Lakshmana to proceed in haste to the spot from which the cry had come.

Lakshmana was an intelligent person, used to discriminating and arriving at right conclusions. He was also a loyal adherent of the directions of his brother; he revered those orders, precious as his own breath. So, he said, "Mother! No calamity can ever happen to Rama. No Rakshasa, however crafty, can harm Rama. You have seen, haven't you, how he destroyed in a trice thousands of these very Rakshasas? Do not be anxious. Muster courage and be calm. Rama will soon come back hale and hearty into this hermitage."

Just then, the cry came again across the distance: "Ha! Sita! Ha! Lakshmana!" At this, Sita was even more agitated and confused. She said, "Lakshmana! Why is it that you are behaving so heartlessly? I do not understand your intentions. Go soon. Go and put an end to the danger into which your brother has fallen. Help him, go." She demonstrated her fear and anxiety in many ways and tried her best to persuade Lakshmana to leave her.

Of course, Sita knew quite well that Rama can never be touched by trouble. But things have to happen as foundations for future events. She acted like an ignorant person affected by the cries. Lakshmana spoke assuringly in various ways. He pleaded piteously that he would not disobey his brother. Seeing that she cast aside all his arguments and appeals, Lakshmana said at last, "Mother, The Command of Rama is my very Life. I consider it as precious as my breath. Did you not hear Rama ordering me never to leave you unguarded, but always to protect you? Therefore, I shall not move one step away from here whatever might happen."

Sita desired that Lakshmana be sent afar, for Ravana had to approach the hermitage. It was the plan that Rama had designed to effect the destruction of Ravana and the Rakshasas. She had to fulfil the will of Rama. So she too held on to her words and made them sharper and more hurting, so that Lakshmana could yield.

Lakshmana closed his ears with his palms. He could not bear the imputations and the charges. He prayed, "Mother! I shall suffer all the anger you pour on me." But when Sita became harsher and threatened to go herself to the rescue of Rama if he would not proceed, Lakshmana had no alternative. He could bear it no longer. He could not allow her to roam about in the forest in order to discover Rama and help him. So, with a heavy heart, he moved away from the hermitage in search of Rama.

When Lakshmana left the hermitage, he pleaded with Sita to enter the place and be within closed doors, and never to move out. He exhorted her to be careful and vigilant. He moved out of the hermitage with no willingness and with no strength to move! He turned round and addressed the spirits of the forest, praying to them to keep watch over Sita and guard her. He drew four lines around the hermitage and invoking on them mysterious and mighty mantric power. He asked Sita not to step beyond them on any account, under any pretext or pressure.

Lakshmana was a person endowed with all the virtues. He was caught between loyalties to two divergent commands. He could not disobey either. He was overcome with anguish. He had perforce to act counter to the commands of Rama. He had to leave Sita alone and unprotected. Fear shook his heart. He walked off, in spite of his legs failing him. He turned back towards the hermitage, at every step he took forward.

At that very moment, Ravana was transforming himself in appearance and apparel; for he was awaiting just this chance. He became in outer form a Rishi; but his intention, in spite of his innate power to terrify by his very name both gods and demons, was to steal like a sly dog. Casting his eyes all around him, he entered the hermitage, surreptitiously, with a trembling heart. When he attempted to enter by the front door, the mystic lines that Lakshmana had drawn across seemed to raise tongues of fire at him. He feared that his plan might fail and that something even

worse might happen to him. So, he stood beyond the line, and shouted, "Mistress of the House! Give me some alms."

Sita heard the cry. She knew that it was Ravana. She brought tubers and fruits in her palms, and came through the door and stood outside. But Ravana dared not go near her to receive them. He said, "I shall not come close to any hermitage. This is my vow." He wanted Sita to offer the alms into his hand. Sita replied, "No, I cannot cross the line that was drawn by my brother-in-law. Come yourself, revered guest! Receive it from me here." At this, the mendicant who was really an impersonation, urged, "Lady, I will not cross the line and come beyond it. Nor can I accept alms given from beyond a line. It is not proper for ascetics like me. Come, give it to me, I am hungry. I am very hungry." He acted the part so well, with many a gasp and gesture, that Sita decided to give him the alms she had in her hand, crossing the line and getting near him.

All this happened in a trice. No sooner did she cross the line than Ravana drew her by the hand and lifted her away into a waiting chariot. He did not pay heed to her lamentations, but drove the chariot into the distance with terrible speed. Sita screamed out, "Oh Rama! Lakshmana! Come and save me from this wicked monster." The anchorites and forest-dwellers around Panchavati heard the cry but could not save the person who lamented. The entire forest faded green to brown, when the voice of agony passed through it. "Oh Rama! Oh Master, save me! Oh Save me! Save me from this monster!" that was the cry that

reverberated in the forest and made all things that move and do not move, sorrow-stricken. Sita was admonishing Ravana inside the chariot. "Ravana! You are building a royal road for your own destruction. You are effacing your empire, your subjects, your dynasty, completely, without trace. You are perpetrating this vileness with a laugh on your face; but, the day will come when you will pay for it with tears in your eyes. Mean wretch, this vicious act is unbecoming of a person who has practised austerities like you." She gave him many a piece of advice and warning. She also called upon Rama and Lakshmana to rescue her.

The monarch of eagles, Jatayu, heard the plaintive cries that rose from that moving chariot. He recognised the voice as that of Sita. He realised that Sita was in the chariot of Ravana. He grieved over his age, which made him too weak to fight Ravana, the villain who was taking her away. He felt that it would be wrong not to hinder him. He knew that no act of service can be nobler than rescuing a woman from the clutches of a fellow who was kidnapping her from her lord and master. He resolved to sacrifice his life, if need be, for the holy act of saving Sita from the demonic grasp, and using all his energy and skill for that act of service. Circling overhead, Jatayu shouted, "O Sita! Have no fear, I shall destroy this cruel villain and release you. I shall place you in the Presence of Rama." He flew across the chariot's path, and hit Ravana many times with his sharp beak, causing him to bleed profusely. He beat the chariot with his wings and attempted to stop it by creating a terrific wind

that would retard its speed. Even while on his wings, he gave Ravana excellent advice to correct himself, before it was too late. "Ravana! This is a step that would bring you no good. Release Sita and go safely home. Or else, like moths that fall into fire, you and your brood will be burnt in the fire of Rama's anger. Your pride will cause your total ruin. To kidnap another's wife is a heinous sin. Only a sinful heart will yearn for another's wife and wander in search of her. Only base brutes, worse than dogs or foxes, will descend to such depths. You are acting like one who is so mad that he cannot pay heed to what is in store for him. Consider, is there a more barbarous crime than this? Oh! What a sin have your parents done to be claiming you as their son? Your head has turned because you reckon on your physical strength, your riches and the peoples under your control. But listen, all these will go up in flames and be reduced to ashes. Even the powers you have achieved through your austerities will be destroyed in a trice. Will you remain calm and inactive, when your wives are carried away or coveted by other Rakshasas? In fact, those who respect women, both those who are their wives and those who are not, will never invite this dread misfortune on their heads."

Uttering these words of golden advice, Jatayu flew along with the speeding chariot for some distance, Sita derived great consolation listening to the words of Jatayu. She was comforted when she heard these sentiments so well expressed.

Jatayu succeeded in stopping the chariot and forcing Ravana to engage in battle with him, after making Sita dismount and helping her to sit under a tree. But age took its toll. He could not fight for long. He was soon overcome. But he was able, during the fight, to pull down the crown from his head and pluck a few bunches of hair. He pecked at his body so fiercely in so many places that he was turned into a mass of bleeding flesh. Jatayu's beak and widespread wings hurt Ravana a great deal and humbled his pride. As a last resort, Ravana drew his wheelsword, and with its sharp edge, he cut off the wings of Jatayu, felling him helpless on the ground. Wings are as the very breath to eagles. So, he cried out in his agony the name of Rama and fell on the ground.

"I fought, with no reservations, in the cause of my Master; but, my struggle was of no avail. This too is the will of Rama. Rama must have planned all this, in order to confer some benefit on the world. Or else, can Sita be taken away by force by anyone, without His will designing the act? I have now only one prayer to Him. I must hold my breath at least until I meet Him and am able to convey this news to Him. I have nothing greater to do in this life." So saying, he closed his eyes and was lost in prayer.

Meanwhile, Ravana had placed Sita again in the chariot, and started off in great haste and with much commotion. Jatayu saw him moving past. He heard Sita crying out for help. Jatayu was sunk in anguish that he could not offer further resistance. He lay in a pool of his own tears, his heart

yearning for Rama and his tongue whispering His Name. "When death draws near, when calamity is a few steps off, nature behaves in an unexpected manner to warn and teach. Things behave topsy-turvy. This Ravana too, is behaving in this manner, since his end is near, and his kith and kin are about to be wiped off the face of the earth." Jatayu realised this truth and lay there, keeping himself alive by his own will, awaiting the approach of Rama.

Rama returned to Panchavati from the depths of the jungle, after killing the "impersonation" called the Golden Deer. He thought within himself that the plot of his story would have by now worked out, at the hermitage, as directed by His Will. He said within himself, "Though that is but the blossoming of my plan, people should not understand so soon that it is Divine Design. I have to behave hereafter as an ordinary human being." When he was halfway back, he saw Lakshmana coming and he decided that he too must be kept unaware of the secret purpose behind the seeming tragedy. So he asked, as if he was perturbed in mind, "Lakshmana! Brother! You have disobeyed me and brushed my word aside. You have come away, leaving Sita alone in the hermitage. How could you do so? You have come so far leaving her helpless! Alas, you have been witnessing the demonic wickedness of the Rakshasa brood every day. How could you desert Sita so? Alas, what has happened to her? I am afraid some calamity has befallen! I feel that Sita is not there, in the hermitage. Alas, what shall we do now? What is to be our future?"

Hearing this lamentation, Lakshmana fell at his brother's feet and said, "Brother! You know me, as the workings of your mind. Whatever the occasion I am ever ready to offer myself, my very breath, at your feet. Will I ever go counter to your command? However this time it happened. The force that compelled me to disobey is the prompting of my Destiny. What can I do? The outburst, 'Ha, Sita, Ha, Lakshmana' that arose from the throat of that false Deer reached the Hermitage. As soon as she heard it, she urged me in various ways to run to your side. I am conversant with the tricks of these Rakshasas and so, I fell at her feet and prayed for pardon. I told her, 'Rama cannot be harmed in the least. No danger can approach him. The cries we heard are only the false stratagems of the Rakshasas.' A second time, those cries struck our ears. Then she lost all courage. They were exact reproductions of your voice. At this, she ignored her own Reality. She ignored the mores of kinship and family. She used words that should not be spoken or taken by the ear. I could not suffer any more. So I directed her to take every precaution. I did all I could to keep her safe, and then came away from the hermitage. I shall gladly accept whatever punishment you award me, whatever measure you take to expiate for the wrong I have done."

With these words, Lakshmana fell flat at the feet of Rama. At this, Rama said, "Lakshmana, you ought not to have left her all alone, whatever the reason! I feel that Sita will not be at the hermitage when we reach there. How can

we pride ourselves as heroic men, when having come into this forest, we are not able to guard Sita from being carried away by the Rakshasas? Can you tolerate when people say tomorrow that Rama was unable to save his wife from the calamity of being kidnapped? Can you remain calm in mind, listening to such talk? Alas, how am I to bear this tragedy?" Rama moaned and groaned in great mental pain, just like an ignorant man, and ran forward to the hermitage, to find whether his fears were true.

As Rama had indicated, Sita could not be found therein. In seemingly unbearable anguish, Rama lamented her disappearance. Lakshmana fell even as he stood, unable to bear the grief. Aware that he had caused this catastrophe, he felt like giving up his life; but, he realised soon that Rama, already deprived of Sita, would be put to further anxiety and tangles if he departed from this world, taking his own life. He felt that if he dies, Rama would wander alone, in sorrow, through the forest glades. He would have none to give him food and drink. He could not bear the anguish of Rama at the loss of Sita. He could not find his tongue, nor could he frame words to console Rama and pacify him. Lakshmana ruminated in his mind on all that had happened that day. He soon came to the conclusion that it must be the result of Rama's own will. He realised that this brother of his was not an ordinary man. He knew now that what was happening was part of the drama that was destined to bring about progress and prosperity for all mankind. For, he who would gladly wipe the tears from all

eyes, he who was the guardian of the world, he who had not evinced an inkling of sorrow so far, was now lamenting and weeping like any ordinary human, at separation from his wife! Watching these happenings, Lakshmana could easily infer that it was all the unrolling of a play directed by Rama! Lakshmana knew very well that Sita was incomparably virtuous. That such a uniquely pure woman should have met with this calamity was inexplicable, except as a scene in a play, or a part of the Divine Plot, devised by Rama. No one anywhere can execute even the slightest deed without orders from Rama! However, Rama had come down as man, and resolved to guide man by his example along the path of justice, integrity, detachment, devotion, virtue, veracity, morality and humility. Lakshmana realised that this was the meaning of the play which Rama and Sita were enacting. He recognised himself as but an actor, whose whole duty was to act the role assigned to him as well as he could.

Deriving strength from these thoughts, Lakshmana approached Rama and fell at his feet. He said, "Brother, you are, I know, the Director of the Drama which the Cosmos is. There is nothing you cannot do, nothing you do not know. Everything that happens follows your will only. These events could not happen unknown to you. I will not take a denial. I believe so firmly. By these incidents, I believe you are designing to promote the peace of the world and destroy the Rakshasa race. My mind is whispering this to me and asking me to be firm in that faith. This must be

the Truth behind this play. Pray tell me the Truth and give me peace of mind."

Rama replied with a smile, "Lakshmana, you are a limb of my person, so what can I keep away from you? You have hit the truth. I have incarnated in order to uphold and foster Dharma (righteousness). To do so, I have to enact many scenes of righteous and unrighteous conduct. A baby that wails has to be comforted into quiet joy by means of prattle and play, toys and jingles, songs and swings. The mother has to devise many stratagems on the spot, in order to persuade the baby to drink the milk it needs. The purpose is the giving of the milk feed. But consider how useful these means are—the songs and swings, the toys and talks, the tricks and tickles. These methods help the quenching of hunger and the stoppage of wailing. That is their reason, too. You have to add them all up in order to discover how the hunger was quenched and the grief ended. Similarly, dear brother, I who am the Mother of the Universe, have to act in these manifold ways to re-establish Righteousness and demolish unrighteousness. These incidents have been designed to secure the twin aims of the removal of grief and the winning of bliss. They are not just meaningless exercises. Ordinary folk base their conduct on the ideals presented to them. So, as Master and Leader, I have to practise what I intend to place before them as ideal conduct. Unless I practise what I hold forth as the ideal, I cannot claim to be Master and Leader. When masters and leaders, who do not deserve the positions, appear and exercise authority, Righteousness declines and unrighteousness runs

wild. Therefore, brother, remember that those in authority as masters or leaders must prove their advice right, in actual practice. They must help realise the ideals they preach by their own genuine effort. This is the way for them to earn the Grace of God and the gratitude of men.

“Sita knows the role she is playing. These two bodies—mine and Sita’s—evince the joys and pangs of union and separation, only as bodies! The pain and pleasure, the weeping and wailing are all illusory and unreal. They follow the needs and compulsions of the Incarnation I have taken upon myself, along with other limitations. I am taking you into confidence regarding my Reality. Take note that you too will have to act in conformity with time, deed and cause, space, occasion and recipient, as the story unfolds. This Divine Mystery is beyond the intelligence of others. So, you must also keep mum on this and play according to the rules. We have to concentrate on the mission on which we have come.

After this Revelation, they plunged immediately into the task of searching for Sita. Both acted their roles during this search most sincerely, admirably, and realistically. Not only the brothers, but Sita too exhibited supreme nobility and acted with equal staunchness and sincerity, even though the Rakshasa guards, in the place where she was kept captive, terrorised her and threatened her most cruelly. She did not waver or yield. She stuck bravely to her determination to save herself and to preserve her purity. She maintained her vow undefiled.

The drama enacted by the two parties held forth for every householder and every individual the highest ideal of righteous conduct. It placed before the fathers, mothers, wives, husbands, brothers and friends the best lines of behaviour expected of them and how each of them had to keep his promises, and tend his virtues. Why dilate further? The Ramayana lays down ideals for all relationships in life, and for the realisation of the highest aim of human life. Nowhere else can be seen such a variety and quantity of moral dicta and their practical applications. The one text, *Ramayana*, has soaked in its pages directions for correct conduct in all situations and under all conditions. It teaches how to justify human birth, how to carry on the government of a kingdom, how to regulate the reactions of the people and how to design the laws that can control and consummate the wishes of the people. If only the *Ramayana* is studied closely and observed in daily practice, mankind can attain peace and prosperity in all fields.

In order to discover some clue about how Sita left or why or when or whereto, Rama and Lakshmana forsook the hermitage, armed with weapons. They examined every tank and looked over every hill in the region. They could not come across any sign. While proceeding thus, they saw before them branches of trees that had been pulled asunder lying across the track. There were other evidences of a combat that had taken place like broken arrows and patches of blood. Rama drew the attention of his brother to these. He said, “A fight seems to have taken place here,” and

looked around for information about who had engaged whom. He found an eagle of truly regal mien lying on the ground, gasping for breath, but still repeating reverentially with eyes closed the Name it adored, "Rama, Rama." The brothers walked straight to the bird and lovingly stroked its head and body. When the hand of Rama blessed it with the tender touch, the bird recovered some little strength. It opened its eyes and looked around. It saw the beautiful form of Rama that could captivate all the worlds. Suddenly it was overpowered by a flood of both joy and sorrow. The incapacitated bird could not move its limbs, nor could it turn on its side. So it crawled a little forward and raising its head, placed it at the Feet of Rama. Rama placed the head on his lap and gently fondled it into awareness and activity.

Jatayu said in feeble accents, "Lord! While the wicked Ravana—yielding to maleficent motives, forsaking justice and uprightness, casting away powers acquired by years of asceticism—by carrying away Mother Sita, in a chariot, through this forest, as a dog goes in stealth and as a fox goes cunningly, the Mother of all the Worlds, the Daughter of Janaka wailed aloud, 'Rama,' 'Rama,' covering the entire forest in gloom. I heard the wail, but did not know who it was that raised the sad cry. I flew near and discovered to my great surprise and sorrow that Mother Sita was the person in distress! I could not remain quiet. Though old and decrepit, I pronounced your Name, and derived strength thereby and courage to give him battle. I pecked at him so furiously, that his body streamed with blood all over. He

placed Sita in the shade of a tree and fought ferociously. He drew his wheel-weapon and slashed my wings into shambles. I could not do anything to stop his onward journey with Sita. I lay here, weeping over my defeat, and waiting for your arrival. I am most unlucky, for, though I saw Mother being taken away by that ruffian, I could not save her." Jatayu shed tears of despair, as he spoke those words.

Rama too displayed great interest and anxiety, and he addressed the bird thus: "Oh Chief of Birds! I shall never forget your help. The good deed you have performed will give you Bliss in the next world. Do not feel sad." Thus saying, Rama dusted its wings with his own matted hair, while Lakshmana hurried to bring some water to slake its thirst and refresh it. Rama poured the water drop by drop into the bird's mouth. Jatayu was delighted at the good fortune and his face glowed with ecstasy. Jatayu said, "Rama, I am luckier than even your father, for he did not have this chance of drinking water from your hands when he left this world. I could get my last sip from your golden hand! I could rest on your lap. I could drink nectar from your fingers. And while drawing my last breath, I could fill my eyes with the picture of your charming Lotus Face. I am certain I will be merging in you. Oh, I am indeed blessed." Then, Jatayu spoke in feeble tones: "Rama! That vicious demon proceeded in the southern direction. Most probably, he must have reached Lanka. Therefore, go straight to Lanka, destroy that wicked fellow and then bring the Mother to your presence." Jatayu could speak no more.

He cried “Rama” just once and drew his last breath. Rama allowed the vital breath of Jatayu to merge in Him. He performed the obsequies to the body of the bird and took the valedictory bath. After these rituals, he moved towards the south picturing in his mind the regions of the South and the ordeals of Sita.

On the way, a demoness called Ajamukhi espied them and was entranced by their personal beauty. She said to herself, “Ah, what loveliness of body! What loveliness of body! What a feast to the eye! I must wed them and win happiness.” So resolving, she clasped the hand of Lakshmana and drew him towards herself. Lakshmana inferred that she too was stricken with the malady of Surpanakha, and he treated her with the same contempt. He cut off her limbs and taught her a severe lesson. The forest through which they passed was as terrible as the demons they found there. It was infested with wild animals that roared, howled and growled most fearfully. Even the roughest heart would quake in fear at the scene and the noises. While the brothers were trekking across, a demon called Kabanda, a mass of distortion and disfiguration, appeared before them. He opposed their advance and shook the forest with his unearthly guffaw. He attempted to snatch Rama and Lakshmana, but Rama slew him ere he could succeed. He was a monster, with no head. His arms were inordinately long. He had his mouth in the centre of his stomach! He was a terror in that forest, devouring whatever he could get in the sweep of his arms. By killing him, Rama saved the forest-dwellers from a dreaded foe.

On the point of death Kabandha realised who his enemy was. He recognised Rama. He said, “Master! You have this day liberated me from the shackles of a curse that had reduced me to this ludicrous and cruel role. My sins have been exonerated by the vision I have of you.” While falling at the feet of Rama, Kabandha said, “Your mission will succeed, without delay or obstacles. You will certainly triumph over the forces of wickedness.”

Rama, the large-hearted lover of all, moved on from that spot, walking on foot, with his brother as sole companion. They soon came across an old woman—she had a stoop. Her head could not be held erect. Her eyesight had become dull. Her hands were quivering. She was coming towards them, with a basket of fruits on her head! She saw the charming figures of the brothers and inferred that they were the two, who were described with excitement and delight by the rishis of the forest! Placing the basket on the ground, she stood on the track, whispering “Rama” “Rama” in reverence and thankfulness. Lakshmana guessed that this too was an impersonation by some wily Rakshasa to harm them. But Rama knew that his guess was wrong. He proposed to sit under a nearby tree, the tree that was adjacent to the very hermitage where the old woman was residing. Sabari, the old woman, noticed the lotus-petal-like eyes, the ringlets of hair on their foreheads, the long arms that reached down to the knees, and the dark-blue complexion of Rama. She could contain her ecstasy no longer. She could not suppress her adoration. She ran

forward and fell at the feet of both. She asked, "Where are you coming from? What are your names?" Rama replied, smilingly and coolly: "Mother! We are coming from Ayodhya. We are residing in the forest. I am called Rama. This brother of mine is known as Lakshmana." At this, Sabari exclaimed, Father! My long cherished desire has been fulfilled, I have been waiting for your arrival, day and night, and looking for you into the distance, until my eyes have become dull and insensitive. I have achieved success. My longing has had its result. My vigil and fasts have borne fruit. Ah! I have been rewarded! This is the result of my Guru's Grace. This is the mysterious working of God." She brought the basket near Rama. Meanwhile, Rama asked her, "Mother! You speak of a Guru. Who is he, this Guru of yours?"

She said, "His name is Mathanga Rishi. But since women are not taken as pupils in this hermitage, I listened to his lessons, hiding behind bushes and trees. I served my Guru and other rishis, removing the thorns from the tracks that led to the rivers where they take their bath, mostly by rolling over the ground, for I had to do it pretty early, before dawn. I also removed the pebbles and stones that might hurt their feet. I lived on fruits and tubers as the other pupils did. I served my masters unseen, and spent my days in the recesses of the jungle. Mathanga, the Mahatma, who knew the yearnings of my mind, told me one day, 'Mother! Your body has reached a ripe old age. If you strain so much, you will soon be exhausted. So come, reside in the hermitage

and take good rest.' While I was spending my days thus in the service of this hermitage, the rishi desired to quit the body and called me beside him. He said, "Sabari! The task on which I have come is over. I have resolved to leave this body now. You shall remain in residence at this hermitage itself. Within a short time Rama will come into the forest. Invite him to enter this hermitage and offer what little service you can to him. Let this hermitage be sanctified by the touch of his feet." I protested a great deal. I told him how I could never be happy in the hermitage without him. I prayed to him to take me too, through death to where he was proceeding. My Guru was not in a mood to accede to my wishes. He said that I had to be here awaiting the arrival of Rama and that I could not avoid that responsibility or lose that joy. From that day, I am existing here, with arms outstretched to welcome you, with eyes watching the horizon, and carrying about with me this decrepit body, so that I may live to see you and serve you. Oh Rama! Oh Lord! Oh Compassionate of the Afflicted. Oh Dweller in the hearts of Rishis. The wish of my Guru has been fulfilled. The hermitage is just a few feet off. Please sanctify it by entering it." Sabari fell at Rama's feet and entreated him to accede to the last request of her Guru.

Rama was naturally happy at the dedication and devotion of the old woman. He was the very embodiment of spontaneous surging love. So, he rose and walking towards the hermitage with his brother, Lakshmana, entered it. Oh! Sabari was overcome by a flood of joy. The flood

broke all limits and expressed itself in ecstatic thrill and speech. That gem among women was until that moment too weak to tread a few paces. Now, she found herself endowed with the strength of a thousand elephants! She marched buoyantly to the river and brought, in quick time, cool limpid water that was eminently sweet. She tasted first the fruits she chose from the basket and she offered to the brothers those she found sweet and ripe. While they ate, she looked on happily and with gratitude at their charming faces, and when they had finished, she washed their feet and placed on her head the drops of water sanctified by the contact. "Lord, I have no more desire. For what shall I live on? I survived until now for that one piece of good fortune—the Darsan of Rama. I have had the Darsan. Now, save me by merging this life, this breath, in Thy Lotus Feet. I have heard your glory extensively from the sages and saints. Today, I have witnessed it. I am full of gratitude and joy." Rama relished the fruits she offered with so much devotion. While partaking of them he said, "Mother! These fruits are as sweet as your own heart. Really, these are not fruits that grow on trees. Why, the wild fruits that grow in jungles are not so sweet at all. They can never be. These are fruits that have grown on the holy tree of life, on the branches of the pure mind, in the sunshine of love." Rama ate the fruits extolling their taste all the time.

Seeing Rama in this mood, Lakshmana was happy beyond words; for, Rama had not eaten fruit with such joy since long. All these days, Lakshmana had to persuade him

to taste a few, with a good deal of parley, pleading and praying, even after the fruits were peeled, cut, and placed before him. Rama was so afflicted by the separation from Sita. In spite of all the efforts of Lakshmana, Rama would eat only half a fruit or so. Never was Lakshmana satisfied with the quantity that his brother ate. Today, Sabari gave him the fruits which had dropped ripe from the trees. She used to dust them and clean them and keep them for him every day, and when Rama did not arrive, she consumed them herself as sacramental food, given to her by Rama himself! Day after day, she roamed the forest in search of sweet ones to be placed before Rama. Thus, daily the fruits were saturated with her love and devotion and the fruits became doubly desirable. Lakshmana noticed that this was the reason Rama was eating them with joy. He was filled with delight and he admired the devotion of Sabari that was so richly rewarded. He appreciated the divine joy that she had filled herself with as a result of her long years of spiritual study and practice.

Sabari stood with folded hands before Rama and said, "Lord, I am of low caste. I am of untutored intellect, dull and stupid. I am not learned in any sacred art or text. I am lower than the lowest. How can I extol you or describe your glory? I have no skill in the use of words. I have not cultivated my Reason. Nor have I practised austerities prescribed to gain insight into Divinity. I am on the lowest step in spiritual Sadhana. My only strength is my love for God. I have no other support or sustenance." She spoke of

Rama's compassion, in accepting her offering. "Your grace is boundless." she said. Rama was listening to her words intensely. He lifted her chin and looked right into her eyes. He said: "Mother! Devotion is the thing I need. The rest are subsidiary. Other things like scholarship, intelligence, status, social prestige, caste, I do not pay any attention to them. They are of no value in my eyes. More than all the powers gained by spiritual disciplines and austerities, I relish the sweetness of devotion saturated with love. I seek only that. A man who has no love in him is as barren as a cloud with no moisture, a tree with no fruits, or a cow yielding no milk; he is ever far from God and can never earn Grace. Sabari! Of the nine ways of evincing and cultivating devotion, I only desire that any one be followed consistently by man. But I find you have followed to the very end all the nine ways. So, I do not see anyone higher than you in spiritual attainment. I am indeed elated in all manner of ways, for you have offered me devotion that is pure, steady, and selfless and which is Love springing from the heart and surging from it in all directions and towards all directions and towards all beings. You have not cast aspersions on anyone, even while dreaming! That is what makes your mind so pure. Your mind does not blossom when 'good' comes to you. Nor does it wither, when 'bad' comes. You are blessed in all ways."

Sabari drank in these words of counsel that Rama spoke to her. She said, "Rama! There is no path for the devotee other than doing one's best to please the Divine, is

there? I do not crave for aught else. This day, my father, my God, the Lord of my life, the Lord of all the Worlds, the Lord of all Creation has appeared before me! How can I measure my good luck, Oh Lord of Janaki, of Sita the daughter of Janaka?" At this she remembered Sita, and the brothers, too, suddenly realised their plight. Rama told her, "Alas, Sabari, all this while you kept us happy, rid of anxiety, floating in joy; but now you have plunged us in grief." Sabari was struck with remorse. She raised her head in consternation and pleaded, "Lord! What is this you say? Pardon my indiscretion," and she fell at the feet of Rama.

Rama asked her, "Sabari! Do you know anything about Sita? Have you heard anything about her?" Sabari replied, "Don't I know! Don't I know about Sita? No woman who knows the Rama-principle will be ignorant of the Sita-principle, that Gem of womankind, that Crown of virtue, that Light of femininity? Oh, what great good fortune is hers! She is the very shadow of my Rama! Rama, I must tell you what my Guru Rishi Mathanga has taught me about the Sita-principle. Of course, there is nothing you do not know. But since you asked me now, whether I knew anything about Sita, I shall tell you what I know. 'Rama deluded the minds of Manthara and Kaikeyi, in order to fulfil his mission of destroying the Rakshasa brood.' As a result of this, my Guru told me 'Sita, Rama and Lakshmana have entered the forest as exiles.' He said, they would visit hermitages and bless the ascetics and that Rama would kill the demons who obstruct their rituals and disciplines. He

said that Rama would devise a plan by which Ravana, who is knit strongly with the Rakshasa clans, will be tempted to enact a role in a dream centring around the ‘abduction’ of Sita! He assured me that the Sita abducted by Ravana is only a pseudo-Sita and not the real, genuine Mother. He had told me that Rama would come into this forest, while searching for the Sita who has been abducted and that, I would be rewarded as never before by that visit. My Guru also told me that Rama would cultivate an alliance with Sugriva, who had taken refuge in the Rishyamuka Hills (adjacent to this hermitage) from the deadly depredation of his elder brother, Vali. Rama would accomplish the task of seeking out Sita through Sugriva. Rama! You are the Director of this Cosmic Drama, which you have designed. The incidents of your Drama were known to my Guru and he has revealed them to me. Your stage is the entire Cosmos. Your will decides the future of the Universe. It ensures the stability and progress of the Universe. All that happens is the unrolling into action of your Will; without it, nothing great or small can ever happen.

“Lord, you are acting in this play, as if you are unaware of your own plot. You are pretending to be grief-stricken at separation from Sita! Only those who are foolish, or who have no faith in the Atmic reality, or who are atheists can take it as true. Those who are aware of Divinity and its mysteries, those who are devotees and Sadhakas seeking to know God as their own Reality, will not be led away into the belief that it is genuine. You are the Doer of all that is

done. No one however powerful can hinder or oppose your Will. You *will* the reactions of people to all happenings as good or bad. They are not the authors thereof. The ignorant may assert that they are the executors of their deeds. Rama! Pardon my impertinence. I have spoken too much in your presence.” Thus saying, she fell at the feet of Rama. She developed the inner Fire of Yoga and as a result, her body was reduced to ashes, while her breath was merged in the Rama-principle she adored.

AN ALLY ACCEPTED

Thus, Rama and Lakshmana fulfilled the deep yearnings of Sabari and filled her departing soul with bliss. They continued their journey through the forest, moving like twin lions, talking about the devotion and immeasurable dedication of the aged aspirant, Sabari. Travelling fast, they approached the Rishyamuka Mountain Range. Amidst the hills of that range, Sugriva was residing as a refugee, with his Ministers and Courtiers. Sugriva espied the two brothers, nearing the hills and was astonished at their noble mien and mighty stride. They appeared to be Divine. Sugriva was ever on the watch for strange faces nearing his habitat, for he was afraid, his elder brother, Vali, might torment him, even in his present home, by sending emissaries of death or distress. He had his eyes on all lines of access to his craggy residence. He was frightened at the gait and the glory of the two

strangers. He was anxious to know quickly who they were and what their mission was. So he called Hanuman to his presence and said, "Mighty hero! Have you noticed those two effulgent personalities? Do not delay any longer, go. Inquire who they are and why they have come and from where. Bring me all the news you can gather. If by some chance they happen to be persons sent by Vali, give me a signal. I shall be watching for it—bend your head low over your chest. That will do. I shall immediately arrange to give up this hill for another."

Sugriva gave him various directions and suggestions to meet all contingencies. Hanuman hurried towards the strangers by leaps and bounds. Reaching their presence, he fell at their feet in great reverence. He said, "Oh Shining Ones, You arouse deep wonder and curiosity in me. Your charming forms are attracting my mind with a strange yearning. You look so tender and innocent. Indeed, you are not mere men. Of that, I am convinced. I guess you are the Divine pair Nara-Narayana, come down on earth. Won't you tell me why you are going through this jungle with no others to serve or guide you?" Hanuman questioned them in great humility and reverence.

Rama appreciated the devotion and humility of Hanuman. There was a smile on his face when he replied, "We are the sons of Emperor Dasaratha, ruler of Ayodhya. We entered the forest. This is my brother, Lakshmana. My name is Rama. My wife too came with me into the forest; but while we were residing at Panchavati, she was carried

away by some Rakshasa when both of us were absent from our cottage. Now we are moving around in this area, searching for her, intent on knowing her whereabouts and on regaining her.” Rama spoke to Hanuman without any inhibitions, the plain facts which could explain their presence near their range of hills. He said, “Well, I have given you my antecedents and story. I would like to know about yours, too.” Hanuman realised that the brothers were his own Overlords. So he fell at their feet once again to pay respectful homage. Rising up, and standing before them on one side, shedding streams of tears in sheer joy and devotion, he could not speak at all.

At last, gathering courage, and standing with folded arms, he said in a faltering voice: “Lord, I am a stupid ignoramus. That is the reason why I questioned you so. Pardon my audacity and my foolishness, Oh, Monarch of Monarchs! You are asking me to tell you my antecedents and present condition, as if you are ordinary mortals who can know them only when told. Is this just? I could not know who you were, bound as I am by the delusion which you yourselves spread over us. Lord, You are mighty and unconquerable. How can the servant be on a par with the Lord and Master? All beings are overcome and deluded by your strategy and plan! I desire to make a declaration, for which my Lord is witness. I know no other activity than adoring my Lord. When the servant is fostered and guarded by his Lord, why should he fear? The might of the Lord is the shield of the servant.” Saying so, Hanuman assumed

his real form. Rama was filled with delight at the sight of Hanuman. He embraced him, “You are as dear to me as Lakshmana is.” He drew Him to himself and fondled him lovingly stroking his head and gently touching his forehead and face. He said, “Hanuman, I shower my Love most on those who serve me and who deem that service as the highest means of liberation.” At this, Hanuman said, “Lord, Sugriva, the Ruler of the Vanara hordes, has drawn upon himself through various circumstances, the enmity of his elder brother Vali and he has been driven out of the kingdom as an exile into this forest where he has taken residence. He too is your servant. He deserves your affection and blessings. Confer Grace on him and release him from the disgrace he is now immersed in. He has the capacity and authority to send millions of monkeys all over the world to seek and find Sita. He is the Monarch of Monkeys. He can achieve victory in that undertaking.” Hanuman detailed the manifold excellences and capabilities of Sugriva, and persuaded Rama to seek his friendship. When Rama decided on that step, Hanuman offered to carry them on his shoulders, right to the top of the mountain range where Sugriva was.

Sugriva was delighted at the sight of Rama and Lakshmana. Sugriva understood the reasons why Rama had come into the forest and to him. They both sympathised with each other and appreciated each other’s distress. They felt bound by common bonds of comradeship. Sugriva fell at the feet of Rama and Lakshmana, and offered reverential

hospitality. Rama assured Sugriva that he would destroy his fear and remove his distress, for he was the embodiment of compassion itself. Sugriva too promised to sacrifice everything, even his own life, in the service of Rama. The vow of everlasting friendship was solemnised with ritual Fire as witness. For Fire is present as warmth and light in the heart of every living being. Fire that is present in the inner consciousness can burn away any wavering or waywardness that might affect the vow. In fact, Fire or Agni (the subtle Divine Effulgence and Illumination which is the core of Fire) is the chief element in the *Ramayana*. Rama was born of the nectarine gift brought by the God of Fire from out of the sacrificial altar. Sita was wedded to Rama with Agni as the Witness. Lanka was destroyed by Agni. It was in Agni that the Reality, the principle of Sita was kept in deposit while she was taken by Ravana to Lanka. And it was from Agni that she was again redeemed, when the war with Ravana ended in victory for Rama. The implication is that the heart of Rama was cleansed and rid of alloy with each contact with Agni. For Rama is the symbol of Jnana or the Most Supreme Wisdom. He is the symbol of the most supreme morality, too. So the pact with Sugriva was affirmed and sanctified by invoking Agni (Fire) as the Witness. Lakshmana sought to deepen faith and tighten the bond by relating to Sugriva the Truth of Rama and the mission on which he had come.

He told him also of Sita and her Divinity. She was the daughter of the King of Mithila, he said, and so she can be

won and her blessings secured, only by untiring *Methane*, or churning, or Sadhana. Listening to him Sugriva shed tears of contrition. He said, "Master, One day, while I was engaged in exchanging counsel with my ministers, I heard the cry, "Rama! Rama!" from the sky, from within the Pushpaka chariot, which we saw flying through space. While we were watching this strange scene, she threw a bundle tied in cloth down to where we stood. It was a bundle of jewels and so we have preserved it in tact and safe. It is very likely that the Rakshasa called Ravana has carried her away. For there is no iniquity that Ravana has not committed so far." Sugriva gnashed his teeth in anger at the monster whom he suspected as having done this foul deed. Rama asked that the bundle of jewels be brought. At this, Sugriva himself rose and proceeding to the cave where he had hidden it. He carried it to the Presence and placed it before Rama. The cloth in which the jewels were bundled was a part of the fibre cloth which his step-mother had thrown towards Sita, so that she might wear it while in exile as a recluse in the forest. Recognising it as such, Lakshmana shed tears. Seeing him overcome, Sugriva and Hanuman also became sad. Rama loosened the knots and undid the bundle. He showed the contents to Lakshmana in order to confirm whether the jewels were those of Sita herself. Lakshmana declared that he could not identify them all, for, he had never raised his eyes and looked at Sita. "I have seen only the toe-rings that sister-in-law wore, for I used to prostrate at her Feet every day. Yes, these are the toe-rings she wore. I can vouchsafe for that. While moving through the jungles,

I used to follow her and walk on her footsteps. You know that you always walked in front and I followed behind Sita. I was walking, watching her feet and so, I know these rings quite well." Sugriva and Hanuman looked on wistfully at the brothers, when they acted their roles and were deeply moved at the sight of the jewels dropped by Sita. Sugriva could not bear it any longer. He said, "Lord, do not give way to sorrow. This day itself I shall set on foot plans to discover where Sita is, and for destroying the wicked Ravana. I shall bring Sita back and make you both happy. This is my plighted word, my sacred promise."

Rama expressed great satisfaction at this promise. He said, "Tell me in detail the reason why you are residing in this forest and not in your capital." At this, Sugriva described consecutively and in clear concise terms, as beads are strung on a string to form a garland or rosary, who his parents were, which his real place of residence was, what were the reasons for the enmity that grew between himself and his elder brother, etc. Rama felt that the story of Sugriva was more or less akin to his own, especially the separation from the wife and the exile from the Kingdom. He felt that Sugriva was upright and just, and that Vali deserved punishment since he had carried away his brother's wife, a crime which the code of monkey morals will not excuse.

Rama asked Sugriva to tell him the story of his birth. Sugriva replied, "Yes, I seek to place at your feet the chronicle of the origins and fortunes of my entire clan. Once upon a time, Brahma, the Creator, created a monkey form.

It was endowed with great might; but, it was ever wayward in movements and activities. So Brahma named it Ruksharaja. When it demanded to be told where it should reside, Brahma directed, 'Live in the forest, for there you can move as your waywardness dictates. And when you catch a Rakshasa, kill him and save the area from his misdeeds.' Ruksharaja migrated to the southern region, and followed Brahma's instructions. One day, the monkey Ruksharaja went to a lake to slake its thirst and when it dipped its face on the surface of the clear water, it saw its image in the lake. It was much concerned, for evidently there was an enemy hiding in the lake, lying in wait for him! It roamed all round the shore of the lake, eager to catch the enemy when it popped out of the waters. The enemy inside the lake roared when he roared, gnashed its teeth when he did so. It echoed, reflected, all noise and all gestures. Unable to control himself any longer, Ruksharaja jumped into the lake to strangle his rival. That jump transformed him into a female! Struck with amazement, she came on shore; and turning to the Sun, she prayed for Grace. She also prayed to Indra, with great mental anguish. Through the Grace of Surya (the Sun) she got a son, that is, Sugriva, myself; and through the Grace that Indra bestowed on her, she got another son, Vali, my brother. Immediately after the birth of the two children, she became once again, Ruksharaja! Ruksharaja took the two babies with him and approached Brahma for instructions. He related to Brahma his entire story so that He could recollect the facts of his decision thus: "Oh Vali and Sugriva! Go into the regions of

the South and establish yourselves in Kishkindha. The Lord of all the Worlds, the Supreme Sovereign of the Universe, He who is known by many Names will take birth as Rama, as the son of Emperor Dasaratha of Raghu Dynasty. He will come into the forest according to his father's command. He will engage himself in many superhuman achievements. He will also behave like an ordinary mortal. During his wanderings, he will arrive at Kishkindha, where you are, and form friendship with you. Seek the fortune of securing his darsan, hearing him speak and touching his feet. Your lives will be rendered blessed thereby."

