



Ramakatha Rasa Vahini, Vol 2

Divine Discourses of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba

Index Of Discourses

The Inner Meaning	2
This Book	6
1. The Dandaka Forest	9
2. Panchavati	22
3. The Wily Villain	40
4. An Ally Accepted	66
5. Success In The Search	89
6. Lanka On Fire	112
7. The Bridge	132
8. The Siege	154
9. The Nether Region	177
10. Ten Heads Roll	187
11. Happy Ayodhya	203
12. The Coronation	209
13. Exile For Sita	228
14. Ending The Play	247

The Inner Meaning

Rama is the indweller in every body. He is the source of bliss (the Atma Rama) 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, and you gain Rama. Sita gave up the luxuries of Ayodhya so she could be with Rama in the period of "exile". When she cast longing eyes on the golden deer and craved 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 examples of persons saturated with dharma. Dasaratha is the representative of the merely physical, with the ten senses. The three qualities (gunas) - serenity, activity, passivity (sathwa, rajas, thamas) - are the three queens. The four goals of life (purusha-arthas) are the four sons. Lakshmana is the intellect; Sugriva, discrimination (viveka). Vali is despair; Hanuman, the embodiment of courage. The bridge is built over the ocean of delusion. The three demon (rakshasa) chiefs Ravana, Kumbhakarna, and Vibhishana are personifications of the active (rajasic), passive (thamasic), and pure (sathwic) qualities. Sita is the awareness of the Universal Absolute (Brahma-jnana), which the individual must acquire and regain while 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.

- Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba

Preface - This Book

For many centuries, the Rama story, Stream of Sacred Sweetness, has been for millions of men, women, and children 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 in which 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. This story plays its tender fingers on the heartstrings of people, evoking lithe, limpid responses of pathos, pity, exultation, adoration, ecstasy, and surrender and transforming us from the animal and the human into the Divine, which is our core.

No other story in human history has had such a profound impact on the minds of people. 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, lullabies, myths, and tales, through dance and drama, through sculpture, music and painting, through ritual, poetry, and symbol, Rama has become the breath, the bliss, the treasure of countless spiritual seekers (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 humanity has devised for the expression of their 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, invigorated, corrected, consoled, and comforted His contemporaries in the Thretha 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 Ramakatha Rasa Vahini - must have appeared to them as "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. "Sai-ence" 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 toward 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 it is to have this divine narrative in our hands, to inscribe it on our minds, to imprint it on our hearts! 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 humanity into the haven of peace. While ruminating over the second half of this story, let us pray that we too be allotted roles, and may He grant us, as reward, the vision of that Haven.

N. Kasturi

Editor, Sanathana Sarathi

Prasanthi Nilayam

14 January 1984

This Book

For many centuries, the Rama story, Stream of Sacred Sweetness, has been for millions of men, women, and children 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 in which 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. This story plays its tender fingers on the heartstrings of people, evoking lithe, limpid responses of pathos, pity, exultation, adoration, ecstasy, and surrender and transforming us from the animal and the human into the Divine, which is our core.

No other story in human history has had such a profound impact on the minds of people. 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, lullabies, myths, and tales, through dance and drama, through sculpture, music and painting, through ritual, poetry, and symbol, Rama has become the breath, the bliss, the treasure of countless spiritual seekers (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 humanity has devised for the expression of their 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, invigorated, corrected, consoled, and comforted His contemporaries in the Thretha 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 Ramakatha Rasa Vahini - must have appeared to them as "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. "Sai-ence" 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 irrever-ence toward 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 it is to have this divine narrative in our hands, to inscribe it on our minds, to imprint it on our hearts! 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 humanity into the haven of peace. While ruminating over the second half of this story, let us pray that we too be allotted roles, and may He grant us, as reward, the vision of that Haven.

N. Kasturi

Editor, Sanathana Sarathi

Prasanthi Nilayam

14 January 1984

1. The Dandaka Forest

While Bharatha was spending his days at Nandigrama in constant contemplation of Rama, far away in the forest, on Chitrakuta Peak, Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana were praising his devotion and sense of dedication.

They were happy in the peaceful, quiet forest home.

The fool Jayanta

One day, a fool named Jayanta sought to measure Rama's valour, 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 Rama's side, lost in the contemplation of the scenery spread out before them, pecked at the sole of her tender foot with his sharp beak, causing blood to trickle from the wound.

Seeing the blood, Rama plucked a blade of dry grass from the ground and threw it at the crow.

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

Jayanta prostrated before Rama, pleading for mercy. He said, "I am a fool. I didn't 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

Jayanta's 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 resumed its nature. Jayanta was grateful to be let off with just a token punishment for the heinous crime he had committed, and he lived for a long time on Chitrakuta Peak, where Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana had taken residence. One day, the tenth day of the bright half of the month of Margasira (November-December), Rama ordered Jayanta to go southward from his habitat.

A visit to the sage Athri's hermitage

Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana also left Chitrakuta, for the hermitage of the great sage Athri. Through his pupils, the sage learned in advance of Rama's intention to visit his retreat. So when Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana were approaching the hermitage (ashram), the sage moved far out on the forest track to welcome them. 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. That day, he said, his austerities had at last borne fruit.

That evening, the sage Athri gathered his pupils and placed a high seat for Rama at the head of the assembly.

Meanwhile, his consort, Anasuya, attended to Sita's needs and brought her also to that place. Then, Athri described to all present the sacredness of the occasion, the powers of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana, and the divine forces that had incarnated as these three. Anasuya also praised the virtues of Sita and gave her holy counsel on the duties of woman 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, was the incarnation of the One and

only masculine principle in the universe. In him, she said, there was no trace of duality, of mine and thine, of grief or joy. He was the embodiment of fearlessness; He was strength personified.

The Eternal Masculine (Purusha) had wedded Nature (prakriti), the Eternal Feminine. Though nature appears manifold and variegated, it is really One undifferentiated unity. In this way, Sita revealed the truth of the Rama principle to Anasuya, the consort of sage Athri.

Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana spent a happy time at the sage's ashram. They gave good counsel to the residents and pupils on various problems of right conduct.

Taking leave of Athri, they resumed their journey through the jungle. The ashramites 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 themselves. Helplessly, they had to witness the departure of the divine master of their hearts.

A stay at a beautiful hermitage

The jungle echoed with the roar of ferocious beasts wandering 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 so that Rama and Sita could walk safely along the track. As 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

charming crowns of beauty. The branches of the trees drooped 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 streamed 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 and partook of the simple repast.

In the evening, they took baths and performed due rites. Rama spoke to the residents on ideal modes of conduct and behaviour. He let them ask questions on doubts that might be puzzling them and knotty points of interpretations of the scriptures. They welcomed the opportunity most enthusiastically. Rama offered convincing and clear explanations, in simple and satisfying words. Without a doubt, the dwellers of the ashram experienced heaven on earth. They spoke among themselves with great delight that Rama's presence 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 ashramites, 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 hermitage or place for more than one single night.

An encounter with Viradha, the ogre

They resumed their journey. Passing through the forest, a monstrous form, the frightful ogre Viradha, suddenly appeared and rushed menacingly toward them. Sita was naturally frightened at the apparition; but she mustered

courage, knowing that, with 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 a sharp arrow at the monster. Soon, he showered many missiles on it. Wounded by the arrows, Viradha transformed himself 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.

Later, Kubera had taken pity on him and declared that his demonic career would come to an end the moment he met his death from Rama's arrow. He could then return as an angel to Kubera's presence, it was said. So, the angel 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 and 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.

Sarabhangha immolates himself

Next, Rama entered the famous hermitage of the sage Sarabhangha. Even while he was nearing the ashram, 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 scarcely believe his eyes; he doubted whether it was a dream, an illusion, or some strange experience caused by meditation mania. 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 while extolling 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. I could 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 this body off while my gaze is fixed on you." Within minutes, a pyre was set up. Sarabhanga ascended it, and it was lit, with him sitting unconcerned on top, his eyes shining in joy at the ecstasy of looking 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 to 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.

At first, the ashramites grieved over the departure of their preceptor and master, but 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. Feeling that they had shared in that gift of grace; they adored Rama and extolled him in various ways, shouting "Hail! Victory! Victory!" They applied the ashes of their master on their brows in

reverent gratitude.

Sutheekshna adores Rama

The news of Sarabhanga's immolation soon brought to that hermitage residents from other ashrams as well.

They fell at Rama's feet and praised him and his mission of compassion. "Lord! How fortunate Sarabhanga was," they cried, "Many a sage has fallen prey to the voracious ferocity of the tribe of demons (rakshasas) 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, the pupil of the renowned Agastya, came forward and prostrated before Rama. He was an incomparable devotee, and his mind was saturated with love for Rama. He had steady faith that God could 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 blinking, lest even that fraction of time should go to waste. His heart melted in adoration at the sight of Rama.

He said, "Lord! Did you come so far into this region just to bless me? Can't you merge me into the Lord you are? Having come upon the earth with this visible form, do you still wish me to adore, as hitherto, the formless Absolute? No. I love this form and this name. I don't 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, isn't that enough? O, Saviour from the travail of birth and death!

No form of worship is so effective as service of the Lord through love, right? Singing your glory, meditating on it, and deriving unspeakable bliss in the process - can anything else yield greater joy?" Sutheekshna danced about, unaware of where he was or what he was doing. Tears flowed in streams down his cheeks. For those who couldn't gauge the inner joy he was experiencing, he appeared insane. Rama knew the urge within the sage, drew him near, and embraced him most lovingly. He spoke softly and sweetly, 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 to consciousness; as soon as he came to, he fell at Rama's feet. He raised his hands above his head and, joining palms in adoration, expressed his joy and took delight therein. He said, "Lord! You are the conflagration that destroys the forest of delusion in which humanity has lost itself. You are the solar orb that makes it possible for the lotuses of the hearts of good people to bloom in beauty and fragrance. You are the lion 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 burned away when a tiny glance from your eye falls on them." He extolled Rama thus and in various other forms, deriving great joy at getting the chance. He also utilised the chance to gaze upon the Lord, 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 blink once while looking on and drinking deep the glory of Rama.

Rama watched him for a while. Then, he raised him up with his hands upon

his shoulders. "Sutheekshna!

You are endowed with all desirable virtues. Ask 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." On to Agastya's ashram With Sutheekshna as companion, Rama began walking to Agastya's ashram, with Sita and Lakshmana following.

A short distance later, they heard the murmur of a river flowing by. When they walked toward 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, Agastya's lovely hermitage could be seen 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 by their very nature, aquatic animals and land animals, beasts and birds of every type, sported and lived together, free from fear or enmity. Many monks and ascetics were sitting on the river bank, lost in meditation.

When they neared the ashram, Sutheekshna ran forward to convey the tidings to his master. He fell at his feet and declared, "O great teacher! O embodiment of mercy! The prince of Ayodhya, the very sustainer of this universe, has just come to our ashram 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, has come to you, near you. Ah! What a great good day this is! What great good fortune!" Sutheekshna forgot himself and was filled with immeasurable ecstasy.

Agastya rose suddenly from his seat and walked fast into the open. He saw the three coming toward 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 his embrace and stood with his arms around

Rama, clinging to him, as a creeper clings to the trunk of a tree.

Agastya couldn't 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 asked about the journey they had gone through and listened with eyes closed in deep delight, tears of joy streaming down the cheeks, as Rama answered his queries. A happy smile hovered on his face.

At last, he spoke, "Lord! I'm convinced that no one is more blessed than I. 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.

Agastya asks not to be deluded into egotism

Rama said, "O monarch among monks! I have nothing to hide from you. You know too well why I have come into the forest. Tell me how I can destroy the brood of demonic persons (rakshasas) who obstruct the austerities of sages and monks, and how I can protect and preserve the dedicated servants of God from danger. I will act accordingly; I await your advice. In the cold (hemantha) season, lotuses shrivel up and die. The season has approached for the shriveling of the demons." Agastya smiled and replied, "Lord! You are omniscient. I don't know why you ask 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 sight (darshan), touch (sparshan), and conversation (sambhasan) with which you have just blessed me, I am able to grasp the significance of your question. That too is your grace. Illusion (maya), which is your creation and your puppet, your slave, lying at your feet, is watching ever to carry out your commands at the slightest raising of your brow. Through the skill endowed by you, illusion is creating all beings on earth and in heaven.

"Your illusion is unconquerable. It harasses beings endlessly, that is to say, those who fall a prey to its machinations.

That is a fact that is known to all. Your illusion is like the banyan tree, spreading far and wide. The orbs in the cosmos are as the fruits of that tree, and 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 commoners would. You praise me as people do. This makes me laugh.

I'm not concerned with anything now. I would like you stay in this hermitage, with Sita and Lakshmana; that is the only boon I ask. 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 to slide into the background, as if you are innocent of anything and ignorant of everything! But don't elevate me. Don't ask me for directions. My duty is to assent and accept your wishes and to follow your footsteps. Father! Don't inveigle me into your illusion (maya) and delude me into egotism, making me the target of your sport." Rama replied, "O venerable sage! You know this region well, so what harm is there if you tell me which place to select for my stay? This is what everybody would expect of you, isn't it?" The story of the curse on Dandaka Forest Agastya replied, "Master! Since you have commanded me, I shall obey and give answer. Very near to this place flows the sacred river Godavari. For ages, that great river has been flowing full and free. Adjacent to it, we have the Dandakaranya region. When you sanctify it by residing in it, you will confer all content and happiness upon the monks and sages that live therein, for that forest region and its guardian ruler are under a curse and afflicted thereby." Rama interrupted the sage. "Master! Sita is anxious to learn the story of that curse. Tell us about it in detail."

Agastya saw through that request, so he addressed Rama. "O, Director of the eternal play. Once upon a time, famine raised its head in the Panchavati area. All the monks and ascetics who lived there took refuge in the hermitage of sage Gautama. 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 some pseudo-monks among them 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. Gautama saw it was about to bite a beautiful flower from its stem, and he attempted to drive it away. But at his very first push, the cow breathed its last! The conspirator monks immediately laid the dreaded sin of cow killing (go-hathya) on him! They condemned him as an outcast and a heathen.

"Gautama wanted 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, which is polluted by such low-minded persons, be out of bounds for the good and the saintly. May it become the haunt of demons (the demonic Yakshas).' "Another incident added to the effects of this curse. Danda, the ruler of this region, violated the chastity of the daughter of his own preceptor, Bhrigu. Bhrigu listened to the pathetic story related by his daughter and, in the extremity of his anger, overwhelmed the region with a downpour of dust. Therefore, this area was sodden deep with mud, and in the course of time it became 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 sure that when you take residence in that forest, the demons (rakshasas) will be decimated and the curse will be lifted. Monks and spiritual aspirants (sadhakas) will once again dwell there and progress in their austerities. Humanity everywhere will benefit by this cleansing and this consummation. The sage who cursed 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 will reside there." On to Dandaka Forest Rama took leave of the sage and went with Sita and Lakshmana to Dandaka Forest. Before they left his hermitage, Agastya brought forth some weapons that he had acquired from divine sources by asceticism. He gave them to Rama, saying that he had no wish to use them, for 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 can't save me, but You can. Your grace is my most powerful weapon. 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 and 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 and soon arrived at the place known as Panchavati, which Agastya had indicated.

There, they saw 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 told the eagle the sad news of Dasaratha's death and alleviated his sense of loss and bereavement. Rama told him about himself and spoke to him about Sita, Lakshmana, and 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.

2. Panchavati

Lakshmana's sense of duty

Rama wanted to stay at Panchavati on the Godavari for some length of time. So, reclining under the cool shade of a spreading tree, Rama called his brother and said, "Lakshmana! Brother! Find a beautiful and comfortable spot in this area and build a nice little cottage there, as charming as you wish." Lakshmana received this order as a dagger thrust! He could not bear the agony. He fell at Rama's feet, 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 can't understand what makes you so sad. Have you heard 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 could 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 a hut there for us to live in. Isn't it so?" Lakshmana closed his ears with the palms and protested, "Rama! Rama! I can't 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 nothing else. How then can I bear to listen to words that indicate that I have to choose a spot for the cottage according to my wishes? As if I had the capacity and inclination to choose! Had I preferences of my own, how could I be a fit servant of Rama? How could I deserve this privilege and pleasure? It would mean I was unfit to be alive on earth, and my life would be but a burden and a shame." Lakshmana stood, sobbing aloud, unable to stifle his grief.

Rama saw his plight and consoled him with kind words. "Brother! Your heart is

highly sanctified. I used those words in the ordinary worldly sense, but don't be under the impression that your brother is unaware of your innermost quality of dedication. Don't 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 in the language of common usage, that is all. Don't 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 hut (parnasala) 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 to exercise my wish or will or to do anything on my own." He fell at his elder brother's feet. Rising happy and content, he began to collect 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 often confessed to Rama that, for her, life in the forest was even more delightful than life at Ayodhya, because a brother like Lakshmana was accompanying them 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.