"We listened to the Voice of Brahma addressing us thus. We were delighted at the prospect that lay before us. We did not undertake any *japa*, austerity, ritual or *yajna*. All our talents and accomplishments were the direct result of the Grace that Brahma showered on us that day. When that Voice ceased, we offered homage in our minds to Brahma and reached Kishkindha. We destroyed the rakshasas who infested the forests there. One day, a rakshasa named Mayavi, the son of Maya, proceeded against us in order to wreak vengeance against us. He besieged us at midnight and created tremendous confusion. My elder brother could not tolerate, even one moment, the audacity of the foe. Vali rose and fell upon him with all his might, and Mayavi fled in terror. Mayavi hid himself in a cave, and Vali pursued him to the very last. I was also engaged in the hot pursuit of the wicked rakshasa, close behind Vali. As he entered the cave where Mayavi had taken shelter,

Vali directed me, 'Brother! I am going into this cave to kill the enemy. Watch the entrance and remain here, lest he escape.' When I asked him how long, he replied, 'Even fifteen days and nights! Keep close watch that long. If I do not emerge on the sixteenth day, you may take it that he has killed me. You can then return.' I waited and watched for full thirty days. By that time, the smell of blood emerged from the cave, a smell that I inferred was that of my brother's blood. I feared that Mayavi might emerge alive from the cave. So I placed a huge boulder at the mouth of the cave and knowing that it was foolish to wait any longer, I returned home. I gathered my companions and well-wishers and consulted them about the next step. We felt that Mayavi who could kill the redoubtable Vali must indeed be a formidable enemy and so, I spent the days in perpetual fright.

"The inhabitants of the capital realised that they must have a leader in these hard times when they were beset by foes on all sides. They pleaded that since Vali had died, I must step into his place. I had no inclination to accept the authority, but they forced me into it. Shortly after, within about two or three days, Vali returned to the capital. He had slain Mayavi and rid the land of that vile foe. On finding me holding the position of ruler, Vali was filled with uncontrollable anger. He inferred that I had shut the exit of the cave with a boulder to prevent him from coming out alive, and that I had deliberately sought the position that was thrust on me. He decided to wreak vengeance on me

for this. He began treating me as the lowest of the low and to impute motives for even the slightest fault or mistake. He deprived me of all powers and positions and looked down on me as if I were less than a menial of his household. He forced me out of the family home. He took my wife into his custody. One day, determined to destroy me, he fought with me ferociously. I could not stand up to his prowess. So I left Kishkindha and took refuge here. Vali insisted that those who supported me or befriended me should not stay behind and so they have also joined me at this place. My wife tried hard to come back to me; but however much she tried, he did not allow her to come away. He treated her as his own wife." Sugriva's eyes were streaming tears as he related his sad story. Rama consoled him and sympathised with the plight. He assured him once again that he would protect him from harm and guard him against evil.

Sugriva said, "I am residing on this hill, helplessly, for this is the only place where my vengeful brother, Vali, cannot come. There is a curse laid on him by a sage which effectively prevents him from entering this region. Or else, I would have died at his hands long ago."

Rama inquired, "Friend, how did he incur that curse?" Sugriva explained, "Master, Dundubhi, the brother of Mayavi, was a mighty hero. No one could equal him in valour and physical strength. He revelled in confrontation with mountains and the sea, in sheer joy at demonstrating his might! One day, while he was exulting on his daring

exploits, standing in front of a mountain peak that he had pulverised, he heard an unseen Voice announce: 'Dundubhi! Do not allow your head to swell so! Beware! There lives one who is mightier than you. He is gaily wandering on the shores of the Pampa Lake, assuming leadership and asserting his power. His name is Vali.' When these words fell on his ears, Dundubhi changed himself into a formidable buffalo and rushed into Kishkindha, where the Pampa Lake is situated. He ploughed the earth with his horns and bellowed his way through hill and dale, parading in lofty pride his impregnable power. His fury was getting wilder at every step. He cast terror all around. When he dug his horns into the earth, huge trees rolled uprooted, on the ground. His ferocity quaked all hearts. While he was thus invading his region, like Rahu venturing to swallow the Moon, Vali perceived him; and that very instant, he fell upon him. The two strange-looking foes struggled for victory, like wild tuskers entangled in mortal combat. The fight lasted more than six hours. Finally, Vali gave a mortal blow to Dundubhi. Staggering with pain, he fell dead on the ground, like a mountain peak reeling to the ground during a violent earthquake. The impact was so unsettling that giant trees too lay flat on the ground along with him! Vali was so intoxicated with success that he tore the corpse apart and threw the halves far into the distance, one to the south and the other to the north. But one bleeding mass of flesh and bone fell on a hermitage, showering a rain of blood over the holy area, which polluted the ascetics who were peacefully engaged in meditation and recitation of

sacred hymns. It was the hermitage of the great saint, Mathanga. He had gone to the river for his ritual bath. When he returned, he noticed drops of blood all over the place and soon came near the half-corpses of a terror-striking monster. He could not contain himself. His disciples and pupils, yearning to be bathed in bliss, were bathed in blood. His forbearance gave way. He halted a moment wondering who could have dared commit such a sin. His anger could not be kept under restraint. It did not allow him to look back or peer into the future. He pronounced a terrible curse! ‘If that vicious, sinful Vali approaches this hill or even casts his eye on this hill, may his head be broken in two.’ That was the imprecation he uttered. Scared by that curse, Vali is keeping away from this hill. He cannot approach this place or even look upon it. Emboldened by this circumstance, I am living here, unhampered, robbed of my wife and deprived of my kith and kin.” Sugriva related his plight to Rama, with nothing held back.

Rama was disturbed by the story of the wickedness of Vali which was tormenting Sugriva since long. He could not listen any more to the list of his atrocities. Rama could not tolerate unrighteous acts. He would not relish the description of vice. He comforted Sugriva and assured him that Vali could not escape punishment for relying solely on physical strength and material power, ignoring the strength and power that one should earn through righteousness and devotion to God. He vowed that with one arrow he would fell Vali to the ground and put an end to his wicked life,

even if all the fourteen worlds oppose the fulfilment of the vow. He said, “Do not cast your looks upon the face of a person who is unaffected by the sorrows of his friend, or by the absurd boast of his enemy. Do not choose a friend merely to win some temporary gain, or to satisfy some urgent desire, or to plunge into some foul behaviour. Friends must have deep love towards each other. He who has no love filling his heart, moving his mind or lighting up his face can only be a bad, undesirable ‘friend.’ The hearts of such false friends will be crooked and contaminated. A wily servant, a greedy, miserly and evil-minded wife or husband, a false friend—these four make life painful, as when pierced by spears and spikes. Therefore, Oh Sugriva, do not grieve. I shall come to your rescue, to the fullest extent of my physical, verbal and mental capabilities. What does it matter how strong Vali is? You are not aware of your own strength. You are bewildered by your estimate of his strength, that is all. That is at the bottom of your doubts and fears. Well, perhaps you desire to be assured of my powers, before you develop confidence and courage. Ask me to accomplish any task so that your faith in me can take deep root. I shall demonstrate my strength and fill your heart with courage. When that is done, I shall fight with Vali and destroy him.”

Rama gently stroked the back of Sugriva, in order to induce him to trust him and be rid of fear and anxiety. Sugriva was eager to see the prowess of Rama. He was also wanting some prop for faith. He said, “Rama, once upon a time, I and my brother agreed to test our strength

and skill on a line of seven giant palm trees, trying to fell them one after the other, shooting a single arrow right through all of them. I felled only three, but my brother Vali hit five and they all rolled on the ground. His capacity had that maximum measure. To defeat Vali, one should have strength beyond his. I am most eager to find out whether you have that extra might and to see how many palm trees you can fell with one arrow."

Sugriva and his courtiers then took Rama to a place where seven mammoth palms were piercing the sky in a row. They asked him to attempt to shoot them down. They talked among themselves that since those monstrous trees were four or five times huger than the five that Vali felled, Rama must be considered strong enough to overpower Vali even if he felled two of these giants. Looking at that row, Rama smiled and calling Sugriva near him, he told him, "Sugriva, these palms are in my eyes the weakest and tiniest." Then he fitted an arrow on his bow. He felled *all* the seven. His arrow carried all the fallen palms up a mountain that was in the distance, blasting the rocks on the way!

Sugriva was overwhelmed with wonder and devotion. He prostrated at the feet of Rama, exclaiming, "Rama, a hundred Valis could not have achieved this feat. I am indeed fortunate. I have no more worries in life, since I have secured your friendship! Though I am estranged from one Vali, I have today got a hundred fold Vali as my thickest comrade! Pardon my mistake. I am ashamed that my small-

mindedness persuaded me to test your powers in this manner. Oh, I am indeed lucky that I am blessed with the friendship of God Himself, in this form. My tale of woe has ended this day. Hope has dawned in my heart that I can soon regain my Kishkindha. I am really happy that I can again live happily with my wife and children. I am only tossed in doubt about when and how soon it can happen—within minutes, or hours or days. Of course, that depends on the will of Rama, on His Grace. It will be fulfilled the moment He decides."

Sugriva knew that Rama alone could help him and that Rama alone had to be relied upon. He prostrated at Rama's feet and said, "Rama, Your Will, Your Compassion, they are my sole refuge. When are you intending to put an end to my sorrows?" Rising again from his seat, Sugriva declared, "Listen Rama, for so long, I had labelled Vali as my greatest enemy, and shivered in fear of him. Now, I find he is my greatest benefactor. For fear of him, I took residence on this mountain range. Since I was here, I could notice your arrival and meet you and be blessed by this friendship! Therefore, Vali is the root cause of all these developments. He is, indeed, my benefactor." "Rama, we fight with another person while in a dream. We hate him to the utmost. We adopt all methods to ruin him; but as soon as we awaken and rise from bed, we know that the hatred and the struggle were false and baseless. Your Darsan has awakened me from my dream. While in that dream, I hated Vali and interpreted all his actions as inimical to me. I fought

with him, in my ignorance. Now that I have seen you and had the benefit of listening to your counsel, I have risen, conscious from my dream. The touch of your holy feet has imparted the vision of Truth. My long fostered hatred and envy, greed and egoism, my enmity towards Vali and my plans for vengeance, these made me weaker and weaker. I was sunk in my single-minded yearning for a favourable moment to pay off old scores. This was the *thapas*, the austerity, that granted me your Grace. I got you and my agony was reckoned as asceticism, my anger was transformed into love. Lord, bless me, pour Grace on me. I have no more desire to regain my kingdom. My wife and children have their careers marked out for them by destiny. What can I do to change the course of events? I shall no more worry about them. Enough for me if you confer on me the joy of serving you and being with you, in your presence, for the rest of my life."

When Sugriva prayed in this strain, Rama tenderly stroked his head and said, "Son, the words you utter are indeed true. Kingdoms and power, joy and grief, anger and anxieties, properties and privileges, good and bad, are all of the stuff of which dreams are made. The proximity to God, the God-Principle in you, that alone is real. But remember, my vow, my word, can never prove false. Whatever might happen, I shall grant you the kingdom. You cannot escape the responsibility of ruling over it. You cannot evade the fight with Vali which must take place tomorrow. Come, get ready."

Rama rose. Both he and Lakshmana moved forward, armed with bow and arrow, with Sugriva by their side. Hanuman and others were permitted to remain in that hill-residence itself. Sugriva was given necessary instructions, while on the way. At last, he was directed to go forward alone, and shout a challenge in front of the main gate of the City. Following this command given by Rama, Sugriva stood before Kishkindha City and shouted so fiercely that the walls of the fort shook, and the earth quaked in fear. No sooner did that call fall on his ear than Vali rose from his bed as a cobra does when it is trodden upon, and came out, ready to fight and put Sugriva to flight. He knew it was his brother who had challenged him to combat.

At this, Tara, Vali's wife, clasped his feet and reminded him of the words spoken by his own son some days earlier. She said, "Lord, the brothers who have sought his help are no ordinary men. They are endowed with mighty powers. Sugriva, who was in hiding all this time, has come now with new confidence and courage. He has even dared challenge you. He would not venture to do so without looking before and after. He must have received conviction about their capabilities and won the promise of their assistance. The princes, Rama and Lakshmana, have Divine Powers. It is not propitious that you enter into battle with them." Listening to her pathetic importunities, Vali burst into a jeering laugh. "Cowardly woman," he said. "It is said that Rama is equal-minded. If that is true, he will certainly look upon both of us with an equal eye. Moreover, I have

not done him any harm, have I? In spite of this, if Rama kills me, well, I shall believe my birth and years of life have been fulfilled thereby!" Tara was happy on the one hand that he had such an outlook. On the other hand she could not entertain for a moment the idea of separation from her lord. So, she pleaded again, "Lord, it is considered a bad omen when a woman objects. Do not rashly accept the challenge." But Vali set aside all her pleadings. "When battle calls, no one cares for omens. Either the enemy should die or one's own life should end." So saying Vali pushed Tara aside and rushed towards the main entrance to the Fort roaring in terror-striking rage.

He saw only Sugriva there. So, he jumped on him and both began a heavy fight with their fists, inflicting hammer-blows on each. Sugriva could not bear the rain of fierce hits. He felt a desire to flee. Vali with many a kick and pull, caused such agonising pain that Sugriva managed to escape leaving Vali victor! Vali retired into the Fort, patting his thighs exultingly. Rama and Lakshmana followed the fleeing Sugriva. When they reached the hill resort, Sugriva fell at the feet of Rama, his heart heavy with the burden of disappointment, despair, pain and fear. He said, "Lord, I do not understand why you caused this disgrace to me. I proceeded on this venture, buoyed up with a huge pile of hope that you would come to my rescue. All the while, I was watching for the moment when your arrow will hit Vali and finish him. But that event never happened. I could not bear the weight of those blows. So, I had to take the

shameful course of fleeing for sheer life. My brother is a mighty hitter. I could not stand those blows."

Rama consoled him and said, "Sugriva! Don't grieve. Listen to the reasons. You are so like each other, so indistinguishable one from the other, so much the same in appearance and attainments, that I could not take correct aim at him." Those words had a deep inner meaning, too. They meant that Vali too was devoted to His Feet. "He too is my votary. He has yearned for My Grace as much as you have." But Sugriva could not grasp the hidden import of the declaration. He prayed, "Knowing so much, could you not discover who Vali was and who Sugriva was? I cannot believe your words. I do not know the reason why you could not. Perhaps, you wanted me to display my ability to the utmost. If that was your intention, I could have taken note of it from the beginning itself. What really happened was, I was so confident that you would bring about his downfall, that I took the fight rather easy, and in a light-hearted manner."

Rama drew the downhearted, dispirited Sugriva to his presence and consoled him profusely. He passed his Divine hand over the body of Sugriva, so that the pain disappeared in a trice. The wounds and contusions were instantaneously healed. Sugriva was overwhelmed with surprise. He exclaimed, "Rama? Your hand can achieve anything. It contains everything. Creation, Preservation, Destruction, all three are subservient to Your Will. I have no desire to rule over this kingdom. Compared to the joy Your Grace can confer, that joy is nothing at all."

Rama did not pay heed to his words. He said, "These words of yours are but reflections of passing thoughts. You spoke like this when you had a vision of my Power and Glory. I do not attach much value to them, for I care more for feelings that rise in the heart. There are many great devotees who forget everything when they experience the Sport and Supreme Might of God, and believe that there is nothing higher than God. But after some time, or when their mental cravings do not bear fruit, they develop doubts even about what they experienced or saw! These are the veils that hide, the curtains that distort the truth in the minds of those with weak faith. I know how it all happens and so I do not attach much value to these sentiments. You have to get ready to confront your brother once again." Thus, Rama forced Sugriva into the fray.

Sugriva had no liking for the fight, but he was certain that this time Rama would keep his promise and kill Vali. He walked boldly on, with confidence in his heart. Rama got some wild flowers and had them strung as a garland which he put round Sugriva's neck. What Rama meant was: Vali had already told Tara that Rama looked upon all as equal. It was this "equal" sight that prevented him from killing Vali. "Now, I have put this garland of flowers round his neck to show that my love towards Sugriva is greater, and so, I can with justice, deal with Vali differently. Sugriva has a garland extra, indicating that he wears the symbol of Divine Love. Love needs no reason for its flow. It comes from no selfish urge."

Thus encouraged and filled with heroism, Rama and Lakshmana persuaded Sugriva to shout the challenge again at the gate of Vali's Fort. They hid themselves behind a tree that was near by. When Vali rushed out eager for the fight, and when the earth quaked under the weight of his impact, Sugriva was frightened. He prayed to Rama with all his heart to come to his succour soon, and went forward to meet his foe. To justify his own attainments and capacity, Sugriva fought to the best of his ability. When his strength gave way, and the first signs of exhaustion appeared in him, he called out "Rama" just once. Rama has as his favourite task the guarding of his devotees. So, when he heard the call, he placed an arrow on his bow and shot it straight into the proud heart of Vali. Vali swung round helplessly and slid until he fell flat on the ground. At that moment, Rama came near Vali and granted him the Divine vision of Himself.

Though struck by the fatal shaft, Vali rose and assumed a sitting posture. He was strong and courageous beyond compare! With folded palms, he cast his lingering looks on that cloud-blue complexion, those lotus-petal eyes, and shed streams of tears in his ecstatic exhilaration. He could scarce contain his joy. He exclaimed "Oh Rama! Being such a divinely auspicious embodiment of beauty, being the very Lord of all Creation, why had you to perform this questionable act? Had you but told me, and then killed me, I would have been extremely happy to die. Would I have refused to render you the good that Sugriva could? No. No.

This has been thus done, not without some justifiable reason. For the Lord would never undertake any task without just reason. Seen from the outside, the task might appear contrary to our idea of Divinity; but, with the inner view, the fact that it is based on Truth would become evident. I know that the deeds of the Lord should not be interpreted from the common worldly point of view. The Lord is above and beyond the Gunas, attributes that limit and regulate human conduct. So, His deeds can be understood correctly only when viewed from a position unaffected by emotion, passion, or prejudice. Acts done with perfect equanimity can be understood only by perfect equanimity. If you are swayed by characteristics and attributes, you would naturally see only kindred characteristics and attributes, even when they are absent!" Vali was endowed with a very clear intellect. So, he argued thus and said "Rama, I know full well your prowess and skill. You can with one arrow destroy not only this Vali, but the entire Universe. You can create the Universe again. Nevertheless, I desire to learn from you the sin for which you have killed me. Please identify for me the error I was responsible for. You have come upon earth in human form in order to re-establish righteousness, haven't you? What is the meaning and purpose of this action—hiding behind a tree, like a common hunter, in order to kill me."

Rama graciously sat by the side of the dying Vali and said, "Vali! You know that my deeds are not motivated by selfish ends. Give up your wrong notion that I sought and

secured the friendship of Sugriva in order to search the whereabouts of Sita. Why, you yourself said just now that I have assumed this human form for the purpose of re-establishing righteousness on earth! Now, tell me, if I simply witness the wrong, the unjust and vicious deeds of yours, what would you call it? Service or disservice to the world? Righteous or unrighteous? The brother's wife, the sister and the daughter-in-law are all three equivalent in status to one's daughter. To cast sinful eyes on them makes one a heinous sinner. No sin affects one when such a sinner is killed.

"How unjust was it for you to infer that Sugriva closed the entrance of the cave with the evil intention of killing you! You said you would come out at the end of fifteen days, at the most, and asked him to wait at the mouth of the cave until then. Yet, he waited there, anxiously awaiting you, for one full month! Finally, when he was assailed by the smell of blood, he was grieved that his brother was killed by the ogre. He hesitated to enter the cave, for to the ogre who destroyed you, Sugriva would certainly be no match. When he placed the boulder up against the mouth of the cave, his intention was to prevent the ogre from coming out, and to see that he is confined within that cave itself. The citizens pressed on him the rulership and he had to accede to their wishes. What crime had Sugriva committed when he acted thus? You did not stay to inquire. He never disobeyed your commands and directives, even to the slightest extent; for he loved you and revered you.

He adheres strictly to the path of Truth. But you treasured in your heart vengeance against him for no reason at all. Your overweening pride drove him into the forest. When you sent him out, you should have allowed his wife too to go with him. Instead you chose her to be your wife, the person whom you should have treated as your own daughter. Do you call this a sin or don't you? There is no sin more heinous than this. Besides, you occupy the position of the ruler of this region. You have to protect and foster your subjects. How can you punish those who commit crimes when you yourself revel in the same crime? 'As is the King, so are the subjects,' says the proverb. The people will be such as their rulers are. Therefore, what you have done becomes more heinous and more reprehensible. Doesn't it?"

Thus, Rama out of His infinite love clarified to Vali the crimes and sins he had committed. Vali listened with attention and thought over what he heard. At last, he realised his error, and said, "Lord, my cleverness has failed to make you pronounce my acts as right. Now hear me! I am not a sinner at all. Had I been a sinner, how could I be floored by an arrow from the Lord's own hands, and how could I pass my last moments looking on the Face of Divinity and listening to the sweet words of the Lord?" Rama was highly pleased at these words spoken with such high wisdom, out of the depths of love and devotion, delight and dedication. Then Rama wished to announce to the world the genuine spirit of renunciation that Vali had at heart. He said, "Vali,

I am restoring you to life. I am freeing you from the obligation of old age and senility. Come, have your body back again." He placed His hand on the head of Vali. But even while He was blessing him so, Vali intervened with a prayer, "Ocean of Compassion, give ear to my appeal. However many attempts one might make throughout life, at the moment when breath deserts us, death cannot be avoided. At that moment, even the sovereign sages do not get Your Name on their tongues! Unique good fortune I have secured now, here, when I pronounce Your Name, look on Your Form, touch Your Feet and listen to Your Words. If I miss this chance and let it slip away, who can say how long I may have to wait for these again? Continuing to breathe, what great achievement will I accomplish? No, I do not wish to live any longer."

"Lord, even the Vedas, the Source of all Knowledge, speak of you as only 'Not this' 'Not this.' Thus they proceed, until they declare finally, 'This.' 'This' I have now secured in my grasp. Shall I let it slip? Is there in this world a fool who would give up the Divine Wish-fulfilling Tree that he has in his grasp for the sake of a wild weed? This Vali, born out of a mental resolution of Brahma Himself, endowed with strength of body and sharpness of intellect and renowned for these qualities, cannot yield to the temptation of clinging to the body as if it is real and valuable. No, if I yield, I will become the target of infamy. Why elaborate? When there is no self-satisfaction, what do other types of satisfaction matter? Lord, as a result of Your Darsan

and Your Words, I have overcome all sense of duality and distinction. I have acquired the Vision of the One, apart from all the rest. The mass of ‘consequence’ I had earned through my sins has been destroyed. Let the Body which is burdened with the consequence be destroyed along with it. Do not allow another body appear to bear the burden.” Vali declared his determination to give up his breath, and called his son to his presence. He said: “This fellow grew up until now as the lust-born son of this body. He is strong, virtuous, humble and obedient. Now I wish You would foster him as Your Love-deserving Son. I have placed him in Your hands.” With these words he placed the hands of his son in the hands of Rama. Rama drew Angada, the son, near Him, and blessed him, with great love. Pleased at the acceptance, Vali shed tears of joy. His eyes were fixed on the Divine Face before him. His eyes slowly closed in death. Will an elephant worry or take any notice of flowers that fall away from the garland round its neck? With the same unconcern, Vali too allowed his breath to slide away from him.

The inhabitants of Pampa Town gathered in sad groups as soon as they heard the news of Vali’s demise. His wife, Tara, came to the place, accompanied by her retinue. She fell upon the body and lost consciousness. The agonising wail of Tara was so poignant that stones melted in sympathy. When she recovered consciousness, off and on, she looked on the face of her lord and cried in utter grief. “In spite of all the protest I made and the arguments I used to stop you, you rushed forward to this doom. The wife should ever be

vigilant about the security and happiness of her lord. There is no one more concerned about the welfare of the husband than the wife. Others, however eminent, will always have some little egoism mixed in the advice they give. Lord! On account of the mischief of Destiny, my counsel could not prevail. Lord, how am I to foster and bring up this son? Will those who killed you desist from harming your son? Who will guide us now? How did your mind agree to leave us behind and proceed to the next world? For whose sake must I continue this life?”

Then, Tara turned to Rama and poured out her heart. “You sent my dear Lord, my very breath, to the next world. Do you want us, who are left behind, to live at the mercy of strangers? Is this the right thing for a noble person, a person devoted to right conduct, to be proud about? Is it appropriate? If you do not desire our progress, if you have no wish to alleviate our sorrow, then kill me and my son. The arrow that killed the mighty hero will not quail before a weak woman and a stripling lad. Let us join him in his journey.” She fell at the feet of Rama and wept in inconsolable anguish. Rama said, “Tara, why do you weep so? You are a heroic wife. Do not behave in this manner, for it brings your role into infamy. Be calm. Control yourself. The body is a temporary phase. It is contemptible. Vali himself regarded this body as debased! Its fall, its end, might happen any day, it cannot be avoided. It is but an instrument to achieve the Supreme Goal and if that end is not kept in view and attained through it, the body is but a lump of coal

whose destiny is the fire. Weeping for Vali as this body is foolish, for the body is here. Do you then weep for the Atma that was in this body? That Atma is eternal. It cannot die or decay, diminish or disintegrate. Only those who have not realised the Atma principle suffer from the delusion that the body is themselves; until then, even the most learned are led into error. Being enamoured of the body as if it is you is ‘ignorance.’ Being aware of the Atma, which you really are is ‘wisdom.’ Getting the knowledge of the Atma is as precious a piece of good luck as getting a diamond in the dust. The Atma is the gemstone embedded in this mass of flesh. The body carries urine and faeces, bad odours and bad blood. It is pestered by pests and problems. Its decay cannot be arrested. It must die someday. The achievement that one can realise through it is its justification. That is the crown of human life. Your husband has achieved many heroic and honourable victories through his body. While ruling this kingdom, he protected and promoted his servants and faithful followers as if they were his very breath. He destroyed the Rakshasas. He had deep devotion towards God. But he inflicted injury on his brother. Besides that sin, he did not commit any other. His death at my hands was the consequence of that sin. Therefore, believe that it too has been washed away. Now, you have no reason to grieve.

When Tara heard these words of counsel and consolation wisdom dawned in her mind and she was calmed. Rama said that there should be no more delay. He asked Tara to go back and have the funeral rites for Vali

performed by Sugriva. He advised Sugriva to bring up Angada with love and care. When the rites were over, he sent Lakshmana into the Capital City, and had Sugriva installed on the throne. Hanuman and others too entered the City and helped him, as friends and followers, to carry on the task of government successfully. As soon as he assumed the reins of office, Sugriva called together the elders and leaders of the community. He ordered them to make all proper arrangements to seek and find the whereabouts of Sita. He asked them to initiate all steps necessary for the purpose. Sugriva was not happy that he became the ruler and was honoured by that responsibility. He was, on the other hand, sad and morose, because he had been the cause for the killing of his brother. “Alas, anger leads one to perpetrate the direst of sins. It breeds hatred, and murders love. Shame on me! To what depths have I fallen, since I allowed anger and hatred to enter my heart. My heart is torn in anguish by the words of adoration Vali addressed to Rama. I never realised, even in my dreams, that Vali had such a deal of devotion and dedication in him. Ah, his wisdom is boundless. His furious anger did not allow that wisdom to express itself! Yes, anger suppresses the divine in one. Lust and anger drag life into disaster.” Though much depressed by these thoughts, Sugriva learned the guidelines of government from Lakshmana. He prayed to Rama that He should enter the City and bless him and his subjects. But Rama said that he had to live in the forests only and not enter any town or city. Otherwise he would be disobeying his father’s wish.

Sugriva held a conference of leaders and announced that, since the season was late autumn, rains were imminent and the monkey hordes would be hard put to it to move about in the cold and in the storm. So he suggested that as soon as the autumn passed, they must set about the task of searching for the place where Sita was. He presented this information to Rama and Lakshmana also. Rama realised the truth of these statements and he acceded to the proposal. The brothers retired to the Rshyamuka Hill and took residence there.

The rains started soon. It poured as if potsful were emptied from the sky on every square inch of space! It became a hard task for Lakshmana to procure, in time, even tubers and fruits for sustenance. They could not come out of the shelter of the hermitage. Sunlight was scarcely to be seen. Rama spent the time in administering valuable counsel to Lakshmana. "Lakshmana!" he would say, "When a wicked son is born, the code of morality will be corroded. When a cyclone starts its career, the clouds shudder in fear. The company of bad men is the prelude to the disappearance of wisdom. The company of good men makes wisdom blossom." Thus, they spent their days, learning and teaching, matters concerned with Wisdom and its acquisition and preservation.

SUCCESS IN THE SEARCH

The rains stopped. The Sarad season dawned on the world. The earth shone resplendently green.

Grass sprouted everywhere and soon the earth decked itself with many-coloured floral dress. Greed weakens when gladness grows. So too, the waters evaporated when the star Agasthya appeared in the sky. The mind is rendered pure and pellucid when desire and delusion disappear. So too, the rivers were rendered clear and clean. Rama told Lakshmana, "Brother, it is desirable to give a warning to Sugriva now." Lakshmana paid heed to that command, and requested Hanuman, who was a daily visitor to the hermitage, to remind Sugriva of the promised task. Hanuman was most earnest and anxious to fulfil the orders of Rama. So he warned Sugriva immediately and effectively. He called together the leaders of the monkey hordes and initiated the arrangements. Sugriva gave

everyone the determination and courage needed for the execution of the task assigned. Urged by the resolution that the mission must succeed, he sent them to all the four quarters. He entrusted the overall leadership to Hanuman himself. Led by Hanuman, the entire assembly of monkeys shouted, "Jai" to Sugriva and "Jai" to Rama, the Lord. Dancing and jumping in glee, the monkeys hurried on their different demarcated paths, inspired by Hanuman and the holiness of the mission.

Hanuman went East with a group of followers. Sushena and Mandava proceeded North. They searched the Gandhamadana Mountain Range, the Sumera Peak, the Arjuna Mountain, and the Nilagiri Ranges, and the caves therein, until at last they reached the shore of the Northern Sea. The group led by Hanuman were also equally earnest in their search. They cared nothing for sleep or food. They were ready to offer their very lives at the feet of Rama. They desired only one thing, success in their task of serving Rama. From the least to the highest, everyone had the same loyalty and spirit of dedication. Reciting the Name, "Rama" "Rama" "Rama," they peeped into every nook and corner, every peak and promontory, every cave and cove, every valley and riverbank, for they could penetrate into regions and places where men cannot enter.

One day, they reached the shore of a broad lake. There they espied a woman deeply engaged in austerities. They prostrated before her from a distance. She opened her eyes

and seeing their exhausted condition, she said, "Monkeys, you appear very tired and hungry. Refresh yourselves with these fruits," and she supplied plenty of food. When they sat around her, she heard from them the mission on which they were moving about. She said that she was proceeding to the holy place where Rama was in residence. "Listen to my story," she said. "My name is Swayamprabha. I am the daughter of a Celestial Gandharva. I have an Apsaras friend called Hema. While engaged in austerities, Brahma appeared before me and asked me what I needed. He assured me that he would grant me my wish. Then I replied, 'I wish to see God as man, moving on earth!' He said: 'Be here alone. In due course, a number of mighty monkeys will arrive here and halt at your request. From them, you can know of Rama, who is God come in human form. Later, you can look on Rama himself.' Ah! That boon is being realised. The first sign and the second, of its fulfilment are already evident. The first is your arrival. The second is your account of Rama's story and the place where He is in residence. Now, I am as happy as if I have already attained the third, namely, the Darsan of Rama." The woman was immersed in unbounded ecstasy and delight and shedding tears of joy. The monkeys too were deeply moved and shed tears of delight. Meanwhile, the woman began introspecting with eyes closed. She broke the silence with the announcement, "Monkeys! On a seashore, in a beautiful City, at the centre of a charming garden, alone, all by herself, Sita is bewailing her fate. You will see her without doubt. Be assured of this. Proceed in confidence and with courage."

One day, during their journey, the monkeys sank in gloom and sighed, "Alas, of the period allotted to us by our Master, Sugriva, only two days remain. And we have not traced Sita!" Angada and the rest lamented their fate and were lost in despair. Tears rolled down their cheeks. They had come to the shore of the sea and were sad that not one of them could cross it to continue the search. So, they sat in groups on the sands and were pining in disappointment. Jambavantha, the old leader, counselled Angada in many ways. "Why do you grieve? We have put forward our best efforts. We have searched all places without the least dereliction of duty. We have not wasted a single moment in idling. We have not worried even about food and drink. We have been engaged ceaselessly in the search for Sita. Our Master and ruler, Sugriva, might not be a witness to our activities; but believe me, Rama is witnessing them! Therefore, Rama will not be a party to the infliction of any punishment on us. We have no reason to fear the anger of Sugriva. Since this is His Task, let us carry it out with His Name on our tongue and His Form in our minds."

While Jambavantha was thus consoling and comforting Angada, a huge aged bird hopped up to the shore, in order to perform the last rites for its dead brother, and offer water sanctified by sesame grains, in the holy sea. The monkeys gathered around the new arrival and wondered whether it was a Rakshasa who had transformed himself into that form. The bird, however, started speaking

first. It said, "Monkeys! My name is Sampathi. Jatayu and I are brothers. Eagles as we are, we both raced towards the sun in competition, years ago. My brother could not bear the scorching heat as we neared the Sun. He flew back. But a sense of pride induced me to continue the flight. As I proceeded stage by stage, my wings were burnt, and fell off. I dropped like a stone from the depth of the sky. A sage named Chandrama happened to pass that way and see my plight. He sat by my side and taught me a good deal of wisdom through his lessons. Listening to his precepts, my pride was destroyed. He told me, 'Oh King of Birds! Listen to my words. In the Thretha Yuga that is coming, God Narayana is incarnating in human Form. His Consort will be carried by Ravana to an unknown place. An army of Vanaras (Monkeys) will proceed to trace her whereabouts. Your life will be rendered holy and worthwhile on seeing those emissaries of God engaged in their holy mission. You can assure yourselves that it has been rendered so, because at that very moment, your wings will grow in strength. Your duty will be to communicate to them information regarding the place where Sita is kept.' This day I came to this place by the sea in order to perform the last rites of my brother, Jatayu. Seeing you, I recollected the words of that sage uttered so long ago. Why? As soon as I recollected, see, his words have come true!" At this, the Vanaras exclaimed excitedly, "Sampathi! Keep aside the story of your life. Our term is fast ending. Tell us quickly the clues to know where Sita is. Tell us what you know, what happened to her?"

Sampathi lost no time in elaboration. He said, "Oh Vanaras! One day, when I was afflicted with uncontrollable hunger, I called my son, Suparna, to my side and told him, 'Son, fly quickly. Get me some food. I am old. I am hungry. My wings too have fallen off.' Seeing my plight, he flew into the forest, but did not return. My anxiety for him suppressed the pangs of hunger. At last, he appeared with some quantity of venison. My hunger made me forget the restraint natural to a wise being. I was enraged at the inordinate delay and I decided to pronounce a curse on my son. Fearing this, my son caught hold of my feet in supplication and said, 'Father, I did not waste a single moment while away. Please listen to my prayer. Pardon me for the delay that was unavoidable.' He placed the venison before me, and when my hunger was appeased by eating it, I asked him to relate to me the cause for the delay. He said, 'When I was flying into the forest a person with twenty hands and ten heads was hurrying along. With him was a woman of indescribable beauty. She was weeping and wailing most pitifully. I knew it was a monster, and so I attacked him and saw the woman inside the chariot. She was crying out just one Name, Rama! Rama! Rama! No other word emerged from her mouth. My futile attempts to stop his progress and to save that woman caused this delay.' When I heard these words, I felt terribly ashamed that I had lost my wings and that I had grown old. I was overcome with grief. I guessed he must be a Rakshasa. So, I asked my son, in which direction that ten-headed monster was proceeding. He answered that he had taken the southern

direction. Immediately, I exclaimed, ‘Alas! That monster is the Ravana, whom the sage had mentioned. That woman is the Divine Mother, Sita! There can be no doubt in this. That monster has stolen her like a dog, a fox, and he is running away with his prey.’ I gnashed my teeth in anger. What else could I do?” Thus, Sampathi explained what had happened and what he knew of the incident. “I have been awaiting the arrival of the army of Vanaras, as the Sage had informed me. I was hoping every day that they would be passing my way. Today, my prayer is answered. My life has been sanctified.”

Then, Sampathi announced, “Oh Vanaras! The City of Lanka is situated on the Triple-Peak-Hill by the shore of the sea. That City has many charming gardens and parks. There, Sita is in the Asokavana, moaning her fate. She is awaiting your arrival. So, proceed further south.”

Angada asked the bird, how it came to know that she was in the Asokavana, under a tree grieving over her misfortune. Sampathi answered that the vision of the eagle does cover an area of 400 yojanas and that, had he not been handicapped by age, he would certainly have helped them even more in their mission. The problem now was crossing the ocean! Sampathi said, “Oh Vanaras, you can achieve success in the task allotted to you by Rama if there is one among you who has the strength and the skill to leap a distance of 100 yojanas.” As he was saying thus, the wings of Sampathi grew and flapped a little. He could hop a slight

distance and within a short time, he could actually fly. The words of the sage had proved true.

Sampathi was wonder struck at the regaining of the wings. He said, “Oh Brave Vanara heroes! To fulfil the command of Rama, you have carried out the search with great efficiency and enthusiasm, without allowing even hunger and thirst to hinder your efforts. You have evinced steady faith and deep devotion. You have risked your lives often, while engaged in the search. It is Rama who has been conferring endurance and strength on you. He is having His task executed by you. Your duty now is to contemplate on Him and pray to Him with a full heart. When that is done, you can see Sita without fail and give satisfaction to Rama. You can, with His Grace, leap over the ocean with ease, see Sita and bring joy to Rama’s heart. The joy that we cause in the heart of God is the only worthwhile achievement. What can we say of lives that do not offer this gift to God? Only those who live on the lines laid down by God and who by their acts carry out His Wish are valid. The rest are barren and futile. They only consume precious food and move about, burdening the earth.” With these words, Sampathi took wing and flew away.

The Vanaras who watched him fly aloft were struck with pleasant surprise at the sudden recovery of his powers. They said among themselves that Ramanam can achieve the impossible; as the saying goes, the dumb can speak, the lame can climb hills. The wingless Sampathi could get back

its wings and fly into the sky only through the Grace won by recital of the Name. By means of Sampathi's words the Vanaras were enabled to see and know things correctly. Each of the monkey leaders started estimating its strength and leaping capacity. Meanwhile, Jambavantha addressed them thus. "Friends, old age has overwhelmed me. My skill and strength have declined. Somehow prodded by the joy of executing the commands of Rama and encouraged by His Blessings, I have been able to stay on till now and move about with you. I was in full possession of my strength and intelligence, and in the best adult stage of life, when the Lord incarnated as Vamana and demonstrated His Trivikrama Form."

Hearing this, the Vanaras gathered around the Crown Prince of their kingdom, Angada. "Oh Prince," they pleaded, "Search for some feasible means. Decide who amongst us has to attempt to leap over the ocean." Then, Angada called together a full session of all the Vanaras and announced that he would like to know the capacity of each for this enterprise. At this, Vikata rose and said, "I can leap over thirty yojanas at the most." Nila declared, "Prince, I can manage to leap at one jump forty yojanas, but I regret I will not be able to exceed the distance by even a finger-breadth." Durdhara rose next and said that he could easily jump a distance of fifty yojanas. Nala came forward and with great flourishing of hands, he said he could jump sixty yojanas. While such competitive boasting and parading of skills were going on, Angada declared, "Listen, I can leap

over this ocean once, but I have my doubts whether I would have enough strength left to leap back. One has not only to reach the other shore, one has to fight with the Rakshasas there if need arises. That would make me still weaker and I would have no strength left. I am afraid my resources won't last long enough for all these three operations."

When Angada spoke in these depressing terms, the leading Vanara elders rose as one and pleaded, "Prince, you are the heir-apparent to our kingdom. The discussion whether you are capable or not, to take up this mission is irrelevant. It is not right and proper that you should cross over to the land of Rakshasas. It is against the canons of royalty. This is a task which you have to assign to some servant of the kingdom. When you have millions of servants eager to do what you bid, it is not right that you should consider undertaking this task." Jambavantha suggested that someone else might be charged with the errand and Angada looked around, and looking at Hanuman, he said, "Oh Son of the Wind-God, you are the dedicated servant of Rama. Your devotion is indeed deep. You were blessed first among all of us with the Darsan of Rama. Through your intelligence, diplomacy and moral pressure, you established friendship between Rama and our ruler, Sugriva. And now, you are observing silence, when we are involved with difficulties in the execution of the mission of Rama. I find it difficult to understand the meaning of this silence." Angada extolled Hanuman still further and said, "There is no adventure that you cannot tackle successfully. You are

strong, you are highly intelligent. You are endowed with all the virtues. Evaluate your own skills, capacities and excellences, and rise.” The words of Angada filled Hanuman with his erstwhile strength. He rose with a sudden gesture and said, “Oh Vanaras! Wait here, all of you, awaiting my return. Wandering all these days through hills and dales, jungles and plains you have had no time to rest awhile. Eat the fruits and tubers available in this area and station yourselves here. I shall, this instant, leap over the ocean, enter Lanka, see Sita and come back. I have no other work than carrying out the command of Rama. How else can we make our lives worthwhile than by earning His Grace?”

With these words, he raised his folded palms in salutation before the vast gathering of monkeys. He took leave of Angada, the Crown Prince. The monkey hordes were raising in unison the exultant cry, “Jai Rama,” “Victory to Rama.” Hanuman pictured in his mind the glorious Form of Rama, and with one leap into the sky, he was off over the sea. Unable to withstand the tremendous airflow caused by his leap and flight, trees on the hills were uprooted and carried along. The impact of his leap was so great that the peak on which he stood sank into the nether regions.

Seeing him fly across, the sea thought within itself thus: “This Hanuman is a servant of Rama. He is proceeding on the mission of Rama. Ah, how lucky is he! He has the strength and intelligence necessary to win victory in that mission of Rama. He is indeed the foremost among the

devotees of Rama.” The sea was boisterous with the joy it felt at the sight of Hanuman going over and across. The Mainaka Peak, which was submerged in the sea, rose over the waters, for he wished to serve the person who was engaged in the service of the Lord. He said, “Oh Son of the Wind-God! It will be exhausting for you to cover the full distance in one leap, please take rest for a while on my head and confer on me the good fortune of having a share in the service you are devoted to.” Hanuman gave ear to the prayer of Mainaka, but did not halt. He touched the peak as a token of halting and sped on. He bowed to the hospitable peak in gratitude. “Mainaka! I am going on Rama’s errand. Till I fulfil it, I can have no thought of rest or even food and drink. It is not proper for me to stay awhile on the way,” he said. A little further on, a Serpent-demon called Surasa and an Ogress named Simhika obstructed his passage, but Hanuman overcame them all and reached the Lanka shore.

There, splendid in the sunlight, he found many gardens and parks as well as pleasure centres which made Hanuman forget where he was. He was amazed at the variety of multicoloured birds that fluttered to and fro in clusters within the parks. Hanuman climbed onto a charming mound that was nearby and thought within himself, “This success is not due to my skill or strength. It is entirely due to the Grace and Blessings of Rama only.” Seeing the uniquely grand houses, the long wide streets, the attractive gardens, etc., in that City, Hanuman was moved with wonder and

doubt—doubt whether it was a replica of Heaven itself. Wherever one cast his eye, one saw well-built Rakshasa soldiers parading the streets, Rakshasa women, famed for their skill and powers to assume whatever form they wanted were found by Hanuman indulging in licentious sports. Deva, Naga, Gandharva and human damsels enslaved by Ravana were pining and wailing in the palaces, awaiting the day of release. Hanuman concluded that it would not be wise to move about in his native form among the vast crowds that filled the streets. He assumed a subtle imperceptible form and entered the City.

There was at the very entrance gate of Lanka a demoness, named Lankini, placed there on purpose to prevent any foreigner, whatever his intentions may be, from entering the City. She saw the strange figure of Hanuman, venturing to enter and accosted him in a threatening manner. "Who goes there? Where do you come from? Who are you? We have never before seen such a creature in this region. You could not have come from outside the bounds of Lanka, for Lanka is surrounded by the sea. Ah! did you, by any means, come across the sea? How can you avoid me and enter the City? Halt! Stop where you are!" Hanuman paid no attention to her vapourings. He moved forward, dragging his tail behind him as if he had not heard her threats. Lankini became even more furious and ferocious. She roared in anger, "Oh, ill-fated fool! Do not my words fall on your ears?" Hanuman brushed aside her protests and questions. He walked towards the gate, with a smile on his face.

Lankini shouted, "Ugly beast! Whoever goes against my orders will be eaten up. Remember, I will chew your bones in seconds. Be warned." She rushed forward to catch the tiny monkey that Hanuman had become, while he sought to enter Lanka City. When she came right in front of him, Hanuman tightened his little fist and hit her a mighty blow. She rolled unconscious on the ground. Blood flowed in streams from her mouth. She recovered after a while and rushed madly forward to catch hold of Hanuman. But when Hanuman dealt another blow, she could not bear the impact. She fell and could not rise again. But she managed to sit up after great struggle, and with folded palms, she supplicated, "Oh Person of wonderful Form! Long ago, when Brahma, the first of the Trinity, was turning away from Ravana, after granting him many boons, he faced him all of a sudden and said, 'The day your Guardian of the Gate is fatally hurt by a blow from a monkey's hand, know that your downfall begins. Your powers can no longer help you. Be warned by that incident that death is drawing near. That monkey will enter Lanka at the command of God for fulfilling His Mission. His arrival heralds the destruction of the Rakshasas. Be conscious of this.' You are the messenger indicated. How fortunate that my body was sanctified by contact with your sacred hand! Ah! How soft and thrilling was the blow you gave me." Saying thus, she fondled the spot where Hanuman had hit her.

Meanwhile, paying no heed to her words, unmoved by praise and unconcerned with blame, Hanuman entered

Lanka, repeating “Rama” “Rama” “Rama” with every breath. Still a thought tormented him. Who would give him the clue about where Sita was? How to identify Sita when one sees her? He adopted a subtle form to escape notice and moved from one treetop to another. He roamed in the bazaars and among groups of Rakshasas, unknown to anyone. Suddenly, his eyes fell upon a building that seemed a temple of Hari (Vishnu, whose Avatar Rama was). It had a garden of Tulsi plants all around it. Over the entrance door, the name Hari was carved beautifully. The house was undoubtedly a Temple of God Vishnu. Hanuman was surprised. “How came the name of Hari over this door?” he wondered, “Surely, this is a holy spot,” he decided.

The curiosity of Hanuman was awakened. He jumped on to the roof of that place and peeped through the window to find out what exactly was happening. Just at that moment, a person was stretching his limbs prior to rising from bed, pronouncing the Name of Hari. When that fell on his ears, Hanuman was extremely delighted. He was also emboldened when he knew that even in Lanka there were people reciting the name of Hari. So he felt like searching for Sita with greater courage and less apprehension. “The man of this house appears to be devout and good. Perhaps he may be able to tell me the whereabouts of Sita. He might be persuaded to befriend me since we are both loyal to the selfsame Form of God.” With this idea, Hanuman changed himself into a priest of the Brahmin caste, and made his entrance into that house. Though for a moment he had some

doubt regarding the stranger, Vibhishana, the owner of the house, decided that, whoever he is, he surely must be honoured since he was a Brahmin. So he came forward and prostrated before Hanuman. “Master! which is your native place? Where are you coming from? How could you avoid being noticed and harassed by the Rakshasas in the streets?” Vibhishana asked. He described to his guest the horrors indulged in by the Rakshasas and extolled the audacity and fearlessness of Hanuman. Hanuman replied, “I am a servant of Hari. My name is Hanuman. I have come because Rama sent me,” and he spoke thereafter of the virtues and excellences of Rama in some detail. Hanuman noticed that while he was describing Rama, tears rolled down the cheeks of Vibhishana. “Oh, what a happy day! How great is my fortune! As soon as I rose from bed, I could hear today these glorious words which bring peace and joy,” thought Vibhishana to himself.

Hanuman interpreted these incidents as the Grace of Rama. He was wonder struck that in Lanka, the Land of Fear, there could be one such person soaked in Hari. He asked him, “Sir, how is it that you live without fear in this vile atmosphere?” Vibhishana replied, “It is due to the Grace of God. For however long He resolves that we should live, we have to live that long. There is no escape. He is the master of the objective world and so, His law cannot be overruled, or changed by anyone. Does not the tongue move about incessantly in the cavity of the mouth where teeth with sharp edges surround it? Who helps it to escape being

bitten? So too, I am living here. Enough about me. Tell me on what task you have been sent here.” Hanuman realised that he was a good man and that association with such men would without doubt yield good results. Before answering the queries of Vibhishana, he repeated the Name many times in joyful gratitude, Ram, Ram, Ram, Ram, and prayed for permission to disclose his mission to the pious pure-minded Vibhishana. He felt it would not be correct to hide things from him. As a preliminary, he asked, “Sir, what is your name? What are you doing in this Lanka?” Touched by the humility and good manners of Hanuman, Vibhishana replied, “Sir, I am an unfortunate person, the brother of Ravana. My name is Vibhishana. I am in a pathetic fix, for I am unable to recite the Name of Hari, to my heart’s content.” Hearing this Hanuman felt he had his answer. He performed one high skip in joy and said, “I am a Messenger of Rama. I have come in search of Sita.” In an instant, Vibhishana fell at the feet of Hanuman and asked, “Sir, where is my Rama now? I am yearning long to see Him, but I lack the virtues that alone can entitle me to that gift. My tribe is the demonic Rakshasa tribe. Can I have the chance to have His Darsan? I have not engaged myself in Sadhana. I have no freedom here to practise austerities and rites. I have earned no right to the good fortune. Will I be blessed by Rama?” Listening to his appeal, the heart of Hanuman melted in sympathy.

Hanuman consoled Vibhishana a great deal. He said, “Vibhishana, Rama heeds only the heart. He will not be

affected by family affiliations, religious affinities, or Sadhana attainments. He is pleased best by feelings and their purity. He will bless you for the loftiness of your ideals and the cleanliness of your daily life. He will grant you the Darsan you are yearning for; do not grieve. Why, you can take me as the best proof for what I am saying about His compassion and grace. I am a monkey. Waywardness is the hallmark of my tribe. The word ‘monkey’ has become a byword for a prankish, playful, petty mind. I am not versed at all in the Sastras. As for asceticism, I have no idea what it means. I have not repeated, according to prescribed rules, the Name of God, nor have I gone on pilgrimages seeking holy rivers! How then has Rama blessed me? Because He heeds only the love which animates and the feelings that activate people. In your case also, He will pay attention only to the Purity of Feelings. Be confident. Do not doubt.”

Relieved by these words, Vibhishana informed Hanuman details of how Sita was brought to Lanka. Hanuman refused to partake of any food or drink, since he had resolved to refrain from both until he could see Sita and communicate to her the message of Rama. He was eager to renew the search without delay. But Vibhishana advised him to proceed cautiously and slowly, and inform himself of the strength and weakness of Ravana’s Empire before he left. He himself acquainted him with these points in some detail. Thereafter, he permitted Hanuman to leave on his errand. Hanuman was so delighted to learn that Sita *was* in Lanka that he actually forgot to ask where she actually was!

He entered many mansions to find out whether she was anywhere therein. He saw bevies of women, fallen on their beds, intoxicated by drink and dance and floored by the banalities of luxury. Keeping in mind the characteristics and excellences of Sita that Rama had described to him, he observed closely every woman in those houses; but he could not find Sita. In near despair, he jumped on a peak of a hill and thought over the situation, deeply, for long. "How can I go back to Rama, without completing my mission, meeting Sita and consoling her? Better far to drown in the sea yonder. Alas, mine is a wasted life. Fie upon it," he said to himself.

That very instant, he saw a beautiful garden, trim and green, shining in the distance. Coming down the peak, he realised that since the garden was in a valley surrounded by tall mansions, he could not discover the place from the ground. Not knowing what to do next, he hied fast to the house of Vibhishana and discovered him immersed in reciting the Name of Rama. Seeing Hanuman, Vibhishana rose and approached him in a friendly and pleasing manner. He asked, "Hanuman! Did you see Sita?" Hanuman expressed his disappointment, but Vibhishana gave him the information. "Hanuman, there is in this City a garden named Asokavana. There, in the midst of terrible and mighty Rakshasas, Sita is kept. My wife and daughter are with her, doing service." He also disclosed to him the route by which he could reach the garden and the spot. Hanuman could not stay a moment longer. He reached the garden in a trice. Those who saw him began shouting and accosting, for his

figure was strange and peculiar to them. Noticing this, Hanuman felt that his figure was making him too prominent and public, and so he assumed a diminutive size. Jumping unnoticed from branch to branch, hiding himself behind clusters of leaves, he reached the Asokavana.

There he saw a woman, sitting under a tree, weak and worn, through want of food and sleep. The fierce Rakshasas sitting guard around her were threatening her, to change her will and to break her determination. Meanwhile, a grand cavalcade neared the place heralded by the beating of drums and the blowing of trumpets. Behind them Hanuman could see a royal personage, bejewelled and berobed in magnificent style. Hundreds of maidens followed him, carrying plates full of jewels, sweet and fragrant presents and soft silks. Ensconcing himself within the green shade of leaves, Hanuman watched the scene from the top of a nearby tree. It was Ravana, evidently, for he pleaded before Sita and prayed to her that she might offer her love to him. He tried to extract a promise by threats of cruel punishment. Hanuman heard him exhort those around him to inflict pain and injury on her. That frail feeble woman did not raise her eyes towards Ravana even once during all the tirade. She only said, "Fool! Vile vicious fellow! Rama alone has rights over me. No one other than Rama has any. I shall reduce this body to ashes in the flames of sorrow at separation from Him. I shall never stray from my resolve. Believe in this and beware!" Hanuman heard these emphatic words and realised that the woman was Sita and no other. His

mind gained peace and calmness when he knew this. Very soon, Ravana stung by disappointment and angry at the discomfiture, became even more violent in speech. He gave her a month's respite, to think over and accede. The cavalcade and the maids with the plates also accompanied him out of the garden. When they had all left, Sita raised her head towards the heavens and sighed: "Rama! Has not compassion yet entered your heart? Why have you condemned me to this torture? When am I to be freed from this?" and she burst into weeping.

A Rakshasa named Thrijata was one of the warders of Sita. She was deeply attached to the Lotus Feet of Rama. She was a pious devotee, who had both worldly wisdom and spiritual experience. She spoke to her companions keeping watch over Sita, "Comrades, last night, I had a dream, which I must relate to you. But first, let us serve and revere Sita and win her grace. For listen to the story that revealed itself to me in my dream. A monkey entered Lanka, slaughtered the Rakshasas and set the city on fire! Ravana had no clothes on. He was riding, of all animals, a donkey and moving fast in the southerly direction. And his head, I noticed, was shaven close. Besides, I found that his arms were severed from the body. Vibhishana was crowned the emperor of Lanka. Throughout the length and breadth of the land, the name of Rama was resounding. Then Rama sent for Sita. Sisters of the Rakshasa clan! Take note. I never get dreams. I haven't seen any so far. So if I dream at all, know it will certainly come true. It will happen just as in

the dream. Moreover, the realisation, in actual fact, of this dream will not take long. Things must happen just as I dreamt, within four or five days." The Rakshasa women were amazed at the revelation. They forthwith prostrated at the feet of Sita and silently resumed their routine duties.

Seeing the behaviour of Thrijata, Sita addressed her, "Thrijata! Rama Himself must have sent you here to be one of this group that is around me. Truly, it is because there are a few women like you in this Lanka that unfortunate persons like me are able to sustain our chastity and virtue. Or else, what will be the fate of women like me? You heard didn't you, the expressions Ravana used just now? He has given a month's respite. If Rama does not come within that month, I, or rather, this body, will be cut to pieces and it will be plucked and eaten by vultures and crows. Being the consort of Rama, I can never tolerate that horrid fate for this body. Tell me some plan through which I can get rid of this body sooner." Hanuman heard these words from the branch of the tree. He was overcome by sorrow, when Sita spoke in that strain of despair. At this, Thrijata fell at Sita's Feet and assured her, "Mother! Do not lose hope, Rama is no ordinary being. His might and majesty are unequalled. It will ever be so. You are certain to be saved by him. He will arrive very soon and hold your hand in his. Do not lose courage." She consoled her by loving words and left for home.

Availing himself of this chance, Hanuman jumped from his perch to a lower branch. He dropped right before

Sita the ring that was given by Rama. It fell shining like a flame of purest ray. And he kept on repeating “Rama! Rama” in ecstatic bliss. When her eyes fell upon the ring, Sita was astonished at what she saw. “Is this true, or am I dreaming? Can it be true? How can this golden ring worn on the golden finger of my Lord be found in Lanka? Is this Rakshasa magic or mere hallucination? No, I should not hesitate any longer, after recognising it as my Lord’s, to take it in my hand. It will be a sin if I refrain from handling it.” So saying, she took it and placed it on her eyes in reverence. Tears of gratitude flowed from her eyes. “Rama! Are you granting me your Darsan, the joy of your presence through this ring?” she said and raised her head.

There she saw a small monkey sitting on a branch of the tree and reciting in deep devotion, “Rama, Rama,” continuously. In a flash, she remembered the incidents in Thrijata’s dream as related by her. “Ah! Good days seem to be fast approaching. For ten long months, I have not heard the name of Rama pronounced in this Lanka. This day, I am able to see a living being reciting the holy name. I also received the dearly loved ring of my Lord,” she exulted. She could not keep her joyful excitement down. Sita, who had not talked to any stranger for long, looked at the monkey-form and addressed it thus: “Oh monkey! Who are you? Wherfrom is this ring?” She could not put full trust in the monkey, for, she had been deceived for months by tricks of impersonation. She interrogated the monkey in various ways in order to verify his credentials. Off and on,

she would ask the monkey about the welfare of Rama and at the very thought of His being alone, in the forest, tears would flow profusely from her eyes. Sita swung alternately between joy and grief. Hanuman watched her plight. He could not keep away from her the bond of love and loyalty that was holding him onto Rama. He related the dynastic story of Rama and His exploits, as well as his own story until he met Rama. When she listened to that story, she felt as happy as when Rama stood before her. She could picture Rama standing beside her at Ayodhya and in the forest retreats. She felt so thrilled that she forgot herself and her condition.

Soon, she recovered consciousness and knew where she was. She said, “Oh Monkey! I am glad you told me all this, but let me ask one question: ‘How were you able to enter this heavily guarded city, in spite of your being only a weak little monkey? How could you escape being caught by these Rakshasas and succeed in spotting out this place and coming to me?’” Hanuman replied, “Mother! What skill and strength have I? I am the servant of Rama, His slave. He makes me do everything He wants or likes. Without Him, I cannot survive even a moment. I am a doll in His hands. I play as He pulls the strings. I have no will of my own.” Then, Hanuman elaborated on the glory of Rama and manifested his devotion and dedication in the most impressive manner. It was most thrilling to hear those words of his.

Rama had told Hanuman, for communication to Sita, some incidents which no one else knew. He had said, “It

may so happen that Sita may not believe your words. She may doubt your genuineness. Then, you can remind her of these events, which are known only to her and me.” So, Hanuman began relating those special incidents. “Mother Sita, He has asked me to tell you of the attempts made by the wicked Crow to cause injury to you and of His attempt to save you and to kill that demon.” At this, Sita wept aloud, saying, “Hanuman! Why is Rama who was so kind to me then delaying to release me from this torture? Rama is the ocean of mercy. Yes, but why has He become so hardhearted at my fate? No! No! I am wrong. Rama is the embodiment of compassion. He has to play a role that involves all this apparent hardheartedness, that is all. Hanuman! You are no ordinary individual. For, Rama will not associate Himself so closely with ordinary individuals. Nor will He send His ring with inferior persons. How fortunate you are to be His messenger! Show me once your full stature and form.”

Then, Hanuman landed on the ground and stood before Sita with palms folded in adoration. When Sita saw him growing into a huge and terror-inducing size, she half suspected it to be some demonic trick. She closed her eyes and turned aside! Realising her fear and the suspicion that was at the basis of that fear, Hanuman said, “Mother! I am neither Ravana nor any one of his devilish Rakshasas. I am the faithful servant of Rama with the pure sacred body of unequalled splendour. He is the very breath of my existence, believe me. I am speaking the Truth. Guessing that you may not have faith in my being His authentic messenger,

He took off His finger this golden ring and placed it in my hands to be given to you. With me, there came Jambavan, Nila, Angada and thousands of others of extraordinary heroism. But I alone was able to cross the ocean through the Grace of Rama. The others are all on the other shore. We were able to hear from Jatayu and Sabari the story of your having been brought here by this villainous Rakshasa King. When we came to know, three days ago, from Sampathi news confirming your being here, we felt as happy as when seeing you before our eyes. Rama and Lakshmana are awaiting my return with the good tidings. If you permit me, I shall get back immediately and communicate to them news about your welfare.”

Sita pleaded, “Hanuman! I do not know whether you will be back at this place or when. Please stay for a day more and delight me, by telling me about Rama and Lakshmana.” But since the demonesses gathered around in groups to carry out their separate assignments, Hanuman resumed his miniature size and hopped onto a branch of the tree.

Sita sat under the tree, ruminating on all that Hanuman had related to her. She derived delight while doing so, and she cast her eyes showering benediction on Hanuman sitting on the branch above her head. That day, she had no thirst or hunger. She did not touch the fruits and drinks that the women-guards brought for her. Her pathetic condition hurt the kind heart of Hanuman. She appeared to him as the

very picture of misery. Hanuman heard the harsh and sharp-pointed words used by the women-guards, and he gnashed his teeth in anger, for he could not deal with them as he wished to. Sita alone could give him orders what to do.

After some time, Sarama, the wife of Vibhishana and her daughter, Thrijata, came to the tree and fell at the feet of Sita sitting disconsolate thereunder. They enquired about her health. Since they were partial towards her, Sita spoke to them about how the dream of Thrijata had come true, and how a monkey had actually entered Lanka in accordance with it. Sarama and Thrijata showed extreme enthusiasm and excitement when they heard the account of what had happened. They plied Sita with questions, in their eagerness to know all details. Sita showed them the monkey perched on the branch and the Ring it had brought. They both pressed the ring on their eyes in reverent adoration. Hanuman was watching for an opportunity to see Sita while alone and very soon he got it. Hanuman jumped to the ground and whispered to Sita, "Mother! Do not be anxious and grief-stricken. Sit on my back, and I will transport you in a trice to where Rama and Lakshmana are awaiting news about you." Hanuman pleaded in many ways for acceptance of this plan. Sita replied, "Hanuman, I am indeed very glad to hear you speak thus. I am sunk and struggling in the sorrow of separation. Your sweet words give me solace like a boat on a stormy sea. But do you not know that I will never contact a person other than my Lord? How then can I sit on your back, consider that?" These words of Sita were a sharp repartee

which hit Hanuman in the heart and exposed his pettiness and pride for having suggested a dishonourable step.

But Hanuman recovered soon and said, "Mother! Am I not your son? What is wrong when the son carries the mother on his back? What evil consequence can follow from that?" He supported his idea with various pleadings and points. In reply, Sita declared, "Hanuman! Of course, for me and for you, the feelings of mother and son are real; but, imagine what the world will think of it. We have to consider that aspect also, haven't we? We must so live that we are ideals for the lives of others. We should not draw upon ourselves by our acts the ridicule, contempt or condemnation of others. No one should point the finger of scorn at us. Above all, we must derive self-satisfaction, as a result of our acts. When I know I cannot derive that satisfaction I will never attempt such acts. Even if my life departs, I don't need or crave for another's assistance.

"Moreover, my Rama has to destroy this vile demon who tortures me. He is the person who has to discharge the responsibility, no one else can. He must come himself into this Lanka, kill this Ravana, and lead this Sita back holding her in His hand—that is the sign of the true hero that He is. That is the sign of genuine valour. Look at this Ravana. He came like a thief in a false form and stole me from my Lord. But Rama is the embodiment of Righteousness. He observes the norms of right behaviour. He honours the spoken word. When news spreads that Rama sent a monkey and brought

away Sita without the knowledge of Ravana, it would be dishonouring him. Getting out of here in the way you suggest will surely be treason. We should not resort to mean stratagems. We should guard the fair name of Rama as our very breath. His fame is the deity we adore in our hearts. We have to preserve it unimpaired by thought, word and deed. Your proposal has not given me satisfaction for this reason.” Hanuman admired her untarnishable virtue and her steadfast adoration of her Lord, and the loftiness of the ideals she maintained. He extolled her in his mind and recollected her words, in order to draw inspiration therefrom. He said, “Mother, pardon me. Since I saw with my own eyes the tortures you are undergoing and the pangs of separation which Rama is suffering, I entertained this idea to take you as quickly as possible to the Lotus Feet of the Lord. Pardon me if it was wrong,” and fell at her feet, again and again, in great remorse.

At this, Sita questioned him many times on the condition of Rama and Lakshmana and how they were faring in the forest. “Why worry about men? They can bear any burden or travail. They can bear separation from women with fortitude. Women suffer most, for it is terror for the wives to live apart from their husbands.” Hanuman told her, “Mother, Rama and Lakshmana are keeping well, of course; but, do not compare them with ordinary males. It is not fair. Alas, every moment, Rama is spending in thoughts of you and of separation from you; and so, He is not paying heed to either thirst or hunger. He does not eat or drink,

unless pressed lovingly by Lakshmana to partake of a few fruits or a little drink. I do not remember a single occasion on which Rama drank a gulp of water on His own initiative. Do not be under the impression that they have forgotten you or are neglecting you.

“Lakshmana is spending his days watching over Rama as the lids guard the eye. He is the breath of the Breath of Rama. He is overcome by the agony of separation from you and of witnessing the anguish of his brother. He has become a rock, unaffected by any feeling other than concern for Rama. He is the source of courage and sustenance that is unfailing and full. He has not slept these ten months, nor has he taken food.”

When Hanuman was describing the pathetic condition of the brothers, Sita acted as if she was amazed at the love and affection that Rama had towards her. Again and again, she said, “Yes, you too describe only the misery of the men. What do you know, how can you gauge the sorrows of women?” She pretended not to believe all that Hanuman related to her. She watched Hanuman and appreciated his wisdom and powers. She recalled the story of how Rama and Hanuman had met and came to be bound in love and loyalty, and derived great joy and content therefrom. At last, she got firm faith in Hanuman and his mission.

Again and again, Hanuman pleaded, “Mother! Why this feeling of separateness? Why spend days and months in agony and pain? Please sit on my back and I shall take

you in a trice into the Presence of Rama.” Sita noted the anxiety of Hanuman to win his point in spite of her arguments, moral and spiritual, legal and worldly. She decided therefore to stop further conversation on this score by a sharp repartee. She said, “Hanuman! Are you or are you not one who obeys strictly the commands of Rama?” Hanuman replied, “Yes, I would rather give up my life than go against the commands of Rama or disobey His orders.” He banged his chest with his fist in order to lend emphasis to his declaration. “Well, consider this. Did Rama command you to seek me out and bring him information about where I am after seeing me, or, did He ask you to bring me with you?” Hanuman was rendered dumb by this question. He could not continue his pleadings. He said, “Mother! I did not think so deep into the consequences of my proposal. I ask pardon again.” From that moment, he never broached that matter.

LANKA ON FIRE

Hanuman knew that it was wrong to spend any more time in Lanka. He felt that the sooner he communicated to Rama the welcome news about Sita the better for all concerned. He prayed for permission to leave. She said, "Go, go safe and soon. Tell Rama to come soon and take me with Him." She shed tears of hope and sorrow. Hanuman was moved by the pathos of the scene. Sadness overwhelmed his brave heart. He consoled her and said, "Very soon, Mother, Rama will lay siege to this Lanka, with His Vanara hordes, He will destroy these Rakshasa forces, rescue you and restore you to Ayodhya."

But Sita was inconsolable. She had her doubts. "Hanuman, what is it that you say! Can monkey hordes fight against and destroy these Rakshasas who have mastered many a mysterious stratagem and subterfuge, and

who are themselves much stronger? How can the two brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, stand up against these demons and win? Victory over the demons is an impossible dream. This can end only in my death. Rather than causing the death of so many of you on the battlefield, I would faint breathe my last and save all your lives." Sita was lamenting thus, while Hanuman interrupted her and said, "Mother! Do not weep. We of the monkey hordes are the bond slaves of Rama. All of us believe that Rama is our strength and our courage. We take in as our very breath the name, Rama. We have no other source of life. Therefore, even if each of these Rakshasas increases a thousandfold in deviltry, we monkeys can easily destroy them. We can win victory over them in spite of their wiles and wickedness. You are doubting the extent of our strength and skills, since we appear in our wonted forms. Let me show the Form I can assume in battle." Hanuman rose sky-high, and stood before Sita—a mountain-peak of shining Gold. Sita was astonished at this. She said, "Hanuman! Stop. Stop. Enough. Limit yourself. If the eyes of the Rakshasas fall on you, you may not be able to return soon to Rama." Sita protested and pleaded with him to assume his old form. Hanuman gave up the terrible form he had converted himself into, and became a quiet little monkey in no time. Hanuman fell at the feet of Sita and turned his steps away. But the plight of Sita and her anguished face were so deeply imprinted on his heart that his feet would not move away.

While returning from the place where Sita was, he saw an orchard and plucking some tasty fruits, he ate his

fill. He cast aside those that were unripe and the extra ones he had plucked. Sighting this, a Rakshasa guard wanted to frighten him away but Hanuman gave him a blow which felled him to the ground. He ran to the head of the gang of guards. He fled in terror to his superior in office and he in turn approached his master. Thus, the news of a monkey rioting in the garden reached the Imperial ears of Ravana himself. It struck Ravana as an evil omen. He could not restrain his anger at the mischief and the insult. The flames of his ire rose to the skies. He ordered a few hundred Rakshasas to overwhelm and catch the audacious animal. Since they could not succeed in their mission, he sent a few thousand trained and heavily armed Soldier-Rakshasas into the garden where Hanuman was awaiting their onslaught. Even that formidable force could not harm the monkey or persuade him to move off. Hanuman broke a dry twig from the tree on which he sat and with that tiny weapon which he waved around to the recital of Ram, Ram, he warded off every missile that was directed at him. Seeing this, the Rakshasas wondered who he was. Was he an emissary of the Gods? Or, was he the harbinger of the destruction of Lanka? The defeated heroes returned to camp, burdened with premonitions of disaster. They had no courage left to report their discomfiture to their ruler, Ravana. "You sent on this expedition countless Rakshasas selected for this special assignment, but we could not achieve the object. When the monkey roared once, hundreds of our men died for sheer fear. The earth shook under our feet. That roar echoed and re-echoed from every mansion

in the city. Seeing our plight, our leaders decided to come to you and report that this is no ordinary foe, and that this presages some evil calamity." This was the statement they made before Ravana. He was told the plain fact, without any reservation. If the monkey was allowed to roam about, danger was certain to envelope the land.

At this, Ravana sent his own dear son, Akshayakumara, at the head of thousands of seasoned Warrior-Rakshasas. But Hanuman slaughtered this host in a trice, and Ravana had to mourn the death of his beloved son. The entire land shivered in fear at the news of the death of the Prince and the decimation of his army. People whispered in fear, that this was no ordinary monkey, that it must be a Divine Phenomenon, and that it was the terrible avenger for the sin of bringing Sita over to Lanka. Many prayed to Sita in their heart of hearts to deliver Lanka from the monkey, for they feared it was her vengeance that had taken shape as that strange beast. Ravana sent word for Meghanada, and commissioned him to destroy this new invader. He placed at his disposal a huge army of several thousands. Meghanada ascended his chariot and led the heroic army in great pomp. As they marched along, earth and sky were astounded at their might and their angry tread. Their war cry rent the heavens. All who witnessed that pageantry and panoply were struck with wonder and admiration.

Hanuman watched their march and heard their trumpeting with absolute unconcern. He sat unmoved, on a

little branch of the spreading tree, and enjoyed the antics of the Rakshasas until they drew near. The soldiers rained arrows on Hanuman from all sides. With one ear-splitting roar, Hanuman jumped down and plucking a giant tree by its roots, he waved it round, beating off the rain of arrows that tried to reach him. The arrows were swept off so fast that when they hit back the Rakshasas who shot them, the impact killed them in such large numbers that very few were left to carry on the fight. Meghanada was felled by a blow. He rolled, spouting blood. So, he resolved to resort to the sacred arrow of Brahma that he had with him. He knew that Brahma, the first of the Trinity, had told Ravana that he would meet his death at the hands of man and monkey. He decided to prevent that calamity. The Brahmastra was released with appropriate ritual formulae. Hanuman had great reverence for the weapon that is sanctified by such mantras and dedicated to Brahma. So, he did not counteract it. He reverentially prostrated before it. So, it was easy for Meghanada to bind him with the Serpent Rope.

The happy news was immediately carried to Ravana by the exultant Rakshasas. Lakhs of eager faces crowded the streets to see the monkey that had been bound. Hanuman was unaffected by fear or anxiety. He moved calm and collected watching the crowds with an amused smile. At last, he reached the Audience Hall of Ravana. The courtiers and ministers assembled there were aghast at the insulting indifference shown by Hanuman to the display of power

and luxury that the Hall contained. Ravana laughed aloud at the absurd figure of the monkey; but the next moment, he was overcome by fear of impending death. However, anger was the overriding emotion at that time in him. He asked, "Hey, you monkey! Who are you really? Whose is the might that you have been exhibiting and using? Why did you destroy this orchard and this park? Though bound, you have no sense of shame. You look around with your head high up. Come, give me the right answers."

Hanuman had a hearty laugh at his interrogator. He used for his replies a style of speech and a vocabulary which were beyond the understanding of the people who stood around him. But Ravana, who was an expert in rhetoric and grammar, understood him quite well and the dialogue between them appeared to the listeners like a disputation between two intellectual giants. Ravana demonstrated before Hanuman several magic feats in order to impress him with his invincibility. He manifested many powers and feats. But Hanuman remained unmoved. He said, "Ravana, I know your prowess. I have heard that you fight with a thousand arms. I am aware also of your famous fight with Vali. But what wrong have I done? I was hungry. I plucked a few trees by their roots. It is my nature. I was in my element, my natural habitat, the tree top. Of course, each one has the desire and the determination to safeguard his own life, to protect his own body. Your soldiers are awfully wicked. They hurt me. So, I hurt them, and unable to bear the hurt, they died. I fought with them in order to save

myself. The arrow of your son forced me to enter into his bondage. But I am not trying to deceive you in return. My only desire is to carry out the orders of my Master. Listen to me carefully. Give up all sense of personal pride and reputation. Reflect on the grandeur of your clan, the family to which you belong. Remember, you are the great-grandson of Brahma. You are the grandson of the great Pulastya. You are the son of Visravas. Give up this delusion of accumulating pomp and power; adore in your heart the Destroyer of Fear from the hearts of those devoted to Him, the Crown Jewel of the Ikshvaku Dynasty, the precious Gem of the Raghu Dynasty, Rama! Surrender to Him, take refuge in Him. Even Time shivers in fear before Him. It is not good for you to harbour enmity towards Him. Listen to me. Place Sita at the Lotus Feet of Rama, and meditate on the Grace that flows from those Feet. Strengthened by that Grace, Rule over the state of Lanka for ever and ever. Make the glory of your grandfather, Pulastya, reach the far corners of the world, without blemish, so long as the sun and moon illumine the sky. The fair name of your line should not be tarnished by you in the least. Give up your pride and your delusion. Oh, Emperor! Rivers taking birth on mountain ranges get flooded in the rainy season and roll furiously along. Within weeks, they run dry with just a trickle of water. Your power and wealth will soon dry up and vanish. Adore Rama as the source of power and wealth. Then, they would never get dry; for He is the inexhaustible spring of peace and prosperity. He is ever full. He won't lose, but you will benefit from Him. Oh Ravana! I am telling you

with nothing held back, with an open mind. No one can rescue the unfortunate person who is blinded by hatred towards Him. Accept my advice."

These words of Hanuman were soft and salutary. They were full of wisdom and morality. But Ravana was not prepared to benefit by the counsel. He said, "Fool! Dare you advise me what to do? Fie on you, fie! Death has drawn near you; or else, you would not have the courage to lecture thus so long in my presence. Enough of your prating, keep your mouth shut!" Hanuman did not obey. He retorted "Ravana! These words of yours spell your doom. Alas, you have become insane. You will know the truth of my diagnosis as time passes. In a few days you can know to whom Death is drawing near, to you or to me!"

When Hanuman spoke thus, in utter fearlessness, with no bounds or limits, Ravana was enraged beyond control. He rose, spouting fire and slapping his thighs in challenge he roared an order to his henchmen to kill the impudent monkey. Everyone rushed to where Hanuman sat bound in snake ropes. Just at that moment, Vibhishana, Ravana's brother, entered the Hall, followed by his retinue. He prostrated before his elder brother and said, protestingly, "Master! It is not right to kill an emissary. *Rajadharma* will not approve the deed. Punish him in any other manner, but do not pronounce the sentence of death." The ministers of Ravana supported this stand and declared that what he had suggested was the noblest truth. Ravana laughed in scorn at their absurd ideas of right and wrong. Still, he

climbed down and said, "Well, mutilate him and send him off." The ministers gathered in a group to decide on the mutilation. They came to the conclusion that monkeys are proud of their tails and would fain keep them intact long and strong. Someone suggested that the best punishment would be to wind sheets of cloth on the tail, pour oil until it soaks and drips and then set fire to the tail. This plan got unanimous acceptance. They exulted among themselves at the brilliance of the idea. "The tailless monkey will proceed to its master and bring him here for avenging the loss. Then we can witness the manliness of his master and his might." There was a spate of whispers in the Hall.

Hanuman was watching their movements, listening to their confabulations, and laughing within himself all the while. When they had finished, he burst into a thunderbolt of laughter! The Rakshasas were enraged at this display of insulting behaviour. They procured cloth and oil and started the process of winding and soaking. But the more they wound and soaked, the longer grew the tail! Miles of cloth and tanks of oil had to be ordered. News of the wonder spread all over the City and crowds of men, women and children ran towards the Hall to witness the miracle. Meanwhile, bands of musicians led the procession. Crowds began clapping hands. Hanuman was led along the streets with oil soaked cloth wound along the whole length of his tail. At last, the Central Square of the City of Lanka was reached. There, before a huge crowd of eager citizens, a burning flame was applied to the tip of Hanuman's tail.

Suddenly, Hanuman assumed his subtle form, and so the ropes that had bound him became too loose and fell off. He could now assume his natural size and jump about. He rose in one jump on to the top of a golden mansion. He shouted Rama, Rama, and made the Rakshasas shudder in fear, for, a strong wind rose from nowhere and blew with great speed. Hanuman somersaulted in the air and was beside himself with joy. He jumped from one mansion to another, with the burning tail trailing behind him. The tail grew longer and longer. The conflagration swelled in size as he moved from street to street. The mansions all over the City of Lanka were caught in the conflagration and changed into heaps of ashes. The Rakshasas fled desperately with their wives and children, forsaking their burning homes, eager to save their lives. To add to the confusion, cattle, horses, mules and elephants broke away from their sheds and ran helter-skelter in panic and pain. The entire City was enveloped in a shroud of wails, cries, roars and trumpeting. "Oh! Save us." "Oh! Take us to a safe place" ... agonising appeals like these rose from the throats of women and children and echoed from the sky.

Queen Mandodari heard that wail. She summoned the soldiers guarding the Palace, and ordered them to give refuge therein to women and children. She confessed her fears and poured out the grief she suffered. "Alas! The foolish obstinacy of Ravana is causing the extinction of the Rakshasa clan. This blow will end only with the holocaust. I and brother-in-law Vibhishana advised him a

great deal. We prayed with folded arms. He refused to pay heed. We lamented that it will end in the destruction of every single Rakshasa. But as they say, ‘When extermination is near, discrimination flees far.’ Bad times are approaching him, and so, he is behaving in these nefarious ways.” Wherever she turned her eyes, ferocious tongues of flame glared at her. Hanuman too was very much before her eyes, jumping about in the midst of the flames. From every household there rose the cry, “Hanuman, save us.” “Spare this house.” With folded palms, they prayed, “Take pity on our children.” The wife of Kumbhakarna, the younger brother of Ravana, ran forward with her prayer. “Oh, Messenger of Rama! My husband is submerged in deep sleep. Do not set fire to our home. Save my husband from being burnt to death.”

Lanka was caught in the throes of total destruction. Ravana himself came to know of the calamity pretty soon. He ordered that the monkey be surrounded by soldiers with weapons and mortars. Those who proceeded towards Hanuman scattered in panic when the burning tail of Hanuman flailed them mercilessly. Many were killed by that flaming tail. Women clamoured and called on the clouds to shower rain and stop the fire from spreading. Malyavantha saw their plight and said within himself, “No, this is not fire that can be put out by rain! This is the unbearable grief of Sita.” Others said, “This is the flame of anger against Ravana. It is the fiery form of the curse he has to go through. It will burn this city to ashes.” The huge

flame hopped from rooftop, without any sign of exhaustion. Sometimes, Hanuman made himself small, sometimes, gigantic; but the pace of destruction was the same, whatever size he assumed. The crackle of the flames and the incessant thud of falling walls could be heard from all sides.

Sita heard the news. She raised her head and had one long look at the smoke and sparkle surrounding the garden. The sky was darkened by smoke! The garden too had become uncomfortably hot. Sita called upon the God of Fire without delay and prayed that He should save Hanuman, the genuine Bhaktha of Rama. Since she prayed out of a compassionate heart, it became suddenly cool and comfortable for Hanuman. Ravana suffered loss and dishonour for discarding the advice given by elders and for indulging in vulgar talk, when he was shown the proper road. In just under a wink, the capital city of his empire was wiped out by fire. The house where Kumbhakarna was asleep, and the house of that super most among devotees, Vibhishana were the only two that were not erased by the fire. Hanuman leaped into the sea and dipped his tail in the waters to put out the flame. Then he assumed the form of a miniature monkey and reached the place where Sita was. He prostrated before her and said, “Mother! I shall relate to Rama all that you have asked me to. Give me something so that I could prove that I have met you.”

Sita thought for a while, and taking from her head a gemset jewel, she placed it in Hanuman’s hand. Hanuman pressed it over his eye reverently and fell at Sita’s feet again,

overcome with joy. Sita blessed him, and said, "Hanuman! You saw with your own eyes the torture Ravana is inflicting on me, and therefore there is no need for me to dilate on that. Tell the Lord that he must grant me the fortune of his darsan. Tell him that I prayed for it again and again. Tell him that, with Lakshmana, he must lay siege to Lanka, within a month. Hanuman! These three days I spent happily, speaking to you of Rama. My heart has become calm and cool. I cannot imagine how I will spend both night and day, hereafter, when you are gone. I shall be a fish in a dry pond. Of course, the omniscient Lord is ever watching over me; but when, oh when shall I feast my eyes on those lotus-eyes of His?" Hanuman tried to infuse faith and courage in her mind by his assurances and assertions. He prayed, pleaded and prostrated again and again. At last he turned toward his path.

Before leaving the Ashoka Park, Hanuman bellowed a farewell roar, which shook the earth, and made the men, women and children of the island shiver in terror. Without any more delay Hanuman reached the shore of the sea. He filled his mind with the thought of Rama and his eyes with His charm; and even while meditating on that Name and Form, he leaped over the sea and reached the other shore in a trice. That day was the Full Moon of the month Karthik. The cool moonlight was as balm to the heart. The name of Rama implanted strength and joy. Hanuman had won. The monkey groups who had espied Hanuman from the distance coming through the horizon were elated beyond words.

They were filled with joy. Their faces blossomed. They shone with a new splendour as they saw him come nearer and nearer. They exulted that they had fulfilled the mission on which they were sent by Rama.

Three full days they had waited for his return, and their hearts had gone dry with despair. Now they clothed themselves in leaves and flowers. They ranged themselves along the shore, pressing forward to clasp Hanuman to their bosoms as he landed. As soon as Hanuman touched ground, they asked him about what happened in Lanka, about Sita and her welfare, and circumstances and conditions of Lanka. Hanuman told them all they wanted, with high enthusiasm, and left for where Rama was.

In a short while, they entered the Madhuvana and gorged themselves with the fruits that grew thereon, for Sugriva had promised them all a free run of the garden, as soon as they had discovered the whereabouts of Sita. The guards posted there prevented the entry of the horde, but they streamed in nevertheless. So they ran to their master and reported that they were helpless to prevent the loot. When Sugriva heard them, he exclaimed, "Oh, they have won. They have fulfilled the task set for them by Rama!" He was exceedingly happy. Sugriva told the guards, "This is a celebration. This is a Festival of Ananda. Go, do not worry!" Meanwhile, groups of monkeys arrived and fell at the feet of their King and Master. Sugriva smiled at them and said, "Well, I came to know that you have attained the fruit of your expedition." They replied, "Lord! Through

your Grace and good wishes we succeeded in our endeavour. It was a great hero who won the victory. He gave us new life. If we are standing before you alive and talking to you, he alone is the cause.” Then they gave him details of the situation in Lanka and the plight of Sita there. At this, Sugriva rose suddenly, declaring, “We shall not delay a minute longer,” and hastened to where Rama was. Realising that the monkeys were proceeding towards him with the news of a successful mission, Rama and Lakshmana seated themselves on a huge boulder watching the group hurrying forward. They advanced in leaps and bounds, quite excited, and fell at Rama’s feet.

First, Rama inquired about their health and welfare. Meanwhile, Jambavan, the seniormost among them rose and said, “Those who have earned your compassion are indeed blessed. That endows them with all virtues. Such a one’s renown will encompass the three worlds.” He praised Hanuman in various ways. Hanuman rose and prostrated before Rama. He described in detail the island of Lanka. He told Him of the plight of Sita with tears of joy and commiseration flowing from his eyes, and placed in Rama’s hands the crest-jewel that he had brought with extreme care and caution. Rama clasped Hanuman to his bosom. He said, “Oh Son of the Wind-god! Tell me more of Sita, her plight and her feelings.”