Rama constantly has visitors

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 in a

house of leafy thatch like their own, spread far and wide. Every day, groups of ascetics trekked there to offer their homage. They brought their pupils with them, too. They had their fill of the sight (darshan) of the Lord, 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 attempting to define and interpret the codes of morality or the texts on rituals. Others prayed to Rama and sought clarification on whether their ascetic practices 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 raised in order to drag another into a controversy and, later, to inflict a humiliating defeat, are trivial.

Questions asked in order to demonstrate one's own cleverness and skill are "low". Questions that announce the intellectual equipment and reasoning faculty of the questioner are "passable". Questions asked with the sincere desire to remove one's doubts are "praiseworthy". It needs no mention that the sages, monks and ascetics came to Rama with only the fourth type of question.

Rama and Lakshmana were filled with delight when they saw the ascetics. Many 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 scriptures (sastras), and so free from complexity. They burst into paeans of praise and adoration. "O master supreme!" they exclaimed, "O, 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. O, How fortunate we are! How our wishes have been fulfilled!" They departed from His 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 Rama's cottage, 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 His sight (darshan). 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 they had to practise thereafter. He discoursed on dharma and spiritual disciplines 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.

Rama discourses on spiritual matters

"Lakshmana!" he said once, "Affection for the body, attachment toward possessions of any kind, egotism 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. It establishes her domain over all beings and things, all species of living creatures.

"Each of the five senses of perception and five senses of action (the ten indriyas) has its presiding deity, and illusion (maya) perceives the objective world and derives pleasure therefrom through their instrumentality. Every item and particle of such pleasure is illusion-produced and is therefore illusory, evanescent, and superficial.

"Illusion has two forms. One type is called knowledge-based illusion (vidya-maya); the other, ignorancebased illusion (a-vidya-maya). The latter 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 first kind of illusion has created the cosmos, under the prompting of the Lord; 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 the qualities (gunas) serenity, restlessness, and inertia (sathwa, rajas, thamas), each of which separately or in some kind of combination is characteristic of beings. Sathwa means the equal balanced temper; rajas, the sanguinary or the emotional, active temper; thamas, the dull, inert temper).

"The truly wise (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 who 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 khalvidham Brahma; na iha nanasthi kinchana.) He knows that the entire cosmos is constituted of the same Brahman, that there can be no second entity apart from Brahman.

"O Lakshmana! You must know that the Trinity (Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra) are but the reflections of the one Brahman in each of the three strands or attributes - serenity, restlessness, inertia (sathwa, rajas, thamas). The restless attribute is personified as Brahma, the serene aspect as Vishnu, and the unchanging 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 some combination of these three attributes. So, the wise person goes beyond and beneath these three strands and seeks the origin in the One. Only such a person deserves the name monk (vairagi), for such a person has no likes and dislikes, no attachment (raga)." Sometimes, Rama explained to Sita and Lakshmana that as long as the individual (jivi) does not understand aright the affinities it has to illusion (maya) and to the supreme Brahman, it cannot liberate itself and merge in the Supreme; it has to remain just a particularised individual, 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, illusion will disappear, like fog before the risen sun. This is the genuine self-knowledge (Atma-jnana), for the Supreme is Supreme Self (Param-atma) and the individual is the same Supreme Self seen as an image in the body-with-name-and-form, the container (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 (your swa-dharma); you derive detachment thereby. Practise yoga, the search for union with the Supreme, and derive spiritual wisdom (jnana) thereby. This wisdom is the very last step in spiritual progress. It leads to consummation.

"Adoring the Supreme with the greatest possible love is called devotion (bhakthi). I shower grace on one with such love; devotion will grant full prosperity. Devotion emanates from the heart, spontaneously. It doesn't depend on extraneous things or persons. Devotion can also confer spiritual wisdom (jnana) on the person who has dedicated themselves to the Supreme. The joy that devotion endows on a person is unique and immeasurable. How

does a person first decide to walk on the path of devotion? It all begins with the compassion of some one good and godly sage or realised soul. This path leads people quickly to Me." Listening to such discourses, Sita and Lakshmana forgot where they were and under what conditions. Rama also 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.

Surpanakha falls for Lakshmana

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

As soon as she saw 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 him with amorous gestures. But Lakshmana paid no heed; he continued his task, unaffected by the apparition.

Surpanakha couldn't bear inattention any longer. She came close to him and, with a pathetic voice, she appealed, "Lord! Why do you plunge me into despair? Cool my unbearable ardour; cast your loving happinessconferring eye on me." Lakshmana didn't 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.

Surpanakha pelted harsh, abusive words at Lakshmana, like 'coward' and 'villain', and laughed loudly in scorn at his unresponsive behaviour. She hadn't noticed Rama; all her attention and anger were fixed only on Lakshmana. She pleaded with him, "O 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, so if I wed you, you will have to live as a slave." 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 at which Lakshmana was pointing. 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 to Rama and, weeping out her distress, she prayed, "God of love! God of beauty! Accept me as yours." Rama also decided to treat her to a homily and derive some fun out of the ludicrous situation. With a chuckle, He said, "O beauteous woman! I cannot wed you, because I am under the vow of monogamy. I have my wife here. My brother, Lakshmana, 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 Lakshmana and started her appeals once again. "Your brother has agreed to the wedding, so don't 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 desperate. 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, for Rama could not wed her with Sita 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.

Surpanakha is punished

Lakshmana stood ready, watching Rama's face for orders. Rama realised that the woman was far gone and had to be stopped. Feeling that an axe need not be used when nails are enough, he looked at Lakshmana, raised his hand, and counted four on his fingers.

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, so he could rightly interpret the slightest gesture of Rama.

Rama had held his hand up toward the sky. The sky (akasa) is the fifth elemental force, characterised by sound; sound is the symbol for Brahman, known as Sound (Sabda) Brahman, or God. God resides in heaven, and heaven is also indicated by the raised pointing hand. Heaven is known as naka in Sanskrit; it has also another meaning, nose!

As soon as Rama made those two gestures, Lakshmana rushed toward the demonic 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 of 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." She disappeared quickly into the forest.

The demons want revenge

Surpanakha went straight to the demon chieftains, Khara and Dushana, in

Dandaka Forest and wailed, "How can you bear this insult and injury dealt to your sister so silently? 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." Surpanakha started telling 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.

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 toward Rama and Lakshmana, the brothers who had punished her in that manner. The ogre warriors were so indomitable that they couldn't 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 was an inauspicious beginning for the campaign. She was a bad omen for the expedition. A bleeding face, a widow, a defective - these are considered bad omens. Surpanakha was all these. The demons (rakshasas) were not aware of the pros and cons of the signs and omens for starting on a march toward the battlefield; they relied on their physical and material might and their nefarious stratagems. For this very reason they were always unable to stand before the might of divine and dharmic (virtuous) 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, muscles, and 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!

The demons kill each other!

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, "O most wicked, O most unfortunate!

You dared deform our sister, did you? Now, see if you can save your life from extinction!" Rama was already aware of their approach; he told Lakshmana to keep Sita in a cave and be on guard. "Don't worry about me in the least! Nothing ill can ever happen to me," Rama said. Lakshmana knew Rama's might, so he obeyed implicitly. He had no doubt at all about Rama's victory, He led Sita into the cave and stayed there, with his bow and arrow ready for any emergency.

Rama stood before the hermitage, a smile lighting up his face and his bow, well stringed, ready for the fray.

He 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 multihooded 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 one 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 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 also 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 were similarly entranced. "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 don't have even an iota of anger or hatred toward 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 bliss (ananda) by the sages living here." Khara did not like to talk with Rama, so he sent a messenger to find out from Rama 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 question. Rama smiled at this behaviour. He said, "Listen fellow! I am a warrior (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 won't kill those who run away from the field." This statement was carried back to Khara and Dushana and 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 among them by Rama did as much havoc as fire or lightning could do. The ogres retreated before the onslaught, crying out in pain, "O mother! O father! Alas! Save us!" and so on in sheer agony and despair.

Seeing them flee, Khara, Dushana and their youngest brother Thrisira called out, "Demons (rakshasas)!

Don't flee from the fight. Whoever is found running away will be killed on the spot, by our own soldiers." At this, they thought "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 toward 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 and confounding the enemy. 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, 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 also 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 Ravana's end was also 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 the entire race of ogres or demons off the face of the earth and thereby ensure the peace and prosperity of mankind.

Ascetic sages visit Rama

As soon as the fierce engagement ended, Sita and Lakshmana came to 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, Sita's eyes were roaming over Rama's body 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 Rama's Panchavati ashram, 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 of them who had acquired the power of forward vision approached Rama in all humility and said, "O Master! You have to be vigilant and alert in the coming days. The demons 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. Their elder brother Ravana 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. "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 didn't 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, told him, "You heard it, didn't you?" Turning to the sages, Rama said, "Please don't 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 in them and allowed them to return to their hermitages, confident that they could continue their studies and practices in peace and tranquility, undisturbed by the demon hordes.

Ravana hears Surpanakha's story

As the sages foretold, Surpanakha lost no time in appearing before her brother, Ravana, the demon emperor, rending the air with her weeping. She barged into his audience hall and spouted angry invectives, to the astonishment and anxiety of everyone present. The demons of Lanka were frightened that some calamity had overtaken their land; they came out into the streets and began discussing what the reason could possibly be.

Her appearance was monstrous; her body was covered with blood, and her words were poisoned by anger.

Ravana understood that someone had inflicted great injury on her. He 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 demon (rakshasa), if the superhuman powers you gained by years of asceticism are real, then come, the moment has arrived to use your valour, your courage, and your heroism. Arise! Don't 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 demons have entered Dandaka Forest. They felled hundreds of thousands of demon soldiers. They cut the brothers Khara and Dushana to pieces. They wiped out of existence thousands launched against them in the wink of an eye. Their heroism is beyond description. Their personal beauty - Ah!" Surpanakha halted and stood silent, contemplating the splendour that had enraptured her.

Ravana became uncontrollably furious. He gnashed his teeth and slapped his thighs as if in a burst of challenge.

"What? Did those vile persons kill Khara and Dushana? Perhaps they didn't know my name, that I am behind them as their support. Perhaps they haven't heard of my might and vengefulness." Ravana continued to boast aloud, recounting his exploits to the people present.

Surpanakha interrupted him. "O 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 don't know that renunciants (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. Don't neglect fire, illness, an enemy, a snake, and a sin on the grounds that they are small and insignificant. When they grow big, they are bound to inflict great harm. Therefore, hasten; do not hesitate." Surpanakha's words poured the poison of hatred into Ravana's ears. 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 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. Tell me, were you sleeping soundly when they cut them off?

This is indeed surprising." Those 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 talking to them! They always bubble over 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. Never have I set eyes on such beauty.

"Fie upon our demon prowess, our vile stratagems, our abnormal figures, our ugly appearance! We are indeed disgusting. Look upon them but once and you will swear I am right. Why? Khara and Dushana, who died in the battle, were reluctant to fight with them. They protested and pleaded 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 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.

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, 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 live 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 likes of her does not exist on heaven or earth."

3. The Wily Villain

The thoughts of Ravana and Vibhishana

Listening to Surpanakha, Ravana's lusty passion was aroused, and he became the bondslave of ruinous foolishness; he wriggled out of the feeling of hatred toward Rama and Lakshmana and started planning stratagems to get Sita away from them. He sank in thought and was plunged in 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 Rama and Lakshmana, there was one person in the audience hall, Vibhishana, who listened 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 demons (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 that he had reached in previous lives, so he was roaming about as a demon. But 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 that Rama was Narayana Himself come in human form to confer joy and peace on the gods and to destroy all traces of demonic wickedness on earth. But there was no other route for him to reach Narayana, so he had to cultivate wanton wickedness and violent hatred and to invite Rama to kill him. Of course, this might be called a stupid and infamous kind of devotion. 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 demonic 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 demonic 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.

Ravana enlists Maricha's help

Ravana announced that the assembly was adjourned and ordered his aides to bring the imperial chariot to the audience hall for his journey. He took his seat in the chariot with no companion beside him. He hurried to Maricha's seashore dwelling and told him what had happened. He ordered Maricha to play his part in the execution of his plan.

Maricha said that he had already borne the brunt of the might of both Rama and Lakshmana. He told Ravana that they were not of the common run of princes and 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, and he threatened to punish Maricha if he did not yield to his will. Maricha decided that it was better to die at Rama's hands than at the hands of the demon that Ravana was. He agreed to Ravana's proposal and got ready to play his part in the conspiracy.

Ravana went to the Dandaka forest, with Maricha following him closely. On the way, Ravana explained the strategy he had conceived. He told 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 Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana's hermitage.

Maricha had to assent, since he had no way to escape from Ravana's ire. Ravana told him, "Rama will try to capture you and will follow you, and you should lead him far into the distance; from there, you must yell in painful agony, 'O Sita! O Lakshmana,' in a voice exactly like Rama's." Then, keeping the chariot afar, both moved toward the hermitage.

Rama and Sita discuss their plans

While this web was being woven, at 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, "Companion! You know all. Both of us know 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. Your nature and characteristics are noble and holy beyond measure.

Both of us 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 earth that was furrowed by the sacred plough in order to consecrate it for a fire-altar, where a rite (yajna) 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 will also 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 our smallest act has to be an ideal for the householders of the world. We have to hold forth models in the relationship between 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 spiritual texts (sastras). We have to shape our lives in an exemplary manner, so that common people can be inspired and prompted to follow the ideals elaborated therein.

"We must consummate the effect, namely, the destruction of Ravana and the demon (rakshasa) brood. But there can be no effect without a cause, so we must manipulate a cause to justify it or bring it about. 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). 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 a situation that it would appear that he kidnaped you in a fit of passion.

"The world has to realise that Ravana's '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 craving for sensual pleasure and immoral yearnings? Activities and behaviour emanating from a consciousness that is not pure are tarnished; 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 exercise (sadhana), asceticism, 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. A curse 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. 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 demons.

Though you might apparently be under Rama's surveillance, 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. He is our instrument in this endeavour. When this task is accomplished and we have to re-enter Ayodhya, I will 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 then on, 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 could Sita and Rama ever be separated? Through their conduct, they only willed to teach mankind some valuable lessons.

The deer entices the brothers

At this moment, Lakshmana made his entrance, with his hands full of fruits and other eatables. They ate 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 demons that 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 Ravana's passion and perversity, but he didn't 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 this is! I am about to be blessed 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 I am! I am the servant, who has to tread on Rama's footsteps.

But my Master will follow me now.

"Of course, I know that I'm engaged in a most heinous action, but I'm forced into it; I don't act according to my will. Since I'm being forced into it, I'm 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 my life has become! No one is luckier than I am." Maricha dwelled on these sweet thoughts as he walked slowly toward the hermitage. The all-knowing Rama and the all-knowing Sita awaited his appearance. The deer approached the precincts of the cottage hesitatingly and with evident trepidation. It fixed its looks on Sita and Rama and stood for a while; then, it frisked and skipped a few paces. 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 its 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 fulfil this tiny wish, so that I can entertain myself when alone, fondling it and watching it play about?" Sita appealed to them, exhibiting great attachment to the mysterious deer.

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 didn't know the drama that was being enacted, with this as the prologue. Rama said, "Lakshmana! It has to be caught without inflicting any wound or injury. So I have to pursue it and catch it myself. I have to fulfil Sita's wish myself." 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 demons. 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 we always have to have an arrow on bow and watch all four quarters with utmost alertness. Guard Sita with great care. Don't leave Sita alone, under any circumstance. This deer might escape me and flee into the distance. I have to catch it alive, and this may take time. 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 stalks and kills the deer Stalking the strange deer, Rama went out of sight. The deer ran fast with its head bent backward, its eyes cast on Rama, the pursuer! Seeing this behaviour, Rama was delighted. Rama knew that the deer was Maricha, his great devotee who had experienced and realised the Rama Principle and the Rama Power. So Rama fixed his eyes on the deer and followed its gait with great interest. The deer came within reach one moment

but sprang away with a leap, to attract Rama further from the hut. Rama seemed to be enjoying this tantalising pursuit. But after some time, Rama fitted an arrow on his bow, aimed it at the deer, and released it straight on target.

When the fatal arrow struck him, Maricha exclaimed in agony, "Ah! Sita! Ah! Lakshmana!" and collapsed on the ground. The cry fell on the ears of Sita and Lakshmana.