Hanuman said, “Oh Lord of my Life. It is impossible to describe. Sita is reduced to bones, for she does not take food nor does she sleep. She is counting every minute

praying for your Darsan. She has no other thought than the recitation of your name. She wanted me to inform you of her countless prostrations. She remembered Lakshmana often and shed profuse tears. The sharp verbal dagger thrusts that Ravana administers every morning and evening when he comes to her and speaks to her, I have heard with my own ears. Mother does not listen to his prattle in the least. She is ever melting away in the agony of separation and in thoughts centred on you.” “Save Sita this very moment!” cried Hanuman falling at the feet of Rama. Hearing these words, Lakshmana rose in vengeful anger and wept at Sita’s condition. The picture of Sita in Lanka burnt his inner being. He said at last, “Brother! Do not delay. Save my sister-in-law!” Rama replied with a smile, “Lakshmana! Do not hurry. Bide your time. There is a time when each step has to be taken. Do not be dejected when grief invades or exults when joy flows in.” Rama consoled him with soft and soothing words.

Then he called Hanuman near, and invited him to sit close to him. He seated him near his feet. He asked him, “Hanuman! What is the nature of the rule that Ravana has established in Lanka? How did you set Lanka on fire?” Hanuman said, “Lord, there is nothing you do not know. What shall I say of the strength of monkeys! We are only animals that jump about from branch to branch. How can we jump from one shore of the sea to the other? How can we overpower the Rakshasas? How can we destroy the City of Lanka through fire? All these were due solely to your

Grace and Glory. The strength and courage that your Name confers helped us to achieve those things. I am absolutely unable by myself to do anything. The Ring of yours that I had with me guarded me and guided me aright. Lord! Seeing the Ring and holding it in her hand, how happy was Mother! ‘Is this a dream? Or, was it really sent by Rama to me?’ She wondered thus, doubted thus, and finally became firm in faith. Lord, her grief, the extreme anguish of hers, they set fire to Lanka and destroyed it, not I. You chose me as an instrument and you achieved these great tasks with me as a tool. All this is a blessing bestowed on me, since you have great affection towards devotees. Lord, nothing is impossible for one who has won your Grace.”

When Rama heard these words steeped in sincerity and humility, he was very pleased. He turned to Lakshmana and said, “Brother, prepare for the campaign, without delay.” Watching the earthshaking forces that were gathered and the preparations that Jambavan and Sugriva made, quite soon, the Gods themselves were astounded, and gratified. The monkey warriors touched the feet of Rama and raised a triumphal roar. Rama blessed them all by his glance of compassion and benediction. Each warrior became a mountain peak that had grown wings! They marched forward with exultation at every step. Auspicious omens greeted them as soon as they stepped forward. Sita too at Ashoka Garden sensed auspiciousness that very moment. Ravana was beset by ominous forebodings indicated by inauspicious happenings. Jambavan and others plucked

huge trees and waved them as arms. They raised such war cries on their way that the earth shook under their feet and the skies rumbled all around. Off and on, they cheered, “Victory to Lord Ramachandra.” In Lanka every Rakshasa was struck with anxiety about what was in store for him in days to come. They were afraid of the disaster that was imminent. They were convinced they could not escape the calamity. They could communicate their fears to each other only in whispers since they were mortally afraid of Ravana.

Wherever groups of Rakshasas collected in Lanka, the talk centred round the calamitous damage inflicted by the messenger of Rama. They wondered, “When the servant is capable of such tremendous heroism, what would be the measure of the onslaught the Master can inflict?” They pictured Rama as capable of immeasurable attack. Their fears were communicated by her maids to Mandodari, the Queen of Ravana. Her mind was filled with apprehension and anxiety. She realised that the fear was based on a correct estimate of the happenings. She waited for a propitious moment when Ravana would be in a receptive mood, and could be spoken to while alone. Getting such a chance, she said, “Lord! Do not develop enmity with the Omniscient One. You yourselves expressed the opinion that Rama is not an ordinary person. Your army could not wreak vengeance when sister Surpanakha was disfigured. It could not harm him or move him to repentance. Now he has with him millions of redoubtable Vanara heroes. What can our Rakshasa warriors achieve against him now? They could

not even bind and punish the messenger who got entry into this kingdom. That is the extent of the misfortune that has beset us. When one servant caused such horror and despair, how much worse would be the calamities that millions like him could bring about? Therefore, pray listen to my appeal. Send Sita back to Rama, in the care of brother Vibhishana, or with your Ministers. Sita too is no ordinary woman. She is exemplarily chaste. She is the very embodiment of spiritual energy that results from the righteous nature. Causing grief to such a person can bring you no good. Accede to my pleading. Return Sita to Rama. When that is done, all will be good for you and for our Rakshasa race. Or else, as the serpent swallows frogs, the arrows of Rama will swallow the Rakshasa hordes. Give up stubbornness and pride. Offer Sita at the feet of Rama.” She fell at the feet of Ravana with this pitiable importunity.

Ravana, the conceited ignoramus, looked at Mandodari, and replied with a loud peal of laughter. He said, “Fie on you! Tender women are easily scared. That is their very nature. Their words rising from fear will turn even fortune into misfortune. When the monkeys arrive at our doors, the Rakshasas would certainly gobble them up. The gods shudder in mortal terror when my name is uttered within hearing. Why are you afraid of these tree-dwelling brutes? Fie on your fears! Get thee gone from here.” Saying thus, he proudly moved into the Hall, appearing like personified audacity. As soon as he left, Mandodari bewailed to herself, “Alas, destiny is devising a mighty

tragedy. What has it decided for me? It is terrible even to guess what it is.” Burdened with grief and at a loss to plan what else to do, she resorted to her rooms and rolled on her bed, agitated by a multitude of thoughts.

At the Audience Hall, Ravana called the ministers together, and invited them to give expression to their estimate of the situation. “You are aware of the calamities that were inflicted by that messenger of Rama. What preparations are necessary? What are your suggestions for the future? Tell me quite frankly, without the slightest fear.” The ministers looked at each other. They sneered in repressed laughter, but no one dared speak. Suddenly, Kumbhakarna, immersed in sleep for months, and who was therefore unaware of the conflagration at the time of the visit of Hanuman, emerged from his sleep and rushed into the Audience Hall. He shouted at his elder brother, “Hello! You boasted that there is no hero equal to you in all the three worlds. You challenged the worlds and dared anyone to face you. Now I hear a tiny little monkey entered the City and burnt it to ashes! Shame! Shame on you! How did you allow it to escape alive?” With these words of jeer, he left the hall, and hastened home. At this point, Minister Atikaya rose from his seat and addressed the Emperor thus: “Master! We shall obey your commands. If only we have a gracious look from your eyes falling on us, we can destroy all men and monkeys and wipe them out of the face of the earth. Why assert more?” He sat down with a grunt of satisfaction. Then, Meghanada, the general endowed with

the power of adopting any form he likes, rose to speak. "Supreme Master!" he said, "Your might and majesty resound all over the world. The gods are your bondsmen. Why should we speak of the fate of men in your Presence? For who can be stronger than these gods?" His words were soaked in pompous pride. The atheistic sons of Kumbhakarna, the highly egotistic brothers, Kumbha and Nikumbha also spoke in the same strain. Akampana and other warriors also added their tunes to the same song. Off and on, the irrepressible Mahodara stood up and rapped his thighs as if he was proclaiming his eagerness to join the fray. Of course, every one of them was infected with an inner fear, though they did not exhibit it in their speech or their countenances. The result was that Ravana was rendered happy, and their aim to hearten him was realised. Lastly, one Rakshasa rose and tried to catch attention. He said, "Emperor! I shall dress myself as a Brahmin and approach Rama and Lakshmana wherever they are. I shall invite them for lunch; and when they come into my hermitage, I shall bind them hand and foot. If you approve of this stratagem, I shall attempt it."

Ravana was very pleased with his ministers and others. Meanwhile, Vibhishana had entered the Hall. Ravana looked at him and asked him, "Brother! What is your opinion on this question: these men and monkeys?" Vibhishana replied, "Most compassionate brother! I shall answer as best I can, without any frills or feints. I only pray that you listen patiently and carefully. Pardon me, Oh

Sovereign Lord! If you desire a good status after death, an unsullied fame while alive, prosperity and happiness here and hereafter, you must desist from admiring the beauty of women who belong to others. What can one single living being like you do to injure or obstruct the Ruler of the Fourteen Worlds? Can anyone survive after opposing Him? How can such a one prosper? Greed clouds all the virtues of a person. Lust and anger are gateways to the regions of ruin. Rama is not an ordinary person. He is Death to the God of Death. He is the regulator of Time. He cannot be affected by illness or want or weakness. He is unborn and so, immortal. Give up your hatred of such a Divine Person, and pray to be accepted as His servant. Return his consort to Him and earn His Grace. I am falling at your Feet and pleading with you with all the force I command." Hearing him, Malyavantha, an old and revered Minister, nodded in agreement. He stood up and spoke thus: "Master! The words spoken by your brother are just and right. Accepting his suggestions will redound to your renown."

But Ravana was greatly incensed at the advice given by them both. He reprimanded them hotly. He said, "You are both fools! Do you know what you have been doing so long? You were extolling my enemy. You are not fit to be present in this Hall, while this subject is being considered." He ordered that they be removed from the Hall. At this, Malyavantha got down from his chair and hurried home, Vibhishana too offered his prostrations to his elder brother and, with folded palms, he expostulated, "Oh King! The

Vedas and Sastras declare that in every person's heart there resides the twin natures of goodness and wickedness. When goodness predominates and is given full authority, the person will possess joy, peace and prosperity of all types. When wickedness predominates and is given full authority the person will be attacked by all types of adversity. Now, the vile nature is overwhelming your virtuous nature. So you condemn as enemies those who offer good advice and try to promote your good. Sita is like the Night of Destruction for the Rakshasas. You have no compassion towards her. That is the wicked trait in you. I am praying for this boon from you. Please agree to my request. Return Sita to Rama. I am sure that will endow you with all happiness and auspiciousness."

At this, Ravana rose suddenly from his throne and exclaimed. "Fool! Death has drawn very near you. You could be alive till this moment only on account of my grace. Now you are counting my enemies as your benefactors. I cannot understand why you have developed respect and loyalty to them. Is there on earth anyone living who cannot be subdued by the strength of my shoulders? Eating the food I give, living in the house provided by me, residing in my territory, how dare you extol my enemies? Thorny bushes grown to protect the fort have become harmful to the fort itself. You have spread too much to be useful. Go, go to some hermitage and teach your lessons on morality and goodness." Thus saying, he pushed Vibhishana at his feet away from him with a kick. However angrily he was

kicked, Vibhishana persisted long in praying to him, his hands holding the very feet that were kicking him. "King! Rama resolves on Truth and his resolution can never fail. Your time is running out. So too, the time of your followers, I am going to take refuge with Rama. I have done my best to save you. I have nothing to repent for. I have not done any wrong." With these words, he left the Hall. Reciting with every breath Rama Rama, and breathless with joy and excitement, he crossed the sea and landed on the other shore. The Vanaras who noticed him took him to be a messenger from Ravana, and they reported the arrival to their Ruler, Sugriva. Vibhishana was prevented from entering the camp. The information was conveyed to the Lord, thus: "Oh Rama! The brother of Ravana has come to have your Darsan."

Rama asked Sugriva, who brought him the news, what he thought about the incident. Sugriva replied that it was difficult to understand the plans and purposes of Rakshasas since they assume various forms as and when they like and so are inexplicable. We do not know why he has come among us. I guess it is to open a wedge between me and Angada, the son of Vali. I believe it is advisable to bind him and keep him aside, without delay." Rama replied, "Friend! Your words are correct. You spoke in accordance with the injunctions in the Sastras about defections. Yet, listen to my vow. It may be opposed to your advice. My vow is to protect all those who surrender to me. Even if the person surrendering is our enemy, to make an exception in his case is wrong. I shall not give up any being that

surrenders to me, even if it involves the sin of slaying a billion Brahmins. Perhaps he has been sent by Ravana in order to sow the seeds of dissension among us. Well why should we be afraid of him even if this be true? Or he has come frightened by his brother, if he surrenders to me, I shall guard him and foster him as my own life breath. Therefore, bring him in, quickly," he ordered and Sugriva hastened to obey.

Hanuman hastened to him and in an instant, made him stand before Rama. When his eyes fell on the Lotus Face of Rama, Vibhishana shed profuse tears of ecstasy. He could scarce stand erect. "Lord," he gasped, and fell at the feet of Rama. "Save me, save me. I am your slave," he prayed. "Oh Protector of the Gods! I took birth in the Rakshasa race. I am the younger brother of Ravana, who rules over the Rakshasas. My name is Vibhishana. My birth as a Rakshasa is the result of the vast quantity of sin I had accumulated. Dullness and ignorance have mastery over me. As the owl craves for night, I relish only darkness. You foster all those who surrender to you yearning for your love and grace. I have none else to whom I can run for rescue."

Rama saw him pleading so humbly and so earnestly for being taken into confidence and saved, and He was delighted. He drew him near, and softly fondled him, patting his back in deep love. He spoke sweetly to him, and said, "My dear Vibhishana, do not worry. The very Darsan you had of me has destroyed the Rakshasa nature in you. You are to me as close as Lakshmana and Sugriva." These words

wiped away all fear from the heart of Vibhishana. Then Rama said, "Oh Ruler of Lanka, are all your followers and companions hale and hearty? How were you passing your days right in the midst of many million Rakshasas? How were you able to maintain your devotion and dedication to God in that environment?" He also enquired of him various matters relating to his activities.

At the end, Vibhishana said, "Oh Lord of the Raghu Dynasty! Lust, anger and the rest of that evil brood will infest the heart until the moment you enter it, with the bow and arrow in your hand. When your nature and your loveliness are known, they flee from the mind. Attachments and hatreds infest the dark hearts that know not the light of wisdom. Lord, I have earned the fruition of dearest dreams when I could cast my eyes on your Lotus Feet and touch them with my hands and head. My fear and sorrow have been destroyed. I have not done a single good deed any day, but yet you embraced me. Oh, how great is my good fortune!" From Vibhishana's eyes, tears flowed in streams. They were tears of joy and gratitude.

Rama intercepted his words and said, "Vibhishana, you possess all desirable excellences. Or else, you would not have earned this Darsan, this chance to touch me and contact me, and this opportunity to converse with me." At this Vibhishana was thrilled with unbounded joy. He fell at the Lotus Feet of Rama again and again. Rama told him, "Go, have a bath in the sacred waters of the sea, and return soon." Accordingly, Vibhishana left for the seashore. Rama

asked Hanuman to bring from the sea a pot of the sacred water. When Vibhishana prostrated at the Feet of Rama, after the bath, Rama took a handful of water from the pot that Hanuman had brought and, sprinkling the drops on Vibhishana's head, he declared, "I am making you by this rite the Ruler of the Kingdom of Lanka." Vibhishana rose and said, "Oh Lord! Why do I need a kingdom? I am content if I secure a place by the side of these Lotus Feet." But Rama said, "No, you cannot escape this duty." Vibhishana replied, "I bow my head to the command I receive from you." He folded his hands in prayerful humility. The Vanaras stood all around, struck by the compassion and grace that Rama bestowed on the person who surrendered his all at His Lotus Feet. Their hearts were filled with Bliss.

Rama saw the Generals of Vanara hordes and spoke to them. "Leaders! Take this Vibhishana with you. Do not consider him as someone apart. Regard him as your comrade. He is my own." These endearing words greatly heartened Vibhishana. Soon they moved towards the seashore.

THE BRIDGE

Looking at the sea, Rama questioned how it was proposed to cross it. Many among the Vanaras suggested means and methods. At last Vibhishana rose from his place and addressed Rama thus: "Lord, the Ocean owes its origin to your forefathers, Sagara and his sons. It is the family 'preceptor' of your line. If only you resolve that it should be crossed, the Vanaras can easily go across."

Meanwhile, a messenger sent by Ravana was sighted by Vibhishana and the Vanaras bound him and took him to where Sugriva, their Ruler was. Sugriva ordered that his limbs be cut off. When the Vanaras prepared themselves for the execution of that order, the fellow raised a hue and cry. He shouted in his pain, "Oh Vanaras! I swear by Rama! Do not cut off my nose and ears." His pathetic cry was heard by Lakshmana. He asked that the Rakshasa be brought

to his presence. He spoke softly to him, and admonished the Vanaras for torturing a Messenger deputed by Ravana. He wrote a letter and placed it in his hand, with the words, "Give this missive to Ravana. Repeat to him the words I now utter: Oh, Demolisher of the fortunes of your own clan! Change your heart at least this day, and fall at the feet of Rama. Rama will pardon you. Do not decimate and destroy the Rakshasa tribe in order to prop up your wiles. Know there is no other means available to you to avoid the Death that is imminent." With these hard and heavy warnings, the Messenger was sent back to his master. The fellow was overjoyed that he could escape alive. He shouted, "Jai to Lord Ramachandra," and fell at Rama's feet before he hied back home.

At the Court of Ravana, he related the events that had ensued and started describing with uncontrollable delight the majestic charm of Rama. He gave Ravana the letter Lakshmana had entrusted him with. Ravana enquired about his brother, Vibhishana, and asked how he fared. "Fie upon him," he ejaculated, "His days are numbered. Death will swallow him soon. He is a pest, bred in this granary. He left this Lanka and joined the camp of my foe. Misfortune will haunt him until he dies." He turned to the fellow and asked him, "Under this pretext, you visited their camp. Did you not tell them of our military might and adamantine resolve? Tell me also what you learnt about their resources and capabilities." The messenger, Suka, stood before the throne with folded palms, and said, "Lord! I pray that you extend

some grace to me and listen calmly and with forbearance to what I say. The very moment your brother sealed friendship with Rama he was crowned Emperor of Lanka by him! Knowing that I reached their camp as your messenger, the Vanaras caught hold of me and tortured me in various ways. I swore in Rama's name and called upon him to save me. Therefore, they allowed me to come away unmutilated, with my nose and ears intact. Had I a thousand tongues, I cannot describe the might of those Vanara armies. What a galaxy of heroic warriors are they! There are Vanaras of many different colours, of all ages and grades, of gigantic stature and strength. One shakes in terror when one casts his eyes at them. Why, even to picture them in the mind or think about them is a terror-striking experience. Imagine the might of that one Vanara who killed your son and reduced the City to ashes! It is all the result of their being reflections and echoes of the invincible might of Rama himself. Even the tiniest brat among the monkeys becomes, by that token, a horrifying monster. There are monkey warriors with various names, and each of them is endowed with the strength of many herds of elephants. Dwivida, Mainda, Nila, Nala, Angada, Vikata, Dadhimukha, Kesari, Kumuda, Daja, Gavaksha, Jambavantha—these are the Generals. Every one of them is equal in might and military skill to their Ruler, Sugriva. There are hundreds of thousands more among them, who are of equal might. Their number is beyond calculation. Their fury and ferocity can destroy earth, heaven and the nether regions, as if these were but heaps of straw. Lord, I heard that their number is

eighteen Padmas. Each Padma has a valiant General at its head. Emperor, I did not find a single Vanara, from the highest to the lowest who doubted their victory; nor was there anyone who had the least trace of nervousness on the eve of the march. They are all tightening their muscles to pound this City. They are only waiting for the signal from Rama. They have not had it so far.

“Whether the ocean yields to them and gives the right of way or not, they are determined to build a causeway of stones, and succeed in their venture. They are baring teeth and gnashing them, boasting that they would squeeze Ravana out of shape and reduce him into a handful of pulp. Fear strikes everyone who listens to their exultant roar and challenging call. The instant they hear the name Ravana uttered within earshot, they get so enraged that they pluck giant trees, root and branch, and brandish them in angry demonstration of hate. They are swaying and swinging, surging and shouting, in their eagerness to consume this City. They have equally redoubtable bears too among them. To crown all, they have Rama as their leader, capable of overwhelming millions of ‘Death-deities.’ Hundreds of thousands of Adiseshas, each of which is blessed with a thousand heads and tongues, cannot do full justice if asked to describe the heroism and military skill of Rama. With one arrow shot from his bow, he can dry up even the Ocean.”

The reaction of Ravana to this report of the spy and messenger was a peal of wild laughter. He said, “Fie on you. Giving ear to the pratings of the monkeys that surround

him and of that arch coward, Vibhishana, you are extolling that fool so high. It is sheer nonsense to describe the strength and heroism of mere monkeys. Enough, enough, can monkeys ever be so strong! I have heard enough, long ago, of the power and might of this Sugriva; and what can this poltroon Vibhishana, who has become his minister now, do? Can he contribute any wealth, victory or resources to Rama?"

The messenger could only pine within himself and bewail the lack of intelligence that Ravana was exhibiting. He folded his palms in obeisance and stood silent. Then Ravana tore the envelope of the missive that Lakshmana had sent, and after perusing it, handed it over to his minister. He said, "You are like the thithiri bird afraid that the sky will fall upon its young fledglings! Poor thing! It covers the little ones holding its head over them as a cover! Can the sky ever fall and kill the birds? Can these anchorites, these ritual-ridden priests, who try to frighten me by a shower of words, ever succeed?" Suka, the messenger, watched the heroics of Ravana for sometime. Then he intercepted with the words, "Lord! What I have now said is the full truth. Read well and carefully the contents of that letter and act, without any sense of resentment or pride. Listen! Give up the hostility you have developed. Rama is very tender of heart and compassionate. He is the master of the three worlds. If only you approach him, he will take you under his protection and guard you from harm. He will pardon all your wrongs. Surrender Sita to him. Give heed

to my prayer." The envoy pleaded plaintively that Ravana save himself from ruin.

While he was pouring out his pleas, Ravana's eyes reddened with anger and shame. He roared in protest, "What! Do you take me to be a criminal! Did I send you, Oh fool, to go and surrender at the feet of those prattling babies of the forest? Audacity and impertinence cannot go further," and rising from the throne, he kicked the fellow out of the Hall. The Rakshasa, Suka, fled to the camp of Rama and sought refuge. But the Vanaras seeing him again amidst them were moved into revenge. However they restrained themselves, and awaited the orders of Rama. Sugriva led Suka to the presence of Rama. Suka prostrated before Rama and related in detail his story and fate. He prayed that he might be accepted as Vibhishana was accepted, and that he might be protected by his new Master. Rama, as the very embodiment of compassion, called to his presence the leaders of the Vanaras, and directed them to welcome their new brother, Suka. He too was overcome by gratitude and he declared that his life had reached its goal.

Then, Rama directed Lakshmana to bring him the bow and arrow, and when he brought them, Rama said, "Haughty persons deserve no kindness. Mischievously cruel persons deserve no softness. Misers by nature deserve no moral teaching. Egotistic persons deserve no advice. Greedy persons cannot benefit from insistence on renunciation. Persons stricken with anger deserve no counsel on being at

peace. Lust-crazy victims deserve no scriptural readings. Saline fields deserve no seeds of grain. So too this Ocean that does not yield to soft request deserves no mercy." So saying, he fitted an arrow to his bow. At this, Lakshmana was afraid what the consequences would be for the Ocean. The Ocean too was rendered hot at the mere preparation to shoot the arrow into its depths. The denizens of the deep suffered extreme agony. As if terror-stricken, the waves began screaming. Wave after wave rolled towards the place where Rama stood and gently lapped his feet, as if praying for mercy. At that time, a Voice was heard as if from the sky, "Lord! There are two generals in the campus, Nala and Nila, who are targets of a curse pronounced by a sage. That curse can now be used as a blessing, listen. The story can now be told." The Ocean itself communicated the details of that dire incident to Rama.

"There were many hermits living on a river bank in cottages. While young, these two entered these hermitages. While the sages were immersed in deep meditation, seizing the holy icons called saligrams which they worshipped, they used to cast them into the waters of the river. The sages were enraged at this sacrilege and they cast a curse on them, in this manner. 'Boys! May all things that you throw on water never sink. May they float instead. May they remain just where you have thrown them, even if the waters flow fast in floods.' Therefore, every rock they throw will float at the very place. Have your Name inscribed on every slab and rock. Your Name is light, not heavy at all. Thus, even

huge mountain peaks when thrown would float and form a bridge. I shall also contribute my share of help; for when the search is for Truth, all Nature must serve the seeker." Rama decided not to let go the arrow he had fitted; but since his arrow, once fixed had to find a target, he aimed it at a forest area in the far distance and as a result, it became a dry desert.

Rama called together the ministers and directed them to construct the bridge across the Ocean. Hanuman said, "Lord! Your Name is the bridge that can safely transport man across the Ocean of Life. Which bridge can be stronger and safer than that?" Jambavan, the aged General, said, "Lord! Your prowess, which is a raging conflagration, can dry up this mass of water. It is sure to be filled to the brim again by the tears of the women widowed in Lanka during the coming battle with Ravana and his armies."

Rama smiled at the simple sincere loyalty and valour of these devotees. Jambavan reminded Nala and Nila of the assurance given by the unseen source, which was no other than the Ocean itself, about the use that can now be made of the curse they had drawn upon themselves while young. He directed them to install Rama in their hearts and throw hills, hillocks, mountains and rocks into the sea. At this, the Vanara heroes ran in all directions, and brought back entire hills on their heads and shoulders, as if they were as light as balls used for games. They stood in one long line and passed the hills from shoulder to shoulder, all the while repeating aloud the Name of Rama. Off and on,

they also uprooted huge trees and passed them onward to the bridge site, where Nala and Nila were casting the materials into the water.

The whole of that day they worked without rest and with no thought of food or sustenance. They built a length of fourteen yojanas in one day. Refreshed by a good night's sleep, they rose before dawn, during the *Brahmamuhurtha* itself, and resumed work. They acclaimed with cheers, "Jai to Sri Ramachandra, our Lord," and hurried to the various corners of the land in search of hills and mountains. They brought them onto the shore and piled them there for being used by Nala and Nila.

The second day, the bridge was extended by another twenty yojanas. The next day, they were able to build it for a further length of twenty-one yojanas. The fourth day saw the bridge extending over a further twenty-two yojanas. And, on the fifth day, by constructing a further twenty-three yojanas, they completed the 100-yojana bridge in another successful spurt.

Thus, Nala and Nila, unconcerned with exhaustion or the need for rest, intent on fulfilling the task assigned by Rama for the completion of his mission, were able to announce in the Presence of Rama that the bridge was ready, because his Name and Form were ever before those who toiled for its completion.

Rama was informed through Sugriva that the hundred-yojana bridge, he had resolved upon was finished and ready

to be used. Rama and Lakshmana were pleased at the devotion and sense of duty of the Vanaras, who finished the job so soon and so well. Rama directed the Ruler of the Monkeys, Sugriva, to pass along the long line of Vanaras the order that each one should deposit the hill he was transporting at the time, at the very place he stood, and take a little rest before returning to base. Sugriva conveyed the order to those who were engaged in passing from shoulder to shoulder, the boulders and peaks for the bridge. Hanuman was at that moment transporting a huge hill from the far north. When he heard that Rama had ordered that it be deposited, he cast it down, near Brindavan where he was at the time. He was surprised to hear a loud wail from the fallen peak. "Alas," it cried, "I have lost the chance of service to Rama." It could not be consoled or comforted. When Hanuman brought its condition to the notice of Rama, Rama smiled in appreciation. He said, "Ah! Even mountains are yearning anxiously to participate in this task!" He expressed joy at their enthusiasm. He told Hanuman, "Go quickly. Console the hill. Tell it not to be sad. During the coming Dwapara Age, I shall hold that hill high on my palm, for seven days and nights. On hearing this, the peak will be happy." That assurance made it the Govardhana Hill, which the Lord held aloft as promised in the Tretha Age.

On the fifth day, Rama sat on the seashore, and was delighted when he saw the bridge. "Oh Vanaras," he said, "Your devotion and skill in service are beyond description. By your sense of dedication you have won my heart." At

that time, Vibhishana came into the presence and said, "Lord, we have to enter Lanka tomorrow. So I have a prayer to place before you." Rama replied, "What is it? Tell me." Vibhishana continued, "Ravana is a devout worshipper of Siva. He has intense attachment towards that aspect of Godhead. Yet, it is certain he will meet death at your hands. I pray that, to commemorate his devotion to Siva, you may, on the eve of moving towards Lanka and entering it through this bridge, install a Sivalinga here, so that in coming centuries, when people enter Lanka along this route, they can worship the Sivalinga and remember these events. They would indeed be fortunate to have such an experience. The Linga would be extolled by them as Rama Lingeswara, the Idol installed by Rama. Even when the bridge is eroded and crumbled by time, the spot could be identified by future generations by means of the Idol worshipped here." Rama was happy at the suggestion. He said, "I shall fulfil your wish. You are the future Ruler of Lanka, and in order to please you, I am ready to carry out your wishes, whatever is involved." At this, Sugriva directed the Vanaras to get all the requisites for the installation. He procured an impressive Linga sending Hanuman himself for the purpose. Rama performed the ceremonial ablution for the Linga with water from the sea and invoked Vitality and Grace into It. Rama's words had the effect of mantra or sacred formula. So, nothing more was needed to sanctify the Linga. The Vanaras uttered hymns and their ecstatic shouts echoed from the heavens. Amidst the Jai Jai of the hordes standing around, Lakshmana and Sugriva helped Rama to plant the

Linga in position and to complete the ceremony of Consecration.

Then, the Vanaras started marching over the bridge in regular formation, with the picture of Rama in their minds and the name of Rama on their tongues. The scene was inexpressibly sublime. Rama and Lakshmana stood on the bridge and looked at the sea surging on both sides. The presence of Rama, the Ocean of Compassion, raised the spirits of the Ocean below. Waves rose to catch a glimpse of Rama. The denizens of the sea peeped over the waters and frolicked in joy at the sight of Rama. They discarded their natures and stared long and hungrily at the Divine Form of Rama. The Vanaras had prepared a Camp on the Lanka end of the bridge. So when the vanguard reached the heights, the news spread throughout the island. Very soon, Rama, Lakshmana, Sugriva and Vibhishana, who crossed at a slow pace, also reached the main gate of the fort of Lanka. Accepting the orders of Rama, the Vanaras plucked entire trees and dancing in joy, they ate the fruits and cast the branches and twigs over the battlements into the City itself. They heaved huge boulders over the wall and dropped them into the streets beyond. They sought out Rakshasas moving about alone outside the fort. They teased and tormented them, threatening to wring their necks. Such pranks of the monkeys could not be restrained.

Very soon, news reached Ravana that the enemy was at the gate. Though possessed of ten throats, Ravana was using only one throat so far to communicate with others;

but now he roared through *all the ten*, in anger and hate. He did not remember that it was a bad omen to speak through the ten throats! There was a curse laid on him long ago, that when he spoke through all the ten his end would draw near. Within a few seconds of the roar, he recollects the curse and was frightened at the fact. But however much he attempted to control the other throats, his voice came out of all the ten. The Rakshasas who noted this strange occurrence inferred that his destruction was imminent, now that Rama and his Vanara armies had entered Lanka. They sat amidst their wives and children and lamented that their lives would end that day or the next. They decided to use the little time they had at their disposal in merrymaking and pleasure. When calamity approaches, discrimination departs, says the proverb.

Even when he knew that the curse was coming true, Ravana dismissed the warning, and told himself that nothing evil would happen to him. He moved into the Queen's apartments, for, he was afraid the Ministers might read from his fallen face that he was overcome by the awareness of the curse. Ravana sank within himself through anxiety and agony. "Will they, as when my sister fell into their hands, slice off the noses and ears of my ten heads? Or will they slice off the heads themselves?" These fears haunted him.

He saw Mandodari, the Queen, in the apartment. Her eyes discovered that Ravana had become forlorn. She decided to administer wise counsel to him. She held his hands in hers and in a soft, smooth and sweet voice, she

said, "Lord! Please listen to me, give up your anger; pay heed to my words. Think them over carefully. Those whom we can win over by reverence and devotion, we should not plan to win by hatred and opposition. In such circumstances, we have to resort to intelligent reasoning. It will not bring any good if we oppose such sacred persons. You cannot achieve victory if you encounter Rama. The glow-worm cannot vanquish the Sun. Listen to me. Take Sita, at least this moment, and while returning her safely, prostrate before him and pray for pardon. Do not ruin your life and destroy Lanka and sacrifice the lives of its women and children. Persisting in your resolve to fight is not in line with the devotion and dedication to God that you are famous for. If you hold fast to this horrid decision, even Siva, whom you have pleased hitherto, is sure to give you up. Good deeds alone can win the grace of God. How can God reward and appreciate such heinous acts?"

Mandodari spoke in this strain for a long time trying to mend his ways and to save him from destruction. "Lord! You are as dear to me as my own life. Pay heed. Rama is no ordinary human prince. He is the very person who destroyed Madhu and Kaitabha come again. He killed Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakasipu. He is the Lord who trampled on the head of Emperor Bali. He demolished the pride of the thousand-armed Karthaviryarjuna. Then why boast of the prowess of your mere twenty? He is worshipped by the entire world. He is of the most auspicious form. A long time ago, you had yourselves told me that Brahma had told

you that God would incarnate as Rama in order to relieve the earth of the burden of cruelty and vice. Do you not remember? Aware of all this, how is it that you do not give up this path, and recognise the truth? Return to Rama the Acme of Chastity, the Diadem of the Virtuous, the Incomparable Jewel of beauty, Sita. Then let us crown our son as Emperor of this realm and spend the rest of our days in peace and plentiful joy in the immediate presence of Rama. Ah! How fortunate is your brother! He is moving in the cool shade of Rama's grace. It is not too late. At this very moment, hasten towards Rama who is at the very entrance of Lanka and fall at his feet, praying for pardon."

Mandodari, was in tears when she spoke thus. She rolled at the feet of her lord, appealing to him to be warned in good time and to take immediate measures to rescue himself and his empire, his people and his fame. Ravana raised her to her feet and wiped her eyes. He said, "Dear one! Why are you agitated thus? Wherfrom all this fear, this lack of courage? There is no one more powerful than me in the world. The rulers of the eight directions have been defeated by the might of my arm. Death dare not step near me. Do not yield to fear. You are extolling that weakling Rama in my hearing unaware of the depth and extent of my might." With these words, he left the Queen and entered the Audience Hall, where he promptly sat on the Throne. Mandodari noticed his movements and the trend of his thoughts. She said to herself, "What a fool! This is the inevitable fate of persons who do not give up their false

pride. Good counsel cannot enter their minds. When one is suffering from fever, sweet things taste bitter. He is now having the poisonous fever of pride. Therefore, nectarine counsel is rejected by him, as if it is poison. What more can I do now?" She pictured in her mind the calamities and sorrows that were in store for Lanka. She felt that, before witnessing and sharing in all that misery and grief, it would be better to end life itself. With a heavy heart and with thoughts of Rama filling her, she went into her room and threw herself on the bed.

Meanwhile, Ravana sent for his ministers and set about making preparations for the battle that was imminent. "Rakshasas!" he accosted, "The Vanaras, the Jambavanths, and the men who are now attacking us are not even a morsel for our maws. Do not lose courage, hesitate or argue. Plunge into the fight. Get ready," he yelled. But Prahasta stood up from his seat, and with folded palms, he said, "Rakshasas! Let us not desert the right path. Lord! These ministers of yours speak words that are in line with your desire. But that will not ensure success. One solitary monkey crossed the ocean and coming into our City performed many a wonderful feat. At that time, these ministers and these armies could not put an end to his destructive antics. You say monkeys are but morsels for our maws. Well, when that monkey was here, where were those maws? Did they have no hunger? When it burnt the City into a heap of ashes, these ministers had evidently no appetite to eat it! Lord, the words that fall from the lips of these ministers might

appear very pleasant to you now but they will bring about dire calamities as time moves on. Think about all this in the quiet hours. Rama has struck camp on our Suneela Mountain. He came over the sea through a bridge they constructed. He has with him an army of uncounted numbers of Vanaras. Can such a person be a mere man? Give up that surmise if you believe so. Do not prattle as the tongue, that is let loose, talks. Do not welcome into your ears the rhetoric of these ministers. Do not also condemn me as a coward, afraid of battle. Believe in me and in the aptness and urgency of my advice. Take Sita with you now and surrender her to him, praying for pardon. That step will save us and save Lanka. We can then claim that we have rescued our tribe from destruction. This is the triumph we can achieve. Or else, face defeat and disaster. Get ready this very moment. Your renown will last as long as the Sun and Moon endure. Do not acquire a name that will be execrated so long as the Sun and Moon endure."

Ravana replied in dire anger and sheer bravado. He was trembling with rage at the unpalatable advice that Prahastha gave him. Raising his voice to a wild roar, he admonished Prahastha in a torrent of abuse. "Fool! Who taught you this trickery? Whence did you derive such wisdom? They say, sparks originate in bamboo clusters! You are born in my clan." Ravana gnashed his teeth wildly. He shouted harsh and vulgar abuse. Finally, he kicked Prahastha out of the Hall. But before going out, Prahastha clarified his stand condemning his father and his

overweening pride which had rendered him blind. Ravana, he said, would be the cause of the destruction of the dynasty. He consoled himself that for one who is mortally stricken and is awaiting his last breath, no drug can be of any use. "So my good advice appeared futile to my father," he told himself. He proceeded straight to his mother and related all that happened. Both agreed that there was nothing they could say or do, which would turn him on to the right path. So they sat together and were lost in the contemplation of Rama and his majesty.

The Vanaras put up a nice camp for Rama and Lakshmana on the Suvela Hill. They prepared soft rests for them, heaping grass, leaves and flowers, and made them into nice beds. Rama appeared as soon as they had finished. He sat upon it, to give them joy. A little later, he placed his head on Sugriva's lap and went to sleep. Bows and arrows were kept in readiness on both sides of the bed. The Vanaras were scratching their palms which itched, in anticipation of hitting Ravana and killing him. They were holding back only because Rama had not given them the "go." Hanuman, the lucky, and the Crown Prince Angada were reverentially massaging the feet of Rama. Lakshmana was standing at the foot of the bed, ready with his bow and arrow, observing the face of Rama with one-pointed attention. At this moment, Rama looked out towards the East. His eyes fell on the Moon, which was rising above the horizon. "Friends," he said, "Look at the Moon. There is a dark patch on the Moon. Don't you see it?" he asked. Each one of

them answered about the patch the way he felt; but Hanuman confessed, "Lord! I do not see any dark patch on the Moon. I see it as the reflection of your face. So I do not see the patch you mentioned, or any other blemish."

That night Rama spent with the Vanaras until dawn, with delightful talk and in pleasant companionship. When day brightened, he had his bath in the sea and he performed there, on the shore itself, the rituals prescribed. He called together the ministers of Sugriva and other leaders and gave them instructions about the task ahead. Later, they met and agreed unanimously that Angada, the son of Vali and the Heir-apparent of the Vanara Kingdom, be sent as an Envoy to Ravana, before launching the siege of Lanka. Rama called Angada forward and told him, "Son, you are strong and virtuous. You have to go on a Mission from Rama to Ravana and advise Ravana cleverly and cautiously, softly and assuringly, without making him further enraged." He was given directions about the tone and contents of what he had to tell Ravana. He took leave, after prostrating at the feet of Rama. While departing, he said, "Master! Pray bless me with the auspicious look of your eyes. I am indeed fortunate that I am entrusted with this work. Whatever might happen to me while executing it, I am ready to offer my very life to you." Rama's heart melted with compassion when he heard these words of Angada. Rama came forward, clasped Angada to his bosom and placed his palm on his head, showering blessings on him.

Angada then moved into the City, with Rama installed in his heart and his Form ever in his mind. He pushed aside

everyone who alerted and stopped him on the way and displayed great self-confidence and courage. He encountered the son of Ravana on the way. The Rakshasa Prince accosted him and inquired, "Here, Oh Monkey! Who are you and wherefrom?" Angada replied, "I am Angada, Envoy of Rama." At this, the Rakshasa raised his foot to kick Angada. But Angada was too quick for him. He caught him by the foot and raising him aloft twirled his body until he dashed him on the ground. The Rakshasas who witnessed this were struck with terror. They realised that the monkey was of gigantic might and kept discreetly away. News spread that the monkey that had set Lanka aflame had returned and this created widespread confusion and fear. Angada noticed, wherever he turned, panic-stricken groups of inhabitants were watching his movements. He had no need to ask any group to clear the path. They hurried out as soon as he was sighted.

At last, he fearlessly stepped into the Audience Hall of Ravana himself. One of the guards carried the news of Angada's arrival in hot haste to Ravana. Ravana directed him to bring the Envoy to his presence and, accordingly, Angada was taken right before the Rakshasa Emperor. Angada saw Ravana as a conscious mountain, black in colour. His twenty hands were as the branches of a giant tree. He walked up to him with no trace of fear in his heart. But all those present in that hall shuddered in their heart of hearts as they saw him enter and proceed. They were in a state of stupor. Ravana asked Angada who he was. Angada

replied, "I am the Envoy of Rama." At this Ravana asked him the purpose of his visit. "Oh Ravana!" Angada began, "you and my father were friends of old. Therefore, with your welfare in view, I have come at the orders of Rama to give you some sound advice." Angada continued softly and persuasively, "You brought away the 'Mother of all the Worlds, the Daughter of Janaka.' You were unable to withstand pride or lust and greed. Well, let bygones be bygones. At least today, at this very moment, if you realise the fact of your iniquity and act as I am telling you, Rama will pardon you. Decide to do as I suggest, without delay. Or else, with your own hand, you will bury in this soil your clan and your kingdom." When Angada spoke thus, Ravana exclaimed, "Oh vilest of Vanaras! You are indeed a fool. Perhaps you do not know that I am a foe of your 'God.' What is your name? What was the relation between me and your father? Don't be blind to the consequences of your speech."

Angada laughed outright at this outburst. He said, "Oh Monarch of Rakshasas. My name is Angada. My father's name is Vali. There was friendship between you two." Hearing the words that Angada spoke, Ravana was rendered stiff and silent. But he overcame the reaction soon and said, "True, true, there was, I remember, a monkey of that name in olden days. Oh, are you his son? Hello, Angada! You seem to have been born in that clump as a spark of fire in order to destroy it?" Angada laughed aloud at the excited reply from Ravana. He said, "Ravana, your days have come

to an end. You will soon be reaching your old friend Vali. He can tell you there the consequence of opposing Rama. Equipped with twenty eyes, you are nevertheless blind. Burdened with twenty appendages called ears, you are deaf. Caught in the thick night of ignorance, you strut in pride, proclaiming yourself great! The tribe you plan to save will be effaced. That is the plan. Sinner! Vile Barbarian! Villain blinded by pride! Demon!" When Angada gnashed his teeth in anger and poured on his head the stream of abuse, Ravana rose from his throne in a trice and shouted, "You monkey, you destroyer of your own race! Since I know and recognise the rules of political morality, I am bearing in silence your impertinence, beware. There is a limit to my patience." Ravana stared at Angada in fiery anger. But Angada was not at all affected by that demonstration. He retorted, "Oh Rakshasa Monarch! I have heard much of your righteousness, your virtues, and your political morality. Consider what wonderful achievements your righteousness has effected. Kidnapping the wife of another person, devouring the messenger duly sent by your elder brother, Kubera. These are the highlights of your political morality! You are boasting of these without a trace of shame. You dare talk of your virtues and your morality? You set fire to the tail of the messenger who came to your kingdom, and yet you proclaim without shame that you are bound by rules. Such is the behaviour of Rakshasas. You have no right at all to utter the word political morality, with your tongue. You are the vilest sinner."

When Angada was replying, without break or hesitation, the courtiers who filled the Audience Hall were aghast with fear, wondering what was in store for them. Ravana resumed his talk. He said, "Listen, monkey! Is there a single hero in your camp who can stand up against me in battle? Your Lord is broken down in sorrow at separation from his wife. He is pining and pining every day. His brother is affected and weakened by the sight of the agony. And, Sugriva? He hates you and is opposed to you, since you are the heir to the kingdom. Like a pair of birds fighting on the edge of a river, you will both drop into the flood someday. Both of you have your eyes on the same Kingdom. How then can you fight wholeheartedly and successfully against me? My brother, upon whom you seem to rely, is a coward. Jambavantha, another of your leaders, is too old to be of any use. Nala and Nila are but engineers, unaware of the art of wielding swords."

Angada interrupted this tirade and cut in with his own. "Ravana! One tiny monkey entered your City and set it on flame. Did any fool believe that it was ever possible? Now you, who know it is true, deny that the monkey is a valiant fighter. I am not in the least affected by anger when you declare that there is no one in our camp who can defeat you in battle. Yes, the texts on morality lay down that either friendship or enmity has to be only with equals. Will anyone praise a lion for destroying a frog? Surely, the attempt by Rama to kill you is too low for his status and dignity. Killing such a mean contemptible foe is something that will reduce

his majesty. The rules that lay down the conduct and characteristics of the Kshatriya caste to which he belongs are high and noble. You are a vicious, vile, vulgar sinner, who must meet death at the hands of mere monkeys only."

Ravana burst into desperate laughter. "Nasty monkeys! You dance in glee and jump shamelessly hither and thither, as the person who holds the rope tied round your waist commands. You learn the tricks he teaches and repeat them whenever he orders you, so that he may collect a few coins from the onlookers." Angada could not put up with these sarcastic remarks. He ejaculated, "You seem to know only about animals. You have not cared to know about the Lord, about God, about Destiny and about Fate. Why, have not monkeys taught you more than you know? They have demolished your parks, they have killed your son, they have reduced your City into a pile of ash. Yes, they have to perform one more feat, yet. They have to administer proper punishment to you. We have allowed you to escape the fate that you must meet. I believed that your heart will be cured by downright advice and harsh truth. But no, you have no sense of shame. You have no idea of repentance. You have no trace of morality, no habit of rectitude. What a pity! You are still gnashing your teeth in anger at Vibhishana and calling him names, like coward and traitor. You are burdening the earth by the weight of your body. The sooner you are eliminated the better. You are worse than the dogs that infest your streets. They do not have the vices you suffer from. You will soon realise that their lives are better than yours."

Angada poured abuse on Ravana regardless of convention and manners. Ravana could not digest such fiery admonitions. "Angada! Know that I am the hero, the redoubtable stalwart, who lifted the Kailasa peak by sheer physical power and courage. This Ravana is the person who laid, not flowers but his own heads, plucked by him from his body, as offerings at the Feet of Siva. This is the devotee whose might has been acknowledged by Siva himself. This is the warrior whose name strikes terror in the bravest, whose picture spreads panic. Stop your prattle praising yourself and your patrons." But Angada was in no mood to stop. He continued his onslaught. "Oh you conceited fool! Don't chatter away like this. Use your breath for some good purpose. Sing some songs in praise of Rama. Surrender to Him. Or else, the arrow of Rama will make your heads leap like balls from the shoulder where they are now resting. And the Vanaras will gleefully kick them about, as in a ball game. I happen to be the messenger from Sugriva, our Ruler. I have, unfortunately, no orders from Sri Rama; and I do not desire to deprive them the chance, or else, I would have put an end to your life in a trice and cast your carcass into the ocean."

Angada grew into a fierce phenomenon as he uttered this threat. Like the lion, he slapped the ground with his palms. The earth shook so hard at the impact of those blows that the crowns on Ravana's ten heads shook and fell on the floor. Ravana rolled from his throne, but he recovered balance very soon. Angada collected four of the ten, and

threw them with such great force and sure aim that they fell into the camp of Rama, right within the Presence. The Vanaras there were struck with wonder at the strange articles and they described to each other the excellences and beauties of the jewelled crowns. Rama knew what they were. He said that, while coming over, they appeared like Rahu and Kethu, which cause eclipses.

Meanwhile, Ravana commanded, "Bind this monkey. Don't allow him to depart. Eat him up," and hastily retired to the inner apartments. Angada shouted, "Shame on you! Why all this boast of strength and prowess? Go, dip yourself in the depths of the sea and hold your breath until you die. Woman stealer! Fool! Lust-ridden lout! I shall pluck your tongue out of your mouth on the battlefield and throw it as food for crows. Be warned." Angada was gnashing his teeth in hateful anger, when Ravana turned back and called on the Rakshasas in the Hall, "Lift him by the legs and throw him on the floor. Splinter his head." At this, Meghanada rose from his seat and holding Angada by his legs pulled him with great force in order to make him fall. Many others rushed forward to help him. However many they were, they could not move the feet even a wee bit. They only rolled on the ground, full of humiliation and unable to decide what to do next. Then, Devakantaka tried various holds to make the feet move. He too failed ignominiously. At last, Ravana himself attempted the impossible task. He held Angada by his legs and wanted to lift him and throw him forcibly on the floor. Angada laughed at Ravana's foolishness. He said,

"Ravana! No, these are not the feet you have to hold. Place your hands on the Feet of Rama, in the genuine gesture of surrender. That will liberate you from fear and bondage."

With these words, Angada shook his feet in order to loosen the hold. The impact of that gesture was so unexpected and so strong that Ravana hit the floor and lost consciousness. His glory and splendour were destroyed. The sense of shame spread over his faces and he looked like the moon in broad daylight, pale and poor. Angada looked at his plight and felt that he should not continue his dialogue with the coward. Rama, he remembered, had told him only to administer some good advice to Ravana. "This fellow will not yield to good counsel, he will not realise his error and correct himself. He sticks to his vicious nature. War alone can give effective cure." Deciding thus, Angada left for the sacred proximity of the Feet of Rama. Reaching there, he submitted a report of all that had happened.

Ravana entered the apartments of the queens, overwhelmed by shame and fear. Mandodari noted the pallid crestfallen appearance of Ravana. She said, "At least, now, give up your foolish tenacity. To cultivate enmity towards Rama will bring disaster to the kingdom itself. You could not step across the line drawn by Lakshmana. How then could you hope to defeat them in battle? Your powers and might are but dry leaves before them. Your followers could not overpower the messengers they sent. Can you ever hope to overwhelm them when they invade this land in their billions? You could not stir Angada's feet even a hair

breadth, and yet, you hope to capture and bind billions of such Vanaras! I am pained that, in spite of all experience already available, you are still holding on obstinately to your resolution. Our son was killed. Your city was reduced into a heap of ash. Your parks were uprooted. Countless Rakshasas were thrown up like balls and killed by the fall. Where were your strength and skills at that time? boastful declarations can inflict no harm on these Vanaras."

"Lord," Mandodari pleaded, "Pardon me for these words. You are badly mistaken when you consider Rama a mere man. He is the Master of the Universe. He is an invincible hero. You are already aware of the extent of his might and valour, aren't you? Recollect the facts related by Angada, quietly within yourself. Remember! You were seated in the gathering of kings in the Hall of Janaka, to exhibit your strength and skill; but you failed even to shift a little the position of the Bow of Siva. Rama lifted it as if it was a spurt of playfulness and cast it aside in broken halves. This demonstration of might was seen with your own eyes. If you still do not give up your foolish tenacity, it is an indication that your destruction is imminent. What could you do when the nose and ears of your own sister, Surpanakha, were sliced off? Are you not ashamed to proclaim and boast about your strength and your heroism, after all these experiences? Rama killed Vali with a single arrow. Was Vali an ordinary foe? Rama has now come with his army of Vanaras and encamped on the Suvela Hill. Rama is the very embodiment of Righteousness and Morality; or

else, why should he send an envoy to you, as he has done, to advise you how you can still save yourself? This envoy has tried to turn your mind towards accord with Rama. But you do not give up your sense of pride. You do not appreciate the moral sense that moves Rama. You do not understand the virtues that animate the supremely sacred Person who has sent the envoy. You are causing the downfall of your own kingdom! What could you do now to throw out Angada, the envoy, who entered the Audience Hall? There are in their camp thousands, nay, lakhs of Vanaras, mightier and more destructive than this one. Listen to my words, give up this demonic passion. Go and surrender to Rama." These words of counsel reminding Ravana of happenings in the past, struck his heart like sharp arrows.

Meanwhile, a new day dawned. Ravana entered the Audience Hall as the very personification of Vicious Pride and installed himself on the Throne. Inside his head were revolving fast and furious the words of both Angada and Mandodari. Plans, fears, schemes, and surmises rolled inside him, like the earth and sky rotating round him. But none of them was along right lines, for the day of destruction of the demon clan of Rakshasas was drawing near.

Ravana accosted a Rakshasa named Vidyutjihva, and said, "Fellow! Use your magic skill and bring before me the 'head' of Rama as well as his 'bow and arrows.' Seeing them, Sita must believe them genuine. She must be plunged in grief!" Vidyutjihva rose from his seat in a trice and moved out of the Hall. He made a correct replica of the 'bow and

arrows' of Rama as well as of his head. Ravana was pleased at the exactness of reproduction. With them, he himself proceeded to Asokavana, where Sita was kept in confinement. Holding them before her, he said, "Oh Sita! See, these are the bow and arrows, this the head of the very person whom you are pining for and extolling, night and day. I have annihilated the Vanara hordes. Lakshmana has saved himself by fleeing from the field. In order to convince you that all this has really happened, I have brought before you this head, this bow and these arrows. Look at them." With these words, he placed them before her. Sita was hit by grief for just one moment; but she reminded herself that there was no one, in the fourteen worlds, who could pluck that head. She knew that this was a mean trick played to terrorise her and she brushed aside the threats. She said "Ravana! Surely, your destruction has arrived. Or else, such abominable thoughts would not have come into you. You have no courage even to approach Rama. How then could you ever hope to kill him? Even in a dream, you cannot realise that hope. This is a dirty magic trick which fails to deceive me." Sita poured scorn and insults on Ravana. Meanwhile, loud exultant shouts of "Jai," "Jai for Lord Rama," "Jai for Lord Rama," were heard from all around. The Vanaras had entered the City from all directions! Ravana hurried back into his palace and the Audience Hall.

The good woman, Sarama, wife of Vibhishana, then came near Sita and consoled and comforted her. She said, "Mother! This Ravana is a trickster and all that he does is

subterfuge. No one can dare hurt Rama; just now, he has triumphantly entered Lanka with his Vanara hordes. Lanka is being shattered into shreds by the very shouts of the Monkeys."

THE SIEGE

When Rama heard from Angada what had happened at Lanka and learnt from him the attitude and alertness of the enemy, he called together the chief leaders and commissioned them to decide how best to lay siege to the four gates of the City. At this, the Ruler of the Monkeys (Sugriva), the Ruler of the Bears (Jambavan) and the Ruler of the Rakshasas (Vibhishana) met together. They decided on the division of their forces into four, under commanders and guides. Then they fell at the feet of Rama and enthused by his blessings, they gave orders for attack.

With Rama in their hearts, the Vanaras armed with boulders and trees rolled forward in terror-striking floods. Lanka was reputed impregnable, but the blessings of Rama helped them to break into it. The Eastern Gate was stormed by the forces under Nala. The Southern Gate was breached

by the millions under the command of Angada. The Western Gate fell before the onslaught of the army led by Hanuman. The Northern Gate was guarded by Ravana himself, and Rama fought with him there. The Vanaras had no war drums or trumpets, but the “Ram—Ram” they voiced forth in devotion rose as one Call from all throats and echoed from the sky. The entire City of Lanka was sunk in confusion and panic. Ravana was blinded by foolish pride. He was exulting at the prospect of victory over the opposing forces, and revelling in the thought that the festive day of victory had dawned for the Rakshasa Sun.

The Rakshasas had taken up positions over walls and turrets and bastions of the fort, just as clouds on the peaks of the Meru Mountain. They were beating drums and blowing trumpets. Their shouts of “Victory for Ravana” confronted the confident shout “Victory for Rama, the Lord.” The boulders that the Rakshasas were hurling on the Vanaras attacking their walls and attempting to scale them, were seized ere they fell by the Vanaras and hurled back with fatal effect on the very Rakshasas crowding the walls. The advance of the Vanaras gained in momentum as the fight progressed. They killed the Rakshasas wherever and whenever they caught them. As a giant storm scatters the clouds into the four directions, the mounting onslaught of the Vanaras so dismayed the Rakshasas that they fled into the distance and the City was shrouded in despair.

Women, old men, and children began blaming Ravana for bringing about the calamity that had descended on their

heads. Some Rakshasas gave up the fight, and fled with their wives and children, in order to escape certain death. Noticing such groups, Ravana gnashed his teeth in anger and yelled, "Cowards, backing out of battle! I shall cut you into pieces with my Diamond Sword!" At this, a few of the fleeing Rakshasas stayed in the fray. Meanwhile, the Vanara heroes penetrated the enemy lines and reinforced by their contemplation on Rama they entered the inner fortress of Ravana himself, and succeeded in razing it to the ground. They plucked a pillar of gold and wielding it as a weapon, started their orgy of destruction. Every Rakshasa they encountered was given a terrible beating. Then, his head was severed and cast away, with such force and such aim that it fell right in front of Ravana himself. When darkness fell, the Vanaras, after demonstrating their superior might and heroism before the Rakshasas, presented themselves before Rama.

The Rakshasas are nocturnal beings, so when night fell, their acclamation and fury increased manyfold. Their shouts of "Victory to Ravana" fell on the ears of the Vanaras like the roar of lions. The Vanaras plunged into battle again. The Rakshasa generals, Akampa and Athikaya through their magical skill spread pitch darkness over the four quarters. Under cover of the blackness, heavy rains of dust, stones and blood were poured on the enemy forces. The Vanaras could not distinguish friend from foe. They were afraid to fight with full fury. They prayed, "Rama! Rama," in a loud voice, so that they could gain courage and give the enemy

a good fight. Rama heard their cries. He called together Angada and Hanuman and told them that the magic skill of the Rakshasas had caused the commotion. They were furious at the shameful tactics of the enemy, but Rama coolly pulled out the Agneyastra, the Fire-arrow from his sheath, and shot it into the darkness they had designed. The effulgence of that arrow destroyed the darkness, and filled the area with splendid illumination. The Vanaras and the Bears set about their task of overwhelming and destroying the enemy with redoubled energy and enthusiasm. When the triumphant yell of Angada and Hanuman were heard, the Rakshasas took to their heels and fled. But they could not escape. The Vanaras caught them by their feet and threw them far out into the sea! The Rakshasas retreated into their camp when night advanced. They had no energy left for continuing the fight. The Vanaras came into the Presence of Rama. When the eyes of Rama fell upon them, they were all refreshed and recouped, with no trace of exhaustion.

Meanwhile, Ravana summoned his ministers and addressed them thus: "This day, thousands of Rakshasas were slain on the battlefield by the Vanaras. We have now to plan our strategy to foil them." Then up rose Malyavantha, the aged Minister who had served Ravana's father and who was also the father of Ravana's mother. He counselled various rightful and moral paths for his edification. "Ravana," he began, very endearingly, "Listen to my words in calmness. Pardon me for being outright. Ever since you brought Sita here, bad omens have been

witnessed. It is not possible to describe them in detail. The glory of Rama, the Supreme Person, cannot be measured and extolled adequately even by the Vedas. By opposing this Cosmic Person, this Virat Purusha, you cannot earn any good, or win any grace. You would do well to ponder over this calmly. Rama is the very Person who slew Hiranyakasipu and Hiranyaksha. He is the repository of all virtues. Do not entertain hatred against Him. Oh Emperor! Save Lanka, I pray. Surrender Sita to Rama. Do not delay any longer. Your safety lies in immediate surrender." Thus saying, Malyantha bowed his head and performed obeisance to the Ruler. These words hurt Ravana. He was infuriated. He ejaculated, "You seem to be determined to enter the jaws of Death. Your senility is pleading with me to pardon you; or else, I would have hacked you to pieces. Beware, get up and go out of my sight." Ravana hissed like an angry serpent. Malyantha felt sorry, for he feared Ravana's end was fast approaching. He laughed within himself at the conceit and ignorance that had blinded Ravana. He concluded that he was yielding to ruinous reasoning and foolish reactions, brushing aside the advice that would save him and his empire, because destiny had decided to close his career.

At that moment, Meghanada rose and said, "Father, do not hesitate. Tomorrow, during the morning hours, you can witness my skill in war. I shall demonstrate in action much more than I declare in words." His assurance mollified Ravana's anger and assuaged him a little. He was filled

with joy. It gave him courage and hope. He drew his son near and caressed him fondly. He patted his head and extolled, before all, the bravery and heroic heart of his son. The Assembly dispersed about midnight. Each member hied back to his own residence, but not one of them had a wink of sleep. Nor had anyone the appetite for food. All were sunk in anxiety and terror about the calamity which might overtake them any moment. Even as they were rolling in fear, dawn spread over the east. The Vanaras and the Bears laid siege to Lanka from all directions. Confusion and panic raised their heads. Their roars echoed from the sky. The Rakshasa warriors too had to take up arms and oppose them. They had no other alternative. The rain of rocks and hills that fell on the City from the walls around were fought back with arrows and other weapons from billions of Rakshasas. They too shouted and yelled, reverberating the sky as on doomsday. But the huge peaks and hilltops that the Vanaras threw at them reduced the Rakshasa hordes into a mass of lifeless pulp.

Enraged at the news that the Vanaras had rushed into the City, Meghanada took up arms and advanced to attack them. The hordes that followed him, beat their war drums and sounded their clarions. Meghanada was famous as Indrajit, for he had once overwhelmed in battle no less a person than Indra, the Ruler of the Gods. He was the chief among Lanka's generals and a terrible warrior. The Vanaras lost courage when they espied him on his chariot. Sighting the flight of the enemy forces, Meghanada shouted in joy

and stringing his mighty bow, he shot a rain of arrows upon them. Drawing the string right back to his ear, he shot the arrows fast and furious. They flew like winged serpents in all directions. So the Vanaras were afraid to face him. They lost the urge to fight and retreated. Some were felled by arrows, others fainted and fell. Witnessing the pitiable plight of the Vanaras, Hanuman was overcome with rage. He hastened towards Meghanada, full of fury appearing as the God of Death Himself! He plucked a mountain peak that was nearby and threw it at the Rakshasa leader. As soon as he saw the peak rushing towards him like the messenger of Death, Meghanada used his magical skill to rise up into the sky. His chariot, the horses and the charioteer were all crushed underneath that peak as it fell exactly where it was aimed. Meghanada designed many other magic stratagems. But his design to create terror in Hanuman was as ineffective as the attempt of a miniature snake to terrorise the King of Eagles, Garuda. He showered fire from the sky. He rained blood. He spread thick night, when day was bright. The darkness was so dense that one could not see his own palm spread before his eyes. The Vanaras were confused and rendered despondent by such tactics. They felt that their end had come.

Rama saw the tricks into which the Rakshasas had descended in their despair. He laughed within himself at their helplessness. He became aware that the Vanaras had lost confidence and courage. So he shot one single arrow into the fray. The magic of the Rakshasa was mortally hit

and it no longer worked. Brightness was restored to the earth, as if the Sun had risen in the sky. The Vanaras recovered self-confidence and advanced towards the Rakshasa ranks. The compassionate glance of Rama fell upon them and they were refreshed. The entire Vanara horde shouted with one voice, "Jai," "Jai for our Lord, Rama," and pressed forward against all odds. Nothing could halt them. No one could delay their advance. To heighten courage and quicken their pace, Lakshmana joined Hanuman, and with his mighty bow and sharp arrows he fell upon Meghanada. Ravana heard that Lakshmana had jumped into the fray and so he hastened to send strong reinforcements to support his son on the field. The Vanaras fought without respite, armed with tree and rocks. Both sides fought ferociously with unabated fury. Most of the fight centred round duels between warriors and leaders. The Vanaras hit with their clenched fists and bit with their sharp teeth. This caused the death of a vast number of Rakshasas. They clipped with their nails many a head from the shoulders on which they rested. They pulled many a hand from the sockets in which they were fastened. The yell of victory with which the Vanaras announced their triumph resounded among the Nine Islands. Headless corpses of the Rakshasas continued to run along the directions which the Rakshasas had taken while alive. Seeing this eerie phenomenon, the Vanaras broke into ribald laughter. The roads that criss-crossed over the vast field of battle were filled with streams of blood.

Lakshmana and Meghanada were involved in deadly combat. Each appeared the other's equal in skill and strength. Indrajit decided to defeat Lakshmana by magic stratagem rather than by the tactics of war. But even these were foiled and his plans ended in failure. Lakshmana in a spurt of terrific rage destroyed the chariot of Meghanada and killed his charioteer. Afraid that his death was imminent, Meghanada took on hand the supremely potent weapon, Sakti, that Brahma had gifted, and aiming It at the very heart of Lakshmana, he directed It to the target. The weapon hit the heart of Lakshmana, coming straight from Meghanada's hand. Lakshmana fell on the ground, in a "mortal" swoon. Meghanada, now no longer in fear, approached the fallen hero and tried to lift the body away to his own camp. Though his strength was equal to Lakshmana's, Meghanada could not raise the body. Countless warriors came forward to help him; but numbers were of no avail. Lakshmana was the Primeval Serpent, that bears the Cosmos on Its Thousand Hoods, Adisesha, come again. How could anyone however strong or any number of such ones succeed in lifting him? Only those who have won the Grace of Sri Rama could move Lakshmana!

Meanwhile, the shades of evening invaded the land. The two opposing forces returned to their camps. Sri Rama saw the returning Vanaras but could not see Lakshmana among them. He asked, "Where is Lakshmana?" Just at that moment, Hanuman entered carrying the body of

Lakshmana over his shoulder. Hanuman was praying plaintively, "Rama! Rama!" Rama acted as if he was perturbed and affected by anxiety, but he soon righted himself. He laid the body of Lakshmana on his lap and examined it carefully for a long time. Jambavan, the aged, spoke at that juncture. He said, "Lord. Let us not lose time. Let us not delay treatment or hesitate. It is best we get Sushena here, the physician, from Lanka. He knows the remedy." That very minute, Hanuman assumed a microscopic human form and entered the inner city of Lanka. Even while moving in, he was hurt by a doubt whether Sushena would comply with his request to come into the camp of Rama. So Hanuman resorted to a ruse. He lifted the house of Sushena with him inside it, and brought it intact over the intervening distance. When Sushena emerged, he found himself in the presence of Rama himself. Sushena fell at the feet of Rama, and disclosed the name of the mountain where the drug, which could save Lakshmana, was growing. While considering whom to send in search of that precious drug, Hanuman himself prostrated before the lotus feet of his Lord, and prayed that he might be enjoined to bring it. Rama entrusted the task to him.

Meanwhile, one of his spies reported to Ravana that Sushena, the physician, had reached the presence of Rama. Ravana consulted Kalanemi on this new development and its consequences. Kalanemi replied, "Ravana! This Hanuman is an impossible person! Did he not set Lanka in flames even when you were looking on? What special skill

or strength do I have to contain and conquer this Hanuman? The time to do the right is still not past. Give up the absurd notion that it is possible for you to win a victory over Rama. Go, take refuge at the feet of Rama. Your fortunes will get better thereby. Forsake your pride and obstinacy.” Kalanemi gave Ravana good counsel, but what he looked for was something different. Therefore, Ravana condemned him. Shaking with rage, he shouted. “Are you prepared to obey me? If not, prepare yourself for death.” Kalanemi thought that it would be much more beneficial to die at the hands of Rama than being killed by Ravana. So, he left for Rama’s camp. Exercising his magical skills, he sought a lake in the centre of a lovely park, and wearing the robes of a rishi, he sat in deep meditation on its bank. Hanuman who was on his way to the mountain range where the life-saving drug was to be found, was exhausted, since he had had no rest after the fierce engagement with Meghanada. He felt that a few moments’ rest and a drink from the cool lake would be worthwhile, for he could proceed thereafter all the quicker. Hanuman fell at the feet of the rishi, who was reciting the name of Rama and extolling his exploits and excellences. He was delighted. He too sang the Name “Rama! Rama!” The disguised Kalanemi told him further, “Oh Vanara! There is a war being fought between Rama and Ravana. I am watching it every day from here. There is no doubt that Rama will soon emerge as victor without fail.” Hanuman was elated at this. He told the sage that he was thirsty. The sage told him that his water vessel had cool refreshing water and he offered it to him. Hanuman said, “Master, this little

quantity cannot quench my thirst to any appreciable degree.” Then the rishi told him that there was a lake nearby and he could have a dip in its limpid waters and also drink his fill, in order to get refreshed. Hanuman agreed and proceeded towards the lake indicated. He stepped into the lake, until his feet were immersed in the water; just then, a crocodile crept up from within the lake and held his foot in its vile grip. Of course, it could not do any further harm. Hanuman shook it off and bit it to death. As soon as its crocodile life ended, it stood before Hanuman as a resplendent Heavenly Being. Hanuman was surprised at this vision. He asked the Appearance, “Who are you?” That person answered, “Oh Servant of Rama! My load of sin melted away when I had the good luck of seeing you and being touched by you. Kalanemi and I were musicians, Gandharvas, at the Court of Indra in Heaven. One day, the sage, Durvasa, celebrated for his short temper, arrived at Court. When our eyes fell on that wild ferocious figure, we burst into laughter. So he cursed both of us to be born on earth as Rakshasas. We pleaded for mercy, holding his feet and shedding tears of contrition. He took compassion on us and said, ‘Well! You will take birth in Lanka. The Lord will be incarnating as Rama, in the last quarter of the Thretha Age and a terrible battle will ensue between Rama and the Ruler of Lanka. During that battle, Lakshmana, the brother, will get fatally hurt by the weapon called Sakthi and Hanuman, a devoted servant of Rama, will be journeying to the Sanjiva Mountain, green with bushes of drugs. You will both be liberated from the Rakshasa encumbrance by contact with

him.' Oh Vanara! The rishi who lives near by, who directed you here, is no rishi at all. He is a Rakshasa in disguise. He is named Kalanemi."

Hanuman approached Kalanemi, and shouted in his ear, "Dear Preceptor! Accept the offering I propose to make in return for the lesson you taught me. You are my Guru and I have to pay you fees." What had happened was that Kalanemi had wondered why Hanuman had taken such a long time to quench his thirst and return, and he had guessed that the reason was the revelation of his own identity and history by his brother who was living his curse out there, as a crocodile. So, Kalanemi pretended to be too deeply involved in *dhyana* (meditation) to recognise the person who stood before him and accosted him. Hanuman knew the disguise that Kalanemi was hiding under. He caught hold of his neck and twisted it fast until he died, with the words, "Rama! Rama!" emerging from his lips with the last breath.

Kicking aside the corpse, Hanuman hastened towards the Drona Mountain Range and reaching the Sanjiva Hill, started looking for the drug he had come for. But he failed to identify it among the plentiful vegetation with which the hill was carpeted thick. Time was running out. His return was already much delayed. He was conscious of the urgency of Rama's Command. He resorted to another plan. He plucked the entire hill and leapt through the sky carrying it on his palm.

He had to pass over the City of Ayodhya on his way to Lanka during the hours of night. Bharatha was at that time pining alone, wakeful but worried about his brother and his life in the forest. Suddenly, the moonlight was darkened by a shadow, the shadow of Hanuman and the hill falling upon him. Bharatha inferred that the monkey with the mountain load must be a Rakshasa that had assumed that form proceeding on some wicked mission. He decided to destroy it before it could accomplish any mischief. Seizing his bow, he shot an arrow at it, drawing the string right back to the ear and with good aim. When the arrow struck him, Hanuman gave out a shrill cry, "Rama!"

When that name fell on his ears, Bharatha stood up shocked and ran towards the fallen monkey. From Hanuman he learnt the story of his mission and the urgency of his errand. He was overcome with grief. He embraced Hanuman and pleaded that he must be pardoned for his foolish haste. Bharatha broke into tears. He prayed, "If it is true that I have adored Rama through thought, word and deed and that I have not deviated from this path, let this Vanara be restored to his original health and strength."

When Bharatha lamented so deeply and took so firm a vow, Hanuman was relieved of his pain. He rose up fresh and free. Then a thought entered into him, to test the sincerity of Bharatha. He said, "Victory to the Lord of the Raghu Dynasty." At this, Bharatha's heart was so struck by anguish that he broke into loud sobs. He pleaded, "Oh Chief of Monkeys! Are Sita, Rama and Lakshmana keeping well?

My mother, Sita, is she happy and in good spirits?" Bharatha shed tears of joy when he recollected the absent Sita and his brothers. At this, Hanuman related to him all that had happened. Bharatha was overwhelmed with sorrow when he heard the narration. He fainted and fell on the ground, when he heard that Lakshmana had lost consciousness on the field of battle. Recovering soon, Bharatha rose and said, "Hanuman! Pardon me for my foolish act. I ought not to cause any further delay. Hasten with Sanjivi Hill, with the precious drug that can cure him. Proceed fast."

Hanuman fell at the feet of Bharatha and raised aloft the Hill on his palm. When he took off and flew into the horizon, Bharatha watched him with unwinking eyes, until he disappeared from view. He was glad that at last he was able to secure some knowledge of the movements of Rama, but he was full of grief at the condition of Sita and of Lakshmana. With a heavy heart, he went home and communicated the story to the mothers.

Sumitra, the mother of Lakshmana, though saddened for awhile, quickly recovered her composure, reminding herself that Rama was present by the side of her son. She told herself, "The son born of my loins is offering his very life, in the service of Rama! That is enough consolation for me. It gives me a great sense of satisfaction. My life has attained fulfilment. But I am concerned, because Rama must be afflicted at the fate of Lakshmana. This 'loss of consciousness' must be affecting him. Separation from his brother might cause him grief. Son, Satrughna, go to where

Rama is and be by his side!" At this Satrughna stood up in readiness saying, "What greater good fortune can fall to my lot?" But Bharatha stopped him and said, "Without specific orders from Rama, I am unable to agree to your joining him." Bharatha comforted Satrughna, and told him that Rama might dislike this act, and that it was always beneficial to bow to his will.

Meanwhile, in Lanka, Rama was guarding Lakshmana. The day rolled into evening and night and even into the hour of midnight. The Vanaras were squatting around Rama. Rama, acting as merely human, expressed anxiety at the non-arrival of Hanuman. "It is midnight. There is yet no sign of Hanuman! Has he lost his way by any chance? Brother Lakshmana is still critically unconscious!" He turned the face of Lakshmana tenderly towards him, and fondling it with tearful affection, said, "Brother! Open your eyes and look at me. Never have you spent such long hours without turning your eyes towards me. Without even a wink you watched over me, all these years, with no respite. How can I bear this silence from you? Since yesterday, I have none to comfort me with soft speech." Rama wailed thus, like common mortals. "Brother, for my sake, you forsook both parents and wife. You came into exile and forest life, along with me, though you were under no obligation to do so. You never paid attention to the hardships you encountered. Your nature is simple and sweet. But for my sake you welcomed the hot sun, you got wet in the rain, and you shivered in the cold. You would not take food, at

mealtime; for, you had no regular hours. You gave me whatever food you collected. Lakshmana, I am not unaware of the fact that often you laid yourself on the bare ground on an empty stomach. Brother! For twelve long hours I am deprived of loving care, do you not realise this? Lakshmana! Open your eyes just once and look upon me. That is what I most need now." Rama held the chin of Lakshmana in his loving hand and prayed most touchingly for one glance from his eye. The Vanaras shed tears of sorrow at the anguish that Rama experienced. Many of them climbed the hilltop trees and peered into the distance to discover signs of the approach of Hanuman.

Soon, Hanuman appeared carrying the Sanjivi Peak on his upraised palm. Hanuman shone before their eyes as the embodiment of courage, made more loveable by the splendour of compassion. He touched ground and came among the Vanaras. The Vanaras shouted, "Hail! Hail!" They said, "You have made our lives worthwhile. Had you not come before dawn, we would all have plunged into the ocean and ended our lives, for we could not have survived Lakshmana or cared to exist without him. You have saved our lives." When Rama saw Hanuman with the Peak on which the curative plants were growing, his delight was beyond measure. Sushena immediately secured the drugs he required—the Visalyakarini, the Samdhanakarini, the Souvarnakarini and the Samjivakarini—from the Peak and administered them to Lakshmana. Lakshmana sat up, fully awake. Rama was overcome with joy. He embraced his

brother and caressed him very fondly. He exclaimed, "Brother! Brother! Where had you been these hours?" His eyes were streaming with tears of joy and gratitude. He was plunged in high delight, comparable only to Brahmic Bliss. Meanwhile, as a result of contact with the vitalising air that blew from the Sanjivi Peak in their midst, the Vanaras who had fallen dead during the days of bitter battle recovered their lives and were able to sit up and move about as before. This produced great joy among the Vanaras, who danced in glee, embracing their revived companions and kinsfolk. Rama showered his blessings on Sushena. He assured Sushena that he would guard him against any vengeful steps that Ravana might plan against him. He ordered Hanuman to deposit him back again in Lanka, house and all, and also to deposit the precious Sanjivi Peak near his house, in memory of his service to Lakshmana and the Vanaras. Hanuman praised his services and thanked him for saving the life of his master as well as those of his companions. He carried his house, with him in it, as well as the Peak and placed them safely on the ground in Lanka.

Another day dawned. War drums could be heard from the Rakshasa camp. The Vanaras were agog with excitement. They drew enormous strength from the thought of Rama, their guardian and guide. Each of them was filled with the might of many elephants. They all jumped about, impatient, to start the fray. That day the enemy generalissimo was Dhoomraksha. He fought desperately, but he was killed the next day by Hanuman. At this, Akampa stepped into

the breach and fought ferociously at the head of the demonic horde. Angada led the Vanaras against Akampa, and he was able to kill the Rakshasa general that very day. Hearing that Akampa had met his death at the hands of the enemy, Prahastha rushed into the battlefield raising a great hue and cry. Nila took him on; and remembering ever more keenly the name of Rama, he engaged him furiously. Leaping on him with terrible ferocity, Nila succeeded in killing the new general, Prahastha. Mahodara came next. Hanuman jumped on him with a reverberating roar, and fought with him, tooth and nail. Soon, he was able to cut Mahodara into pieces.

For five long days thereafter, the two sons of Kumbhakarna, Kumbha and Nikumbha, continued the fight, at the head of a phalanx of fierce Rakshasas. On the sixth day, both brothers reached the Heaven that warrior heroes attain when they die on the field of battle.

Observing the unbroken series of calamities that rained upon their forces, the Rakshasas of Lanka were stricken with panic. They were struggling to hide themselves somewhere in order to save their lives. Many surrendered and sought refuge in the Camp of Vanaras. They blamed Ravana and abused him bitterly. Many proceeded to Queen Mandodari and prayed to her to arrest the train of disaster. She too was sad that Ravana had yielded to his mad impulses, and she tried to dissuade him away from the war.

But the war went on unabated. Makaraksha, the redoubtable warrior, continued the battle. Lakshmana

opposed him and killed him. When such signal success was accomplished in a trice, the Vanaras leaped in joy and shouted, "Jai! Jai!" Ravana wailed and wept when he heard that his unbeatable generals had all, one by one, fallen dead on the ground! He ran towards the place where his brother, Kumbhakarna, lay asleep, and he attempted to awaken him by urgent and drastic means. Vast crowds of Rakshasas gathered near his ears and beat huge drums wildly. Ravana brought hundreds of boxers who hit the sleeping demon. Hundreds rained punches on him with their fisticuffs. Many dealt heavy thrusts on his thighs, with gigantic maces. At last, the eyes opened, and the demon looked around. Ravana related his despair to him. He told him of the death of his own sons. That made him rise in red vengeance, as if he was the very embodiment of Time, the Universal Destroyer. He exclaimed, "Fool, can victory be ever achieved by you? You have tarnished yourselves unpardonably by the sin of stealing and bringing away Sita, the Mother of the Universe. Your wicked act is inexcusably heinous. Your viciousness is bringing destruction on Lanka. Go, surrender to Rama at least now, regardless of your absurd sense of prestige! Was it right, for a ruler charged with the high duty of maintaining righteousness and suppressing unrighteousness in his kingdom, to cast off propriety and good conduct, and abduct another's wife? Has this the approval of ethics? Is it conducive to spiritual progress? You have to suffer the fruits of your actions. Ravana! Rama is no ordinary mortal. Surpanakha, our sister, was maddened by lust. She planned to achieve her selfish desire and she suffered the

consequence of her wickedness. She set your instinct on fire, and induced you to enact this barbarous crime. Listening to a wily woman, you cast aside all discrimination, and brought on your head this calamity by the mischief of your own hands.” Kumbhakarna laid the blame on his own brother and advised him for long. But Ravana was in no mood to accept the blame. “Do not desert me in disaster. Prepare yourselves for leading our armies into the war. Save my life,” he pleaded.

Finding no means of escape, and overcome by affection for the brother, Kumbhakarna got ready. They placed cauldrons of toddy and mounds of meat before him, so that he might breakfast on them. Gulping the whole lot in a moment, Kumbhakarna proceeded to the battlefield. Seeing him enter the fray, Vibhishana, his younger brother, ran forward from Rama’s camp and fell at his feet in humble reverence. Rising up, he announced himself by name. Kumbhakarna beamed in joy. He embraced his brother with loving tenderness. Vibhishana was the first to speak. He said, “Brother! Ravana insulted me in open court and kicked me out of the Audience Hall. I considered all aspects of this affair and counselled him in various ways. He discarded my advice and gave ear to power-mad foolish ministers. He hurled unbearable abuses on me, within the hearing of those persons. I could not suffer the shame of it. I surrendered to Rama; and knowing that I was helpless and innocent, he accepted me and granted me refuge.” At this, Kumbhakarna replied, “Well, brother! The shadow of Death

is already on Ravana. How then can he pay heed to good counsel? Surely, you have done well to fulfil the goal of your life. You are not Vibhishana now, you are *Vibhushana* (the shining jewel, the most splendid ornament) of the Rakshasa clan! You have ennobled and purified the clan by serving so ardently the very Ocean of Happiness, the Crown of the Raghu Dynasty, Rama. Go, serve him with sincere zeal. Brother! I have to engage in battle regardless of the fate in store for me. I am also nearing Death. Ravana knows that my heart is not with him. I advise you to give up loyalty to this side or that, but confine yourself to loyalty to Rama.” Receiving this advice and the blessings of his brother, Vibhishana returned to the presence of Rama. He told Rama, “Lord! That mountain of a Rakshasa is Kumbhakarna. He is a ferociously brave fighter. He has come to engage you in battle.”

When the Vanaras heard these words, they were so angry that they spouted fire and leaped under the leadership of Hanuman on the enemy forces. They threw huge trees and enormous boulders at him. But Kumbhakarna stood firm and unaffected. The Vanara attack was like hitting a mad elephant with an eyelash! Boiling with anger, Hanuman administered a mighty blow with his clenched fist and Kumbhakarna reeled. But recovering soon he returned the blow, and felled him to the ground. Nala and Nila now joined the fight. They too could not withstand the might of Kumbhakarna. Fear seized the Vanara hordes. Sugriva and Angada had their share of the mighty Kumbhakarna’s

onslaught and they rolled on the ground. At last, Kumbhakarna squeezed Sugriva under his arm and carried him off the field. Kumbhakarna asserted that, by carrying the King off, he had vanquished the Vanara Army.

Meanwhile, Hanuman regained awareness of the state of things. He found Sugriva was not around. He got anxious to discover his whereabouts. While being carried away, pressed under the arm of the mighty Kumbhakarna, Sugriva recovered consciousness and he tried his best to wriggle out of the hold. Hanuman found him engaged in this desperate bid and ran to render him help. However, Sugriva separated himself from his captor and started a valiant fight against him. He bit off the nose and ears of Kumbhakarna, and the monster had, as a consequence, enormous difficulty to breathe. Soon, a horde of Vanaras yelling, "Victory to Rama" "Victory to our Master," surrounded Kumbhakarna and rained rocks, hills and trees on him. The infuriated demon leaped on the Vanaras and catching whomsoever he could lay his hands on, he crunched them and swallowed them. Many were crushed to death. Thus Kumbhakarna was able to scatter the Vanaras in panic.

At this, Rama told Lakshmana and others that the time had come when he had to enter the field. His intercession could not be delayed any longer. "Lakshmana! Bring that 'inexhaustible' arrow sheath hither," he said. Bearing the command of Rama on his head, he brought the sheath immediately and placed it in his brother's hands. Armed with the Kodanda Bow, Rama walked into the battle area,

like a lion towards its prey. Lakshmana, Sugriva, Hanuman and Jambavan followed him. The arrows from Rama's bow flew fast like winged serpents straight at the foe. They spread all over the place and penetrated the four quarters. They destroyed millions of heroes and warriors in the enemy ranks. Unable to stand the onslaught of the arrows, the Rakshasas fled. The stream of arrows never got dry, every arrow that was shot returned back into the same sheath after inflicting the injury intended. Realising that Rama was out to exterminate the Rakshasa forces, Kumbhakarna was terribly enraged. He roared like a wounded lion and jumped into the midst of the fray. The Vanaras were alarmed. They fled in fear. Finding that no other plan was feasible, Rama aimed an arrow at Kumbhakarna and sliced off his hands at the shoulders. At this, the monster shone like the Mandara Mountain, when its wings were sliced off by the Lord of Gods, Indra. He rushed towards Rama with a shriek. Rama drew the bowstring full behind the ear and let go a bunch of arrows that struck with deadly force all over his face. Kumbhakarna reeled at the impact but did not fall. So, Rama shot another arrow which severed his head and felled it to the ground. When the head was sliced off, the trunk continued to run for some distance, and to prevent this movement, Rama shot another arrow which cut it in twain.

Suddenly, a splendour arose from the body and advancing towards Rama merged in him. The Rakshasa attained liberation without performing any *Sadhana* or *Japa* (Recitation of Name) or *Thapas* (Austerity for Sense

Control and Mind Control). While alive, he shone like an incomparable hero on the battlefield; dead, he attained the highest state of Mergence with God. Rama stood on the field, with a sprinkling of sweat drops on his lotus face. His body revealed a few drops of Kumbhakarna's blood that had fallen on it during the fight. It was the hour of dusk. Both armies had had a fierce hot day of ferocious fighting. They retired into their camps. The Grace bestowed by Rama reinforced the spirits of the Vanaras. Like fire fed by dry grass, the flame of their ardour rose high.