Caught between two loyalties

Even before the sound reached them, Sita said, "Lakshmana? Did you hear? That's your brother's voice.

He's calling you for help. Go, go immediately; don't delay. These demons (rakshasas) are experts in magical transformations and tricks. They cause profuse calamities, changing their shapes and natures." She wanted Lakshmana to go 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, as precious as his own breath. So he said, "Mother! No calamity can ever happen to Rama. No demon, however crafty, can harm Rama. You have seen, haven't you, how he destroyed in a trice thousands of them? Don't be anxious; muster courage and be calm. Rama will soon return hale and hearty." Just then, the cry came again across the distance: "Ah! Sita! Ah! Lakshmana!".

Sita was even more agitated and confused. She said, "Lakshmana! Why are behaving so heartlessly? I don't understand your intentions. Go quickly, 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 could 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 her cast aside all his arguments and appeals, Lakshmana said at last, "Mother, Rama's command is my very life; I consider it as precious as my breath. Didn't you hear Rama order me never to leave you unguarded, but always to protect you? I won't move one step away from here, whatever might happen." Sita wanted Lakshmana be sent afar, for Ravana had to approach the hermitage; that was Rama's plan to effect the destruction of Ravana and the demons. She had to fulfil Rama's will. So she too held on to her words and made them sharper and more hurting, so that Lakshmana would yield.

Lakshmana closed his ears with the 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 Rama's rescue if he wouldn't, Lakshmana had no alternative. He could bear it no longer. He couldn't allow her to roam about in the forest in order to find 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 go inside and stay there, with closed doors, never to move out. He exhorted her to be careful and vigilant. He left the hermitage with no willingness or 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, 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 endowed with all the virtues, but he was caught between loyalties to two divergent commands.

He couldn't disobey either, so he was overcome with anguish. He had to perform to act counter to Rama's commands, for 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 toward the hermitage with every forward step.

Sita is kidnapped!

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 sage (rishi), but his intention, in spite of his innate power to terrify both gods and demons by his very name, was to steal like a sly dog. Looking 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 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 lines and shouted, "Mistress of the house! Give me some alms." Sita heard the cry and knew that it was Ravana. She brought tubers and fruits in her palms, came through the door, and stood outside. But Ravana dared not go near her to receive them. He said, "I won't 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, revered guest! Receive it from me here." 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 into a waiting chariot. He paid no heed to her lamentations, but drove the chariot away with terrible speed. Sita screamed out, "O Rama! Lakshmana! Come and save me from this wicked monster." The anchorites and forest-dwellers around Panchavati heard Sita's cry but could not save her. The entire forest faded green to brown when the

voice of agony passed through it. "O Rama! O Master! Save me; O Save me!

Save me from this monster!" The cry reverberated in the forest and made all things sorrow-stricken that move and do not move.

Inside the chariot, she admonished him. "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.

Jatayu tries to save Sita

The monarch of eagles, Jatayu, heard the plaintive cries that rose from that moving chariot. He recognised Sita's voice and realised that she was in Ravana's chariot. 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 kidnaping 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.

Using all his energy and skill for that act of service, he circled overhead, Jatayu shouting, "O Sita! Have no fear, I'll destroy this cruel villain and release you. I shall place you in Rama's presence." 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 tried 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 step will bring you no good. Release Sita and go safely home. Or else, like moths that fall into fire, you and your brood will be burned 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 can't pay heed to what is in store for him.

"Consider, is there a more barbarous crime than this? O! What sin have your parents done to claim 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. Would you remain calm and inactive when your wives are carried away or coveted by other demons? In fact, those who respect women, both those who are their wives and those who are not, would 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 these words. She was comforted when she heard these sentiments so well expressed.

Jatayu succeeded in stopping the chariot and forcing Ravana to engage him in battle, after making Sita dismount and helping her to sit under a tree. But age took its toll, and he could not fight for long. He was soon overcome. But he was able, during the fight, to pull down the crown of Ravana's head and pluck a few bunches of hair. He pecked at his body so fiercely in so many places that Ravana 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 wheel-sword and, with its sharp edge, cut off Jatayu's wings, felling him helpless on the ground. Wings are the very breath to eagles. He cried out Rama's name in his agony 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 Rama's will. Rama must have planned all this in order to confer some benefit on the world. Or else, could Sita be taken away by force by anyone, without His will designing the act? I now have 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 back in the chariot. He started off in great haste and with much commotion.

Jatayu saw him moving past and 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 is also 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.

The brothers lament Sita's disappearance

Rama returned to Panchavati from the depths of the jungle, after killing the "impersonation" called the golden deer. He thought that the plot of his story would have by now worked out at the hermitage, as directed by His will. He said to himself, "Though this is but the blossoming of my plan, people should not understand so soon that it is of divine design. I have to behave hereafter as an ordinary human being." When he was halfway back, he saw Lakshmana coming and decided that he must be kept unaware of the secret purpose behind the seeming tragedy. So he asked, as if he was perturbed, "Lakshmana! Brother! You disobeyed me and brushed my word aside. You came away, leaving Sita alone in the hermitage. How could you? You have come so far, leaving her helpless! Alas! Every day, you see the demonic wickedness of the ogre brood; how could you desert Sita so? Alas! What has happened to her? I am afraid some calamity has happened! I feel that Sita

isn't there, in the hermitage. Alas! What will we do now? What is to be our future?" 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. Would 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, 'Ah, Sita, ah, Lakshmana' that arose from the throat of that false deer reached the hermitage. As soon as Sita heard it, she urged me in various ways to run to your side. I know the tricks of these demons, so I fell at her feet and prayed for pardon. I told her, 'Rama can't be harmed in the least. No danger can approach him. The cries we heard are only the false stratagems of the demons.' "A second time, those cries struck our ears. Then she lost all courage. They were exact reproductions of your voice. She ignored her own reality; she ignored the mores of kinship and family; she used words that shouldn't be spoken or heard; I couldn't suffer any more. So I directed her to take every precaution; I did all I could to keep her safe, and then I came away from the hermitage. I will 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 Rama's feet.

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 get 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 demons? Can you tolerate it when people talk tomorrow that Rama was unable to save his wife from the calamity of being kidnapped? Can you remain calm, 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 to the hermitage to find out whether his fears were true.

As Rama had indicated, Sita wasn't there. 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 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 died, Rama would wander alone, in sorrow, through the forest glades; he would have none to give him food and drink. He couldn't bear Rama's anguish at the loss of Sita. He couldn't find his tongue or frame words to console Rama and pacify him.

Lakshmana realizes the truth

Lakshmana ruminated on all that had happened that day. He soon came to the conclusion that it was 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 Rama, who would gladly wipe the tears from all eyes, who was the guardian of the world, 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 a 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, 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 that 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 fell at Rama's feet. He

said, "Brother! you are, I know, the Director of the drama that is the cosmos. 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 that firmly. By these incidents, I believe you are designing to promote the peace of the world and destroy the demon 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 assents Rama replied with a smile, "Lakshmana! You are a limb of my person, so what can I keep away from you?"

You have hit upon the truth. I incarnated in order to uphold and foster righteousness (dharma). 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. Consider how useful these means are - the songs and swings, the toys and talks, the tricks and tickles.

They 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 reestablish 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 people.

"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 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 quiet 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 also exhibited supreme nobility and acted with equal staunchness and sincerity, even though the demon 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.

Study the Ramayana closely!

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 their promises and tend their 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 laws that can control and consummate the wishes of the people. If only the Ramayana were studied closely and observed in daily practice, mankind could attain peace and prosperity in all fields.

Jatayu tells them what he knows

In order to discover some clue about why, how, and when Sita had left, Rama and Lakshmana forsook the hermitage, armed with weapons; they examined every tank and looked over every hill in the region. They could not find any sign. While proceeding thus, they saw lying across the track before them branches of trees that had been pulled asunder. There were other evidences of a combat that had taken place, like broken arrows and patches of blood. Rama drew his brother's attention to these. "A fight seems to have taken place here," he said. He looked around for signs 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 Rama's hand blessed it with the tender touch, the bird recovered a little strength. It opened its eyes and looked around. It saw the beautiful form of Rama, which 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 forward a little and, raising its head, placed it at Rama's feet. Rama placed the head on his lap and gently fondled it into awareness and activity.

Jatayu said in feeble accents, "Lord! The wicked Ravana, yielding to maleficent motives, forsaking justice and uprightness, casting away powers acquired by years of asceticism, carried mother Sita away in a chariot through this forest, as a dog goes in stealth and a fox goes cunningly. Sita, mother of all the worlds, the daughter of Janaka, wailed aloud, 'Rama, Rama,'

covering the entire forest in gloom.

"I heard the wail but didn't know who raised the sad cry. I flew near and discovered to my great surprise and sorrow that mother Sita was in distress! I couldn't 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 put Sita in the shade of a tree and then 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, so 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 couldn't save her." Jatayu shed tears of despair as he spoke those words.

Rama displayed great interest and anxiety. "O 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 his good fortune, and his face glowed with ecstasy. Jatayu said, "Rama! I am luckier than even your father, for he didn't have this chance to drink water from your hands when he left this world. I got my last sip from your golden hand! I rested on your lap. I drank nectar from your fingers. And, while drawing my last breath, I filled my eyes with the picture of your charming lotus face. I am certain I will be merging in you. O, I am indeed blessed." Jatayu spoke further, in feeble tones. "Rama! That vicious demon went south. Most probably, he reached Lanka. Therefore, go straight to Lanka, destroy that wicked fellow, and 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 walked south, picturing in his mind the regions of the south and Sita's ordeals.

Ajamukhi loses her limbs

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 Lakshmana's hands and drew him toward 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.

Rama kills Kabanda

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, a demon called Kabanda, a mass of distortion and disfiguration, appeared before them. He opposed their advance, shaking the forest with his unearthly guffaw. He tried to snatch Rama and Lakshmana, but Rama slew him before he could succeed. He was a monster with no head; his arms were inordinately long, and his mouth was 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, Kabanda realised who his enemy was; he recognised Rama. He said, "Master! This day, you 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." Falling at Rama's feet, Kabanda said, "Your mission will succeed, without delay or obstacles. You will certainly triumph over the forces of wickedness." Sabari tells her story Rama, the large-hearted lover of all, moved on, walking on foot, with his brother as sole companion. They soon came across an old woman. She stooped; her head

could not be held erect; her eyesight had become dull; her hands were quivering. She was coming toward 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 sages (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 demon to harm them. But Rama knew better. He proposed sitting under a nearby tree, which 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 Rama's dark-blue complexion. She could contain her ecstasy no longer; she could not suppress her adoration. She ran forward and fell at their feet. She asked, "Where do you come from? What are your names?" Rama replied, smilingly and coolly, "Mother! We come from Ayodhya, and we reside in the forest. I am Rama, and my brother 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, 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 while hiding behind bushes and trees. I served my guru and other sages (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 I spent my days in the recesses of the jungle.

"Mathanga, the great one (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 sage 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. Within a short time, Rama will come into the forest. Invite him into 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 for Rama's arrival and that I could not avoid that responsibility or lose that joy.

From that day, I have existed here, with my arms out-stretched to welcome you, with eyes watching the horizon, and carrying about with me this decrepit body so that I might live to see you and serve you. O Rama! O Lord!

O compassionate of the afflicted! O dweller in the hearts of sages (rishis)! My guru's wish 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 her guru's last request.

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 walked toward the hermitage with his brother and entered it.

O! Sabari was overcome by a flood of joy, which broke all limits and expressed itself in ecstatic thrill and speech. Until that moment, that gem among women was 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 the fruits she chose from the basket and offered those she found sweet and ripe to the brothers. 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 the drops of water sanctified by the contact on her head.

"Lord!" she said. "I have no more desire. Why should I live on? I survived until now for that one piece of good fortune: the sight (darshan) of Rama. I have had that sight. 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 witnessed it; I am full of gratitude and joy." Rama relished the fruits she offered with so much devotion. While eating 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 hadn't eaten fruit with such joy for a long time. All these days, Lakshmana had to persuade him to taste a few, with a good deal of 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 Lakshmana's efforts, Rama would eat only half a fruit or so, and Lakshmana was never satisfied with the quantity that his brother ate.

Rama admires devotion

Today, Sabari gave him the fruits that 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 ate 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 why Rama was eating them with joy. He was filled with delight, and he admired Sabari's devotion, which was so richly rewarded. He appreciated the divine joy with which she had filled herself 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 haven't cultivated my reason. Nor have I practised austerities prescribed to gain insight into divinity. I am on the lowest step in spiritual exercises. 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 listened to her words intensely. He lifted her chin and looked right into her eyes. "Mother! Devotion is the thing I need; the rest are subsidiary. Other things like scholarship, intelligence, status, social prestige, caste - I don't 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 desire only that any one be followed consistently by a person. But I find you have followed all nine ways to the very end. 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 that is love springing from the heart and surging from it in all directions, toward all directions and toward all beings. You have not cast aspersions on anyone, even while dreaming! That is what makes your mind so pure. Your mind doesn't blossom when 'good' comes and doesn't wither when 'bad' comes.

You are blessed in all ways."

Sabari drank in these words of counsel. She said, "Rama! There is no path for the devotee other than doing one's best to please the Divine, is there? I don't crave anything 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, O Lord of Janaki, of Sita, the daughter of Janaka?" Sabari tells what she knows At this she remembered Sita, and the brothers also 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 Rama's feet.

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! O, what great good fortune is hers! She is the very shadow of my Rama! Rama! I must tell you what my guru, Sage Mathanga, 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 will tell you what I know.

"My guru said, 'Rama deluded the minds of Manthara and Kaika in order to fulfil his mission of destroying the demon (rakshasa) brood. As a result, Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana have entered the forest as exiles.' He said that 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 demon clans, would be tempted to enact a role in a dream centering 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 also told me that Rama would come into this forest while searching for Sita, who had 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 finding Sita through Sugriva.

"Rama! You are the designer and director of this cosmic drama. 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 griefstricken 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 spiritual aspirants (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, Sabari fell at Rama's feet. She developed the inner fire of yoga, and as a result, her body was reduced to ashes, while her breath merged in the Rama principle she adored. Thus, Rama and Lakshmana fulfilled the deep yearnings of Sabari and filled her departing soul with bliss.

4. An Ally Accepted

The brothers continued their journey through the forest, moving like twin lions, talking about the devotion and immeasurable dedication of the aged aspirant, Sabari. Traveling fast, they approached the Rishyamuka mountain range.

Amidst the hills of that range, Sugriva resided as a refugee, with his ministers and courtiers. He saw 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 that 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 and was anxious to know quickly who they were and what their mission was.

So, he called Hanuman. "Mighty hero!" he said. "Have you noticed those two effulgent personalities? Go and find out who they are, why they have come, and from where. Bring me all the news you can gather. If by some chance they happen to be sent by Vali, give me a signal. I will be watching for it - bend your head low over your chest. That will do. I will immediately arrange to give up this hill for another." Sugriva gave him various directions and suggestions to meet all contingencies and sent him on his way.

Hanuman meets the brothers

Hanuman hurried toward the strangers by leaps and bounds. Reaching their presence, he fell at their feet in great reverence. He said, "O shining ones! You arouse deep wonder and curiosity in me. Your charming forms attract 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 Hanuman's devotion and humility. There was a smile on his face when he replied, "We are sons of Emperor Dasaratha, ruler of Ayodhya. This is my brother, Lakshmana. My name is Rama. We entered the forest. My wife also came with us into the forest, but while we were residing at Panchavati, she was carried away by some demon (rakshasa) when both of us were absent from our cottage. Now, we are looking for her, intent on knowing her whereabouts and on regaining her." Rama spoke to Hanuman without any inhibitions, giving the plain facts that could explain their presence near their range of hills. He said, "Well! I have given you my story. I would like to know about yours, too." Hanuman realised that the brothers were his own Overlords, and 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 why I questioned you so; pardon my audacity and foolishness, O 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 that 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 want to make a declaration, for which my Lord is witness. I know no activity other 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." And Hanuman assumed his real form.

Rama was filled with delight at the sight of Hanuman. He embraced him, saying, "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." Hanuman said, "Lord! Sugriva, the ruler of the monkey (vanara) hordes, has drawn the enmity of his elder brother, Vali, upon himself through various circumstances. He was 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 in which he is now immersed. He has the capacity and authority to send millions of monkeys all over the world to look for 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 agreed, Hanuman offered to carry them on his shoulders, right to the top of the mountain range where Sugriva was.