The Rakshasas lost strength, night and day. Ravana bewailed inconsolably. He was a cobra that had lost its crest jewel. Pressing his brother's severed head to his bosom, he wept aloud. Meghanada, his son, tried to soothe him in various ways. "Tomorrow I shall demonstrate before you my heroic might. I shall, in a trice, smash this Vanara horde out of shape. I shall confer on you joy immensely greater than the grief you are burdened with today," he boasted. Very soon, dawn broke. Ravana was informed by messengers that the bears and monkeys had surrounded the City. This drew the indomitable warriors among the Rakshasas into the struggle. They marched forth to meet the enemy. Each fought with whomsoever he encountered to the utmost of his skill and strength. The whole of that day, the fury was indescribably frightening. Meghanada ascended his magic chariot and rose into the sky. His challenging roar thundered like clouds in the doomsday sky. That roar felled the Vanaras to the ground, as if by a

mighty blow. The earth shuddered at its echo. In a moment, he contrived a pseudo-Sita and, seating her in the chariot, he came down along the battlefield! Hanuman noticed this before everyone else. And accosting him, Meghanada shouted, "Listen, Hanuman! This Sita, to recover whom, you are waging this war, I am killing her this moment. Look, with her death, this war must end," and drawing his sword, he cut her to pieces and cast them away, Hanuman was plunged in vengeful rage. He called upon the Vanaras to fight on, with no thought of survival, and exterminate the Rakshasa brood. The Vanaras attacked them so ferociously that the Rakshasas fell back into the City.

Hanuman approached Rama and reported to him the wicked deed performed by Meghanada. As soon as he heard the news, Rama pretended to be affected by it. He was not unaware of the fact that it was a pseudo-Sita contrived through the magic skill of the Rakshasas. Still, he acted as if he was just a "man among men." Lakshmana too was down with despair. He grieved at the loss of the Mother of all the Worlds, and sat despondent at the futility of continuing in this world. Hearing reports of what had happened, Vibhishana rushed to the presence of Rama. He said, "Master! You know the truth of this. The entire incident is a fake. Sita is alive and guarded with great care. Ravana alone can have access to the place where she is kept under guard. Meghanada has only designed a 'Sita' and killed her in order to deceive us into despair. Among us Rakshasas such tricks are very common. I know how they revel in

such mean stratagems." Rama and Lakshmana were happy when they heard him, and they appreciated his exposure of the secret tactics of the Rakshasas. In order to confirm the statement of Vibhishana and to satisfy himself all the more, Hanuman assumed another form and entering Lanka City unnoticed by anyone, he went to the park where Sita was kept under guard, and returning, he assured the Vanaras that all was well. This urged the Vanaras to greater enthusiasm in battle.

Meghanada returned to the battle very soon. He rained on the Vanaras this time not only sharp arrows, but spears, maces, axes, pestles, and boulders. The Vanaras heard terror-striking shouts and commands reverberating all around them. "Beat," "Hold," etc., but they could not see who were obeying those orders and beating them, hacking them and holding them fast! It was an eerie experience which spread confusion among them. They were unable to decide whence the danger came and where they had to turn for refuge. Even redoubtable heroes like Nala, Nila, Angada and Hanuman were filled with fear. Meghanada aimed arrows at Lakshmana, Sugriva and Vibhishana and pierced their bodies. But they fought against him nevertheless with unabated fury. Meanwhile, Meghanada engaged Rama himself in battle. He showered hissing serpent-arrows on him. It was the renowned Dragon Weapon, the Sarpastra. Rama, the Supreme Actor come in the Human Role, the mighty Hero who destroyed Khara, Dooshana and their phalanxes, allowed himself to be bound by the effects of

that powerful weapon, the Sarpastra! In order to give due respect to that Divine Dragon and to demonstrate its potency, he permitted it to harm him! This may seem strange, but this is the story of Rama, come with attributes, qualities and limitations. So people with limited capacities of thought, word and deed cannot discover this Truth. The Vanaras were rendered helpless and worried, because Rama had been overpowered by the weapon of the Dragon. Meghanada was overjoyed. He rushed among the Vanaras, spouting vulgar abuse.

Jambavan saw him. "Oh you Vicious Worm! Stop," he cried. Meghanada brushed him aside, saying, "Fie on you, I had ignored you so far, as too old to deserve attention. Of what avail are your words to me? Move away." He threw a trident at Jambavan, which was luckily caught by him and thrown back at Meghanada himself. The aim was so correct and the throw was so forceful, that the trident hit him straight on the heart. The wounded man circled round himself a few times and fell on the ground. Jambavan rushed to where he fell. He held the feet together and swung him round very fast before he dashed him on the ground. "Now say whether I am an old man. Judge whether I have strength of youth or the weakness of old age." Jambavan challenged Meghanada. Meghanada did not die. He rose with great difficulty and moved away. He had not fulfilled his boast, and so, he felt ashamed to show his face before his father. He went straight to a garden named Nikumbala, where many Rakshasas had performed penance and endured austerities in the past.

Four courtiers of Vibhishana who were watching incognito the movements of the enemy leaders came to know about this and they reported the fact to him. He hurried to Rama and said, "Master! I listened to a bit of news just now. Meghanada is about to perform a malignant *Yajna* (sacrifice) to propitiate evil powers. If he completes the ceremonials, it will be hard to defeat him. We will have to hurl obstacles." Rama appreciated the suggestion, and was pleased with his words. He summoned Hanuman and Angada and told them. "Brothers! Go! Disturb and disorganise the Yagna which Meghanada is observing." He turned to Lakshmana and said, "Lakshmana! You have to defeat this fellow on the field of battle. Note that gods are grieving on account of his iniquities." No sooner had he ordered so, than Vibhishana, Sugriva and Hanuman—the three—collected a huge force of Vanaras and followed Lakshmana in order to give him support. Lakshmana armed himself with the bow and the ever-full arrow-sheath, and after prostrating before Rama, he moved out of the camp, with Rama installed in his heart. Angada, Nala, Nila and other generals walked behind Hanuman.

When they reached the Nikumbala Park, they found the Sacrifice already on and the flesh and blood of buffaloes being offered in the ritual fire. They started disturbing the ceremonies. Meghanada did not however desist. Then they began to loudly caricature the hymns uttered by them to propitiate the Forces, but that did not persuade the priests to stop the rituals. The infuriated Vanaras rushed into the

sacrificial area, and catching Meghanada by the hair, they pulled him to the ground and kicked him. Meghanada took hold of the trident and pounced upon them. Angada and Hanuman fell on him, and were hit with the trident. The blow was so hard that both of them rolled on the ground. Lakshmana came to their rescue. He broke the terrible trident in two. Angada and Hanuman recovered soon and hit Meghanada with all their strength. However, the Rakshasa did not quail. He did not show any sign of the impact. Lakshmana rained deadly arrows on him, as if he were the God of Death come to kill him. Each one attacked him as if raining thunderbolts. So, using his magic skill, Meghanada rendered himself invisible. He assumed many a mysterious role and escaped. The patience of Lakshmana ran out at last. He fixed sacred arrows on his bow; and invoking on it the might and majesty of Rama, aimed it at Meghanada, wherever he might be. That arrow entered the heart of Meghanada and ended his life. Since, he had in his mind, during the last moments the image of Rama and Lakshmana, Angada, Hanuman and Vibhishana extolled his bravery and the way he died. Hanuman lifted his body lightly on his shoulders and carrying it to the City Gate of Lanka, placed it there and returned. Lakshmana approached Rama and prostrated at his feet. Rama was pleased at his success. He listened to the detailed narrative of the events at Nikumbala Park. He fondled his brother with great affection.

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Rama embraced Vibhishana, Hanuman, Nala, Nila and others and thrilled them all with the Divine Touch. At this, the pain that tortured them disappeared in an instant. The wounds on their bodies were healed. The Vanaras were delighted at the sight of Rama's happy face. The compassionate look of Rama fell upon the Vanaras.

Meanwhile, Sulochana, the wife of Meghanada, heard the news of her husband's death, through her maids who ran to her with the tragic information. "Until now, I believed that this small task could be accomplished easily by either Meghanada or Kumbhakarna. Now, I have observed with my own eyes the failure of their prowess. I am ashamed that Meghanada fell a victim to the attack of monkeys. Those who are killed by monkeys, how can they claim to be heroes?" Ravana said. He tried to console Sulochana.

He said, "Respected Consort, give up your grief. Do not think that I am a hero of that type. I shall bring you solace, within an hour or so. You can witness on the battlefield, my terrific might. I shall pluck the heads of those who caused the death of your husband, and bring them with me. This shall be done, without doubt." Thus Ravana boasted and raved in the presence of Sulochana. His anger burnt his frame and he was beside himself with rage.

Hearing his words, the wise and virtuous Sulochana said, "Oh Ten-headed One! Is there in your heart any trace of hope that you can win victory? You are sunk in the deep darkness of delusion. I had swallowed my resentment and my disappointment so long, for I felt that opposing one's father-in-law was improper; and in this case, it is also useless to try to convince you. Your rage is the prime cause for the destruction of the Rakshasa population of this island. Let me tell you this—it is impossible for you to win this war. This is the truth, the indisputable truth." Sulochana rose suddenly, and wailing alone, she moved towards the apartments of Mandodari, the Queen, the mother of Meghanada. Reaching there, she fell at the feet of her mother-in-law and said, "This calamity has been brought about by your husband and not by anyone else. You too cannot escape such a calamity, which is sure to befall this day or the next." Her torn heart poured out words that were harsh and cruel. Mandodari too was pained when she contemplated the evil desires of Ravana and his pride at his own wickedness. She wept at the realisation that the

words of Sulochana were awfully true. The two women sat silent for long, and later they described to each other the virtues and excellence of Rama and the patience and chastity of Sita and told themselves that if only they could get a glimpse of that divine person their lives would be rendered worthwhile.

Ravana could not bear to witness the agony of his daughter-in-law, the bereaved Sulochana. Her words thrust his heart like sharp spikes. His grief was so heavy at the loss of such a bright and loving son that he fell on the floor and in despair beat his head on the ground. Rising up, he poured out his anguish before the Siva idol of his favourite temple. Meanwhile, the ministers of his court approached him there. They said, "Oh King, why are you grieving in vain? Sons, wives and all the rest on whom we lavish our love are all like the lightning flash that illuminates the dark cloud for an instant. They come and go. Life is a flash, it does not last. Knowing this in full measure, it is not proper for you to sink in ignorance and bewail their loss. Now is the time to plan the future. Plan out the strategy by which we can destroy the enemy at our doors." They tried to bring consolation and remind him of the immediate task, through various arguments. At last, Ravana folded his twenty palms and praying to Siva, he fell on the floor of the temple in reverent homage.

When this happened on the earth above, Ahi-ravana, living in the nether regions became aware that Ravana was suffering a great burden of sorrow. He thought within

himself, "How could this be? He has all the world under his control and within his grasp! No one can defeat him." Ahi-ravana worshipped no other god but the Devi Kamada. Immediately, he meditated on Her and She revealed to Her votary the place where Ravana was, at that time. So, he could appear before Ravana, in the Siva Temple itself. He fell at Ravana's feet, announcing his name while doing so. Ahi-ravana was no other than another son of Ravana. He enquired the reason why the father was so disheartened. Ravana related to him all that had happened since the nose and ears of Surpanakha were sliced off by the brothers. This account made Ahi-ravana very sad. He said, "The path of morality is adored by everyone in the world. By straying away from that path and preferring the path of immorality, fear enters the heart. Instead of paying attention to the past and future, and the likely course of events, you have plunged into this foolish fatal war. As a consequence, you have destroyed your clan and your dynasty. You do not know the heroism and the power that lies dormant in 'man.' You have counted the greatest among them as the least and the lowest. Yet I wish to tell you one thing now. I shall capture Rama and Lakshmana and take them with me to the nether regions. I shall sacrifice them as offerings to my Kamada Devi. I shall thereby bring immense fame to the Rakshasa name." With these words, he prostrated before Ravana, and made obeisance to Kamada Devi. Then he entered the camp of Rama. With his supernatural power, he invoked the spirit of darkness and enveloped the Vanaras in thick blackness. No one could see his own palm, held before him! Such was

the thickness of the pitch darkness around all. The Vanaras were extremely vigilant in camp. Even Death dare not enter the place. Hanuman, the Vanara guard, elongated his tail to such an extent that he could encircle the camp with it many times over, until the coils one over the other became a high wall, of the size and strength of a mountain barrier. Hanuman himself sat alert at the only gate through which entrance into this impregnable fort was possible.

Ahi-ravana saw the caudal fort and was stricken with great fear. He could not conceive of any strategy to outmanoeuvre this defence. Suddenly getting a brain wave he changed himself into the likeness of Vibhishana and accosted Hanuman at the gate. He told him, "Friend, I must go into the Presence of Rama. With his approval I had gone outside the camp to perform my evening prayers and rites. I have finished them now. If I do not go without delay, I would incur the sin of disobeying His command. So, allow me to enter the camp." Hanuman was taken in by those words and that form, which were to his ears and eyes the same as Vibhishana's. He allowed him into the camp. He found Nala and Sugriva fast asleep, since they were exhausted by the day's fighting. Rama too was sleeping, with his hand clasping the hand of his brother Lakshmana. The pseudo-Vibhishana who was approaching him was not unnoticed by Rama. He had incarnated, adopting, in sport, the human frame and his purpose in so doing was to destroy the entire Rakshasa species and wipe them out. His task will remain unfinished if the descendants of Ravana

survived in the nether regions. So, he played the role, as if he did not know the trick that Ahi-ravana was about to indulge in. Others cannot understand his ways. He knows where, when and by which means, one has to be exterminated. He plays his drama in his own way.

The Rakshasa recited the Mohana Mantra, which would make whomsoever he wants swoon and become unconscious. That made the Vanara heroes sleep even more soundly. Then, he bound Rama and Lakshmana and carried them off to his region in the bowels of the earth, the region called Patala.

After some time, the Vanaras woke up and were plunged in dismay when they found that Rama and Lakshmana were not beside them. The place where they had slept had become a deep pit. The entire camp was soon filled with cries and groans. The Vanaras were rendered as miserable as the sky without the moon, or lotus blooms without water. The Vanaras started moving in all directions to seek out the brothers and recover them. Many ran towards the shore of the sea. Many searched the borders of the campus. No one could discover any clue. The Vanaras lost hope and courage. They were overcome by sorrow and despair. "All the Rakshasa warriors have been destroyed. Ravana alone has survived. His days too were nearing the end. At this juncture, this misfortune has overtaken us." The Vanaras lamented their fate in this manner. Sugriva, the King of the Vanaras, himself fell unconscious on the ground. Vibhishana had not heard about this incident. He

was returning with wet clothes on, from a sea bath, after performing his morning rites. The Vanaras ran towards him and revealed to him that Rama and Lakshmana could not be seen in camp. Vibhishana was struck with sorrow for one instant; but, since he was conversant with the tricks that the Rakshasas could play, using their supernatural powers, he guessed the plot correctly. "Come. Let us go into the camp," he told them. This gave them some little consolation. When he talked with Hanuman at the gate, he was surprised and shocked. Hanuman asked, "Why? You passed through this gate into the camp a while ago. You asked me permission to do so."

It was now clear to Vibhishana. He could picture in his mind what had happened. So he addressed the Vanaras thus: "Vanaras! There is no need to be anxious. Ahi-ravana, the son of Ravana, is a master in such tricks. He is living in Patala—the nether regions. Judging from the depth of this pit, I am sure it is he who has carried Rama and Lakshmana to his own place underground. I have no doubt on this point. For, no one else can assume my form. Do not be disheartened. It is best that someone from among us, who is mighty, proceeds thither." Vibhishana looked around and sighting Hanuman, he said, "Hanuman! Your physical and mental strength are known all over the world. Go immediately to Patala and bring back these Oceans of Mercy, Rama and Lakshmana. Vibhishana described also the route that Hanuman had to take to reach Patala, where Ahi-ravana stayed. Sugriva, Angada and Jambavantha

clasped Hanuman to their breast and shed tears of joy. Hanuman solicited permission from his Royal Master, Sugriva and, while starting on his mission, told the Vanaras, "Do not fear. Do not be anxious in the least. Whoever he is, I shall destroy him, even if I have to sacrifice my life. I shall stand before you with Rama and Lakshmana pretty soon. Be assured." With these words and with the acclamation, Jai Rama, Jai Rama (Victory to Rama, Victory to Rama) emanating from his tongue, Hanuman started off. Reaching the Patala region, he rested awhile under a tree. He heard two birds sitting above him, conversing aloud. Hanuman knew the language of birds. So he sat listening to their talk. "Dear One," spoke the bird, "Ahi-ravana has brought two brothers Rama and Lakshmana, and he has made all preparations to sacrifice both of them to Goddess Kamada just now. He will cast these holy bodies away, after the sacrifice. We can feast on those sacred bodies to our full content. This day is a festival day for us." Hanuman rose suddenly from under the tree; like a cobra whose tail has been trodden upon, he hissed with rage, and leaped forward like a giant flame. "Alas! I fear what has happened already to my Lord," he wailed.

He entered the City of Ahi-ravana. At the very entrance, he had to fight and overcome Makaradhwaja, the guard in monkey form. But seeing that he was a monkey, he explored his genealogy and history. Hanuman was able to win his confidence and get from him inside information about Rama and Lakshmana and their fate. He also came to

know from him that the brothers were to be taken at dawn to the temple of Goddess Kamada, for being offered as human sacrifice to Her.

Hanuman asked Makaradhwaja, the Monkey Guardian of Patala, where the two brothers were kept by the cruel Overlord of the Nether Regions. He gave him all the details. However, he insisted that he will not allow him to enter the area, for, he had to obey his master and be loyal to him and to his interests. "Whatever the suffering I have to endure, I shall not let you in," he said. "If I show you special consideration for the reason that you too are a monkey, I will thereby be dishonouring the entire monkey species, as unreliable and ungrateful. My lord, Ahi-ravana, is as much adorable to me as your lord, Rama, is to you. However near you may be to me, I shall not waver or deviate. I must do my duty and carry out his command. You can get in only after defeating me in combat," he said challengingly. Hanuman appreciated his sentiments and his sense of duty. He was happy that Makaradhwaja had taken the proper attitude. He took up the challenge and entered into the fight. After some time spent in fierce combat, Hanuman decided that protraction was not desirable. So, he twisted his tail around the body of Makaradhwaja and cast him far out in the distance. Then, Hanuman boldly entered the City. He noticed a florist entering the gate with a fine big garland of fragrant flowers. Resolving that this was the best chance to reach the place he wanted to, he assumed suddenly a molecular form and occupied the garland the florist was

carrying. The garland was not rendered any heavier. It was as light as ever. The florist had no idea of what happened. Everything was as before, for him. The garland was delivered to Ahi-ravana himself. He took it in both his hands and placed it round the neck of the image of Kamada in the temple. He also offered various rich dishes as sanctified food to the idol. From his vantage point on the garland round its neck, Hanuman ate up the dishes as they were placed before the idol. The Rakshasas saw the food disappearing, and they were delighted that their Goddess had deigned to accept their devotion. Ahi-ravana too was happy at the thought that "this day my prayers have been answered. My fortune has reached its summit."

Meanwhile, Rama and Lakshmana, the brothers, were brought in, decorated in the manner in which sacrificial animals are decorated. Gigantic Rakshasa warriors were holding them by their arms on either side. Hanuman saw them being made to stand by the side of the sacrificial altar. Hanuman bowed obeisance to Rama from where he was, and filled his mind with adorations for Him. The guards placed the brothers right in front of the Idol, and held sharp swords near their necks. Ahi-ravana said that the sacrificial offering of the lives of the two brothers must take place immediately after the waving of the Holy Flame, and that they ought to be ready to execute their task, without a moment's delay. Rama and Lakshmana, who were really Divine Beings playing the role of humans, had discovered that it was Hanuman who had eaten the food offerings

placed by Ahi-ravana before the Deity, and that knowledge induced them to take on to the impending events with great good humour. Seeing them smiling and light-hearted, Ahi-ravana was awfully enraged. He said, "Well, if the few moments more of life that you are granted give you so much of joy, I do not grudge it. Be happy while you can. A while later, you can smile in the realm of Yama, the Ruler of the Dead." He paid no regard to the brothers, but continued to relish their fate and utter harsh words to wound them even more. At this, the priest rose and paying respects to his master, informed him that the code of political morality requires that the victims be permitted to pray, if they so desire, to their guardian for peace after death. The Rakshasa Chief rose from his seat and announced, "Princes! If you have any well-wishers, this is the time to express gratitude for them, since you have only a few moments to live." Rama and Lakshmana looked at each other's face and smiled.

That very moment, Hanuman let out a terrific roar. Hearing it, the Rakshasas imagined that their Goddess had manifested Herself and was expressing Her anger. Hanuman jumped from the garland, assuming his terror-striking Form and grasping the sword that was in the hand of the Goddess, he felled Ahi-ravana to the ground and hit him all over, hacking him to pieces. But his body was of diamond strength and he had won a mysterious boon which made the bits get together and become whole, as soon as they were separated. At last, Hanuman fixed Rama in his mind and with a shout, Jai Rama, he caught the head in one hand and with the

other sliced the neck. Before they could join, he threw the head into the blazing fire, in the sacrificial pit, before the Idol.

Just then, Makaradhwaja managed to reach the temple and the presence of the Goddess. On seeing him, Hanuman recovered the golden crown from the head of Ahi-ravana, and placed it on his head, he proclaimed him ruler of Patala and advised him to be ever grateful to the Brothers and to be always loyal and devoted to them. He had Rama and Lakshmana seated on his shoulders and, at one jump, he rose from Patala and landed safe in the midst of the Vanara hordes eagerly looking for them with their million eyes. Vibhishana and others could not contain the joy that overwhelmed them when they saw the Brothers safe and sound before them. They fell at the feet of Rama and Lakshmana. They clasped Hanuman in their arms and shed tears of gratitude. The Vanaras praised Hanuman in a thousand different paeans. They lifted him on their shoulders. They fed him and fondled him. They embraced him, poured their love on him. Vibhishana stood before Rama and said, "Lord! What shall I say of your *Leela*, your Sport? You alone can reveal to us the meaning of your acts and activities. You have come with the resolution to wipe off the Rakshasa denizens even in the Nether Regions. All this stage-acting, is, I know, to fulfil that resolution."

Ravana came to know that Rama and Lakshmana had been brought back by Hanuman from the kingdom of Ahi-ravana. He heard the tragic news of the death of his son,

Ahi-ravana. He collapsed and fell on the ground. He lamented his loss, long and loud. Tears flowed in streams from his eyes. Mandodari, the Queen, came to him and tried her best to console him and reduce his grief. He did not give ear to her words. He only grew more and more enraged at her soft counsel. Ravana mustered courage and rose suddenly, to meet a Minister who presented himself at that time. His name was Sindhuranatha. He was a respected elder, far gone in years. He was a very wise man, who was in close proximity to Vibhishana, when he was formerly in Lanka. He advised him on various moral virtues and on the mortality of men and things. Ravana did not listen to his words. He even treated them with patent disgust. The Minister was sad when he saw his reaction. He felt, "In times of misfortune, intelligence too gets warped. Poor fellow! He is heading towards disaster and so, even sweet counsel tastes bitter to him." Still, out of compassion, he continued with his words of sympathetic advice.

Ravana said to himself: "Now my kith and kin have been decimated. There is no one left alive." Just then, an aged Minister said, "Why do you say so? You have another surviving son, Narantaka, who has with him 72 *crores* [a crore is ten million] of Rakshasas. Call him for support. Send a messenger immediately. He can destroy the enemy. You need have no doubt." Ravana was delighted at these words. He sent the messenger, named Dhoomakethu, with instructions to bring with him the clever Narantaka. The messenger described the tragedies that had overtaken Lanka

and communicated the urgent appeal Ravana had made for his help. He proceeded, on the spot, with his hordes and as soon as he reached the field he fell upon the Vanara forces. Hanuman spied him from far. He went forward to confront him. On seeing him and his terror-striking form, Narantaka was struck with fear. He asked Dhoomakethu who he was and was told that he was Hanuman, the invincible hero who had killed all his brothers. Hearing this, Narantaka became even more ferocious. He placed arrows on his bow and let them off against Hanuman; but, he caught them all by the hand and broke them to pieces. He came very close to Narantaka and pounded his breast heavily with his clenched fist. He lifted him aloft and turning him around fast, threw him deep into a Nether Region named Rasatala. Millions of his Rakshasa followers were thrown into the sea. He broke into smithereens the chariots in the army of Narantaka. The charioteers were also decimated.

TEN HEADS ROLL

When Ravana heard the news of this holocaust, he exclaimed, “Whoever expected that the war would end thus? Whoever expected that it would be so calamitous a disaster?” The news of Narantaka’s death spread terror throughout Lanka. Many wise scholars approached Ravana, the bereaved father, and sought to give him consolation and comfort. But their effort was but a waste of time. Their advice did not enter the heads of Ravana. When Ravana recovered himself, he heard the wailings of Narantaka’s wife, and that made him angrier still. He forgot himself in the flames of vengeance and anger. The night ended and day dawned, even though Ravana did not notice it. The Vanaras gathered at the four gates of the City and were, as usual, getting ready to storm them and enter. Ravana

assembled the Rakshasa warriors and addressed them thus: “Soldiers! If your hearts shudder at the prospect of battle, it is best you leave the ranks this very instant. Do not flee when the battle is on. If you do so, I shall slaughter you with my own hands.” Threatening them thus, he felt they would fight to the last. Then, he ordered that the war drums be beaten and trumpets blown. Like darkness intensifying mountain peaks, the Rakshasa warriors marched forward in serried ranks. A series of bad omens assaulted them. Ravana who boasted of his physical prowess did not pay heed to them. The weapons he held in his grasp slithered down. The charioteer who had taken his seat fell from his perch. The elephants and horses marching forward to battle started wailing aloud. All around, dogs and foxes set up a cacophony of grief. Owls hooted ominously as if announcing the doom that loomed over Lanka.

The Rakshasa forces—cavalry, elephantry and infantry—marched forward to meet the enemy at the gates. The earth exuded tremors when the forces trampled hard on it. The splendour of that army was indescribable. The army led by Ravana shone like the army that the God of Spring leads every year, with all its colour, music, and joy. Drums, trumpets, bugles and pipes played around in a majestic stream of heroism and adventure. Meanwhile, the Monkeys and Bears pounced on the Rakshasas and fell upon them, like a host of heavy mountains whose wings were clipped by the arrows of some strange power. They attacked them like the minions of Death. Their most efficient

weapons were teeth and nails. They threw hills and huge trees on the foe. By their leonine roar, "Victory to our Lord, Sri Rama," they made the elephant hearts of the Rakshasas shudder in mortal fear. Very soon, the battle became a series of duels between the Rakshasas and the Vanaras. The cry, "Victory to Rama" was met by the cry, "Victory to Ravana." The Rakshasas fought like the emissaries of Death. The Vanaras bled from many wounds. They pounded the enemies heavily with their fists. They tore them to pieces with their teeth. They kicked them in the ribs with their feet. They held them in their grip and tore them apart. They pulled out their entrails and wore them round their necks. Ravana saw with alarm the decimation of his army. He took up his bow and shot arrows at the soldiers of his army fleeing for life from the field of fury. The Vanaras were inspired when they saw Ravana filled with anger at his own warriors. They yelled in joy and leaped towards him in large numbers. They aimed peaks and trees at him. Ravana turned all round him and encouraged his soldiers to stand firm. The Vanaras fled in all directions unable to meet the onrush. They wailed, "Oh Lord, Sugriva! Sugriva, save us, save us."

Earth and sky were darkened by the showers of arrows sent by Ravana. The Vanaras ran to the far corners of the land. Chaos prevailed in the camp. Lakshmana noticed the situation. He girded up his loins and armed himself with his bow and sheaf of arrows. Prostrating before Sri Rama, he rose with his blessings and proceeded to the field of battle.

Lakshmana accosted Ravana, and scoffed at him thus: "You villain! What benefit can you gain by slaughtering monkeys and bears? Gaze at me, standing before you like Death itself, the Spirit of Time come to finish your earthly career." Ravana replied, "O! Don't I know you? You are the destroyer of my son. I was looking out for you for many days. My heart will find solace only on my killing you this day." Ravana yelled in anger and let loose sharp arrows at Lakshmana. But Lakshmana cleverly cut them into a thousand splinters. In addition Lakshmana shot fiery shafts at Ravana and they succeeded in cutting to pieces the chariot of Ravana as well as his charioteer. Lakshmana rained arrows in deadly groups of a hundred and more. They found their mark on the face of Ravana and on his chest, so that he was felled to the ground, having lost consciousness with the blow and the pain. Yet, he recovered very quickly and rose up in ferocious anger, and directed against Lakshmana the terrible mighty missile that was conferred on him by the First of the Trinity, Brahma Himself. When the missile hit him, Lakshmana rolled to the ground. Hanuman saw the fall, and he hastened to the side of Lakshmana, shouting imprecations against Ravana. Ravana administered a heavy blow on Hanuman with his clenched fist. It made Hanuman reel in pain, but he steadied himself. He returned the blow even more power-filled than the one he had received from Ravana. Ravana was stunned by the impact. He said within himself, "May this fellow's fist be burnt to ashes. I never dreamt that a monkey's fist could discharge such a thunderbolt."

Meanwhile, Lakshmana recovered from the swoon and rose ready for the fray. Ravana had to be helped into another chariot having become unconscious again. His charioteer cleverly drove the chariot in the direction of Lanka itself. He got back his awareness as soon as he reached Lanka. He ordered that a special destruction-yielding, victory-ensuring ritual called Patalahoma be performed so that he could defeat the enemy at his door. What a big fool was he! Can he ever achieve victory in a fight with Rama? Those who were spying his activities on behalf of Vibhishana carried the news of the Patalahoma to him and he was alerted in time. Vibhishana approached Rama without delay, and falling at his feet said, "Lord! Now Ravana is engaged in a ritual, the same as the one which Meghanada began in the past. This ceremony too has to be defiled and desecrated by the monkeys so that Ravana might be deprived of the benefits he hopes to secure through it. In case this Homa is allowed to reach its conclusion, without interruption, it will be very difficult to defeat Ravana."

Very soon day dawned. In accordance with the orders of Rama, Angada and Hanuman proceeded to the Ritual Enclosure with a large following. They jumped and leaped in great hilarity and surrounded the palace of Ravana. "Sacrilegious sacrificer! Fleeing from battle and finding safety at home, are you sitting cosily performing meditation?" Angada dared go very near him and deal him a kick with his foot. Ravana was engaged in preparatory silence and "meditation." Even the slightest movement or

distraction of attention would make him unfit and unholy, so that the Homa he was to perform for achieving victory would be rendered infructuous. Angada and the monkeys took liberties with him. Some of them dug their teeth into him. A few tugged at his crown of hair. That was the limit. Ravana became fiercely angry. He rose to his feet and catching hold of a few monkeys, he twirled them fast over his head and tried to smash them on the ground. But he could not move even a little step. This became a matter of greater shame. Soon, a regular scramble and struggle ensued between Ravana and the Vanaras. The ritual ceremony he had planned could not be gone through. Ravana was sunk in grief.

Rama was informed of all that had happened. Vibhishana and others were happy at the consummation of their strategy. Ravana was badly disappointed that he could not succeed in performing the Yaga. But he had to resolve dutifully to proceed to the battle field. As soon as he started from his palace, bad omens greeted him. Kites flew in and out on his head and his hands, and his crown slipped from its place. He paid no regard to the warnings. He ordered that the war drums be beaten and the clarions sounded. Hundreds of thousands of Rakshasas gathered when that signal was given. The army proceeded to wage a mortal battle against Rama. Rama equipped himself with the arrow-case and took the bow in his hand. With his long arms and broad chest, the splendour-filled embodiment of charm stood on the battlefield, the very picture of heroic might.

The gods assembled overhead and offered reverent homage to the Saviour of Humanity from the Rakshasa hordes. The Vanara army followed Rama, arrayed in perfect order and alert to command. Like the thunder-spitting clouds bringing destructive floods on the earth on the Day of Deluge, the Vanara hordes moved fast towards the Rakshasa forces, bent upon annihilation of the enemy. The mountain peaks that the combatants threw against the enemy fell with the noise of thunder. In an instant, the chariots, elephants and horses of the Rakshasa armies were destroyed. Thousands and thousands of Rakshasas fell on the ground. Blood flowed as rivers. Ravana lost all his warriors. He felt he was alone, and that the monkeys and bears were many. So, he decided to draw on his magic powers. He exercised magic on all except Rama. But Rama willed otherwise. Through His Will Ravana saw wherever he turned a vast ocean of Vanara hordes, with Rama and Lakshmana in the vanguard, leading the forces. At this, Ravana realised that his magic could not produce any effect. Soon, Rama called to his presence the Vanaras and told them in grave seriousness: "You are all exhausted by the long and hardy battle. Go and take rest. Now, watch the fight between Rama and Ravana."

No sooner had he said these words than Ravana encountered Rama with a challenging roar. At this Rama smiled and said in a soft voice, "Fool! First listen to the words of moral counsel I am giving. There are three types of men in the world. The first are like the patali tree, which blossoms finely, but the blossoms do not turn into fruit.

Those who indulge in mere speech and do not practise a mite of what they talk are of this type. The second group are like the plantain tree. It gives flowers and fruits, both. Those who speak and act, practise what they assert, these are of this type. The third type is like the jack tree—it has no flower. It has only fruits. The best type of men do not prattle or boast or talk high. They are silent workers who act with no boast. You are a mere braggart. Your immoral rule has brought ruin on your race."

Ravana was not in a mood to swallow these imputations. He said, "What? Dare you teach me?" and he poured out a stream of abuse. Suddenly, he shot a bunch of hard-hitting arrows on Rama. Rama replied with the Fire Arrow. The arrows of Ravana were burnt to ashes by the weapon that Rama released. Ravana directed against Rama millions of sharp-edged wheels and three-pronged spears. But the hopes of his wicked heart were not fulfilled. Rama thereupon lifted his redoubtable bow and shot a stream of deadly arrows, which flew straight at Ravana like irresistible messengers of death and cobras eager to inject their fatal venom.

Rama noticed that as soon as one head was sliced off by his arrow, another grew in its place. Ignoring his impending death, Ravana was immersed in pride. He challenged Rama in great exultation. It was a ghastly sight. The heads that rolled to the ground were shouting, "Where is that Rama? Where is Lakshmana? Where is that Sugriva?" The heads that remained on the trunk were gnashing teeth

and asking for Vibhishana, and pouring abuses on him. They said, "Brother of mine! Shame on you for awaiting the news of your brother's death, so that you may succeed him on the throne! You are not a hero. You are a cowardly ascetic. Fie on you. No one should look you in the face." Soon the lost heads reappeared and Ravana fought most fiercely and with unequalled valour. Lakshmana, Sugriva and Angada watched him and admired his prowess. Finally, Rama resolved that the end of Ravana should no longer be delayed. His iniquities were multiplying with every passing day. Nala, Nila and other Vanara heroes were casting rocks at Ravana, and hurting him greatly. But the dusk of evening intervened and the battle ended for the day. That night, Thrijata sat near Sita, describing the battle between Rama and Ravana. She told her that whenever Rama sliced off a head, another grew in its place. Sita's face paled at this news. She sank in sadness. Thrijata was surprised at this development. She said, "Do not yield to anxiety. His heart has your Form enshrined in it. That is the reason why the heads grow." At this Sita became both sad and happy. Thrijata hastened to add, "Sita! Have no doubt. His end is imminent. Rama will triumph. Rama too is remembering you every time he shoots an arrow. He too has your form in his heart. So, the end is prolonged until the moment comes when Ravana gives up your memory for a short while. That moment will spell his doom. He will be killed that instant."

Ravana filled the next day of the battle with his magic mystery. The battlefield was filled with his creations: ghosts,

eerie beings and sprites with bows and arrows. Female spirits danced around, holding swords in one hand, gorging blood from skulls held in the other. "Hold," "Beat," "Kill"—they yelled in screaming voices. In whichever direction the Vanaras advanced, they were met by high walls of fire. The monkeys and bears were astounded. A thick rain of sand fell without stop on the Vanaras forces. Ravana roared in glee at the plight of his enemy. Lakshmana, Sugriva and others were incapacitated. The warriors prayed pathetically to Rama to come to their help. Rama was besieged by many "Hanumans" created by Ravana's magic. Each "Hanuman" carried huge mountain peaks. They also attempted to bind Rama in the knots of their tails! The tails coiled and grew over many miles in all directions. But Rama shone unconcerned and unharmed, blue like a fresh blossom in the midst of all the carnage and confusion. He knew that it was all the frail product of Rakshasa magic. He laughed within himself at the efforts of Ravana to mystify him. With a single arrow shot from his bow, he destroyed all the varied effects of that magic skill. The monkeys and bears saw the frightful scenes disappear in a trice, and they were happy. The entire thing melted away as fog before the rays of the sun, as soon as the arrow of Rama entered it. The Vanaras caused a hailstorm of stone to fall on Ravana. They jumped all around him with the missiles. Rama then selected a sharp arrow and shot it straight at Ravana. It sliced off a head. Another grew on the spot in a trice. It happened again and again. Rama watched the fun and seemed to be enjoying it. He remembered the phenomenon of greed coming in place

of gain. As soon as something is gained, greed for more is born. He pictured the falling head as gain and the growing head, as greed!

The battle that ensued between Rama and Ravana was fought with incomparable and unexcelled fury. The saying goes that the Ocean is like the Ocean and the Sky is like the Sky. They cannot be compared with any other phenomenon. So, too, the battle between Rama and Ravana has that battle alone as equal to it. The battle lasted for eighteen days. Rama was not in the least exhausted by the fighting. It was a sport, a pastime for him! There were a few more days left before the fourteen years' exile was to end. So, he could well afford to engage himself in the game of war. If Rama decides on the finale, how can Ravana postpone his end or change the decision? When the allotted days were over, everything conspired to create bad omens for Ravana. Dogs howled, foxes moaned, donkeys brayed. Birds and beast set up piteous wails. Balls of fire dropped from the sky. Sudden bursts of flame became evident in all directions. The heart of Mandodari, the Queen, beat loud and fast. Every idol in every home and temple in the island shed tears in plenty. Tornadoes spread havoc over hill and dale. Alerted by these calamitous signs, the gods knew that the end of the Rakshasas was near and they gathered overhead to witness the triumph of Righteousness, shouting, Jai! Jai! welcoming the victory.

Then Rama shot a bunch of thirty-one arrows at the same instant on Ravana. They darted like deadly cobras.

One arrow entered the "nectar jar" that Ravana had underneath his navel. The rest, the thirty, sliced off his heads and hands. When the heads and limbs rolled on the ground, they hopped about and rose and fell in frantic dance, for some little time and then lay quiet. Thus Ravana rid himself of life and reached heaven. The day was the fourteenth of the bright half of the Chaitra month.

That instant, a host of heavenly drums resounded from the sky. The splendidous spirit of Ravana merged in Rama. Struck by that vision, the Vanara warriors were aghast with wonder. They were amazed at the valour and heroism of Rama in the battle against Ravana which lasted full eighteen days. They exclaimed with one voice: "Victory, Victory to Rama." Hearing that Ravana had died, his queen Mandodari collapsed on the floor. When she recovered, she hastened with her maids to the corpse of Ravana and wailed aloud. She collected the heads and was stricken with grief at the tragic fate of her lord. She recited with fond reminiscence the exploits of Ravana in the past. "Lord! You had overwhelmed and subjugated the entire Creation. The Rulers of the eight directions had fallen at your feet, praying for protection. Of what avail was all that glory! Of what avail were the austerities and asceticism that you underwent. You had to endure this fate in spite of all the might you had won. This blow fell upon you since you turned away from Rama. You could not conquer the promptings of lust. He who becomes a slave to lust cannot escape dire punishment, be he as powerful as even the God of Death, Kala. Blinded

by lust, you could not avoid this tragic end. Lust led you to ignore Rama and invite this calamity on your head. Ravana! Rama has incarnated with the purpose of destroying by the fire of his anger the forest of Rakshasa vice. I disclosed this to you many times over, but a cruel fate rendered you deaf to my importunities. I told you that he is no mere man. You relied foolishly on your physical prowess, your clever intellect, your vast treasures and the vast numbers of Rakshasas you ruled over. Did I not plead with you, holding your feet in my hands, to surrender to Rama, the Ocean of Mercy, and thus save the Rakshasas from annihilation? My pleadings were not welcome to you. You were engaged constantly in inflicting injury on others, an activity which gave you great joy. You seldom attempted to confer benefits on others. Your urges were ever towards sinful deeds and thoughts. In spite of this, Rama has conferred his blessing and your spirit has merged in him. What great compassion is this! You died at his hands. This is a fortune that few can achieve. Why, Rama came into this world in human form for the special purpose of killing you. The royal road to the destruction of the Rakshasa race was laid by the Rakshasa Ruler himself! This will be known as your greatest achievement! This is the supreme example of your protective skill! Is this the final result of all your austerity and spiritual Sadhana? Rama! Have you done this to prove that no one can escape the consequences of his deeds? What greater example for that law can there be? This calamity brought about by him is here for all to see and learn from,” Mandodari wailed for long, sitting by the side of her lord.

Mandodari had realised through her wisdom that Rama was Parabrahma Itself, the Universal Oversoul, the Absolute. The gods, watching her from heaven, were elated at her outlook and attitude at this hour of grief. Vibhishana was moved by the wailing of Mandodari. He agreed that what she said and felt were correct. Rama and Lakshmana approached Vibhishana and consoled him. They directed him to perform the funeral rites for his deceased brother. And according to that order, he too carried out all the prescribed rites and rituals, at the proper places and with correct ceremonial. Mandodari and other women also offered water offerings, sanctified with mantras and til. Every item of the funeral rite was gone through in correct order, without any hitch or disturbance, by Vibhishana who was all the while comforted and consoled by Rama. Rama said that when the curses Ravana had invoked on himself by his sins had ripened and fulfilled themselves, he was killed, and so, there was no reason why the death should be lamented.

Rama called together in his presence Lakshmana with Sugriva, Jambavantha, and Angada, and asked them to go into Lanka with Nala, Nila and others for installing Vibhishana as the Emperor of Lanka. He directed them to proceed without delay, for the fourteen years' exile which the father had prescribed for him would end the next day. But Vibhishana protested and pleaded, “Why do I need an empire? Please place me instead in the immediate presence of your Lotus Feet,” he prayed. “From this day Lanka is

yours. Treat Lanka as a part of Ayodhya," he insisted. But Rama did not agree. He elucidated their political principles and declared that his order was irrevocable. Then, Vibhishana prayed that he should be entrusted with the Empire by his own hands. Rama replied, "No, having observed and followed my father's command for thirteen years, eleven months and twenty-nine days, it is not proper that on the very last day, I should go against it. I am an exile as he desired and an exile should not enter any town or human settlement. You are not unaware of this rule." Thus saying, he blessed Vibhishana and instructed Lakshmana to go into Lanka and install the new Emperor on the throne of Lanka. Bowing their heads in acceptance of this assignment, Lakshmana, Sugriva, Angada, Nala, Nila, and others started towards the City and reached the palace. They placed the crown on the head of Vibhishana and put on his forehead the auspicious mark of authority. Vibhishana prostrated before the assemblage of Vanaras and acknowledging their friendly help, promised to fulfil the real purpose of his life through following their example and benefiting by their help. "I shall rule over this land as Rama's agent. I shall not accept it as mine. I have already dedicated all of myself to Rama." He suffered great grief when he reminded himself of the cruelties and injuries inflicted by Ravana, his sons and his warriors on the Vanara hordes. He consoled himself by the thought that everything that had happened had been the "sport" of the Supreme Will, Rama. Soon, they all proceeded to where Rama was and fell at his feet in reverential homage.