The brothers meet Sugriva

Sugriva was delighted at the sight of Rama and Lakshmana. He understood why Rama had come into the forest and to him. They sympathised with each other and appreciated each other's distress. They felt bound by common bonds of comradeship. Sugriva fell at Rama and Lakshmana's feet 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. And, Sugriva 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 (agni), the subtle divine effulgence and illumination (that 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 Rama's heart was cleansed and rid of alloy with each contact with Agni. For Rama is the symbol of the most supreme wisdom (jnana), as well as the symbol of the most supreme morality.

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 telling Sugriva the truth of Rama and the mission on which he had come. He also told him of Sita and her divinity. She was daughter of the King of Mithila, he said, so she could be won and her blessings secured only by untiring churning (mathana) or spiritual exercise (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, Sita threw a bundle tied in cloth down to where we stood. It was a bundle of jewels, so we preserved it intact and safe. It is very likely that the demon (rakshasa) Ravana 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.

Lakshmana identifies some of the jewels

Rama asked for the bundle of jewels. Sugriva retrieved it from the cave where he had hidden it and placed it before Him. The cloth in which the jewels were bundled was a part of the fibre cloth that Rama's stepmother had thrown to Sita, to wear while in exile as a recluse in the forest. Recognising it, 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 that 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 in her footsteps. You know that you always walked in front and I followed behind Sita. I was walking, watching her feet, so I know these rings quite well." Sugriva and Hanuman looked on wistfully at the brothers as they acted their roles and were deeply moved at the sight of the jewels dropped by Sita. Sugriva couldn't bear it any longer. He said, "Lord! Don't give way to sorrow. This day itself I will start planning to find Sita and destroy the wicked Ravana. I will bring Sita back and make you both happy. This is my plighted word, my sacred promise." Sugriva tells his story Rama expressed great satisfaction at this promise. He said, "Tell me in detail why you are residing in this forest and not in your capital." 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, the reasons for the enmity that grew between himself and his elder brother, and so forth. Rama felt that Sugriva's story 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 that 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 to live, Brahma said, 'Live in the forest, for there you can move as your waywardness dictates. And, when you catch a demon, 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. 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 and 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. Turning to the Sun, she prayed for grace. She also prayed to Indra with great mental anguish. Through the grace of Surya (the Sun God) she had a son, that is, Sugriva, myself; and through the grace that Indra bestowed on her, she had another son, Vali, my brother. Immediately after the birth of the two children, she became Ruksharaja once again!

"Ruksharaja took the two babies with him and approached Brahma for instructions. He told Brahma his entire story so that He could recollect the facts of his decision. Brahma told them, "O Vali and Sugriva! Go into the southern regions 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 the Raghu dynasty. Rama will come into the forest according to his father's command. He will engage himself in many superhuman achievements, but he will also behave like an ordinary mortal. During his wanderings, he will arrive at Kishkindha where you are and form a friendship with you. Seek the fortune of securing his sight (darshan), 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 prayers, austerities, or rituals (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 demons (rakshasas) who infested the forests there.

One day, a demon 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 his audacity even for one moment. 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 pursuing the wicked demon, close behind Vali. As Vali entered the cave where Mayavi had taken shelter, he directed me, 'Brother! I'm going into the cave to kill him; 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 don't emerge on the sixteenth day, you may take it that he has killed me; you can then return.' I waited and watched for a full thirty days. Then, the smell of blood emerged from the cave, a smell that I inferred was from my brother's blood. Fearing that Mayavi might emerge alive from the cave, I blocked it up with a huge boulder. 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, 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.

Vali 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, so they have joined me here. 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 live on this hill, helplessly, for this is the only place where my vengeful brother, Vali, cannot come. A curse laid on him by a sage effectively prevents him from entering this region. Or else I would have died at his hands long ago." The story of the curse on Vali Rama asked, "Friend! How did Vali become cursed?" Sugriva explained, "Master! Dundubhi, the brother of Mayavi, was a mighty hero. No one could equal him in valour and physical strength. He reveled 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! Don't allow your head to swell so! Beware!

There lives one who is mightier than you. He is gaily wandering on the shores of Lake Pampa, assuming leadership and asserting his power. His name is Vali.' "When Dundubhi heard this, he changed himself into a formidable buffalo and rushed into Kishkindha, where Lake Pampa is situated. He ploughed the earth with his horns and bellowed his way through hill and dale, parading his impregnable power in lofty pride. His fury got wilder at every

step; he cast terror all around. When he dug his horns into the earth, huge trees were uprooted. 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, 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 Dundubhi a mortal blow. 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 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 and polluting 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-corpse of a terrorstriking monster.

Mathanga couldn't 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 or even casts his eye on this hill, may his head be broken in two.' That was the curse he uttered.

Scared by the curse, Vali keeps away from this hill. He can't approach it or even look upon it. That's why I live here, unhampered - but robbed of my wife and deprived of my kith and kin." Sugriva told his plight to Rama, with nothing held back.

Rama exhibits his power

Rama was disturbed by the story of Vali's wickedness, which had been tormenting Sugriva for so long. He could not listen any more to all his atrocities. Rama could not tolerate unrighteous acts and didn't 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 and ignoring the strength and power 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 opposed the fulfilment of the vow.

Rama said, "Don't 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. Don't 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 toward each other, and 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, O Sugriva, don't grieve. I will 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 want to be assured of my powers before you develop confidence and courage. Ask me to do any task so that your faith in me can take deep root. I will demonstrate my strength and fill your heart with courage. When that is done, I will fight with Vali and destroy him." Rama gently stroked Sugriva's back, in order to induce Sugriva to trust him and be rid of fear and anxiety.

Sugriva was eager to see Rama's prowess - and he also wanted 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 Vali hit five, and they all rolled on the ground. His capacity had that maximum measure. To defeat Vali, one needs 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 in a row pierced the sky.

They asked him to try to shoot them down, talking among themselves that, since those monstrous trees were four or five times larger than the five that Vali felled, Rama must be considered strong enough to overpower Vali even if he felled even two of these giants.

Looking at that row, Rama smiled. Calling Sugriva near him, he told him, "Sugriva! In my eye, these palms are the weakest and tiniest." Then he fitted an arrow on his bow and felled all seven. His arrow carried all the fallen palms up a mountain that was in the distance, blasting rocks on the way!

Sugriva pours out his feelings

Sugriva was overwhelmed with wonder and devotion. He prostrated at Rama's feet, exclaiming, "Rama!

A hundred Valis couldn't have done that. I'm indeed fortunate; I have no more worries in life, since I have your friendship! Though I am estranged from one Vali, today I got a hundredfold Vali as my thickest comrade! Pardon my mistake. I'm ashamed that my small-mindedness persuaded me to test your powers like that.

"O! I am indeed lucky to be 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'm 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, hours, or days. Of course, that depends on Rama's will, on His grace. It will be fulfilled the moment He decides."

Sugriva knew that only Rama could help him and that only Rama had to be relied upon. He prostrated at Rama's feet, saying, "Rama! Your will and compassion, are my sole refuge. When do you intend to put an end to my sorrows?" Rising again from his seat, Sugriva declared, "Listen Rama! For so long, I had labeled 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 someone while in a dream. We hate him to the utmost and 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 sight (darshan) has awakened me from my dream. While in that dream, I hated Vali and interpreted all his actions as inimical to me; in my ignorance, I fought with him. 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, my greed and egotism, my enmity toward 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 austerity (tapas) 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 won't worry about them any more. It is 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 - all are of the stuff of which dreams are made. The proximity to God, the God-Principle in you, only that is real.

But remember, my vow, my word, can never prove false. Whatever might happen, I shall grant you the kingdom, and you cannot escape the responsibility of ruling over it. You cannot evade the fight with Vali, which must take place tomorrow. Come, get ready." The battle between Vali and Sugriva Rama and Lakshmana moved forward, armed with bow and arrow and with Sugriva by their side. Hanuman and others were permitted to remain in the hill-residence. Along the way, Sugriva was given necessary instructions.

At last, he was told to go forward alone and shout a challenge in front of the main gate of the city. Following Rama's command, 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. He knew it was Sugriva who had challenged him, and he came out ready to fight and put Sugriva to flight.

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 to challenge you. He wouldn't 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, and it's not propitious for you to 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 haven't 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!" On the one hand, Tara was happy that he had

such an outlook; on the other hand she couldn't entertain for a moment the idea of separation from her lord. So, she pleaded again, "Lord! It's considered a bad omen when a woman objects. Don't accept the challenge rashly." But Vali set all her pleadings aside. "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 toward the main entrance to the fort, roaring in terror-striking rage.

He saw only Sugriva there, so he jumped on him, and they began a heavy fight with their fists, inflicting hammer-blows on each. Sugriva couldn't bear the rain of fierce hits. Vali, with many a kick and pull, caused such agonising pain that Sugriva tried to and 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 Rama's feet, his heart heavy with the burden of disappointment, despair, pain, and fear. He said, "Lord! I don't understand why you caused this disgrace to me. I went 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 never happened. I couldn't 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, "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 was also devoted to His feet. "He is my also 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, couldn't you discover who Vali was and who Sugriva was? I cannot believe your words. I don't know why you couldn't.

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. What really

happened was that I was so confident that you would bring about his downfall that I took the fight rather easy and light-heartedly." Rama drew the downhearted, dispirited Sugriva to him and consoled him profusely. He passed his divine hand over Sugriva's body, and 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, "Your words are but reflections of passing thoughts. You spoke like this when you had a vision of my power and glory. I don't attach much value to them, for I care more for feelings that rise in the heart. Many great devotees 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 don't 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, so I don't attach much value to these sentiments. You have to get ready to confront your brother 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 around 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 around his neck to show that my love toward Sugriva is greater. So, I can, with justice, deal with Vali differently. Sugriva's extra garland indicates 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, Sugriva was persuaded by Rama and Lakshmana to shout the challenge again at the gate of Vali's fort. They hid themselves behind a nearby tree.

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 kills His devotee, Vali

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 scarcely contain his joy.

Vali exclaimed "O Rama! Being such a divinely auspicious embodiment of beauty, being the very Lord of all creation, why did you have 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. There is some justifiable reason for this act. 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 attributes (gunas) 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. With one arrow, you can destroy not only this Vali but the entire universe. You can create the universe again. Nevertheless, I want to learn from you the sin for which you have killed me. Please tell me the error for which I was responsible. You have come upon earth in human form in order to reestablish righteousness, haven't you? What's the meaning and purpose of this action - hiding behind a tree, like a common hunter, 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 reestablishing righteousness on earth! Now, tell me, if I simply witness your wrong, unjust, and vicious deeds, 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 a 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 he would certainly be no match for the ogre who destroyed you. When Sugriva 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 was confined within that cave. 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 ask. 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 vengeance against him in your heart, for no reason at all; your overweening pride drove him into the forest. When you sent him out, you should have allowed his wife 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 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 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, 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 Vali's head.

But even while Rama 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, when breath deserts us, death cannot be avoided. At that moment, even the sovereign sages don't get Your name on their tongues! I have secured unique good fortune 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 'This' 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 sight (darshan) and 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 that is burdened with the consequence be destroyed along with it. Don't 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 place him in Your hands." With these words he placed his son's hands 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 allowed his breath to slide away from him.

Rama consoles Tara

The inhabitants of Pampa Town gathered in sad groups when they heard the news of Vali's demise. His wife, Tara, came, accompanied by her retinue; she

fell upon the body and lost consciousness. Her agonising wail was so poignant that stones melted in sympathy. When she recovered consciousness, on and off, she looked on the face of her lord and cried in utter grief. "In spite of all my protests and the arguments, trying to stop you, you rushed forward to this doom. The wife should ever be vigilant about the security and happiness of her lord; no one is more concerned about the welfare of the husband than the wife. Others, however eminent, will always have some little egotism 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?" 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 don't 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 Rama's feet and wept in inconsolable anguish.

Rama said, "Tara! Why do you weep so? You are a heroic wife. Don't 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 and 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 feces, bad odours and bad blood; it is pestered by pests and problems. Its decay cannot be arrested; it must die some day. The achievement that one can realise through it is its justification. That is the crown of human life.

"Your husband 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 demons. He had deep devotion toward 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.

The search for Sita is delayed by weather

When the rites were over, Rama sent Lakshmana into the capital city and had Sugriva installed on the throne.

Hanuman and others also entered the city and helped him, as friends and followers, to carry on the task of governing successfully. As soon as he assumed the reins of office, Sugriva called the elders and leaders of the community together; 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 ruler and was honoured by that responsibility; rather, he was 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, allowing anger and hatred to enter my heart.

"My heart is torn with 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 for Rama to enter the city and bless him and his subjects. But Rama said that he had to live only in the forests 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 move about in the cold and in storms. So he suggested that as soon as the autumn passed, they must set about the task of searching for Sita. He presented this information to Rama and Lakshmana also. Rama realised the truth of these statements and acceded to the proposal. The brothers retired to the Rishyamuka Hill and took residence there.

The rains started soon; it poured as if a potful were emptied from the sky on every square inch of space! It became a hard task for Lakshmana to procure 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 administering valuable counsel to Lakshmana.

"Lakshmana!" he would say, "When a wicked child is born, the code of morality will be corroded. When a cyclone starts its career, the clouds shudder in fear. The company of bad people is the prelude to the disappearance of wisdom. The company of good people makes wisdom blossom." Thus, they spent their days learning and teaching matters concerned with spiritual wisdom and its acquisition and preservation.

5. Success In The Search

The rains stopped. The autumn season dawned on the world. The earth shone resplendently green. Grass sprouted everywhere, and soon the earth decked itself with a many-coloured floral dress. Greed weakens when gladness grows; so too, the waters evaporated when the star Agastya 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's time to warn Sugriva now." Lakshmana paid heed to the command and asked Hanuman, who was a daily visitor to the hermitage, to remind Sugriva of the promised task. Hanuman was most earnest and anxious to fulfil Rama's orders, and he warned Sugriva immediately and effectively.

Sugriva called the leaders of the monkey hordes together and initiated the arrangements. He gave everyone the determination and courage needed for executing the task assigned. Urged by the resolution that the mission must succeed, he sent them to all four quarters. He entrusted the overall leadership to Hanuman himself. Led by Hanuman, the entire assembly of monkeys shouted "Hurrah (jai)!" to Sugriva and to Rama, the Lord. Dancing and jumping in glee, the monkeys hurried on their different paths, inspired by Hanuman and the holiness of the mission.

Sushena and Mandava went north. They searched the Gandhamadana mountain range, the Sumeru Peak, the Arjuna Mountain, and the Nilagiri Ranges, and the caves therein until at last they reached the shore of the Northern Sea.

Hanuman went east with a group of followers. The group were equally earnest in their search. They cared little for sleep or food and were ready to offer their very lives at Rama's feet. They wanted 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 people could not enter.

A clue from Swayamprabha

One day, they reached the shore of a broad lake. They espied a woman deeply engaged in austerities. They prostrated before her from a distance. She opened her eyes. Seeing their exhausted condition 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 going to the holy place where Rama was.

"Listen to my story," she said. "My name is Swayamprabha. I am the daughter of a celestial god (gandharva).

I have a heavenly nymph (apsara) friend called Hema. While I was 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 are already fulfilled. The first is your arrival.

The second is your account of Rama's story and His place of residence. I am as happy as if I had already attained the third, namely, the sight (darshan) of Rama." The woman was immersed in unbounded ecstasy and delight and shedding tears of joy. The monkeys were also 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 sea-shore, 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."

Sampathi knows where Sita is

One day during their search, the monkeys sank in gloom and sighed, "Alas! Only two days remain of the time allotted to us by master Sugriva. And we haven't found 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 they couldn't cross it to continue the search. So they sat in groups on the sands, pining in disappointment.

Jambavan, the old leader, counseled Angada in many ways. "Why do you grieve? We put forward our best efforts; we searched all places without the least dereliction of duty; we haven't wasted a single moment in idling.

We haven't worried even about food and drink. We have been engaged ceaselessly in searching for Sita. Our master and ruler, Sugriva, might not be a witness to our activities, but believe me, Rama is witnessing them! Rama won't be a party to the infliction of any punishment on us. We have no reason to fear Sugriva's anger. Since this is His task, let's carry it out with His name on our tongue and His form in our minds." While Jambavan was thus consoling and comforting Angada, a huge, aged bird hopped to the shore, to perform the last rites for its dead brother and to offer water sanctified by sesame grains in the holy sea. The monkeys gathered around the new arrival, wondering whether it was a demon (rakshasa) who had transformed himself into that form.

The bird, however, started speaking first. "Monkeys! My name is Sampathi. Jatayu and I are brothers. Eagles as we are, we both raced toward the sun in competition years ago. My brother could not bear the scorching heat as we neared the Sun and flew back. But a sense of pride induced me to continue the flight. As I went stage by stage, my wings were burned and fell off. I

dropped like a stone from the depth of the sky.

"A sage named Chandramas happened to pass by 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, 'O King of birds! Listen to my words. In the Thretha era (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 monkeys (vanaras) will trace her whereabouts, and your life will be rendered holy and worthwhile on seeing those emissaries of God engaged in their holy mission. You can assure yourself that it has been rendered so because at that very moment, your wings will grow in strength. Your duty will be to give them information regarding the place where Sita is kept.' "Today I came here by the sea to perform the last rites of my brother, Jatayu. Seeing you, I recollected the sage's words, uttered so long ago. Why? Look! As soon as I recollected, his words came true!" At this, the monkeys exclaimed excitedly, "Sampathi! Put aside the story of your life. Our term is fast ending. Sita's whereabouts, quickly! Tell us what you know, what happened to her!" Sampathi lost no time in elaboration."O monkeys (vanaras)! One day, when I was afflicted with uncontrollable hunger, I called my son, Suparna, to my side and told him, 'Son! Fly quick. Get me some food. I am old; I am hungry; my wings have fallen off.' Seeing my plight, he flew into the forest but didn't return. My anxiety for him suppressed the pangs of hunger. At last, he appeared with some venison. My hunger made me forget the restraint natural to a wise being; I was enraged at the inordinate delay and decided to pronounce a curse on my son.

"Fearing this, my son caught hold of my feet in supplication. 'Father! I didn't waste a single moment while away. Please listen to my prayer. Pardon me for the delay, which 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 pitiably. She was crying out just one name, Rama! Rama! No other word emerged from her mouth. I knew it was a monster, so I attacked him.

My futile attempts to stop his progress and save that woman caused this delay.'

"When I heard these words, I felt terribly ashamed that I had lost my wings and had grown old. I was overcome with grief. I guessed he must be a demon (rakshasa), so I asked my son in which direction the ten-headed monster was going. He replied that he had taken the southern direction.

"Immediately, I exclaimed, 'Alas! That monster is the Ravana that the sage had mentioned; that woman is the divine mother, Sita! There can be no doubt. 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 monkeys (vanaras), as the sage had informed me. Every day I hoped that they would pass my way. Today, my prayer is answered. My life has been sanctified." Then, Sampathi announced, "O monkeys! The city of Lanka is situated on the Triple-Peak Hill by the shore of the sea. The city has many charming gardens and parks. There, Sita is in the ashoka-tree forest (ashokavana), moaning her fate. She is awaiting your arrival. So, go further south." Angada asked the bird how it came to know that she was in the forest of ashoka trees, grieving over her misfortune.

Sampathi answered that the vision of the eagle covers an area of about 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, "O monkeys! You can achieve success in the task given to you by Rama if one among you has the strength and skill to leap a distance of about 100 yojanas." As he was saying this, 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 sage's words had proved true. Sampathi was wonder-struck at regaining his wings.

He said, "O brave monkey heroes! To fulfil Rama's command, 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 and 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 monkeys were struck with pleasant surprise at the sudden recovery of his powers. They said among themselves that repetition of Rama's name can achieve the impossible - as the saying goes, the dumb can speak and the lame can climb hills. Sampathi could get back his wings and fly into the sky only through the grace won by recital of the name. By means of Sampathi's words, the monkeys could see and know things correctly.

Who will cross the ocean?

The monkey leaders started estimating their strength and leaping capacity. Jambavan addressed them thus, "Friends! Old age has overwhelmed me; my skill and strength have declined. Somehow, prodded by the joy of executing Rama's commands 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 three-steps (Trivikrama) form." Hearing this, the monkeys gathered around the crown prince of their kingdom, Angada. "O Prince," they pleaded, "Search for some feasible means. Decide who among us has to attempt to leap over the ocean." Then, Angada called together a full session of all the monkeys and announced that he would like to know the capacity of each for this enterprise.

Vikata rose and said, "I can leap over at most 30 yojanas (1300 km.)."

Nila declared, "Prince! I can manage to leap 40 yojanas at one jump, but I regret I wouldn't be able to exceed the distance by even a finger breadth." Durdhara rose next and said that he could easily jump a distance of 50 yojanas.

Nala came forward and, with a great flourishing of hands, said he could jump 60 yojanas.

While such competitive boasting and parading of skills were going on, Angada declared, "Listen, I can leap over this ocean once, but I doubt that I would have enough strength left to leap back. One has not only to reach the other shore; one has to fight with the demons (rakshasas) there, if need arises. That would make me still weaker, and I would have no strength left. I'm afraid my resources wouldn't last that long, for all three operations."

When Angada spoke in these depressing terms, the leading monkey elders rose as one and pleaded, "Prince! You are the heir-apparent to our kingdom. The discussion whether you are capable of taking up this mission is irrelevant. It is not right and proper that you should cross over to the land of demons (rakshasas); it is against the canons of royalty. You have to assign the task to some servant of the kingdom. When you have millions of servants eager to do your bidding, it's not right for you to consider undertaking this task." Jambavan suggested charging someone else with the errand, and Angada looked around, saw Hanuman, and said, "O son of the wind-god, you are Rama's dedicated servant. Your devotion is indeed deep. You were blessed

first among all of us with the sight (darshan) of Rama. Through your intelligence, diplomacy, and moral pressure you established the friendship between Rama and our ruler, Sugriva. Now, you are silent as we discuss the difficulties of executing Rama's mission. I find it difficult to understand the meaning of this silence." Angada extolled Hanuman still further. "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."

Hanuman jumps the ocean

Angada's words filled Hanuman with his erstwhile strength. He rose with a sudden gesture and said, "O monkeys!

Wait here, all of you, for my return. Wandering all these days through hills and dales, jungles and plains, you have had no time to rest. Eat the fruits and tubers available in this area and station yourselves here. This instant, I shall leap over the ocean, enter Lanka, see Sita, and come back. My only work is to carry out Rama's command.

How else can we make our lives worthwhile than by earning His grace?"

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, "Victory (jai) Rama." Hanuman pictured Rama's glorious form in his mind, 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, "Hanuman is Rama's servant; he is going on Rama's mission. Ah, how lucky he is! He has the strength and intelligence necessary to win victory in that mission. He is

indeed the foremost among Rama's devotees." The sea was boisterous with joy 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, "O son of the wind god! It will be exhausting for you to cover the full distance in one leap; please 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 heard Mainaka's prayer but didn't 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." A little further on, a serpent-demon Surasa and the ogress Simhika obstructed his passage, but Hanuman overcame them all and reached the Lanka shore.

Hanuman gets past Lankini

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 near by and thought within himself, "This success is not due to my skill or strength; it is due entirely to Rama's grace and blessings." Seeing the uniquely grand houses, the attractive gardens, the long, wide streets, etc., in Lanka, Hanuman was moved with wonder and doubt - doubt whether it was a replica of heaven itself. Wherever one cast an eye, one saw well-built demon soldiers parading the streets. Demon women, famed for their skill and powers to assume whatever form they wanted, were indulging in licentious sports. Divine women, female serpents (nagas), female celestial musicians (gandharvas), 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.

At the very entrance gate of Lanka was a demoness named Lankini. She was placed there to prevent any foreigner, whatever their intentions, 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 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, "O, ill-fated fool! Don't my words fall on your ears?" Hanuman brushed aside her protests and questions; he walked toward the gate, smiling. 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 when 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.

She managed to sit up after great struggle, and with folded palms, she supplicated, "O 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 God's command, to fulfill His mission. His arrival heralds the destruction of the demons; 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.

Hanuman meets Vibhishana

Meanwhile, paying no heed to her words, unmoved by praise and unconcerned with blame, Hanuman entered Lanka, repeating "Rama, Rama" with every breath. Still, a thought tormented him. Who would give him a clue about where Sita was? How would he know Sita when he saw her? He adopted a subtle form to escape notice and moved from one treetop to another. He roamed in the bazars and among groups of demons (rakshasas), unknown to anyone.

"Suddenly, his eyes fell upon a building that seemed to be a temple of Hari (i.e. Vishnu; Rama was an incarnation of Vishnu). It had a garden of basil (tulsi) plants all around it. Over the entrance door, the name Hari was beautifully carved. The house was undoubtedly a temple of God Vishnu. Hanuman was surprised! "How did the name Hari come to be over this door?" he wondered, "Surely, this is a holy spot." His curiosity was awakened. He jumped onto the roof of that place and peeped through the window to find out what was happening. Just then, a person was stretching his limbs prior to rising from bed, pronouncing the name Hari. Hanuman was extremely delighted. He was also emboldened when he saw that even in Lanka there were people reciting the name Hari. His courage grew, and his apprehension about finding Sita waned.

"The man of this house appears to be devout and good. Maybe he can tell me where Sita is. He might be persuaded to befriend me, since we are both loyal to the self-same form of God." With this idea, Hanuman changed himself into a priest of the brahmin caste and entered the house.

For a moment Vibhishana, the owner of the house, had some doubt regarding the stranger, but he decided that, whoever he was, he surely must be honoured since he was a brahmin. So he came forward and prostrated before Hanuman. "Master! What is your native place? Where do you come from? How could you avoid being noticed and harassed by the demons (rakshasas) in the streets?" He described to his guest the horrors indulged in by the demons and extolled the audacity and fearlessness of Hanuman.

Hanuman replied, "I am a servant of Hari. My name is Hanuman. I came because Rama sent me." He spoke of Rama's virtues and excellences in some detail.

While he was describing Rama, tears rolled down Vibhishana's cheeks. "O, what a happy day! How great is my fortune! As soon as I rose from bed, I could hear these glorious words, which bring peace and joy," thought Vibhishana to himself.

Hanuman interpreted these incidents as Rama's grace. He was wonderstruck that in Lanka, the land of fear, there could be one such person soaked in Hari. He asked him, "Sir, how do 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, so His law cannot be overruled or changed by any one. Doesn't 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 Vibhishana was a good man and that association with such men would without doubt yield good results. Before answering Vibhishana's queries, he repeated the name Rama many times in joyful gratitude 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 Hanuman's humility and good manners, Vibhishana

replied, "Sir, I am an unfortunate person, Ravana's brother. 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 Hanuman's feet and asked, "Sir, where is my Rama now? I have been yearning for a long time 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 see Him? I haven't engaged myself in spiritual exercises (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, Hanuman's heart melted in sympathy. He consoled Vibhishana a great deal. "Vibhishana!

Rama heeds only the heart; He will not be affected by family affiliations, religious affinities, or attainments in spiritual exercises. 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 sight (darshan) you are yearning for, so don't grieve.

"Why, you can take me as the best proof of what I am saying about His compassion and grace. I am a monkey, and 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 scriptures. As for asceticism, I have no idea what it means. I have not repeated God's name according to prescribed rules; nor have I gone on pilgrimages seeking holy rivers! Why then has Rama blessed me? Because He heeds only the love that animates and the feelings that activate people. In your case also, He will pay attention only to the purity of feelings. Be confident; don't doubt." Relieved by these words, Vibhishana gave Hanuman the details of how Sita was brought to Lanka.

Hanuman refused to eat or drink, since he had resolved to refrain from both until he saw Sita and communicated Rama's message to her. 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 acquainted Hanuman with these points in some detail. Thereafter, he let him leave on his errand.

Hanuman was so delighted to learn that Sita was in Lanka that he forgot to ask where she was! He entered many mansions looking for her. He saw bebies 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, which Rama had described to him, he observed closely every woman in those houses, but he couldn't find Sita. In near despair, he jumped on a peak of a hill and thought over the situation deeply, for a long time. "How can I go back to Rama without completing my mission - meeting Sita and consoling her? Far better to drown in the sea. Alas. My life is wasted. 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 couldn't discover it from the ground. Not knowing what to do next, he hied fast to Vibhishana's house and discovered him immersed in reciting Rama's name.

Seeing Hanuman, Vibhishana rose and approached him in a friendly and pleasing manner. "Hanuman! Did you see Sita?" Hanuman expressed his disappointment, but Vibhishana gave him the information. "Hanuman! In this city there is a garden named Ashokavana. There, in the midst of terrible and mighty demons (rakshasas), Sita is kept. My wife and daughter are with her, doing service." He also told him how to reach the garden and the spot.

Sita at last!

Hanuman couldn't stay a moment longer, and he reached the garden in a trice. Those who saw him began shouting and accosting him, for his figure

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

There he saw a woman sitting under a tree, weak and worn through want of food and sleep. The fierce demons sitting guard around her were threatening her, to change her will and break her determination. Meanwhile, a grand cavalcade neared the place, heralded by the beating of drums and blowing of trumpets. Behind them Hanuman could see a royal personage, bejeweled and robed 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 didn't raise her eyes toward 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 accompanied him out of the garden.

When they had all left, Sita raised her head toward 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.

Thrijata's dream

A demon (rakshasa) named Thrijata, one of Sita's warders, 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 was revealed in my dream.

"A monkey entered Lanka, slaughtered the demons and set the city on fire! Ravana had no clothes on. He was riding a donkey, of all animals, and moving south very fast. His head was shaven close, and his arms were severed from his body. Vibhishana was crowned emperor of Lanka. Throughout the length and breadth of the land, Rama's name was resounding. Then Rama sent for Sita.

"Sisters of the demon (rakshasa) clan! Take note. I never get dreams. I haven't seen any before. So if I dream at all, know it will certainly come true; it will happen just as in the dream. Moreover, the realisation of this dream won't take long; things must happen just as I dreamed within four or five days." The demon women were amazed at the revelation; they prostrated at Sita's feet and silently resumed their routine duties.

Seeing Thrijata's behaviour, Sita addressed her, "Thrijata! Rama Himself must have sent you here to be one of this group around me. Truly, it is because there are a few women like you in Lanka that unfortunate people like me are able to sustain our chastity and virtue. Or else, what would be the fate of women like me? You heard, didn't you, the expressions Ravana used just now? He has given me a month's respite. If Rama doesn't come within a 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 and was overcome by sorrow at Sita's despair.

Thrijata fell at Sita's feet and assured her, "Mother! Don't lose hope! Rama is no ordinary being. His might and majesty are unequalled. It will ever be so. He will certainly save you. He will arrive very soon and hold your hand in his. Don't lose courage." She consoled her by loving words and left for home.

Sita and Hanuman converse

Availing himself of this chance, Hanuman jumped from his perch to a lower branch. He dropped the ring given to him by Rama in front of Sita; it fell, shining like a flame of purest ray. And he kept on repeating "Rama! Rama" in ecstatic bliss.

When she saw the ring, Sita was astonished. "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 demon (rakshasa) magic or mere hallucination? No. I shouldn't hesitate to take it in my hand any longer, when I recognise it as my Lord's. It would be a sin to refrain from handling it." She took the ring and placed it on her eyes in reverence. Tears of gratitude flowed from her eyes. "Rama! Are you granting me your sight (darshan), the joy of your presence through this ring?" She raised her head and saw a small monkey sitting on a branch of the tree, continuously reciting "Rama, Rama," in deep devotion. 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 Rama's name pronounced in this Lanka. Today, 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 couldn't keep her joyful excitement down.

Sita, who had not talked to a stranger for so long, looked at the monkey form and addressed it, "O monkey!

Who are you? Where does this ring come from?" 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 Rama's welfare, 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 to Rama. He related the dynastic story of Rama and His exploits, as well as his own story until he met Rama.

While listening, 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, "O monkey! I am glad you told me all this; but let me ask a 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 demons (rakshasas) and succeed in spotting this place and coming to me?" Hanuman replied, "Mother! What skill and strength do I have? I am Rama's servant, 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 his words.

Rama had told Hanuman for communication to Sita some incidents that no one else knew. He had said, "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 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." 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 won't associate 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 its basis, Hanuman said, "Mother! I am neither Ravana nor one of his devilish demons (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 this golden ring from His finger and placed it in my hands, to be given to you.

"With me came Jambavan, Nila, Angada, and thousands of others of extraordinary heroism. But only I was able to cross the ocean, through Rama's grace. 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 demon king. When we got the news three days ago from Sampathi 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 will get back immediately and give them news about your welfare." Sita pleaded, "Hanuman! I don't know whether you will return, or when. Please stay for a day more and delight me by telling me about Rama and Lakshmana." But since the demonesses were gathering to carry out their separate assignments, Hanuman resumed his miniature size and hopped onto a tree branch.

Sita sat under the tree, ruminating on all that Hanuman had told 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 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 - only Sita could give him orders what to do.

After some time, Sarama, Vibhishana's wife, and her daughter Thrijata came to the tree and fell at the feet of Sita, who was sitting disconsolate thereunder. They asked about her health. Since they were partial toward 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, and 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.