Then, Rama called Hanuman near and told him, "Oh Hanuman, Incomparable Hero! Go into Lanka on my errand once more and communicate to Sita all that has happened and return with authentic news about her condition." Accordingly, Hanuman entered Lanka, went to the place where Sita was and fell at her holy feet. She asked him, "Are Rama and Lakshmana safe, with their Vanara forces? Is Rama, the Ocean of Compassion, safe and happy?" Hanuman replied with folded palms and bowed head. "Rama is safe and happy in all respects. He has killed Ravana and installed Vibhishana as the permanent Emperor of this land." Sita was glad at the news of Rama's victory and Ravana's downfall. Her face brightened with joy. She felt a great thrill of delight. Tears of joy streamed from her eyes. "Oh Leader of Vanaras! What can I offer you as a gift for conveying to me this best of news? Nothing can equal in value the comforting words you have spoken," she said. Hanuman replied, "Mother! The bliss you evinced, the blossoming of joy—they have given me as much as a gift of the three worlds. What more can I crave for? What greater fortune can anyone need than the fortune of seeing Rama victorious over the enemy and happy with his brother?" With these words, he prostrated once again at the feet of Sita. Sita said, "Oh Best among Vanaras! I am sunk in agony these ten months of separation from my Lord, and hence I could not see or know anything about the external world. I do not know which day of the week it is today, nor whether it is the bright or dark fortnight, or which day it is in that fortnight. Whatever it is, you have given me the most

welcome and the most auspicious news. So, I shall name it the Mangala Day, (though it may generally be named otherwise. It was a Tuesday), meaning the Day that brought Mangala or auspiciousness and joy. May this Day be held sacred and may you, the bringer of this news, be adored specially on this day, more than on any other days of the week.” At this, Hanuman fell at her feet and stood with folded palms.

Sita pleaded with Hanuman, “Get me the boon of meeting the Embodiment of charm and compassion, my Lord, Rama. Do you not know that all this fighting and killing in war was for my sake, for the sake of restoring me to my Lord? Take me soon to the Lotus Feet of Rama,” she said plaintively. Hanuman could not bear the anguish that was patent in the words of Sita. He leapt into the sky and reached Rama in a trice. He narrated all that happened during the meeting. Rama gathered Angada, Vibhishana and others and told them to proceed to the place where Sita was and directed them to bring Sita respectfully to his presence. They went to the Asokavana where she was so long interned. Vibhishana directed that Sita may take bath, wear fine silk clothes and be decked in jewels, when she moved out of the Asokavana. But Sita cast aside the suggestion. She said, “Rama is the most precious jewel I have. That one jewel is enough for me. Seeing him is the bath I shall be satisfied with. The prostration I shall do for him is the silk cloth for me. I do not like to wear anything that was once Ravana’s property.” Vibhishana was moved

by the depth of her yearning. He asked the maids to respect her wishes. They also said that Sita was desperately wishing for darsan of her Lord.

Soon, a palanquin was brought and Sita was seated in it. The Vanaras bore the palanquin on their shoulders. The Rakshasa women who had survived, the Vanara warriors, and others were jumping with excitement, on both sides of the road, when Sita passed through. They stood on tiptoe and even jumped high to get a clearer and nearer view. But Sita did not turn to right or left. She bent her head and was sunk in one single thought—Rama. When a little distance had yet to be covered, Sita came down from the palanquin, for, she felt that she should go to her Lord in humility, walking the distance. She walked slowly towards Rama. As she neared Rama, the Vanaras standing along the path fell at her feet and cheered, “Jai, Jai Sita Ram.” When she came within a short range, Rama declared that she should not be brought to him immediately, but that she had to go through the Ordeal of Fire!

At this, the Vanaras were stunned into silence and despair. But they had to go and collect dry sticks and fuel for lighting and feeding the fire for the rite of ordeal. The Vanaras had carried on their shoulders huge mountain peaks and rocks before and during the war with Ravana. Now, those very Vanaras were finding little sticks of dry wood too heavy for their strength, for, their hearts were heavy at the thought of Sita being put through this new trial! Of course, Rama knew that Sita had a spotless character and

was the very embodiment of virtue. Vibhishana, Angada, Sugriva and others knew that the fire ordeal was only to convince the world. The fact was, the *Sakthi* that “was” Sita was transmitted and installed in Fire, when they were in the Dandaka Forest. The Sita who was in Lanka was but the Body. The Sakthi or the Vital Core was all the while fostered in Fire by Fire. She had now to pass through Fire so that she might emerge as the real Sita, embodied Sakthi.

Sita welcomed the rite. For the world will be convinced that her heart was pure and unblemished. She was happy to see the flames leap up. Lakshmana, however, was overcome with grief, for he himself had to supervise the rite. Sita consoled him with her soft counsel. “Lakshmana! When I was married, the Brahmins lit the Fire on the wedding day and sanctified the function. Today, Fire will give me new birth. After that, I will wed the Lord again. Feed the fire well, for that is the right thing to do.” Lakshmana was moved by her pang of separation, her yearning for reunion, her loyalty to righteousness, her attachment to justice and her intelligent analysis of the situation. He shed tears and folded his palms in reverence and stood silent. For, he could find no words to express his feelings. Fixing his gaze on the face of Rama, he piled firewood on firewood and lit the fire till it blazed. Sita was elated when she saw the leaping flames. She had no trace of fear in her mind. She walked towards the fire and standing before it said, “Oh Receiver of Sacred Offerings! By word or deed or thought I have not dwelt in my mind on anyone other than Rama, my Lord,

Oh Purifier. You reside in the heart of every living being. Become as cool as sandal paste to me, when I enter you.” She prostrated before Rama and moved into the Fire. The God of Fire, Agni, appeared in the form of a Brahmin bringing with him the real Sita, and offered her at the feet of Rama, just as the Lord of the Ocean of Milk offered Lakshmi at the feet of Lord Vishnu. She shone on the left of Rama, like a golden lily by the side of a full-blossomed blue lotus. The gathering of gods expressed their joy by sounding heavenly drums and trumpets.

Vibhishana hurried into the City and brought clothes and jewels fit for Divinity in the aerial chariot named Pushpaka. He placed them before Rama. Rama asked that the chariot be taken high up in the sky and the valuables be showered from there on the people below. Vibhishana did as directed. The Vanaras grabbed whatever fell on them or near them. They mistook the gems to be fruits that were red and ripe. When they found from the taste that they were stones, they cast them away in disgust. Rama and Sita enjoyed this fun and laughed in sympathy. Many Vanaras and Bears wore the clothes they secured and approached Rama in gratitude. Dressed in multi-coloured costumes, they danced about in ecstasy. Rama appreciated them and addressed them most graciously; “Oh Vanaras! Through your prowess and valour, I was able to destroy Ravana and place Vibhishana on the throne of Lanka. Now, you can all return to your own homes. I shall always be with you. You need have no fear hereafter.” Rama consoled and comforted

them all by the gracious gesture, promising his eternal protection and assuring them that there will be no occasion for them to fear anyone or any calamity. The Vanaras and others were overwhelmed by gratitude for the love He showered on them. They lost all moorings of their minds. They stood folding their palms in reverential homage and said, “Lord, Your words are in consonance with Your majesty. They confuse us and render us dumb. We are weaklings. You are our Protector, our Guardian. You rule over the three Worlds. Can a fly ever claim to have given help to the eagle? Can a tiny lamp claim to reveal by its light the Sun?” The Vanaras fell at Rama’s feet and stood with tear-streaming eyes.

The Vanaras and Bears felt they had to obey the orders of Rama, however unwilling they were to depart from his Presence. They turned towards their homes with mixed feelings of joy and grief, praying to Rama for His continued blessing and with the Form of Rama imprinted on their minds. Nala, Sugriva, Hanuman, Vibhishana and other leaders and warriors could not give utterance to their feelings. They stood silent with looks fixed on the face of Rama, trying to subdue their anguish. Observing the depth of their love and attachment, Rama had them seated in the aerial chariot named Pushpaka which he was ascending.

HAPPY AYODHYA

The Pushpaka took off and turned north. When it rose, there was great commotion on the ground. Vanara hordes raised thunderous shouts of "Jai"—"Victory to Rama, Victory to Sita, Rama and Lakshmana." Inside the Pushpaka, there was a high throne charmingly carved and designed. Sita and Rama took their seats on it. They then appeared to all as cloud with a lightning flash resting on the Sumeru Peak. Rama drew the attention of Sita to the battlefield below, and said, "Here is where Lakshmana overpowered and killed Meghanada." He also showed her other spots associated with similar exploits and victories. He showed her the bridge that the Vanaras constructed across the sea, and described to her the heroism, devotion and faith of the Vanaras. Very soon, the aerial chariot reached the Dandaka Forest. Rama had the vehicle land before the hermitages of Agastya and other

sages. With Sita and Lakshmana, and other members of his entourage Rama visited the holy sages, paid reverential homage to them, and after taking leave of them, he ascended the Pushpaka again, and reached the Chitrakoota Hill. There too, he offered prostrations to the sages, and soaring to the sky again, he showed Sita the City of Kishkindha from the chariot itself. Even while the Pushpaka was speeding fast, Rama indicated to her the sacred rivers, Yamuna and Ganga. Sita offered worship to the holy streams in her mind. Soon, they could see the thrice-holy Prayag, where the Yamuna flows into the Ganga. They could get a far glimpse from that position of the splendidous City of Ayodhya itself.

The chieftain of the Nishada tribe, Guha, who was yearning most ardently for the return of Rama, his brother and his consort, espied the Pushpaka in the sky. He fell flat on the ground in grateful obeisance, the very moment he saw the vehicle. Lo and behold, the Pushpaka landed just then at the very place. Guha ran forward and fell at the feet of Rama. Tears streamed from his eyes. He could not contain his delight. He rose and embraced Rama in the ecstasy of his heart. Sita, Rama and Lakshmana conferred their blessings on the tribal chieftain. They took their bath in the sacred river and ordered Guha to bring the ferryboat for them to cross the Ganga. The Pushpaka, which belonged to Kubera, before Ravana appropriated it, was sent back to its original owner.

One more day remained to be spent, outside Cities, in exile. Therefore, Rama commissioned Hanuman to change

himself into a Brahmin and proceed to Ayodhya. He was to inform Bharatha the news about Rama and others, and bring back from Ayodhya news of Bharatha. Hanuman left immediately. Rama, with Sita and Lakshmana, and all who had come with him, moved into the hermitage of Bharadwaja and accepted the hospitality and gratitude of that sage. Hanuman found the residents of Ayodhya lean and famished, despondent and depressed. They had not relished food or drink during the absence of Rama. All over the town, one could hear their grievous groans and wailing. No one could move towards another to console or nurse, for everyone was too weak to take a few steps nor had anyone the desire or the capacity to nurse or console. But rays of hope had already been cast by the news he was bringing. Bharatha had some welcome premonitions of the happy event. His right eye twitched and his right arm too. He anticipated the receipt of the good news of Rama's entry into Ayodhya. He was grieving that one more day was still to pass before the period of exile would end. He was worried that Rama had not sent anyone to communicate to him which place he had reached. He told himself how fortunate Lakshmana was, since he was all the time in the presence and serving the Lotus Feet of Rama. "The Lord cast me into this City, for I am a hypocrite. My Lord is all softness and sweetness. He is the kind kinsman of the downtrodden and the fallen. He is Compassion Itself. He will certainly arrive tomorrow," he consoled himself.

Just then, Hanuman was within his sight as a Brahmin, come with tiding. Hanuman was thrilled at the condition of

Bharatha. His body had been very much reduced, he was worn down by anxiety. His hair had become matted. His eyes had become perennial streams of tears. He was repeating the name of Rama without intermission. Hanuman was full of joy at the sight of such a dedicated soul. The hairs of his body stood on end because of the ecstasy. His thoughts ran in several directions. But he remembered his mission and poured the nectarine news he had brought into the thirsty ears of Bharatha. "Bharatha! The person from whom you have been separated and for whom you have been pining without sleep or food all these nights and days, whose virtues and powers you have been extolling and reciting every moment of your life all these years, who has guaranteed safety to the gods and security to the sages, who fosters truth and righteousness in all the worlds—He, Rama, has achieved victory over all enemies, and the gods are singing his glory."

Just as a man suffering from acute thirst is rendered happy at the sight of water, Bharatha was filled with joy when he listened to Hanuman. He wondered whether he was actually listening to someone actually speaking to him. But he assured himself that it was true. "How can this be an illusion? Who is this person who has brought the good news? Where did you come from?" he asked the visitor, embracing him out of sheer gratitude. Hanuman replied, "Oh Bharatha I am Hanuman, the son of Vayu, the Wind-God. You seem to have forgotten. I am the Vanara who fell on the ground, before you, while I was carrying the Sanjeevi Hill. I am a servant of the Lotus Feet of Rama."

Hearing this reply, Bharatha rose most respectfully and was overwhelmed with joy. He bowed his head in reverence. “Oh Leader of Monkeys! You have demolished my sorrow. Your very sight has ushered calm in my mind. Ah! How fortunate am I! I could see a Messenger come from Rama today!” He continued to repeat the same sentiments for a long time. “Is my Rama hale and happy? My mother Sita, how is she? Hanuman, how am I to express my gratitude to you? What shall I do for you in return? I cannot find anything of equal preciousness which I can offer you in gratitude. So I will ever remain indebted. I do not know how to repay the debt, or with what. Where is Rama now? At which place is he staying? Relate to me the exploits he fought unto victory,” he said, with unbearable eagerness. Hanuman was struck by the devotion and dedication that Bharatha evinced and he fell at his feet to demonstrate his admiration. He said, “Bharatha! Rama is very near the City of Ayodhya itself. You can see him within a short time. His achievements are indescribably wonderful. You know this. He too constantly remembers you. The Lord of the Worlds, Rama, has said out of his own mouth that in the whole world there is no brother equal to you in purity of heart, sharpness of intellect, and equipped so fully with all the virtues. How can those words be negated?”

Bharatha was overcome with delight when he heard these words. “Has Rama spoken of me thus? O! How fortunate am I!” he cried and embraced Hanuman fondly. Hanuman declared that he could not delay any longer. He

took leave of Bharatha and reached the Presence of Rama. He informed Rama about all that he had seen and heard.

Now, Bharatha started preparations. He seldom put both his feet down at the same time on the ground! He was ever on the move, most busy. He arrived at Ayodhya from Nandigram and offering prostrations to the Preceptor, Vasishta, communicated to him the news of Rama entering Ayodhya soon. He rushed into the Queens’ Apartments and announced to the three mothers that Rama, Sita and Lakshmana were arriving. The mothers rose quickly and were filled with joy. Bharatha ordered that the entire City be informed of the good news through all media. The news reached all ears with lightning speed. Children, the aged, men and women ran helter-skelter shouting the news at the top of their voices.

Bharatha collected the sages, the scholars, the preceptors, the leading citizens and the four Sections of the Armed Forces, and with the three Queens and Ministers led by Sumantha, he walked forward with Satrughna by his side to meet Rama. Rama, while nearing Ayodhya, was describing to the Vanaras and others around him the beauty of the City: “Oh Sugriva, Angada, Vibhishana! Ayodhya is a holy City. It is a beautiful City.” In the midst of Rama’s enthusiastic description of the City’s charms, Bharatha appeared at the head of the Armed Forces and with his brother and the Queens. As the ocean heaves up in joy at the sight of the autumn moon the vast populace heaved a breath of joy at the sight of Ramachandra, Rama the Moon.

Their excitement reached the sky. The Mothers embraced Rama with ecstatic delight and forgot themselves, caught in the flood of happiness. Sita, Rama and Lakshmana fell at the feet of the Mothers. The joy of both parties knew no bounds. Rama drew Bharatha near him, and pained at his weakened frame, he consoled and counselled him lovingly. He praised aloud his brother for his steadfast devotion and affection towards the people. Sita, Rama and Lakshmana prostrated before Vasishta, Jabali, Vamadeva and other sages, as soon as they were sighted. Even the most ascetic among the sages could not restrain his tears at the happy reunion with Rama.

The Vedic scholars raised their voices to the sky and showered their blessing in traditional formulae: "Live victoriously for hundreds of years," "Live prosperously for hundreds of years." Bharatha and Satrughna fell flat on the ground before Rama in reverential homage. Though Rama pleaded with them again and again to rise up, they found themselves unable to rise and leave hold of the Lotus Feet. Lakshmana and Rama had to exert jointly to lift them. The brothers embraced each other in fervent affection, and shed tears of joy and relief at sight of each other's faces. The delight with which their minds were filled gave their innate beauty a rare splendour. They shone like embodiments of physical charm. The sadness of separation gave place to the joy of togetherness. They were now deep in the ocean of bliss.

Sugriva, Nala, Nila, Angada, Hanuman and others assumed beautiful bodies for the festive occasion. The

citizens were overjoyed at the sight of the entourage of Rama. They extolled in various ways the austerities that Bharatha went through and welcomed the result thereof. They appreciated his sterling virtues. Rama admired the faith and devotion of the people of the City. He gathered around him the Vanaras and Vibhishana. He introduced them to his brothers and his preceptors. When he took them near the Queens and told them, "These are my mothers," all of them fell at the feet of the women, saying, "Oh, how fortunate we are. We see the mothers who gave birth to God Himself. You are indeed most worthy of worship. Bless us most graciously."

Kausalya addressed them thus, "Oh Vanaras! You are all as dear to me as my son Rama himself. May Rama never forget you. May he ever protect you." Then, deliberating among themselves, they ascended the chariots brought for them and entered the City.

In front of every home were placed golden pots filled with auspiciously coloured water. Flags were tied across the streets and on houses. The faces of the people, which were faded and shrunken with sorrow, like lotuses in moonlight, blossomed into freshness and beauty, like the same lotuses at sunrise, when Rama came before them. Their countenances shone with attractive effulgence. The sky resounded with their cheers and shouts of Victory. The chariot which bore Rama entered the city streets, the streets were bursting with excitement and delight. The auspicious flames of the lamps that were held by devoted hands and

waved as he passed, shone like stars and gave the impression that the firmament had fallen on the earth. The roads were soaked with fragrant rosewater.

As the chariot passed, showers of flowers were rained on it by the citizens from the windows and the terraces. The ecstasy of the citizens broke all bounds. With his three brothers and three mothers, Rama with Sita by his side, gave immense joy to the thousands packed on the sides of the roads. People congratulated one another on their good fortune in being alive and present on such a happy occasion. When they reached the Palace, the women of the inner apartments and the aides and servants of the household came forward and received them with customary rituals, like washing the feet.

THE CORONATION

As soon as they entered the Palace, Vasishta, the Royal Preceptor, announced the date when the Coronation of Rama as the Emperor of Ayodhya would be celebrated, giving details of the auspicious attributes of the Day which had persuaded him to choose it for the great event. He invited also all the Pundits and Priests to take part in the ceremonies that the Vedas had enjoined, to consummate the Coronation. They appreciated the decision of Vasishta, for, they said, "a Coronation so celebrated would confer peace and prosperity on all mankind."

Vasishta called Sumantha into his presence and addressed him thus, "Assemble the armed forces—cavalry, elephantry, chariots and infantry—at the City, for the Coronation of Rama is to be celebrated." Those words filled Sumantha with extreme delight. He arranged for the

presence of the Army with all its components. The elephants, horses and chariots were decorated grandly for the occasion. They were posted in serried ranks outside the City Gate. The horsemen and the foot soldiers wore colourful uniforms and they stood at attention, ready to march into the City for the festival. Messengers were sent in all directions to gather, in time, the various auspicious articles necessary for the rituals that formed part of the celebrations. The entire City was agog with joy. Citizens vied with each other in decorating their houses and streets. People felt their two eyes were not enough to imbibe the charm of the City.

Rama was especially considerate towards the persons who had accompanied him from beyond Ayodhya—Sugriva, Vibhishana, Angada, Nala, Nila and others. He ordered that proper arrangements be made for accommodating them and for looking after their needs. Accordingly, servants from the Palace rushed to perfect the arrangements designed for the comfort of the guests. Rama called Bharatha and with his own hands, he combed his hair that had become matted, since he had not paid any attention to it, for years. The three brothers personally poured holy water and attended on Bharatha while he bathed. Then, Rama received the assent of Vasishta to disentangle his own matted hair and had his auspicious bath. The queen mothers meanwhile had Sita go through her bath also. The mothers carefully combed her matted hair too, and dressed her in yellow silk. They made her wear jewels

in plenty. She shone like Goddess Lakshmi. She moved to where Rama was and took her seat to the left of her Lord.

The three mothers experienced the highest bliss, looking on, while Rama and Sita were seated together. "Is not this day the luckiest day for us? This day, our lives have achieved fulfilment. This day, our dearest wish has come true. This day, our eyes have had their purpose realised," they said to themselves. They lost all consciousness of their bodies or surroundings, watching Rama and Sita, and taking them to be the God Narayana and the Divine Consort of Narayana, Lakshmi. Vasishta the great Sage was moved by the splendour that shone in the face of Rama. He was delighted beyond measure at the divine effulgence of the Rama Form. "I achieved today the goal for which I have been waiting so long, he felt, and he ruminated on that joy and remained blissful and silent. He called the servitors and instructed them to bring the Great Throne and install it in the Coronation Hall. It was a Throne set with multifarious gemstone which shone like the sun, with dazzling brilliance.

Rama prostrated before Vasishta and other sages, and fell at the feet of the queen mothers. Then, he prostrated before the entire assembly of elders and citizens and ascended the Throne, with Sita following him close. The vast gathering rejoiced at the unique sight, so full of majesty and glory. The Rishis, the elders, the leading citizens and the saintly well-wishers were filled with gratefulness and joy. The Brahmins recited appropriate Vedic hymns. The

populace shouted Jai Jai, so loud and so often that the sky threatened to fall. It was the seventh day of the dark half of the moon in the month of Vaisakh. Taking the permission of the assembly and the assent of the Brahmins, Vasishta wound round the brow of Rama the insignia of Imperial Authority.

Kausalya, the mother of Rama, turned her eyes on Rama every now and then, and felt supremely happy. What can be said of the joy of the brothers Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrughna! It was beyond words. They were holding whisks and the umbrella, and standing behind the throne, as attendants on Rama. In fact, they were all through the years doing penance for the culmination they were enjoying that day! The gods beat drums of victory in the sky. The celestial musicians sang hallelujahs, the celestial dancers danced in joy. Vibhishana, Sugriva, Angada, Hanuman, Jambavan, Nala, Nila, Dadhimukha, Divida, Mainda—these heroes bore bows and arrows, scimitars, spears and stood on both sides of the throne, in reverential humility.

With Sita sitting on his left, Rama manifested the beauty of a billion Manmathas (Manmatha—the God of Love) rolled into one. The gods were fascinated by the divine charm of the Lord of the Raghu line. Rama wore silk, interwoven with gold, and he had pendants on his ears brilliant with precious gems. He wore ornaments on his ankles and wrists, which derived beauty from his entrancing charm. The three worlds exulted at the sublimity of the event and the personal grandeur of Rama. Really those who

witnessed that scene were the fortunate ones among the living.

Vibhishana came forward with a dazzling necklace of gems, which the Lord of the Sea had offered to Ravana. Sita accepted it. Its brilliance shone all over the vast Hall and struck everyone as a unique string of gems. But with the necklace in her hand, she cast a questioning glance at the face of Rama. Rama knew what was passing in her mind. He said, "Sita! You can grant it as a gift to anyone among those here who deserves your grace." Sita thought just for a second and looked at Hanuman. Becoming aware of the compassion in the look, Hanuman approached her in great humility and stood before Sita with bowed head. The necklace was given by Sita to Hanuman. Hanuman turned it around many times in his hand, its dazzle enrapturing everyone in that vast assembly. He was struggling to discover its specialness, with unslaked curiosity. He plucked every gem, put it between his teeth, and placed it adjacent to his ear, and with a face indicating disappointment, he threw the gem away in disgust! All eyes were watching with increasing amazement this peculiar behaviour. They were stunned into silence and inactivity. Until he treated the last gem in the same cavalier manner, no one dared interrupt or condemn. They could only protest in whispers among themselves! "Who is this monkey that treats the diamond necklace so lovingly and so compassionately presented to him by Sita?" was the question on most lips.

Even Vibhishana was sad that Hanuman had so brazenly insulted the priceless jewel that he had brought. "He has pulled it to pieces and cast the gems aside," he told himself. Everyone in the Hall surmised the reason for this strange behaviour in his own way. At last, one vassal Ruler could not restrain himself. He rose and gave vent to his resentment: "Peerless Hero! Why did you break that necklace of gems into so many bits? Was it right to do so? Tell us the reason why? Give us some explanation and remove our doubts."

Hanuman listened to him patiently and replied. "Oh King! I examined each gem in order to discover whether each had in it the sacred Name of Rama. I could not find it in any gem. Without that Name of Rama, they are but stones and pebbles. So, I cast them on the ground." The ruler was not silenced by this. He asked, "Hanuman! If it is your desire that in every article and particle there should be the Name of Rama, are you not asking for something impossible?" Hanuman replied. "Of what good, of what profit, is anything which has not in it the Name of Rama? I have no need of such." The valiant hero, Hanuman, dismissed the argument of the ruler thus. The ruler, however continued his objections. He said, "You would not wear anything that has not got in it the Name of Rama. Well, you are wearing your body. You are carrying it about with you. Prove to us that you have the Name in it." Hanuman laughed aloud. He said, "I shall prove, see!" He pulled a single hair from off his forearm and held it very near the ear of the Ruler. He

could hear the Name, Rama, Rama, Rama uttered by the single hair! At this, he was overcome with a sense of wonder. He fell at the feet of Hanuman and prayed for pardon.

Rama called Hanuman near himself and warmly embraced him. He asked him, "Hanuman! What can I offer you on this occasion? I have no gift worthy to be given to you. I am giving you myself as my gift to you." Then, he offered his body to be clasped by Hanuman's hands. The assembly was moved into shouts of Jai at this unique act of Grace. They praised Hanuman and declared that there was no one to equal him in all the worlds. They praised the devotion and dedication of Hanuman.

Then, Rama rose from the Throne and moved out into the open, where vast congregations were awaiting His appearance. He gave them the Divine Darsan of His charming majestic Form. They were all thrilled as never before in the bliss the Darsan conferred. All who were in the City were provided festive reception and given lavish food and luxurious shelter. Rama arranged for the distribution, as charity, of gold and money, of vehicles, household utensils and clothing, of houses and other amenities in plenty. Vibhishana and the Vanara heroes were wonder struck at the magnificent elaborateness of these events. They stayed on for six months in the Capital, serving Rama both day and night, in full exultation. The six months sped away as a single day for them. They had no memory

of their homes, their families or their kingdoms during all that period of time.

At last, Rama called all the companions and comrades, who had accompanied him, into the Audience Hall and seated them in appropriate places. Then, he addressed them in soft, sweet accents, thus: "Friends, you have all toiled hard on my behalf. Of course, it is not proper to praise you to your face. You confronted various difficulties for my sake, giving up your homes, not worrying about your wives and children and unconcerned about your properties and possessions. I have no friends other than you all. Therefore, I have special love and compassion towards you. More than my parents, more than my brothers, more than my kingdom, more than my subjects, and more than even my Sita, you are my loved ones. This is my firm assertion. So, I now require you to proceed to your homes. Serve me after installing me in your hearts, with faith and devotion. I shall grant you the fortune of seeing me, beside you, behind you, before you and in your homes. I shall grant you Grace."

They listened to these words so full of Grace and Love, and they were so overcome by gratefulness and joy that they forgot themselves and their surroundings. They did not allow their eyes to stray away from the face of Rama. They shed tears of delight abounding. They could not utter a single word in reply. The tongue was unable to pronounce any. Then, under orders from Rama, the servitors brought large quantities of clothing and jewels. Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrughna were requested to offer them to

the members of the party and to personally help them in wearing them. The Vanaras and Vibhishana were then assisted by them in putting them on and they shone with added charm and brightness. But the Vanaras were unaffected by what was done. They stood unmoved and stiff, looking only at the Feet of Rama, their adored Lord. All bowed their heads and fell at those lovely feet. Rama lifted them gently and embraced them with great affection.

Rama told the departing groups of Vanaras and others, "Children and friends! I am awarding you the Sarupyā stage of liberation, by which you are endowed with powers and attainments approximating to mine own. Go back and carry out the duties devolving upon you with success and fulfil the responsibilities with which you are involved. Rule over the lands and peoples entrusted to your care and enjoy peace and prosperity." Rama provided them valuable counsel of various kinds and gave them leave to depart. Bharatha and Satrughna were struck with admiration by the devotion that shone in the hearts of the Vanaras and others. As Rama commanded, Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrughna accompanied the party for some distance until they reached the outskirts of the City. Even as they sat in the chariots provided for them, the Vanaras turned back wistfully and shed tears at the thought of leaving Rama. The brothers saw the anguish in their faces and could not bear the sight. They knew the meaning of those streams of tears and those sad looks and praised the spirit of dedication which filled their hearts. They gave them company until the river bank

and they supervised arrangements for ferrying them across. Then the brothers returned to Ayodhya. Hanuman also returned with them. He prayed and pleaded with Sugriva, his ruler, and promised to return after about ten days for, as he said, "I cannot bear the pang of separation." Though Sugriva was not very happy, and in spite of his protests, Hanuman came back along with Lakshmana and others to where Rama was.

One day, Rama proceeded to a garden with his brothers and his dear Hanuman, in order to spend some time strolling through it. The place was replete with flowers and fruits. Rama sat on an elevated seat, with the brothers on his side. The brothers were found hesitating to ask some questions, though they had the desire within them. They looked at Hanuman and communicated their feelings to him. They knew that if Hanuman put those questions, Rama would fain give the answers. The omnipresent Rama recognised the situation. "Hanuman! What is it you seek to know? Ask," he said. Hanuman replied, "Oh Protector of the Weak! Bharatha wanted to ask you a question. But he was stricken by doubt. He is downcast with a sense of fear." He folded his palms and fell at the feet of Rama, for having answered his query so bluntly, and in thankfulness that he was commanded to speak in the presence. Rama then spoke thus, "Hanuman! You know full well my nature. There is no difference between me and Bharatha, nothing to make either feel distinct." When Bharatha heard these words, he fell at the feet of Rama, and said, "Oh Healer of the Miseries of

those who surrender to you! Listen. Pardon my errors and protect me. I have no doubts lurking in my mind. I have no griefs and no attachments, even in my dreams. Of course, I owe all this to your grace and compassion. You are the treasure house of all the virtues. I desire to learn the distinction between good men and bad."

Rama deigned to reply. He said, "Brother, the qualities that mark out the good are endless in number, as the Vedas and Puranas say. The distinction that separates the good and the bad are as wide as that between the sandal tree and the axe. Note this; even when the axe cuts the sandal tree, the tree confers on the axe the fragrance it possesses. The axe is killing it, but the tree does only good to its executioner. Hence, the sandal is appreciated by all. The Gods love to have sandal paste on their foreheads. But see what happens to the axe that does harm to the tree that wishes it well. It is kept in fire and while red-hot, it is hammered into shape and sharpness. Wicked persons cause grief to good men in this manner. But the good always wish well and do good to the wicked, whatever harm is done to them. What is their gain? They certainly attain heaven. That is to say, they are in constant bliss. The bad persons, on the other hand, will be constantly struggling in sorrow and discontent. That is to say, they will be subject to hellish agony. Though they may appear happy to observers, they will be tortured inside by the infamy and the hatred they invoke.

"I shall tell you the characteristics of good men. Listen. They are not fascinated by sensual pleasures. They possess all the best virtues and modes of behaviour. They will be happy at the happiness of others. They will be sad when others are sad. They look upon all with equal affection. They have no enemies and they are not bothered even if foes exist. They are endowed with wisdom, knowledge of the objective world, and a deep sense of detachment. Their hearts are tender. They have compassion towards the weak and the helpless. They adore my feet with purity of thought, word and deed. They delight in serving me. They have no concern with fame or infamy, honour or dishonour. They are always interested in serving others. They never yield to the urge of selfishness, even in dreams. Their actions are transparently simple. Their hearts are ever cool and unruffled. They yearn for opportunities to renounce. They are every moment soaked in joy. For them praise and blame are the same. Brother! Whoever has these characteristics in him, take it that he is of my own nature. He is myself, I am himself. Take that to be the truth.

"Now, I shall tell you of the qualities of bad men, listen. You should avoid their company, by all means. Grief will descend upon you as a result of that companionship. Their hearts will be pained at the prosperity of others. They will delight as much in scandalising others, as in welcoming a fortune. The six foes of good men—lust, anger, greed, desire, pride and hatred are fostered by them and they are ever at their beck and call. They move about and act

according to the commands of these six. Pity and charity are absent in their makeup. They pick up quarrels with others for no reason or on no provocation. They develop enmity even towards those who do good to them. Their actions are false. Their utterances are false. Their dealings of give and take are false. Their attitudes are hard. They have hearts of stone. The peacock is charming to behold. Its cry is pleasant to hear, but it kills snakes. So too wicked men are eager to harm others, and craving for others' wives. They relish damaging the reputation of others. They revel in evil. They are evil-minded all the time. They are the meanest among men. They have no fear of retribution. When they see or hear about the progress of another, they are possessed by so much envy that they are afflicted with unbearable headache. But when others are caught in calamity, they exult over their sufferings. When others are suffering, they are elated as if they have been crowned kings of the realm. They are dominated by the ego. They do not have any thought of helping others, even in their dreams! Their hearts are the birthplaces of lust, anger and other passions. They have no consideration towards parents, preceptors or elders. They feel disgust at the very mention of "good personages" or "God." Their intellects are dull. Their conduct is reprehensible. They can be observed in large numbers during the Kali Yuga.

"Brother, of all righteous acts, help rendered to those needing it is the most righteous. Of all evil acts, there is nothing worse than causing harm to others. Know that this

is the essence of the teachings of the Vedas and the Puranas. This is the ideal, held forth by good men everywhere. Those who are benefited by birth as men, and yet indulge in injuring others, are degraded into lower bestial levels and have to be born and die as those beings. Or, when born again as men, they commit further evils through their ignorance and the blindness it causes. For such, I am the meter-out of Karma-consequence and it is only after a long passage of time during which they have to struggle out of the darkness, that I vouchsafe a Vision of Myself. I throw them again and again into the vortex of life and make them experience the ups and downs so that they might be educated.

"Bharatha, the gods, the sages and the great personages do not engage themselves in acts involving dualities. They are ever engaged in adoring me in a dedicated state of mind. They engage themselves in activities without any desire or attachment to the consequence of those activities. If austerities are taken up in order to gain some ends, if activities are undertaken with a view to earn the fruits they yield, people have to be born with bodies so that they may be awarded the good and the bad which those activities deserve. When the fruits are not craved for, and acts are still done sincerely and rightly and correctly, they don't bind. On the other hand, they confer wisdom on the doer. The person will have his devotion and dedication advanced a great deal. And as a result, he will be nearer to the Supreme and mergence in the Supreme. When you are able to

distinguish between the good and the bad on the basis of these characteristics, and act accordingly while choosing company, you will be able to extricate yourselves from the coils of the sea of change, the Samsara Ocean. Brother! Know that all distinctions between good and bad are basically the result of attachment and development, due to your considering the world as real, while it is neither real nor unreal. Those who have escaped this ‘illusion’ and this duality are the Mahatmas. They have realised that their reality is the unchanging Atma. They know that there are no two. They experience always only the One. Others are the ignorant lot.”

The brother and others who listened to this clarification attained equanimity. Their hearts were delighted with the upsurge of Love. They acknowledged the kindness of Rama by gratefully prostrating before him. This they did for each point that was clarified. Hanuman felt the ecstasy more than all others. Later, Rama proceeded to the Palace, accompanied by the brothers and Hanuman. This became the normal routine every day—conveying counsel and then, the carrying on of the duties of administration.

One day, Rama desired that the citizens of Ayodhya assemble in the Palace, with the Preceptors and the Brahmins. They all met at the Durbar Hall, and were provided comfortable seats. Rama came into the Hall and addressed them thus:

“Citizens! Preceptors and Brahmins! Prostrations to you. Listen to my words in peace and to the very end. I am

not discoursing to you in pride or selfish conceit. It is also not to declare that I am your monarch. Nor is it to lead you to journey along evil paths. If my words appear good to you, then, follow the path I indicate. But I must say this: those who listen to my words and walk accordingly, those alone are dear to me. They alone are my brothers. If I utter anything wrong, point it out to me instantly, without hesitation. Well, birth as a human being is hailed in the Vedas and Puranas and by wise men of all lands as the rarest chance of all. The human birth cannot be achieved unless a great deal of merit is built up in many lives previous to this. Even gods yearn for the chance and find it hard to get born as men. Birth as a human opens the door to Liberation. It provides wide opportunities for undergoing Sadhana and benefiting by them. The human body is to be used not for enjoying sensual pleasures. It is not to be treated as an instrument for reaching Heaven and delight in heavenly toys and joys. These pleasures are all momentary. They bring you back again into the tangle of change, the toil of birth and death. Therefore, these pleasures bring about sorrow. Only fools will be led away into the pursuit of these sensual pleasures. Such pleasures are as poison to man. Is it proper to seek poison, in preference to Nectar? Those who crave for poison cannot be good men. They are like the fools who discard the Wish-fulfilling-gem (*Chintamani*) and prefer a bead of glass. Being endowed with the human body, if a person does not use it for crossing the Ocean of illusory Existence (*Samsara*) he is indeed to be pitied as unfortunate and of dull intellect. He is indeed the slayer of

his own self, the enemy of his own progress. Therefore, those who are born as men have to realise that God resides in all men as the Atma within and to serve everyone as Divine, and regard that service as the most proper worship of God. Observe the dictates of God with a full heart. Carry out all activities as if you are dedicating them to God.

Citizens! Those who yearn to be happy here and hereafter! Listen to my words. Have them as your guides and your goals. Follow this path. Of all paths that lead to God and Self-realisation, the path of Devotion (*Bhakthi*) is the easiest, it is a path full of delight for the mind. The Path of discrimination and elimination of illusion (*Jnana*) is fraught with difficulties and packed with obstacles. It is well-nigh impossible to extinguish the mind. Even those who travel along the hard path of *Jnana* can become dear to me only if they have devotion and love in their hearts. There is nothing equal to *Bhakthi*. *Bhakthi* is not bound, it is free. It endows man with all joys and delights. It must be emphasised that you can progress in *Bhakthi* only when you seek and stay in *Sathsanga*, good company.” Continuing his discourse to the assembly Rama said, “Listen, Oh People of my Kingdom! I wish to tell you one very important Truth, often not clearly grasped by you. Do not attribute any distinction between Siva and Kesava. Believe that God is one. The Name and the Form are distinct, but the *Divyatma* (the Universal Absolute Entity) is the same. That *Divyatma* is in everyone in equal potency.”

Hearing these nectarine teachings from the lips of Rama, the citizens bowed their heads in reverential homage.

One of them came forward to express their gratitude. He said, “Lord! We are attached to you more than to our own lives. Our bodies are healthy and hardy because of you. Our homes are resonant with joy and happiness because of you. It is all due to your Grace. You have rid us of sorrow and drawn us near you. Maharaja! Who else can teach us so lovingly as you do? Our own fathers and mothers seek from us the fulfilment of their selfish desires. That is all. Of what use are we for you? But yet, you train us for attaining the Bliss of Heaven. This gives us full contentment. You and your excellent followers have done magnificent service to the world, by destroying the demonic race. We can never acquire a Lord, a Friend, a Father, as kind and considerate as You.” The people expressed their joy and the sense of enlightenment plentifully before Rama. Rama brightened at their loyalty and eagerness to learn more about spiritual matters. The citizens took leave of Rama and returned to their homes. They reminded themselves of the valuable truths they had been taught.

In the City of Ayodhya, every house had a flower garden attached to it. The residents tended the garden with love and care. It was perpetual spring in Ayodhya, for, the plants were heavy with fruits and fragrant with blooms throughout the year. Clusters of bees hovered over the blooms and their murmur could be heard all over. A cool breeze, heavy with the scent of flowers, greeted everyone. Children of the City had many species of birds as pets. Their songs, twitters and chirps mingled to make charming music to the ear.

The wealth and prosperity of the citizens under the benign reign of Rama cannot be adequately described by even a thousand thousand-tongued Seshas. This was the result of the righteousness (Dharma) which Rama fostered and guarded. Rama celebrated many an Aswamedha Sacrifice. Millions and millions of Brahmins were granted generous gifts and they were made happy and contented. Rama, the Promoter of Vedic Rites and Ceremonials and the Guardian of the Codes of Dharma, (but yet, above and beyond all obligations and attributes—*Gunathitha*), as well as Sita, replete with all auspicious attributes and intent on helping all who craved to fulfil their beneficial obligations—were both vigilant in their task of keeping themselves and their subjects on the Path of Dharma. Physical illness, mental anxiety and moral downfall were totally absent, when Rama ruled. People had deep love and affection for each other. Everyone struck gladly to the duties and rights sanctioned by the Vedas to the community and the profession. Austerity, charity, sacrifices, spiritual ritual and studies continued unabated and even enthusiastically all over the land. Sinful thoughts dared not peep into minds of people, even in their dreams. Women, men, old persons, children—all were at all times revelling in thoughts of Rama. There was no calamity or natural catastrophe evident anywhere. During the Rama age, there were no poor, no grief-stricken, no one humbled or crestfallen, no one cruel or hateful, no one ugly or ghastly to behold. Everyone had all the marks of charm. No one hurt another with his pride and pomp. No one envied another. All were versed in Atmic

wisdom. All were eager to practise and protect Dharma. All were compassionate and intent on serving others. Each one was eager to extol the good qualities of another. No one gave room for egoism in his heart.

The entire Globe, with its seven Dwipas bordered by the Oceans, was under the shade of the single Umbrella of Rama's sovereignty. Over this entire region, Rama was the sole undisputed Lord. In this imperial domain, people enjoyed mutual love and mutual help. There was no trace of faction or fight; apartness and the big stick were not evident at all. Of course, distinction came to the fore in dance and the arts. The stick was evident in the hands of ascetics and monks. Fighting was to be seen only when used against the senses by Sadhakas. Attachment (*raga*, also meaning, tunes) could be noticed as raga only in music. When no one had any enemy, how could "killing" be done? But people killed the vagaries of the mind instead and won victories over their own lower natures.

The City and environs shone with incomparably attractive wells, lakes and tanks. Oh the pure waters! Oh the beautiful landing places! Their sublime charm drew admiration from sages and seers. They blamed themselves for being so attracted. The lakes and tanks had lotuses of many colours blossoming on their surface. Many birds were singing on the trees growing thick on their banks. Parrots, peacocks, and others clustered on the branches and made merry. The City was more splendid than even Heaven and people were wonder struck at its uniqueness.

One day, Vasishta entered the Palace in order to see Rama, the Grantor of prosperity in all fields. Rama received him in true traditional style, washing his feet and offering sanctified water as drink. He raised his folded palms and said, "Oh Ocean of Compassion! I have a request to make. I have been watching most delightfully your 'play as man.' I am beset with a big doubt, now. Your potency is limitless. Even the Vedas do not know fully your Nature. Lord! How can I describe you, or decipher you? This profession of Family Preceptor or Priest is rather derogatory. The Vedas, Sastras and Puranas declare that priesthood is inferior in status, since it is a mean occupation. He has to officiate at all the ceremonies in his master's household, both auspicious and inauspicious. Therefore, it is contaminated. First I did not agree at all to enter this profession, but Brahma saw me and understood my plight. He told me, 'Son! You do not know what lies in the future. Accept the profession, without demur. You stand to gain enormously in the coming years. The Parabrahma will incarnate in the Raghu dynasty.' Hearing this, I bowed my head to this profession and became the Family Priest of the Raghu dynasty. I have now, as a result of that decision, attained that Supreme Principle, which can be won only by means of countless years of Japa, Thapas, Meditation and Yoga, besides the performance of many Yagas and Yajnas, without putting myself into the hardship involved in these. All those good Karmas have as the goal to be won, and I have won you.

"What better work have I to do than the one I have chosen? Lord of Lords! Japa, Thapas, Yajnas, Yagas, Vows, Rites and Ritual rules have been laid down in the Vedas. Through the cultivation of wisdom, compassion towards living beings, and virtuous conduct, your Presence and Grace can be attained. Lord! I am praying for a boon. Grant me that in your infinite mercy. Shower your Grace on me from the corner of your compassion-filled eye. Let my devotion for you be undiminished, however many lives I have to live hereafter. This is the boon I crave for." Later Vasishta returned to his residence, taking leave of Rama.

The subjects of the kingdom spent their time singing the thrice-holy captivating story of their Ruler, Rama. One might have achieved success in Yoga or performed many ritual vows but, if one has no love in his heart, he could not get Darsan of Rama. The wise man, the ascetic, the hero, the poet, the scholar, the accomplished, no one of these were afflicted, in Rama's empire, with greed. No one strayed into wrong, urged by pride of wealth. The intoxication of authority did not render anyone deaf. Where was the young man who suffered from the fever of Youth? Or, where could be found the man who lost his fame through yielding to the pull of selfishness? Where was the man tainted by enmity? Where was the man suffering from the paralysis of grief? Where was the man bitten by the serpent, anxiety? There was none such—Rama himself standing above and beyond these, as an example for all to emulate. He is the *Atmaswarupa*, God Himself.

The redoubtable armies of Maya are roaming all over this world. The soldiers are the passions, lust, greed, etc. Pride, unbelief, etc. are the commanding officers. But the same Maya is the bond-slave of Raghunatha, Rama. She is ‘unreal,’ but, yet, unless you have the Grace of Rama you cannot escape from capture and bondage. The Grace flowing from the corner of his eye alone can liberate you from her grip. Maya “possesses” all movable and immovable things in the universe. No one can be free from her hold. She imitates the earthly glory of the Lord and like a skilled actress, she enacts her role with lust, greed and others as supporting cast. Rama, however, as the embodiment of Satchidananda, as the personification of the Deep Blue that characterises the Sea and Sky, the Phenomenon that has no Birth, as the Paramatma Itself, has no trace of Maya in Him.

In the City of Ayodhya, every day was a new Festival, every Festival was marked out with some novel features of entertainment. Each day, Rama gave away riches as charity. It was laid down that no one should blame another or scorn another. No bad word should be uttered. In every home, there were daily readings of the Vedas and the Puranas. No community of people looked on another or considered another as inferior. Each carried on its traditional occupation and respected the norms laid down. Therefore, compassion and affection towards the subjects grew quick and large in Rama’s heart. Observing the devotion and dedication with which wives in Rama’s kingdom served their husbands,

even the Gods grew envious of men. The husbands too shone as persons deserving such service. No one brought a single tear from the eyes of those wedded to them. Husband and wife had the feeling that each was half the body of the other and so, they got on as one, desiring each other’s best interests and devoted to their realisation. In Rama’s time, no one attempted to have recourse to falsehood under any circumstance. Boys and girls honoured the commands and directions of parents and preceptors. Everyone was as happy as the Lord of Gods in Heaven, Indra. Grain and riches were as plentiful in every home as in the place of the God of Wealth, Kubera. The Chakora birds were glad as if they were looking on at the Moon in Autumn, Sarathkala. Women watched Rama from behind the doors of their enclosed apartments and were delighted. Bharatha, Lakshmana and Satrughna were thrilled continuously in mind, filling their eyes with the Divine Charm of Sri Rama. The entire world was filled with full splendour while it was being ruled by Rama. There was no trace or mention of “sin.” The monks and ascetics wandered about fearless in the wildest woods. The mutual affection between the King and his subjects grew more and more from day to day. The earth shone with Love and Light. The forests were shimmering in perpetual green. Birds and beasts had lost their instinctive hatred for one another. Not even an iota of hatred was to be found anywhere, nor was there even a whisper indicating its existence. All were bound by the thickest of comradeships. Every individual evinced great

enthusiasm in describing the excellences and achievements of Rama.

One day, Rama was on his throne, in the Audience Hall, along with his brothers. A Brahmin entered the Hall in great distress. He spoke many harsh words and pleaded angrily for redress. "Alas," he cried, "the fame of the Solar Dynasty has ended today. I remember the glory of the great kings of the past, Sibi, Raghu, Dilipa, Sagara; for, such iniquities would not have happened when those Kings were ruling. Will a son ever die during the lifetime of the father? Can such a disaster happen if the ruler is good? But this day, I saw this thing happen." Rama, who is omnipresent, was able to know what had taken place. He was affected by the words spoken by the Brahmin. He probed within himself the reason for the death and assured his mind that it had not occurred as a result of any administrative fault. He was aware that it was the consequence of evil thoughts, and so he set about prescribing limits and regulations which would prevent such thoughts from arising in people's minds. Rama paid great attention even to such small matters and designed measures to prevent their recurrence. He laid aside all concern about himself and sought to realise the goal he had set before himself, viz., the happiness of his people. He cared for his subjects as if they were as dear to him as his own body. The people too valued the affection and happiness of the King. He was to them as dear as his heart. The Ruler never worked against the wishes of the people. They, too, did not overstep even by a hair's breadth the

orders given by Rama. The Ramaraja of those days was resplendent thus for many years. Rama was Narayana Himself. So, his reign redounded to the glory of the earth and its history. For, Truth and Righteousness are the real guardians of mankind.

EXILE FOR SITA

It was the practice for messengers from the Court to travel about through cities and villages, all over the empire, and report personally to the Ruler the information they had gathered during their secret wanderings. Rama listened to these communications, as his predecessors used to do. One day, a messenger who had come on this duty approached Rama with a hesitation that was strange. He prostrated before him, and rising up, stood mute and trembling on one side. Soon, he recovered confidence and courage and addressed Rama thus: "Maharaja! Listen to my words! Pardon me for bringing these words to you. A washerman was quarrelling with his wife. He was heard admonishing her. "Fie on you," he shouted. "Do you take me to be Rama? Get out of my house. How can I accept you? You were living long in another person's house. Get out of here!" These words struck the

heart of Rama like an arrow. He could not sleep that night. Towards midnight, he sat up on his bed and thought within himself. "It is now one full Yuga since I started ruling this land. I have to continue for a few years more." Then, sunk in a sad reverie, that Ocean of Compassion thought, "Alas! I have to forsake Sita. I have to uphold the Vedic Path." He went near Sita and spoke to her pleasantly. He had a smile on his face when he told her, "Janaki! You have not asked any boon from me so far, yet, I shall grant you a boon. Go to your holy Home." That very moment, Sita fell at the Feet of Rama and went to Vaikunta (Heaven) in her subtle body. No being, anywhere, nothing, was aware of this fact. Sita in her gross physical frame only was standing before Rama on Earth.

Rama asked the Earth-Sita (Maya Sita) "Pray for a boon" and Sita replied, "Lord! I have a desire to spend some happy days in the hermitages of *Munis* (ascetics)." Rama said, "Be it so" and told her, "Start on your journey tomorrow morning." She collected and packed many articles of clothing and utensils for the daughters and wives of ascetics of the hermitages. Rama woke up early. Servitors and favour-seekers were singing praises of his virtues and excellences. His lotus-like face bloomed. Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrughna paid homage to him prostrating at his feet. But Rama did not converse with his brothers. He kept silent. His face was flushed with emotion. His body showed signs of tension. Every limb was shivering with excitement. The three brothers were lost in fear and anxiety,

not knowing the reason for his grief. They shuddered at the sight of Rama's sadness. They could not fathom the feelings that agitated him.

At last, Rama found words to express his wish. Between sighs, he said, "Brothers! Don't say no. Take Sita into the forest, leave her there and return." On hearing this, they were stunned. They were caught in the flames of despair. Their hearts were scorched. They doubted whether Rama was serious or was only joking. Satrughna sobbed aloud. Lakshmana and Bharatha stood motionless, tears streaming from their eyes. They were speechless. Their lips were quivering. Their hands were shivering. At last, with folded hands, Satrughna prayed thus: "Your words have pierced our hearts. Janaki is *Lokamatha*, the Mother of all beings. You live in the hearts of all living beings. You are the Embodiment of Sath-chith-ananda. For what reason has Sita to be discarded now? She is eternally pure, in thought, word and deed, isn't she? Oh, Destroyer of the Rakshasa Race! She is now pregnant and, at this time, in this condition, is it right to forsake her?" Satrughna could not say more. The sorrow surging within him flowed in tears and loud wails.

Rama said, "Brothers, Listen! If you disregard my word, breath cannot survive in this body. May it be well with you. Brothers, as I have ordered, take Janaki into the forest this very morning." He continued sitting with his head bent, silent, as if he was sad at the turn of events.

Bharatha could not restrain his feelings, when he heard the words, so shocking to the ear. He said, "Lord! I am very low in intelligence. Yet, please give heed to my prayer. Our Solar Dynasty has earned fame and renown in the world. Our father, Dasaratha, your mother Kausalya and you yourself—Master of the Three Worlds—have won great fame. Your glory is sung by the Vedas and by the thousand-tongued Sesha. Janaki is the repository of all that is beneficent. Her name will destroy all traces of inauspiciousness. It will confer all things beneficent. She is the soul of holiness. By her blessings, women can attain the supreme Goal. How can this Janaki live separate from you and exist happily in the forest? Can she live even for a moment apart from you? How can a fish live without water? She is the embodiment of Wisdom and the personification of all the virtues. She cannot lead a solitary life."

Rama listened to his words calmly and then replied thus: "Oh Bharatha! You have given utterance to words that are consonant with ordinary ideas of morality. But the Ruler has to foster Dharma and welfare according to the dictates of morality. In carrying out his duties of guarding and guiding his people, he should not cause any crisis or revolution. He has to protect them with great affection." Then he disclosed the information that the messenger had gathered and communicated to him. He said: "Brothers, our dynasty has suffered great infamy. Its name has been tarnished. This dynasty had a series of Kings and Emperors each one more famous than the others. Their might and

majesty are known all over the world. There is none who won greater renown than they. They were ready to give up their lives, but they never acted contrary to their plighted word. Our dynasty has no taint attached to it. And when there was a likelihood of its being tainted, he who hesitated to give up his life was certainly vile. Understand this well.” At this, the brothers cried, “Lord! Janaki surely has no trace of taint. She has come out of the blazing fire. Gods or saints will not impute even in dreams the slightest fault in her. Not knowing this, if anyone calls her a sinner, he will suffer the torture of hell for billions and billions of years.” Bharatha could not control his resentment at the very mention of this possibility. At this, Rama became visibly angry and his eyes reddened. Lakshmana noticed it, and unable to withstand it, he hid himself behind Bharatha.

But Rama addressed Lakshmana himself directly, “Lakshmana!” he began, “Grasp the implications of what the people are saying. Give up the foolish pose of sadness. If you disobey my command and begin arguing with me, you will have to rue it until death. Take Janaki in a chariot and leave her to herself in a deserted place with no human habitation on the bank of the Ganga and then return.”

Lakshmana heard the command of the Lord. He prepared himself even for death if it encounters him while carrying out that command. He got ready for the journey. Stocking the chariot with provisions and clothing, he made Janaki sit in it and then, drove off. Rama’s faithful consort was elated at the prospect of spending some time in

hermitages. She was full of delight and gratitude. But seeing the crestfallen face of Lakshmana, she was saddened. She became mute and dispirited. Like the cobra that had lost its crest gem, she suffered unseen, in her depths.

They reached the bank of the Ganga. The forest was frightful indeed. They got terror in their hearts. Seeing Lakshmana fear, Sita was frightened more. Of course, she knew that she was only acting the part and that her real Self was not there. Still, to make her role successful before the world, she acted her part well. She wailed, “Oh Lakshmana! Where have you brought me? There is no hermitage visible here. Do not wild beasts and poisonous snakes roam about in this forest? No sign of human habitation can be seen here, Lakshmana! I am getting afraid.”

When Sita lamented thus, Lakshmana was overcome with sympathy. He remembered Rama and said within himself, “Rama! What is this you have done!” Gathering some courage, he looked at Sita, but a fatal thirst overcame him at that time and he suffered much. Sita was torn with anxiety at his condition and his struggles. Realising that he was determined to leave Sita there and return, the deities of the forest spoke from the sky, “Lakshmana! Leave Janaki here and go back. Sita, the Embodiment of Fortune shall live.” These words from the Unseen planted courage in the heart of Lakshmana. He folded his palms in reverence and said, “Mother! What can I do? I cannot but carry out brother’s command. I have no courage to overstep it even

to the slightest. I am the vilest villain. Brother has ordered me to leave you in this thick jungle and return." Saying so, he turned the chariot back. His looks were fixed on the track he was leaving behind. He could hear the lament of Sita in the distance. "Lakshmana! Are you abandoning me in the forest and leaving me alone? Who will protect me here?" She was wailing like any common woman. Her cries pierced the ears of Lakshmana; but remembering his duty to follow the commands of Rama, he made his heart as hard as rock and drove fast until he reached the City.

Meanwhile, Sita fainted in despair. Of course, it was all playacting. She recovered consciousness after a little while, sat up and poured out her grief in words. "Oh Ramachandra! From birth, my life has been filled with sorrow. Alas! Life clings to my body, however much I am invaded by grief." She cried out like this for a long time, bewailing her fate. That moment, the sage Valmiki was passing through the forest on his way to his hermitage from the Ganga where he had gone for his ritual bath. Her words fell on his ears. He was surprised that a woman's voice was calling out for help from the recesses of the forest. He followed the voice to its source, searching all round, and at last, came to her very presence. She recognised him as the sage Valmiki and related to him all that had happened to her. "Oh Monarch of Monks," she appealed, "I am daughter of Emperor Janaka. I am the wife of Sri Ramachandra. The whole world knows this. I do not know why he has deserted me and cast me away. Can the dictates of destiny be escaped

from? Great among Sages! Lakshmana brought me here and left. He did not tell me why he had to do so."

Valmiki listened to her tale of woe. He consoled her and comforted her; "Oh Daughter! Your father, the Emperor of Mithila, Janaka, is my friend, my disciple. He has reverence and faith in me. Dear one, do not worry at all. Feel that my hermitage is your paternal home. All will be well with you. You will certainly rejoin Rama. You will achieve that desire." Taking Sita to be his own daughter, he directed her to have a bath in the Ganga and return. After the cleansing bath, she prostrated before Valmiki, and the sage led her to the hermitage, giving her affectionate assurances. He offered her roots and fruits and pressed her to eat a few. She could not refuse the pleadings of the great elder. Thereafter, Sita spent her days at the hermitage, in constant meditation on Rama and his glory and in sharing peacefully with the pupils and disciples of Valmiki the tasks incidental to the upkeep and maintenance of that spiritual household. The residents of the hermitage as well as Valmiki regaled her with interesting and wondrous stories and entertained her with humorous anecdotes and incidents.

Lakshmana reached the City, with his eyes swollen with sorrow, and heart heavy with grief. He related the sad tale to the three mothers. They broke into inconsolable sorrow and sobbed at the calamity that had overtaken Sita. They praised the virtues of Sita and lamented that a lady of such sterling character should be subjected to this disaster. They blamed Rama for harshness. The capital and the palace

were sunk in sorrow. There was no one free from grief. Wailing was the only sound that could be heard. There was no one who did not ask in sorrow, "Could such a mother be ever punished thus?"

Rama heard the wailing and weeping. He retreated into the shrine with Lakshmana as his sole companion and spent the day away from the sight of others. Later, he went to the women's apartments, and consoling the Queens, he counselled them along the path of Jnana. He also explained to the people that the true Ruler considers his people alone as his kith and kin, and treats them alone as his friends. This, he said, is the code of Rama. He said that the Ruler should give up his own kith and kin when need arises, since his real kith and kin are the subjects over which he is placed.

The three mothers were so affected by separation from Sita that they became weaker and weaker with every passing day. It resulted in their death too, finally. They manifested through Yoga the fire latent in them and allowed the fire to reduce their bodies into ashes. Thus they attained the Highest State of Bliss. The brothers grieved over the loss and performed the funeral rites as laid down in the scriptures. They gave away the sixteen great charities as prescribed therein. Thereafter, the four brothers—Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrughna engaged themselves in the administrative problems and assignments set apart for them, in conformity with the wishes of the people and to their full satisfaction.

Meanwhile, Rama announced that he desired to celebrate the Aswamedha Yaga, (the Horse-Sacrifice) mentioned in the Vedas since the Yaga would ensure the destruction of all varieties of grief. He sent information to Angada and others. He proceeded to the residence of the Royal Preceptor accompanied by his brothers and the ministers of the realm. They fell at the feet of the Guru, and the Guru also received them with respect. He inquired about their health and the welfare of the empire, in sweet soft words. He gave them valuable counsel, quoting stories from the Puranas and incidents from the epics.

Then, Rama addressed him thus: "Master! I have one wish in my mind. You have to help me realise it." Then, he fell at the feet of the Guru. Vasishta, the Guru, asked him what that wish was, and Rama replied, "I have decided on a Yaga. The people of Ayodhya will be happy, filled with joy when it takes place. What I desire to perform is the Aswamedha Yaga. The City can be rendered calm if it is done. The people also wish that it should be performed. Bharatha hesitated to inform you of this, since he is afraid of your reaction. So, I felt I must myself approach you when you can meet us and we can communicate to you this wish. We shall abide by your decision and gladly act accordingly."

Vasishta listened to these words uttered with reverence and humility. He rejoiced at the idea. "Rama! Your wish shall be fulfilled. Bharatha! Rise and busy yourself with the preparations for the Yaga," he said. This made the brothers and the ministers very happy. They extolled the

Preceptor and fell at his feet. Many Brahmins well versed in the lore about Yagas followed Bharatha into the City and Palace.

Sumanthra invited leading citizens and called the officials and asked them to decorate the royal roads inside the City as well as the bazaars and shopping centres. He wanted them to erect Mantaps in many places. No sooner said than done. They executed the orders very quickly and the City was made ready for the big event. The City was excited and enthused into joyful activity. The elders of the City and officers reported to Rama that, as he had directed, information had been sent to the chiefs among sages and ascetics, and Vasishta had also been informed of what was being done.

Vasishta advised Rama thus: "Send the news of the Yaga to Emperor Janaka. He will be able to attend the Yaga with his queen and kinsmen." His advice was couched in persuasive and pleasant words. He also said, "Send invitations to the chief ascetics, Brahmins and Maharshis." When the Guru agreed, Rama took him around Ayodhya, so that he might see the preparations. They were both very pleased at the decorations all over the City. The official messengers visited kingdoms far and near and presented the invitations to the rulers of those lands. One of them proceeded to Mithila, the Capital City of Janaka. Jambavantha, Angada, Sugriva, Nala, Nila and other Vanara leaders arrived. Ascetics and monks came to the City in groups. They were all welcomed and accommodated with

due regard to their spiritual eminence. Soon, Viswamitra arrived. Rama honoured him, and offered reverential hospitality. Agastya, the great sage, also reached Ayodhya. He was given proper reception and arrangements were made for his comfortable stay in the Capital. They saw the sanctified Hall where the Yaga was to be held and were delighted.

When the citizens of Mathila saw the emissary from Ayodhya, they were very happy. He informed Janaka, the Emperor, of the Yaga that was to be performed by Rama. As soon as he heard the news, Janaka rose from his throne. He was thrilled when he listened to the emissary. His eyes streamed tears of bliss. He enquired whether Rama was well and whether his brothers too were well. He replied that the letter he had brought would satisfy him on all scores and handed over the auspicious message. He could not speak more. And who can describe the condition of the Emperor? His kinsmen were transported with delight. The City resounded to the shouts of "Jai." The Emperor read the Message over and over. He was overwhelmed with joy. He called a courier in and ordered him, "Spread this news in cities, towns and villages throughout the empire. Announce it with the play of the ten musical instruments." Then, he called in the Minister and handed him the Message. He received it most respectfully and pressed it on his eyes, before reading it for himself and being thrilled thereby. Bringing to mind the glory of Rama he shed profuse tears of joy. In front of every home in the city, the master of the

house installed a pot of auspicious significance. The Emperor gave away countless valuables in charity to celebrate his receiving the good news. The City of Janaka was swaying in ecstasy.

Janaka arrived at Ayodhya, after the long journey from Mithila. On the way, he alighted to pay his respects to Sathananda, his Preceptor. He blessed Janaka and directed him to proceed fast to Ayodhya, accompanied by his entourage and army—the later including all the four fighting forces, chariotry, elephantry, infantry and cavalry. Janaka left behind a section of the army to safeguard the City. He assigned a palanquin for his Guru, Sathananda, and himself rode in another. When the entire party left for Ayodhya, the earth quaked. Who can count the number of generals, commanders and heroes that the army had in its ranks? Journeying thus, Janaka reached Ayodhya at the end of two days. When he knew that Janaka was approaching the City and had come very near, Rama went forward to receive him and they met in great mutual affection. A magnificent residence surrounded by a vast plain had been set apart for him. It was a charming heavenly residence, right on the bank of the Sarayu River. Rama had deputed his brothers to receive and render hospitality to the Royal guests.

Rama fell at the feet of Janaka and rising, sat by his side, Janaka was overwhelmed by the joy that welled within him. He stroked Rama's head and accosted him softly and sweetly. Rama too replied expressing similar sentiments in felicitous language. He assigned helps and aides to look

after the comforts of Janaka and his entourage. He directed Bharatha to be at the service of the Emperor.

Meanwhile, Vasishta arrived in the presence of Rama, accompanied by his disciples, ten thousand in number. He said, "Ramachandra! Listen to my words: The Vedas, Sastras, the Puranas all of them without exception proclaim that a Yaga, performed without the duly wedded wife by the side of the celebrant, will be barren of results. Great sages also declare the same. Therefore, arrange to bring Janaki back. She is very necessary during the Yaga."

Rama was surprised at these words spoken by the Chief among Sages. He kept silent, without explaining the truth or untruth of that belief. He said, "Chief among Sages! You have to carry out my wish without causing breach of my vow, and without bringing down the reputation of my dynasty. If Janaki is brought back, the reputation is bound to suffer. And I shall not marry to have a wife for the yaga."

At this, Vasishta consulted many famed Sages for a solution. They all held fast to the rule that Janaki must be brought. They said, it was an unavoidable prerequisite. But Rama, who was himself the master of all codes of morality, the embodiment of all the forms of God, and the essence of all the Sastras, thought it over for awhile and announced that a golden idol set with gems be made of Sita and kept in place of Sita. He said that all the Sastras support this view and that there can be no objection to this procedure on any score. The ascetics, sages and scholars versed in all fields

of knowledge could not contradict this opinion. They were all surprised at the validity of the solution offered. They admired his omniscience and acknowledged that he was himself the core of all codes.

The golden Sita was got ready in one single day. It was made more charming and realistic through jewels and garments. Everyone who saw it mistook it for the live Sita. It was so realistic. If Sita had seen it, she too would have been struck with wonder. Many believed that Sita had returned, when they saw the idol. They praised the makers with a thousand tongues. Rama sat on the Lion throne over a tiger skin spread over it. The Golden Sita was placed by his side, where the wife had to take her position. The assembly was led to believe that Sita herself was there. All present prostrated in gratitude and joy.

Vasishta addressed the courtiers and asked them to extend hospitality to the assembled guests according to the rules in practice. "Give everyone what he wishes for and make everyone happy and contented." They seated them in proper lines and in appropriate places, with the help of Bharatha who supervised the arrangements. Each one of them congratulated himself on the grandeur of the reception accorded to him and praised the organisers for the care and consideration they showed.

The Yaga Hall was guarded on the outside by 500 warriors and inside the Hall by 500 masters of the Vedas. The Yaga began on the second day of the bright half of the

Magha month, after Rama had initiated himself with the necessary rites. Vasishta directed that the Horse, chosen for the Yaga, be brought so that it might be examined by experts, whether it had the auspicious marks prescribed.

Lakshmana prostrated before the Guru and hurried to the stables of the Palace to seek out the Horse and decorate it before leading it into the Hall. A gemset saddle was placed on its back. It was a horse immaculately white in complexion. The horses of the Sun would have felt ashamed to stand before it! When it was fully caparisoned, it became so charming that people thought the God of Love and Beauty had a hand in adorning it. It was an impossible task to describe its splendour. It could be said that the horse gave the impression that the Sungod (Suryanarayananamurthi) had turned into a horse, and was prancing proudly. On its forehead was placed a peacock feather with emerald gems shining in it. Like the stars shining in the sky, that feather shone brilliantly with its scintillating gems. Silk cords that shone like lightning flashes were placed round its neck and held by attendants. It was accompanied by 5,000 great warriors—heroes of many a battle—fighters of invincible mettle, led by Lakshmana, all on horseback.

When the cavalcade entered the Hall, Viswamitra instructed Rama to worship the sacred sacrificial Horse, which was to be sent out on its mission of conquest. He gave away the sixteen articles in charity. He performed the ritual purificatory bath. Then, he tied on its brow the gold plate with the inscriptional message to all rulers of the land.

This was the writing it carried: "In the City of Ayodhya, there is a Hero. He is the destroyer of enemies. Even the Lord of Gods trembles at the sight of him. This horse is his sacrificial animal. The strong may lay hold of it; or, they have to pay him tax and tribute; or if you cannot do either, flee into the jungles." Rama inscribed thus on that gold plate and tied it on the brow of that horse.

Meanwhile, Bhargava and other sages came to Rama and related to him the atrocities perpetrated by the demon Lavana. The assembled sages were saddened at the news. Rama called to his presence Satrughna. He gave him an arrow case full of the most powerful weapons. Then he told him, "Use these weapons with the appropriate manthras on the enemy. Go, achieve victory and return triumphant." Then, he wanted Vibhishana to come to him. He fell at Rama's feet. Rama asked him, "Tell me all about this Lavana." At this, Vibhishana described everything about his power and nature just as he knew.

Vibhishana had a step-mother and she had a daughter named Kumbhinasa. She was given in marriage by Ravana to a Danava (member of a demonic clan) named Madhu. Madhu accepted her and in course of time, she gave birth to the demon, Lavana. He underwent severe asceticism and prayed to Lord Siva to bless him with boons. Siva was pleased at his austerities. He gave him a trident, describing its prowess thus: "Lavana! Whoever wields this trident shall not be easily overcome in battle by anyone." With the help of that trident, he has been terrorising gods and men, demons

and serpents and parading his powers over the entire land. He was pursuing all living beings and ill-treating them. No living being was left unconquered by him. Hearing this from Vibhishana, Rama gave vent to a peal of laughter. Of course, there was nothing he did not know. But since he was wearing a human vesture, he had to act as if he did not. He had given him the trident in the form of Siva and he laughed at the stupidity of the recipient and the evil use to which he was putting it. He blessed Satrughna with a portion of his Divine Power and sent him on the mission of destroying Lavana, the Demon.

Under Rama's orders, 3,000 war drums beat in unison, and the dhandhan shook the earth. Horses and elephants cried out in joy, the soldiers blew conches and marched on the capital city of Lavana. Lavana heard their war cries. He emerged from the fort with 64,000 soldiers. He roared like a lion, eager for the kill. He played several magic tricks to evade defeat and to confound the enemy. But his army was shattered to pieces. The sons of Lavana who entered the battle were killed by the son of Satrughna, named Subahu. They reached the heaven reserved for heroes who die fighting. At last, Satrughna shot an arrow invoking the name of Rama and that arrow dealt a mortal wound on Lavana. He drew his last breath as a result and ended his vicious career. The gods acclaimed the victory with a chorus of Jais and they showered blessings on Satrughna.

Satrughna moved on with his army and came to the banks of the Yamuna. He prostrated before the holy river,

and led his army further. While proceeding thus, venturing in the four directions along different routes and encountering different places, he happened to reach the hermitage of Valmiki. There, Janaki was living with her twin sons, each redoubtable in splendour like the Sun.

Those two boys saw the Horse, read the golden plate tied around its brow and led it away, to be bound and kept at the hermitage. Then, they came forward eager to fight back the guardians of the horse, with an arrow-case tied around their waists and bows and arrows in their hands. By that time, the warriors accompanying the Horse reached the place. They saw the Horse tied to a tree and finding that it was done by those boys, they cooled down. They said, "Sons! Your parents are indeed blessed to have such charming children. Well. Let that horse loose, and go home." But the little boys replied, "Oh ye heroes! You have come for battle and not for begging, we believe. When you beg the horse from us, you are tarnishing the fair name of Kshatriya." Hearing this, the guardian soldiers said, "Brave boys! Yes, do not tarnish the fair name of the Kshatriyas. That is why we ask you to be careful in speech." The boys only laughed at this repartee. They said, "Ah, how brave must be the person who sent this horse under the protection of people like you? If you have no strength to take it from us, you can proceed home."

When the boys, Kusa and Lava, spoke so sharply and sarcastically the soldiers were provoked to fall upon them in spite of the fact that they were but tender boys. Lava

shot a succession of arrows at them, quite in a sportive manner, humming tunes within himself and rather carelessly as if engaged in a play. The bodies of the warriors were shot through in so many places that they were rendered meshy. They fell fainting on the ground. Some of them ran into the camp of Satrughna. They cried, "Maharaja! Two boys, evidently children of the hermits, have captured our Horse and in the fight that ensued, they have killed a large number of our soldiers." Satrughna was enraged at this effrontery. He gathered the four sections of his army and marched towards Kusa and Lava. When he confronted them, and saw their handiwork, on the field, proving their overwhelming prowess, he was shocked into shame. "How can I enter into battle with these two boys?" he hesitated. Satrughna addressed them thus: "Oh ye children of hermits: Let loose the Horse and go home. You are worthy of worship. It is not right to wage battle with you."

The boys would not yield. They said, "King! What is your name? From which City are you coming? Why are you moving through this forest at the head of an army? What is the reason for your letting this Horse wander about as it likes? Why have you tied this gold plate round its brow? Well if you have the strength and the courage, remove the plate from its brow, loosen the Horse and take it home." When Lava and Kusa spoke straight and sharp like this Satrughna bowed his head in shame and ordered his men to take up arms and march forward. At this, the boys laughed among themselves. "Aha! This King is pretty powerful!"

But listen. Can a lion be frightened when you clap your hands?" They took up the bow and arrow, remembering their Guru, the sage, Valmiki. Their arrows shattered the chariot of Satrughna to pieces. They also entered his body in many places and made it a patchwork of holes. His veteran warriors fainted and fell. They called each veteran forward and shot arrows at them with fatal effect.

Soon, Rama was informed of the exploits of the two boys from the hermitage. Of course, he knew that they were not children of the hermitage. But he did not disclose that fact. He made them believe that what they said was true. He doubted for a moment how anyone could battle against the tender boys belonging to the monks. At last, he said, "Fighting cannot be avoided. Take Lakshmana with you and proceed." Those who had fled to Rama had to return perforce to the same place. Rama also commanded, "Bring those two boys hither. Since they are from the hermitage, they do not deserve death in any case."

Lakshmana marched forward at the head of a fully equipped army. He reached the place where the engagement had already taken place. He saw the heroic warriors who had fainted and fallen. He was surprised at the audacity of the ascetic boys. He addressed them thus: "Boys, I warn you, save yourselves. Flee from this place back to your homes. You are Brahmin boys and it would be harmful for us if we fight against you. It is against the injunctions of scripture. Get away from before my eyes." Kusa and Lava greeted these words with a peal of laughter. "Oh Brave

Commander! See how your brother has fared. Take refuge in your own home soon." Lakshmana heard them and with one look at Satrughna who had fallen in a faint, he took up his bow and arrow.

But he doubted whether fighting against the children of monks was right or no. He tried to persuade the boys themselves. "Boys," he said, "you have no reasoning faculty. You are mere boys. There is no profit in fighting against you. Go, bring those who are supporting you in this adventure." Even while Lakshmana was importuning thus, Kusa, without paying the least attention to his suggestion, shot an arrow right against him. The earth shook in terror at the impact of that arrow. That arrow spread all over the sky. Its splendour was such that even the sun was rendered dim.

Unable to withstand the valour of Kusa and Lava, Lakshmana grew in anger and fell on them with enormous violence. He placed his chariot before them and began attacking them with no dread of the consequences. The brothers broke his arrows into pieces. They fought most admirably, with many new stratagems. Lakshmana threw his mace at them and when it hit Kusa, he suffered great pain. He rolled on the ground. Seeing this, Lava got enraged. He aimed an arrow at the chest of Lakshmana. Though it hit him straight, being a stronger and older hero, he did not fall. Lava jumped on him and they both had a personal duel with fists. The contest was balanced with no one winning; both of them used many holds and evasive tactics. Each of

them fought using all his strength. Lava pounded Lakshmana with his thunderbolt hits. Lakshmana bore the brunt with pain and appreciated the little fellow's mettle and skill. Meanwhile, Lakshmana took Rama's name and aimed an arrow at Kusa. Kusa who had raised himself up fainted and fell again. He remembered Valmiki and Sita as he fell and so he could stand up soon. He recovered his bow and arrow and attacked Lakshmana. Though Lakshmana replied with an arrow that he had used against Meghanada, it could not harm the boys. The boy cut it into pieces, and the pieces fell on the ground. Lakshmana said to himself, "Ah. These calamities are happening to me since Sita was exiled. I can never have peace unless I discard this body." Just then Kusa fixed on his bow the Brahma arrow that Valmiki had taught him to use. At the very prospect of its release, the three worlds shook in fear. He aimed it straight at the heart of Lakshmana and let it go. Lakshmana was hit and he lost consciousness.

Messengers carried the news to Rama. Bharatha was sunk in sorrow. He folded his hands and stood before Rama. "Lord!" he said, "We are experiencing the consequences of the wrong we committed when we exiled Sita." Rama told the brother, "What! Are you adopting this tactic because you are afraid of fighting in battle? Well, if that is so, I myself can go into the field. Get me the chariot. Adjourn further rites in the yaga. I shall go and find out the antecedents of those boys. Brother! Send word to our former allies and friends. Bring Hanuman to the battlefield." Then,

Rama reached the spot where the fighting was going on. Rama was surprised to see the streams of blood.

At that very moment, Kusa and Lava, the unbeatable warriors, also came to the place. The Vanaras who accompanied Hanuman to the field were stricken with terror. But Hanuman addressed the brothers and said, "Boys! The parents who have given birth to such magnificent heroes as you are, are really blessed." But Kusa declared, "Oh Monkey! If you have no strength to meet us in battle, go back! Don't prate." At this, Bharatha developed much anger. He shouted to his men, "Well! Use your weapons!" When he said so, the Vanaras cast upon them trees, rocks and mountain peaks. Lava pulverised all of them by means of a single arrow. In a short time the forces of Rama were in complete rout. The field was one full flood of blood. All the valiant soldiers lost their lives. At last, even Bharatha fell fainting.

Then, Rama came into the battle area, red with anger, at the head of a large army. He saw the two boys and without letting arrows against them, he got them near him and asked, "Boys! Who are your parents? Where are they living? Which is your native land? What are your names?" In reply, Lava said, "Oh King! Of what use are these inquiries? You brothers, all four of you, have the same mannerism, I believe. Come, take up bow and arrow, and fight. Why do you bother about parents and native place. This is no parley, preliminary to marriage negotiations. No, this is serious business." But Rama insisted on continuing. He said, "Boys,

your bodies are so tender. I shall not fight with you until I know your names and your lineage."

"King. Our mother is a daughter of Emperor Janaka. Janaki is being fostered by the sage Valmiki. We do not know the name of our father nor do we know the lineage to which we belong. Our names are Kusa and Lava. We reside in the forest," they said. Rama pretended to have discovered just then that they were his children, and told them, "Boys! Give fight to the army which is coming behind me." Saying this, he raised up Angada, Jambavantha, Hanuman and others from the fainting fit into which they had fallen. He also raised Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrughna so that they might see the happenings of the future. Then, he addressed the soldiers. "Men of the army. Fight, so that fame and status might be protected and strengthened." Then, when the battle was renewed, Rama watched with immense delight the heroism of the boys with their bows and arrows, and their superior skill and bravery.

The Vanara heroes failed to find any means to overpower the boys. So, they spoke to one another that no one in the fourteen worlds could gain victory over them. They could not say or do anything more. They had to keep silent.

Just then Kusa fell upon Rama. The impact forced Rama to faint and fall. Kusa pulled down the decorative ropes and chains on the chariot and the horses of Rama, and both brothers bound Hanuman with them. They led

Hanuman at the end of the rope and took him home. They also took other Vanaras and a few bears, all with bright coloured clothes and decorations on them. The sacrificial Horse was among the possessions they paraded. With these, they approached the mother, Janaki. They prostrated before her and offered the booty acquired as homage to her.

ENDING THE PLAY

Janaki was amazed at the sight of the Vanaras and others, as well as the way in which they were decorated and dressed up. Just then, Valmiki the Sage reached the place, evidently overcome with anxiety. He described all that had happened before Sita. He loosened the bonds on Hanuman, Jambavan and others and bewailed, "Boys! What is this you have done? You have come here after felling to the ground Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrughna." Sita was shocked at this. She said, "Alas, dear Children! On account of you, the dynasty itself has been tarnished. Don't delay further. Prepare for my *sathi*, that I may ascend the same. I cannot live hereafter." Sita pleaded for quick action.

The Sage Valmiki consoled her and imparted some courage. Then he went with Kusa and Lava to the battlefield and he was amazed at what he saw there. He recognised

the chariot and the horses of Rama and finding Rama, he fell at his feet. Rama rose in a trice and sat up. Kusa and Lava were standing opposite to him. Valmiki addressed Rama thus: "Lord! My life has attained fulfilment. Oh, how blessed am I!" Then, he described how Lakshmana had left Sita alone in the forest, and how Sita lived in his hermitage, where Kusa and Lava were born. He said, "Lord, Kusa and Lava are your sons. May the Five Elements be my witness, I declare that Kusa and Lava are your sons.

Hearing these words, Rama embraced the boys and stroked their heads. Through the Grace of Rama, the fallen Vanaras and warriors rose alive. Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrughna caressed and fondled the boys. Lakshmana hurried to where Sita was, for Rama directed him to find out from her what she proposed to do about her "vow." Nearing her, Lakshmana fell at her feet. Sita was desirous of fulfilling the "vow" if that was the wish of Rama. So she accompanied Lakshmana to the presence of Rama. Seeing the Group she made this pronouncement as the Truth: "Oh Gods! Oh Elements Five! I have not dwelt even in my dream on anyone other than Rama, in mind, speech, body or deed. Oh Mother! Goddess Earth! Take me into yourself." Immediately, the Earth sundered where she stood, with a great rumbling and from the trench so formed, there arose a Divine Lion-Throne, with the Goddess Earth seated therein. As She came to the surface, She held out Her Hand, and lifting Janaki from the ground, She blessed her thus. "Oh Janaki! From birth until today, no day passed without

your sorrowing therein. You streamed tears always. Come! In My Home, be happy." The next second, they were both out of sight. Her glory spread over the three worlds. This was clearly seen by Lakshmana and others.

They shed tears. Rama acted the role of a saddened person. He thought within himself. "Janaki has gone in consonance with the inclinations of my mind. She was always moving in accordance with the plans I had in mind. Now, we should also proceed to our Vaikunta residence." But to others, he appeared sad and grieving a little. Soon he left for the Capital City with his brothers and sons. He performed the concluding rites of the Yaga as planned. He gave away in charity the sixteen prescribed gifts in quantities that were beyond description. Rama honoured Emperor Janaka as befitting his status and took the sons to his presence. He was immensely delighted when he saw his grandsons. Since Janaka was replete with wisdom, and since he was aware through his divine insight of the Divinity of Sita, he did not exhibit any surprise or wonder, anxiety or worry, over what had happened. His mind was unaffected because he knew that what had to happen had happened. His attitude was also not affected to the slightest extent by the incidents that took place. Janaka left for Mithila City filled with unbounded joy.

The Gurus and Brahmins came into the presence of Rama, according to the message sent by him. They took leave of him, happy that they were enabled to witness the great Yaga. They returned to their homes fully content.

Thereafter, calling the sons to his side, Rama advised them about the means and methods of administration of the empire. Then he formally invested them with the insignia of imperium. He placed the son of Bharatha, Thaksha, over the Southern Kingdom. His second son, Pushkara, was given the Pushkara Kingdom. They destroyed the remnants of Rakshasas that were there and established themselves in those kingdoms. The sons of Lakshmana, Chitrakethu and Chitrangada, were mighty warriors, heroic fighters, veterans of wars. They were deputed to the Western Region and destroying the Rakshasas there, they ruled over that area. Rama invested those two with regal authority over Cities with different names which became their capital cities. He also gave all the sons valuable advice on political and administrative matters. Kusa was installed in Ayodhya and so Lava was awarded the Northern Region, the treasure chest of riches. The City of Lavapura (modern Lahore) was fixed as his capital City. Rama gave away cows, lands, clothes and money to the fullest to each.

Meanwhile, the news that Rama was contemplating return to his own place came to be known by the people of Ayodhya. They came in immense numbers to his presence and prayed that their requests be listened to. Their request was that they too be taken by him to his divine Home. The Lord said that it was a right request and he agreed to do so. He was glad at their affection and the devotion and dedication they had towards their Lord. Lakshmana led them all.

The Kishkindha Kingdom was allotted to Angada, Sugriva, Jambavantha, Vibhishana, Nala, Nila and other individuals embodying parts of Divinity, and billions of Vanaras come to fulfil the Divine Mission, came to the Presence of Rama at that time. Rama accosted them and said, "Vibhishana! You have to rule over Lanka. You will attain my Presence in the end." He blessed him thus. Then he turned to Jambavan, and told him, "Jambavan, be on the earth till the end of the Dwapara age. Then, incarnated as Krishna, a fight with you will happen to me. You will then recognise me as now." He blessed him in that manner.

Then he proceeded to the bank of the Sarayu River. Bharatha walked on the right side of Rama and Satrughna on his left. Behind him walked the ministers and the people of the City. As they entered the waters, Bharatha merged in the Lord. Satrughna touched the water and shone in the Lotus and merged in the Lord.

The Lord uttered a Blessing that all who come to the Holy Land of Ayodhya and all who bathe in the sacred Sarayu can reach Him.