Sita refuses to go back with Hanuman

Hanuman was watching for an opportunity to see Sita alone, and very soon he got it. He jumped to the ground and whispered to Sita, "Mother! Don't be anxious and grief-stricken. Sit on my back, and I will transport you in a trice to Rama and Lakshmana." Hanuman pleaded in many ways for her to accept 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 don't you know that I will never

contact a person other than my Lord? How then can I sit on your back? Consider that." Her sharp repartee hit Hanuman in the heart and exposed his pettiness and pride for having suggested a dishonourable step. But he soon recovered. "Mother!" he said, "Am I not your son? What is wrong when the son carries the mother on his back? What evil consequence can that have?" 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, don't we? We must so live that we are ideals for others. Our acts should not draw the ridicule, contempt, or condemnation of others; no one should point a finger of scorn at us. And, above all, we must derive self-satisfaction from our acts. When I know I can't 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 has to discharge the responsibility; no one else can. He must come himself into Lanka, kill 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 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. If news spread that Rama sent a monkey who took away Sita without Ravana's knowledge, that would be dishonouring him. Getting out of here in the way you suggest would surely be treason. We shouldn't resort to mean stratagems. We should guard Rama's fair name 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. This is why your proposal has not given me satisfaction." Hanuman admired her untarnishable virtue, 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 from them. He said, "Mother! Pardon me. Since I saw with my own eyes the tortures you are undergoing and the pangs of separation that Rama is suffering, I entertained this idea to take you as

quickly as possible to His lotus feet. Pardon me if it was wrong." He 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?", he told her. 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." "Mother! Rama and Lakshmana are keeping well, of course, but don't compare them with ordinary males. It is not fair. Alas! Every moment Rama spends in thoughts of you and of separation from you, so He is not paying heed to either thirst or hunger. He doesn't eat or drink, unless pressed lovingly by Lakshmana. I don't remember a single occasion on which Rama drank a gulp of water on His own initiative. Don't be under the impression that they have forgotten you or are neglecting you.

"Lakshmana spends 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 unflinching 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 amazed at the love and affection that Rama had toward her. Again and again, she said, "Yes. You describe only the misery of men; what do you know, how can you gauge the sorrows of women?" She pretended not to believe all that Hanuman told 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 she 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 months in agony and pain? Please sit on my back and I shall take you in a trice to Rama." Sita noted Hanuman's anxiousness to win his point in spite of her arguments, moral and spiritual, legal and worldly. She decided to stop further conversation on this score by a sharp repartee. "Hanuman! Are you or are you not one who obeys strictly Rama's commands?" Hanuman replied, "Yes. I would rather give up my life than go against Rama's commands 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 find me 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 couldn't continue his pleadings. He said, "Mother! I didn't think so deeply into the consequences of my proposal. I ask pardon again." And he never broached the matter again.

6. 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 Lanka. With his monkey (vanara) hordes, he will destroy these demon (rakshasa) forces, rescue you, and restore you to Ayodhya." But Sita was inconsolable. She had her doubts. "Hanuman! What are you saying! Can monkey hordes fight and destroy these demons, who have mastered so many mysterious stratagems and subterfuges and who are themselves much stronger? How can 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 cause the death of so many of you on the battlefield, I would fain breathe my last and save all your lives." Hanuman interrupted her and said, "Mother! Don't weep. We of the monkey hordes are Rama's bondslaves.

All of us believe that Rama is our strength and courage. We take in the name Rama as our very breath. We have no other source of life. Therefore, even if each of these demons increased a thousandfold in deviltry, we monkeys could easily destroy them. We can win victory over them in spite of their wiles and wickedness. You doubt the extent of our strength and skills because 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, "Hanuman! Stop! Enough! Contain yourself. If the demons see you, you may not be able to return so soon to Rama." Sita

protested and pleaded with him to assume his old form.

Hanuman gave up the terrible form and became a quiet little monkey in no time. He fell at her feet and then turned to walk away. But Sita's plight and her anguished face were so deeply imprinted on his heart that his feet had difficulty moving away.

Hanuman is captured!

While returning from the place where Sita was, he saw an orchard, and, plucking some tasty fruits, he ate his fill. He cast aside the unripe ones and the extra ones he had plucked. Seeing this, a demon guard wanted to frighten him away, but Hanuman gave him a blow, felling him to the ground. The demon got up and ran to the head of the gang of guards, who fled in terror to his superior, who 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 couldn't restrain his anger at the mischief and insult. The flames of his ire rose to the skies. He ordered a few hundred demons to overwhelm and catch the audacious animal. When they didn't succeed, he sent a few thousand trained and heavily armed soldier-demons into the garden where Hanuman was awaiting their onslaught. Even that formidable force couldn't 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 demons (rakshasa) 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 countless demons on this expedition, but we couldn't 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, that this presages some evil calamity." This was what they told Ravana. He was told the plain fact, without any reservation: If the monkey was allowed to roam about, danger was certain to envelop the land.

At this, Ravana sent his own dear son, Akshayakumara, at the head of thousands of seasoned warrior-demons.

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 prince's death 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 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 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 army in great pomp. As they marched along, the 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 demons until they drew near. The soldiers rained arrows on Hanuman from all sides. With an ear-splitting roar, Hanuman jumped down, plucked a giant tree by its roots, and waved it around, beating off the rain of arrows that tried to reach him. The arrows were swept off so

fast that they were hit back to the demons who shot them, killing 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. 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 sacred arrow was released with appropriate ritual formulae. Hanuman had great reverence for the weapon that was sanctified by such mantras and dedicated to Brahma. So instead of counteracting it; he reverentially prostrated before it. So, it was easy for Meghanada to bind him with a serpent rope.

Hanuman and Ravana talk

The happy news was immediately carried to Ravana by the exultant demons. Hundreds of thousands of eager faces crowded the streets to see the bound monkey. Hanuman was unaffected by fear or anxiety; he moved calmly and collectedly, watching the crowds with an amused smile. At last, they reached Ravana's audience hall. The courtiers and ministers assembled there were aghast at Hanuman's insulting indifference 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 his overriding emotion at that time. He asked, "Hey, you monkey! Who are you really? Whose might 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 laughed heartily at his interrogator. In his reply, he used a style of speech and a vocabulary that 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. "Ravana! I know your prowess. I have heard that you fight with a thousand arms. I am also aware of your famous fight with Vali. But what wrong did I do? 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 them in order to save myself. Your son's arrow 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, the grandson of the great Pulastya, and the son of Vishravas. 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 toward Him.

"Listen to me. Place Sita at Rama's lotus feet 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, as 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.

O, Emperor! Rivers taking birth on mountain ranges get flooded in the rainy season and roll furiously along, but 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 will 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.

"O 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 toward Him. Accept my advice." Hanuman's words 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 wouldn't have the courage to lecture so long in my presence. Enough of your prating, keep your mouth shut!" Hanuman did not obey. He retorted "Ravana! Your words 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 impertinent 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. A king's code of conduct (rajadharma) will not approve the deed. Punish him in some way, but don't pronounce the death sentence." Ravana's ministers supported this stand, declaring his suggestion to be 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."

Hanuman breaks free and sets Lanka afire

The ministers gathered to decide on the mutilation. They came to the conclusion that monkeys are proud of their tails and would 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 soaked and dripped, and then set fire to it. This plan got unanimous acceptance! They exulted among themselves at the brilliance of the idea. "The tailless monkey will return to its master and bring him here to avenge the loss. Then, we can witness the manliness of his master and his might." There was a spate of whispers in the hall.

Hanuman watched 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 demons were enraged at his display of insulting behaviour. They got cloth and oil and started the process of winding and soaking. But the more they wound and soaked, the longer the tail grew! 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 toward the hall to witness the miracle. Bands of musicians led the procession. The 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, 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 onto the top of a golden mansion; he shouted "Rama, Rama". The demons shuddered in fear, for a strong wind rose from nowhere and blew with great speed.

Hanuman somersaulted in the air, beside himself with joy. He jumped from one mansion to another, with his burning tail trailing behind him, and the mansions caught fire! And his tail grew longer and longer. The conflagration swelled in size as he moved from street to street. Mansions all over the city of Lanka were caught in the conflagration and burned into heaps of ashes.

The demons 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 safety." Agonising appeals like these rose from the throats of women and children and echoed from the sky.

Queen Mandodari heard the 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 her grief. "Alas! Ravana's foolish obstinacy is causing the extinction of the demon clan. This blow will end only with the holocaust. Brother-in-law Vibhishana and I advised him so much. We prayed with folded arms. He refused to pay heed. We lamented that it would end in the destruction of every single demon. But as they say, 'When extermination is near, discrimination flees far.' Bad times are approaching him, so he behaves in these nefarious ways." Wherever she turned her eyes, ferocious tongues of flame glared at her, and Hanuman was also very much before her eyes, jumping about in the midst of the flames. From every household rose the cry, "Hanuman! Save us." "Spare this house." With folded palms, they prayed, "Take pity on our children." The wife of Kumbhakarna, Ravana's younger brother, ran forward with her prayer. "O, messenger of Rama! My husband is submerged in deep sleep. Don't set fire to our home. Save my husband from being burned to death." Lanka was caught in the throes of total destruction. Ravana came to know of the calamity pretty soon. He ordered that the monkey be surrounded by soldiers with weapons and mortars. Those who went toward Hanuman scattered in panic when his burning tail 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 fire cannot 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 to 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 had also become uncomfortably hot. Sita called upon the God of Fire without delay, praying for him to save Hanuman, the genuine devotee 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 supermost among devotees, Vibhishana, were the only two that were not erased by the fire.

Hanuman visits Sita

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 went to Sita. He prostrated before her and said, "Mother! I shall tell 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. Then, she took a gemset jewel from her head and 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, so there is no need for me to dilate on that. Tell the Lord that he must grant me the fortune of his sight (darshan). Tell him that I prayed for it again and again. Tell him that he and Lakshmana 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 can't imagine how I will spend both night and day 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 will 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.

Back to Rama's camp

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. 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 Karthika (October-November). The cool moonlight was a balm to the heart; Rama's name implanted strength and joy. Hanuman had won. The monkey groups who had espied Hanuman from a 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 Rama has sent them.

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. They immediately asked him what had happened in Lanka, about Sita and her welfare, and the 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 honey forest (Madhuvana) and gorged themselves with the fruits that grew thereon, for Sugriva had promised them all a free run of the garden when they had discovered Sita's whereabouts.

The guards posted there tried to prevent the entry of the horde but they streamed in nevertheless. So the guards ran to their master and reported that they were helpless to prevent the loot.

When Sugriva heard them, he exclaimed, "O, 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 bliss (ananda). Go, don't worry!" Meanwhile, groups of monkeys arrived and fell at the feet of their king and master. Sugriva smiled at them and said, "Well, I learned that you 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 won't delay a minute longer," and hastened to Rama. Realising that the monkeys were coming toward him with the news of a successful mission, Rama and Lakshmana seated themselves on a huge boulder and watched the group hurrying forward. They advanced in leaps and bounds, quite excited, and fell at Rama's feet.

An interview with Rama

First, Rama inquired about their health and welfare. Then, Jambavan, the senior-most among them, rose and said, "Those who have earned your

compassion are indeed blessed. It 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 Sita's plight, with tears of joy and commiseration flowing from his eyes, and he 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, "O Lord of my life. It is impossible to describe. Sita is reduced to bones, for she doesn't eat or sleep. She counts every minute, praying for your sight (darshan). 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. I have heard with my own ears the sharp verbal dagger-thrusts that Ravana administers every morning and evening when he comes and speaks to her. Mother doesn't 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 Rama's feet.

Hearing these words, Lakshmana rose in vengeful anger and wept at Sita's condition. The picture of Sita in Lanka burned his inner being. He said at last, "Brother! Don't 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. Don't be dejected when grief invades or exults when joy flows in." Rama consoled him with soft and soothing words.

Rama invited Hanuman 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 don't 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 demons? 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 Sita was! 'Is this a dream? Did Rama really send it to me?' She wondered thus, doubted thus, and finally became firm in faith. Lord, her grief, her extreme anguish, 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 toward 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.

"Brother! Prepare for the campaign, without delay." And, watching the earthshaking forces that were gathered and the preparations made by Jambavan and Sugriva, quite soon, the gods themselves were astounded and gratified.

The monkey warriors touched Rama's feet 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 also, at ashoka garden, sensed auspiciousness that very moment. And 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." Mandodari tries to dissuade Ravana In Lanka, every demon (rakshasa) was struck with anxiety about what was in store for them in days to come.

They were afraid of the imminent disaster; they were convinced they could not escape the calamity. They communicated their fears to each other only in whispers, since they were mortally afraid of Ravana.

Wherever groups of demons collected in Lanka, the talk centred round the calamitous damage inflicted by Rama's messenger. They wondered, "When the servant is capable of such tremendous heroism, what is 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, Ravana's queen. 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! Don't develop enmity toward the Omniscient One. You yourself said that Rama was 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 millions of redoubtable monkey heroes with him. What can our demon warriors achieve against him now? They could not even bind and punish the messenger who got 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?

"Please listen to my appeal. Send Sita back to Rama, in the care of brother Vibhishana or with your ministers.

Sita is no ordinary woman. She is exemplarily chaste, the very embodiment of spiritual energy that results from a 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 the demon race. Or else, as the serpent swallows frogs, Rama's arrows will swallow the demon hordes. Give up stubbornness and pride. Offer Sita at Rama's feet." She fell at Ravana's feet with this pitiable importunity.

Ravana, the conceited ignoramus, looked at Mandodari, and replied with a loud peal of laughter. "Fie on you!

Tender women are scared soon; that is their very nature. Their words, rising from fear, will turn even fortune into misfortune. When the monkeys arrive at our doors, the demons will certainly gobble them up. The gods shudder in mortal terror when my name is uttered within hearing, so why are you afraid of these tree-dwelling brutes? Fie on your fears! Get out of here." And 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 returned to her rooms and rolled on her bed, agitated by a multitude of thoughts.

Ravana converses with his ministers

At the audience hall, Ravana called the ministers together and invited them to express their estimate of the situation. "You are aware of the calamities that were inflicted by Rama's messenger. 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, who was immersed in sleep for months and was therefore unaware of the conflagration during Hanuman's visit, 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 burned 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. "Master! We shall obey your commands. If only a gracious look from your eyes falls on us, we can destroy all men and monkeys and wipe them off the face of the earth. Why assert more?" He sat down with a grunt of satisfaction.

Then, Meghanada, the general endowed with the power to adopt any form he liked, rose to speak. "Supreme master!" he said. "Your might and majesty resound all over the world. The gods are your bondsmen. Why speak of the fate of people in your presence? For who can be stronger than these gods?" His words were soaked in pompous pride.

Kumbhakarna's atheistic sons, the highly egotistic Kumbha and Nikumbha, also spoke in this strain. Akampana and other warriors added their verses 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 countenances. The result was that Ravana was happy, and their aim to hearten him was realised.

Lastly, one demon rose and tried to catch attention. He said, "Emperor! I'll dress myself as a brahmin and approach Rama and Lakshmana wherever they are. I'll invite them for lunch and, when they come into my hermitage, I'll bind them hand and foot. If you approve of this stratagem, I'll attempt it." Vibhishana has his say 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, O 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 thus 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 and stood up. "Master! Your brother's words 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. "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 them to be removed from the hall.

At this, Malyavantha got down from his chair and hurried home. Vibhishana also offered his prostrations to his elder brother and, with folded palms, he expostulated, "O King! The Vedas and scriptures (sastras) declare that the twin natures of goodness and wickedness reside in every person's heart. 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 demons (rakshasas). You have no compassion toward 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." Ravana rose suddenly from his throne, exclaiming, "Fool! Death has drawn very near you. Only my grace has kept

you alive till this moment. 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 kicked Vibhishana away from him.

However angrily he was kicked, Vibhishana persisted for a long time 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 haven't done any wrong." With these words, he left the hall.

Vibhishana joins Rama

Reciting "Rama" with every breath, and breathless with joy and excitement, Vibhishana crossed the sea and landed on the other shore. The monkeys (vanaras) who noticed him took him to be a messenger from Ravana and reported his arrival to their ruler, Sugriva. Vibhishana was prevented from entering the camp. His arrival was conveyed to the Lord, thus, "O Rama! Ravana's brother has come to have your sight (darshan)." Rama asked Sugriva, who had brought him the news, what he thought about the incident. Sugriva replied that it was difficult to understand the plans and purposes of demons (rakshasas) since they assume various forms as and when they like and so are inexplicable. We don't know why he has come among us. I guess it is to open a wedge between me and Angada, Vali's son. 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 scriptures (sastras) about defections. But 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 was sent by Ravana 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 will guard him and foster him as my own life breath. So bring him in, quickly," he ordered. Sugriva hastened to obey, and Hanuman brought Vibhishana and made him stand before Rama.

When Vibhishana's eyes fell on Rama's lotus face, he shed profuse tears of ecstasy. He could scarcely stand up. "Lord," he gasped, and fell at Rama's feet. "Save me, save me. I am your slave," he prayed. "O Protector of the Gods! I took birth in the demon race; I am Ravana's younger brother, who rules over the demons. My name is Vibhishana. My birth as a demon 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 earnestly to be 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, "My dear Vibhishana! Don't worry. The very sight you had of me has destroyed the demon nature in you. You are to me as close as Lakshmana and Sugriva." These words wiped away all fear from Vibhishana's heart.

Rama said, "O Ruler of Lanka! Are all your followers and companions hale and hearty? How did you pass your days right in the midst of many million demons? How were you able to maintain your devotion and dedication to God in that environment?" He also asked him about various matters relating to his activities.

At the end, Vibhishana said, "O 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 bow and arrow in your hand; when your nature and your loveliness are known, the lust and anger flee from the mind. Attachments and hatreds infest the dark hearts that know not the light of wisdom. Lord! I earned the fruition of dearest dreams when I cast my eyes on your lotus feet and touched them with my hands and head. My fear and sorrow have been destroyed. I haven't done a single good deed any day, and yet you embraced me. O, how great is my good fortune!" From Vibhishana's eyes, tears flowed in streams, tears of joy and gratitude.

Rama interrupted him, "Vibhishana! You possess all desirable excellences. Or else you wouldn't have earned this sight (darshan), this chance to touch me and contact me, and to converse with me." Vibhishana was thrilled with unbounded joy. He fell at Rama's lotus feet again and again.

Rama told him, "Go. Have a bath in the sacred waters of the sea, and come soon." Accordingly, Vibhishana left for the seashore. Rama asked Hanuman to bring a pot of the sacred water from the sea. When Vibhishana returned after the bath and prostrated at Rama's feet, Rama took a handful of water from the pot, sprinkled drops on Vibhishana's head, and declared, "By this rite, I make you the ruler of the kingdom of Lanka." Vibhishana rose and said, "O Lord! Why do I need a kingdom? I am content just to 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 monkeys stood all around, struck by the compassion and grace that Rama bestowed on the person who surrendered his all at Rama's lotus feet. Their hearts were filled with bliss.

Rama saw the generals of the monkey hordes and spoke to them. "Leaders! Take 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 toward the seashore.

7. The Bridge

Suka, the messenger

Looking at the sea, Rama asked how to cross it. Many monkeys suggested means and methods. At last, Vibhishana rose and addressed Rama, "Lord! The ocean owes its origin to your forefathers, Sagara and his sons.

It is the family 'preceptor' of your line. If you just resolve that it should be crossed, the monkeys can easily go across." Meanwhile, a messenger sent by Ravana was seen by Vibhishana, and the monkeys bound him and took him to Sugriva. Sugriva ordered his limbs to be cut off, but when the monkeys prepared themselves for the execution of that order, the fellow raised a hue and cry. He shouted in his pain, "O monkeys! I swear by Rama! Don't cut off my nose and ears." Lakshmana heard his pathetic cry and asked that the demon be brought to his presence; he spoke softly to him and admonished the monkeys for torturing a messenger deputed by Ravana. Lakshmana wrote a letter and placed it in messenger's hand, with the words, "Give Ravana this missive and 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 Rama's feet.

Rama will pardon you. Don't decimate and destroy the demon tribe in order to prop up your wiles. Know that no other means are 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 to escape alive; he shouted, "Victory (jai) to Lord Ramachandra," fell at Rama's feet, rushed home.

Suka talks to Ravana

At Ravana's court, Suka related the events that had ensued and started describing with uncontrollable delight Rama's majestic charm. He gave

Ravana the letter Lakshmana had entrusted to him.

Ravana asked about his brother, Vibhishana, and how he fared. "Fie upon him," Ravana ejaculated, "his days are numbered; death will swallow him soon. He is a pest, bred in this granary. He left Lanka and joined my enemy.

Misfortune will haunt him until he dies."

Ravana turned to the fellow and asked him, "Under this pretext, you visited their camp. Didn't you tell them of our military might and adamant resolve? Tell me what you learned 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 Rama! Knowing that I reached their camp as your messenger, the monkeys caught me and tortured me in various ways. I swore in Rama's name and called upon him to save me, so they let me come away un mutilated, with my nose and ears intact.

"Had I a thousand tongues, I couldn't describe the might of those monkey armies. What a galaxy of heroic warriors they are! There are monkeys of many different colours, of all ages and grades, of gigantic stature and strength. One shakes in terror when one looks 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 monkey 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.

Some monkey warriors are endowed with the strength of many herds of elephants. Dwivida, Mainda, Nila, Nala, Angada, Vikata, Dadhimukha, Kesari, Kumuda, Dwaja, Gavaksha, Jambavan - these are the generals. Every one of them is equal in might and military skill to their ruler, Sugriva. And there are hundreds of thousands more of them 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 18,000 billion (18 padmas), and each padma has a valiant general at its head. Emperor! I didn't find a single monkey, from the highest to the lowest, who doubted 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 waiting only for Rama's signal, which so far he hasn't given.

"Whether the ocean yields to them and gives the right of way or not, they are determined to build a causeway of stones and to succeed in their venture. They are baring and gnashing their teeth, boasting that they would squeeze you out of shape and reduce you to a handful of pulp. Fear strikes everyone who listens to their exultant roar and challenging call. The instant they hear the name Ravana, 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. There are also equally redoubtable bears among them.

"And, to crown all, they have Rama as their leader, capable of overwhelming millions of 'death-deities'.

Hundreds of thousands of divine serpents (adishesas), 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 even dry up the ocean." Ravana's reaction to the spy's and messenger's report was a peal of wild laughter. "Fie on you! Listening to the pratings of that arch coward Vibhishana and the monkeys that surround Rama. You are extolling that fool so high. It's sheer nonsense to describe the strength and heroism of mere monkeys. Enough, Enough! Can monkeys be so strong! I heard enough, long ago, of the power and might of this Sugriva; and what can this poltroon Vibhishana, his minister, do? Can he contribute wealth, victory, or resources to Rama?" The messenger could only pine within himself and bewail the lack of intelligence exhibited by Ravana. He folded his palms in obeisance and stood silent.

Ravana tore open the envelope containing Lakshmana's missive and, after perusing it, handed it to his minister.

He said, "You are like the partridge, 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 birds? Can these anchorites, these ritual-ridden priests, who try to frighten me by a shower of words, ever succeed?" Suka, the messenger, watched Ravana's heroics for some time. Then he interrupted with the words, "Lord!

What I just said is the full truth. Read that letter carefully and act without any sense of resentment or pride. Listen!

Give up the hostility you have developed. Rama is very tenderhearted and compassionate. He is the master of the three worlds. If only you would approach him, he would take you under his protection and guard you from harm.

He would pardon all your wrongs. Surrender Sita to him. Give heed to my prayer." The envoy pleaded plaintively for Ravana to save himself from ruin.

While Suka was pouring out his pleas, Ravana's eyes reddened with anger and shame. He roared in protest, "What! Do you take me for a criminal! Did I send you, you fool, to surrender at the feet of those prattling babies of the forest? Audacity and impertinence cannot go further." Rising from the throne, he kicked the fellow out of the hall.

Suka fled to Rama's camp and sought refuge. Seeing him again in their midst, the monkeys were moved to revenge, but they restrained themselves and awaited Rama's orders. Sugriva led Suka to 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 be protected by his new master.

Rama, as the very embodiment of compassion, called the leaders of the monkeys and directed them to welcome their new brother, Suka. Suka was

overcome by gratitude and declared that his life goal had been reached.

The ocean shows the way

Rama asked Lakshmana to bring him the bow and arrow. When he brought them, Rama said, "Haughty people deserve no kindness; mischievously cruel people deserve no softness; misers by nature deserve no moral teaching; egotistic persons deserve no advice, greedy people cannot benefit from insistence on renunciation; people 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, which does not yield to soft request, deserves no mercy." So saying, he fitted an arrow to his bow.

Lakshmana was afraid of the consequences for the ocean, which 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 toward Rama, gently lapping his feet, as if praying for mercy. Suddenly, a voice was heard as if from the sky, "Lord! Two generals in the camp, Nala and Nila, 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 communicated the details of that dire incident to Rama.

"Many hermits lived on a river bank in cottages. As boys, Nala and Nila entered these hermitages and, while the sages were immersed in deep meditation, seized the holy icons called saligrams that they worshiped and cast them into the river. The sages were enraged at this sacrilege and cast a curse on them, in this manner. 'Boys! May all things that you throw on water never sink; may they float instead. And 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 will 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; as a result, the area became a dry desert.

The bridge over the ocean is built

Rama called his ministers together 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 could now be made of the curse they had drawn upon themselves while young. He told them to install Rama in their hearts and throw hills, hillocks, mountains, and rocks into the sea.

The monkey 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 Rama's name aloud. Off and on, they uprooted huge trees and passed them onward to the bridge site, where Nala and Nila were casting the materials into the water.

They worked the whole day without rest and with no thought of food or sustenance. They built a length of 202 kilometers (14 yojanas) in one day. Refreshed by a good night's sleep, they rose before dawn, during the sacred early morning (Brahma muhurtha), and resumed work. They acclaimed with cheers, "Victory to Sri Ramachandra, our Lord," and hurried to the various corners of the land in search of hills and mountains. They brought them to the shore and piled them there for Nala and Nila.

The second day, the bridge was extended by another 288 km (20 yojanas); the next day, 302 km (21 yojanas); the fourth day, 316 km (22 yojanas); and the final day, 331 km (23 yojanas). Thus, they completed the 1440-kilometer (100 yojana) bridge in five days.

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

The Govardhana Hill is consoled

Rama and Lakshmana were pleased at the devotion and sense of duty of the monkeys, who had finished the job so soon and so well. Rama told the ruler of the monkeys, Sugriva, to pass along the long line of monkeys the order that each should put down the hill he was transporting right where he stood and to take a little rest before returning to base. Sugriva conveyed the order to those who were engaged in passing the boulders and peaks from shoulder to shoulder.

Hanuman was at that moment transporting a huge hill from the far north. When he heard Rama's order, 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 to be of service to Rama." It could not be consoled or comforted.

When Hanuman brought its condition to Rama's notice, Rama smiled in appreciation. "Ah! Even mountains are yearning anxiously to participate in this task!" He expressed joy at their enthusiasm. He told Hanuman, "Go 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 Thretha age.

Rama installs a lingam

On the fifth day, Rama sat on the seashore and was delighted when he saw the bridge. "O monkeys! Your devotion and skill in service are beyond description. By your sense of dedication you have won my heart." Vibhishana came to Him 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 worshiper of Siva. He has intense attachment toward that aspect of the Godhead. Yet, he will certainly meet death at your hands. To commemorate his devotion to Siva, I pray that you may, on the eve of moving over this bridge toward Lanka, install a Siva lingam here, so that in coming centuries, when people enter Lanka along this route, they can worship the Siva lingam and remember these events.

They would indeed be fortunate to have such an experience. The lingam would be extolled by them as 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." 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." Sugriva directed the monkeys to gather the requisites for the installation; he procured an impressive lingam, sending Hanuman himself for the purpose. Rama performed the ceremonial ablution for the lingam with water from the sea and invoked vitality and grace into it. Rama's words had the effect of a mantra, so nothing more was needed to sanctify the lingam. The monkeys sang hymns, and their ecstatic shouts echoed from the heavens.

Amidst the "hurrah, hurrah (jai jai)" of the monkey hordes, Lakshmana and Sugriva helped Rama to plant the lingam in position and to complete the ceremony of consecration.

A bad omen for Ravana!

The monkeys started marching over the bridge in regular formation, with Rama's picture in their minds and His name 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 of water 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 His divine form.

The monkeys had prepared a camp on the Lanka end of the bridge, so when the vanguard reached the heights, the news spread throughout the island. Soon, Rama, Lakshmana, Sugriva, and Vibhishana, who crossed at a slow pace, also reached the main gate of the fort of Lanka. Accepting Rama's orders, the monkeys plucked entire trees and, dancing in joy, they ate the fruits and cast the branches and twigs over the battlements into the city. They heaved huge boulders over the wall and dropped them into the streets beyond. They sought out demons moving about alone outside the fort; they teased and tormented them, threatening to wring their necks. The monkeys' pranks could not be restrained.

Soon, news reached Ravana that the enemy was at the gate. So far, Ravana was using only one of his ten throats to communicate with others, but now he roared through all ten in anger and hate. He did not remember that it was a bad omen to speak through the ten throats! A curse had been laid on him long ago: when he spoke through all ten, his end would draw near. Within a few seconds of the roar, he recollected the curse and became frightened.

But however much he attempted to control his throats, his voice came out of all ten.

The demons who noted this strange occurrence inferred that his destruction was imminent, now that Rama and his monkey 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 merry-making and pleasure. When calamity approaches, discrimination departs, says the proverb.

Even when he knew that the curse was coming true, Ravana tried to 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 my ten noses and ears? Or will they slice off the heads themselves?" These fears haunted him.

Mandodari tries again to persuade Ravana

Ravana saw Mandodari, the queen, in the apartment. She saw that Ravana had become forlorn. She decided to administer wise counsel to him. She held his hands in hers and, in a soft, smooth, sweet voice, said, "Lord!

Please listen to me. Give up your anger; pay heed to my words. Think them over carefully. We shouldn't plan to win over by hatred and opposition those whom we can win over by reverence and devotion. In such circumstances, we have to resort to intelligent reasoning. It won't do any good to oppose such sacred people. You can't achieve victory if you fight Rama; the glow-worm can't vanquish the sun.

"Listen to me. Take Sita, at least this moment, and, while returning her safe, prostrate before him and pray for pardon. Don't 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 for which you are so famous. 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 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 worshiped by the entire world; he is of the most auspicious form.

"A long time ago, you yourself told me that Brahma told you that God would incarnate as Rama in order to relieve the earth of the burden of cruelty and vice. Don't you remember? Aware of all this, how can you not recognize the truth and give up this path? Return Sita, the acme of chastity, the diadem of the virtuous, the incomparable jewel of beauty, to Rama. Then let us crown our son as emperor of this realm and spend the rest of our days in peace and plentiful joy in Rama's presence.

"Ah! How fortunate your brother is! He is moving in the cool shade of Rama's grace. It is not too late. At this very moment, hasten to Rama, who is at Lanka's very entrance, and fall at his feet, praying for pardon." Mandodari was in tears. 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, his empire, his people, and his fame.

Ravana raised her to her feet and wiped her eyes. He said, "Dear one! Why are you so agitated? Wherefrom all this fear, this lack of courage? There is no one more powerful than I in the world. The rulers of the eight directions have been defeated by the might of my arm. Death dare not step near me. Don't 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 and said to herself, "What a fool! This is the inevitable fate of people who don't give up their false pride. Good counsel cannot enter their minds. When one is suffering from fever, sweet things taste bitter. He now has the poisonous fever of pride, so he rejects nectarine counsel as if it were 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.

Prahastha tries to persuade Ravana again

Ravana sent for his ministers and set about making preparations for the imminent battle. "Demons!" he accosted, "The monkeys, Jambavan, and the men who are now attacking us are not even a morsel for our maws.

Don't lose courage, hesitate, or argue." "Plunge into the fight. Get ready," he yelled.

But Prahastha stood up and, with folded arms, said, "Demons! Let's not desert the right path. Lord! These ministers of yours speak words that are in line with your desire. But that won't ensure success. One solitary monkey crossed the ocean, came into our city, and performed many a wonderful feat. These ministers and these armies couldn't 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 burned 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 Sunila mountain; he came over the sea through a bridge they constructed; he has with him an army of uncounted numbers of monkeys. Can such a person be a mere man? Give up that surmise, if you believe it. Do not prattle as the tongue that is let loose and 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.

Don't acquire a name that will be execrated as 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? Where 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 and, finally, 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 went straight to his mother and told her all that had happened. Both agreed that nothing they could say or do would turn him on to the right path. So, they sat together, lost in the contemplation of Rama and his majesty.

A night of waiting

The monkeys made a nice camp for Rama and Lakshmana on the Sunila 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 on 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 monkeys were scratching their itchy palms 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 crown prince Angada were reverentially massaging Rama's feet. Lakshmana was standing at the foot of the bed, ready with his bow and arrow, observing Rama's face with one-pointed attention.

At this moment, Rama looked toward 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 it - don't you see it?" Each one answered about the patch the way he felt, but Hanuman confessed, "Lord! I don't see any dark patch on the moon. I see it as the reflection of your face, so I don't see the patch you mentioned, or any other blemish." Rama spent the night with the monkeys until dawn, with delightful talk and pleasant companionship. When day brightened, he had his bath in the sea, performing the prescribed rituals on the shore. He called Sugriva's ministers and other leaders and gave them instructions about the task ahead.

Rama's envoy, Angada, advises Ravana

Later, they met and agreed unanimously that Angada, the son of Vali and heir-apparent of the monkey kingdom, go 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 must 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 to tell Ravana.

He took leave, after prostrating at Rama's feet. While departing, he said, "Master! Pray bless me with the auspicious look of your eyes. I am indeed fortunate to be entrusted with this work. Whatever might happen to me while executing it, I am ready to offer my very life to you." Hearing these words, Rama's heart melted with compassion. Rama clasped Angada to his bosom and placed his palm on his head, showering blessings on him.

Angada moved into the city, with Rama installed in his heart and his form ever in his mind. He pushed aside everyone who stopped him and displayed great self-confidence and courage. He encountered Ravana's son on the way. The demon prince accosted him and asked, "Here, Oh monkey! Who are you and wherefrom?" Angada replied, "I am Angada, Rama's envoy." The demon raised his foot to kick Angada. But Angada was too quick for him; he caught foot and, raising him aloft, twirled him and dashed him on the ground! The demons 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 wide-spread confusion and fear. Angada noticed that, 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 seen!

At last, Angada stepped fearlessly into Ravana's audience hall. One of the guards carried the news of his arrival in hot haste to Ravana. Ravana directed him to bring the envoy to his presence and, accordingly, Angada was taken to the demon 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 everyone 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 Rama's envoy."

Ravana asked him the purpose of his visit.

"O Ravana!" Angada began, "you and my father were friends of old. So, with your welfare in view, I have come at Rama's orders to give you some sound advice." He continued softly and persuasively, "Unable to withstand pride,

lust, and greed, you kidnapped the 'mother of all the worlds,' the daughter of Janaka. 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 your clan and your kingdom in this soil." Ravana replied, "O vilest of monkeys! You are indeed a fool. Perhaps you don't know that I am a foe of your 'God'. What's 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. "O monarch of demons. My name is Angada; my father's name is Vali. There was friendship between you two." Hearing this, Ravana was rendered stiff and silent. But he soon overcame the reaction and said, "True, there was, I remember, a monkey of that name in olden days. 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 reach 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 the stream of abuse on his head, 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. But 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, "O demon monarch! I have heard much of your righteousness, your virtues, your political morality. Consider what wonderful achievements your righteousness has effected. Kidnaping the wife of another person, devouring the messenger duly sent by your elder brother, Kubera - these are the highlights of your political morality! You boast 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 demons (rakshasas). You have no right at all to utter the word political morality, for 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. "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 pines and pines every day. And 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 some day. Both of you have your eyes on the same kingdom. So how can you fight wholeheartedly and successfully against me? My brother, upon whom you seem to rely, is a coward. Jambavan 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 possible? And now, you, who know it is true, deny that the monkey is a valiant fighter. I'm 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, an attempt by Rama to kill you would be too low for his status and dignity. Killing such a mean contemptible foe would reduce his majesty. The rules that lay down the conduct and characteristics of the warrior (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." 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 can collect a few coins from the onlookers." Angada couldn't put up with these sarcastic remarks. He ejaculated, "You seem to know only about animals; you haven't cared to know about the Lord, God, destiny, and fate. Why, haven't monkeys taught you more than you know? They demolished your parks, they killed your son, they reduced your city to a

pile of ash. Yes. They have to perform one more feat, yet. They have to administer proper punishment to you.

"We allowed you to escape the fate that you must meet. I believed that your heart would be cured by downright advice and harsh truth. But no. You have no sense of shame, no idea of repentance, 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 don't 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, and Ravana couldn't 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 Siva's feet; 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. Stop praising yourself and your patrons." But Angada was in no mood to stop. He continued his onslaught. "O 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, His arrow will make your heads leap like balls from the shoulder where they are now resting, and the monkeys will gleefully kick them about, as in a ball game. I happen to be the messenger of Sugriva, our ruler. Unfortunately, I have no orders from Sri Rama. I don't want to deprive them of the chance, or else I would 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 Rama's camp, right within His presence.

The monkeys there were struck with wonder at the strange articles and

described to each other the excellences and beauties of the jeweled crowns. Rama knew what they were; he said that, while coming over, they appeared like Rahu and Kethu, which cause eclipses.

Ravana commanded, "Bind this monkey; don't allow him to leave; eat him up," and he retired hastily 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'll pluck your tongue out of your mouth on the battlefield and throw it as food for crows. Be warned." Angada gnashed his teeth in hateful anger when Ravana turned back and called on the demons 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, but however many they were, they couldn't move the feet even a little bit. They only rolled on the ground, full of humiliation and unable to decide what to do next. The mighty warrior Devakantaka tried various holds to make the feet move, but he also failed ignominiously.

At last, Ravana himself tried the impossible task. He held Angada by his legs and tried 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 Rama's feet, 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. A sense of shame spread over his faces, and he looked like the moon in broad daylight, pale and poor.

Angada felt that he should not continue his dialogue with the coward. Rama, he remembered, had told him only to give Ravana some good advice. "This fellow won't yield to good counsel, he won't 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 Rama's feet. There, he

submitted a report of all that had happened.

Mandodari pleads once more with Ravana

Ravana entered the apartments of the queens, over-whelmed by shame and fear. Mandodari noted his pallid, crestfallen appearance and said, "At least, now, give up your foolish tenacity. To cultivate enmity toward Rama will bring disaster to the whole kingdom. 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 their messengers, so how can you hope to overwhelm them when they invade this land in their billions? You couldn't stir Angada's feet even a hair's breadth, and yet, you hope to capture and bind billions of such monkeys!

"I am pained that, in spite of all experience already available, you still hold obstinately to your resolution.

Our son was killed. Your city was reduced into a heap of ash. Your parks were uprooted; countless demons were thrown up like balls and killed by the fall. Where were your strength and skills then? Boastful declarations can inflict no harm on these monkeys." "Lord," Mandodari pleaded, "Pardon me for speaking. 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 quietly, within yourself, the facts told by Angada. Remember! You were seated in the gathering of kings in Janaka's hall to exhibit your strength and skill, but you failed even to shift Siva's bow a little. Rama lifted it as if it was a spurt of playfulness and cast it aside in broken halves. You saw this demonstration of might. 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? Aren't you ashamed to proclaim and boast about your strength and 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 monkeys and is encamped on Sunila hill. Rama is the very embodiment of righteousness and morality - why else would he send an envoy, as he has done, to advise you how you can still save yourself? This envoy tried to turn your mind toward accord with Rama. But you don't give up your sense of pride; you don't appreciate the moral sense that moves Rama; you don't understand the virtues that animate the supremely sacred person who sent the envoy.

"And 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? In their camp are thousands, nay, hundreds of thousands of monkeys mightier and more destructive than this one. Listen! 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.

Ravana tries to trick Sita

A new day dawned. Ravana entered the audience hall as the very personification of vicious pride and installed himself on the throne. The words of Angada and Mandodari revolved fast and furiously inside his head.

Plans, fears, schemes, and surmises rolled inside him, like the earth and sky rotating round him. But none of them was along the right lines, for the day of destruction of the demon clan was drawing near.

Ravana accosted a demon named Vidyujjihva, and said, "Fellow! Use your magic skill and bring Rama's head before me, as well as his bow and arrows. Sita must believe them genuine and be plunged in grief!" Vidyujjihva rose from his seat in a trice, moved out of the hall, and made a correct replica of Rama's head and bow and arrows. Ravana was pleased at the exactness of reproduction. He took them himself to the ashoka tree grove, where Sita was kept in confinement.

Holding them before her, he said, "Sita! See, these are the bow and arrows, this the head of the very person whom you extoll and pine for night and day. I

have annihilated the monkey hordes; Lakshmana saved himself by fleeing from the field. In order to convince you that all this really happened, I brought you this head, this bow and these arrows. Look at them." He placed them before her.

Sita was hit by grief for just one moment, but she reminded herself that no one in the fourteen worlds could pluck that head. She knew that this was a mean trick played just to terrorise her, and she brushed aside the threats.

"Ravana! Surely, your destruction has arrived. Or else, such abominable thoughts would not have come to you.

You have no courage even to approach Rama; how then could you ever hope to kill him? Even in dream, you cannot realise that hope. This dirty magic trick fails to deceive me." She poured scorn and insults on Ravana.

Meanwhile, loud exultant shouts of "Hurrah (jai), hurrah for Lord Rama" were heard from all around. The monkeys had entered the city from all directions! Ravana hurried back into his palace and the audience hall.

The good woman, Sarama, wife of Vibhishana, came near Sita and consoled and comforted her. She said, "Mother! Ravana is a trickster, and all that he does is subterfuge. No one can dare hurt Rama; just now, he triumphantly entered Lanka with his monkey hordes. Our country, Lanka, is being shattered into shreds by the very shouts of the monkeys."

8. The Siege

When Rama heard from Angada what had happened at Lanka and learned 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 demons (Vibhishana) met together; they decided on the division of their forces into four, under commanders and guides; then, they fell at Rama's feet and, enthused by his blessings, gave orders for attack.

With Rama in their hearts and armed with boulders and trees, the monkeys rolled forward in terror-striking floods. Lanka was reputedly impregnable, but Rama's blessings 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 monkeys had no war drums or trumpets; but the "RamRam" 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 reveling in the thought that the festive day of victory had dawned for the demon (rakshasa) sun.

The demons had taken up positions over walls and turrets and bastions of the fort, just like 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 demons were hurling on the monkeys, who were attempting to scale the walls, were seized before they fell by the monkeys and hurled back with fatal effect on the very demons crowding the walls. The advance of the monkeys gained in momentum as the fight progressed. They killed the demons

wherever and whenever they caught them. As a giant storm scatters clouds into the four directions, the mounting onslaught of the monkeys so dismayed the demons 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 demons 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'll cut you into pieces with my diamond sword!" At this, a few of the fleeing demon stayed in the fray. Meanwhile, the monkey heroes penetrated the enemy lines and, reinforced by their contemplation on Rama, 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 demon 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 monkeys, after demonstrating their superior might and heroism before the demon, presented themselves before Rama.

The demons (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 monkeys like the roar of lions. The monkeys plunged into battle again. The demon generals Akampa and Atikaya, through their magical skill, spread pitch darkness over the four quarters, and, under cover of the blackness, heavy rains of dust, stones and blood were poured on the enemy forces. The monkeys couldn't distinguish friend from foe. They were afraid to fight with full fury. They prayed, "Rama! Rama," in a loud voice to gain courage and give the enemy a good fight.

Rama heard their cries; he called Angada and Hanuman and told them that

the demons' magic skill had caused the commotion. They were furious at the shameful tactics of the enemy, but Rama coolly pulled out the fire-arrow (agneyastra) 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 monkeys 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 demons took to their heels and fled. But they could not escape; the monkeys caught them by their feet and threw them far out into the sea! The demons retreated into their camp when night advanced. They had no energy left for continuing the fight. The monkeys came into Rama's presence. When Rama's eyes fell upon them, they were all refreshed and recouped, with no trace of exhaustion.

Malyavantha pleads, Meghanada mollifies

Meanwhile, Ravana summoned his ministers and addressed them. "This day, thousands of demons were slain on the battlefield by the monkeys. Now we have to plan our strategy to foil them." Up rose Malyavantha, the aged minister who was the father of Ravana's mother and who had served Ravana's father. He counseled various rightful and moral paths for his edification. "Ravana!", he began, very endearingly, "Listen to my words in calmness. Pardon me for speaking outright. Ever since you brought Sita here, bad omens are being 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 Hero, 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. Don't entertain hatred against Him.

O Emperor! Save Lanka, I pray. Surrender Sita to Rama. Don't delay any longer. Your safety lies in immediate surrender." Malyavantha 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 get out of my sight." He hissed like an angry serpent.

Malyavantha 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 reasonings and foolish reactions, brushing aside the advice that would save him and his empire, because destiny had decided to close his career.

Meghanada rose and said, "Father, don't 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 appetite for food. All were sunk in anxiety and terror about the calamity that might overtake them any moment.

Meghanada leads the fight

Even as they were rolling in fear, dawn spread over the east. The monkeys and the bears laid siege to Lanka from all directions. Confusion and panic raised their heads. Their roars echoed from the sky. The demon warriors had to take up arms and oppose them, for 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 demons. They too shouted and yelled, reverberating the sky as on doomsday. But the huge peaks and hilltops that the monkeys threw at them reduced the demon hordes into a mass of lifeless pulp.

Enraged at the news that the monkeys 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 monkeys lost courage when they saw him on his chariot. Seeing the flight of the enemy forces, Meghanada shouted in joy. 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. The monkeys 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 monkeys, Hanuman was overcome with rage; he hastened toward Meghanada, full of fury and appearing as the God of death Himself! He plucked a mountain peak that was nearby and threw it at the demon leader.

When he saw the peak rushing toward 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 couldn't see his own palm spread before his eyes. The monkeys were confused and rendered despondent by such tactics. They felt that their end had come.

Rama saw the tricks into which the demons, in their despair, had descended; he laughed within himself at their helplessness. He became aware that the monkeys had lost confidence and courage, so he shot one single arrow into the fray. The magic of the demon was mortally hit, and it no longer worked. Brightness was restored to the earth, as if the Sun had risen in the sky.

The monkeys recovered self-confidence and advanced toward the demon ranks. Rama's compassionate glance fell upon them, and they were refreshed. The entire monkey horde shouted with one voice, "Victory (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, so he hastened to send strong reinforcements to support his son on the field.

The monkeys fought without respite, armed with tree and rocks. Both sides fought ferociously with unabated fury. Most of the fight centred around duels between warriors and leaders. The monkeys hit with their clenched fists and bit with their sharp teeth, causing the death of a vast number of demons. With their nails, they clipped 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 monkeys announced their triumph resounded among the Nine Islands. Headless corpses of the demons continued to run along the directions taken by the demons while alive; seeing this eerie phenomenon, the monkeys broke into ribald laughter. The roads that criss-crossed over the vast field of battle were filled with streams of blood.

Lakshmana is hurt!

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 war tactics. But even these were foiled, and his plans ended in failure. Lakshmana, in a spurt of terrific rage, destroyed Meghanada's chariot and killed his charioteer. Afraid that his death was imminent, Meghanada took in hand the supremely potent weapon, Sakthi, which Brahma had given him. Aiming it at the very heart of Lakshmana, he directed it to the target. The weapon hit Lakshmana's heart, coming straight from Meghanada's hand. Lakshmana fell on the ground in a "mortal" swoon.

No longer in fear, Meghanada 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 Adishesha, which bears the cosmos on its thousand hoods, come again. How could anyone, however strong, or any number of such ones succeed in lifting him? Only those who have won Sri Rama's grace could move Lakshmana!

Meanwhile, the shades of evening invaded the land. The two opposing forces returned to their camps. Sri Rama saw the returning monkeys but could not see Lakshmana. He asked, "Where is Lakshmana?" Just at that moment, Hanuman entered carrying Lakshmana's body over his shoulder. Hanuman was praying plaintively, "Rama! Rama!" Rama acted perturbed and affected by anxiety, but he soon righted himself. He laid Lakshmana's body on his lap and examined it carefully for a long time. Jambavan, the aged, spoke at that juncture. "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 to Rama's camp, so he resorted to a ruse. He lifted Sushena's house 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 Rama's feet and disclosed the name of the mountain where the drug that 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 given the task. Rama entrusted the task to him.

Kalanemi tries to dissuade Ravana

Meanwhile, one of his spies reported to Ravana that Sushena, the physician, had reached Rama's presence.

Ravana consulted Kalanemi on this new development and its consequences. Kalanemi replied, "Ravana! This Hanuman is an impossible person! Didn't he set Lanka in flames even when you were looking on? What special skill or strength do I have to conquer him? The time to do the right thing is still not past. Give up the absurd notion that it is possible for you to win victory over Rama. Go; take refuge at Rama's feet. Your fortunes will get better thereby. Forsake your pride and obstinacy." Kalanemi gave Ravana good counsel; but Ravana was looking for something different, so Ravana condemned him. Shaking with rage, he shouted. "Are you prepared to obey me? If not, prepare yourself for death." Hanuman kills Kalanemi Kalanemi thought that it would be much more beneficial to die at Rama's hands than be 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 sage (rishi), he sat in deep meditation on its bank.

Hanuman, who was on his way to the mountain range to get the life-saving drug, was exhausted, since he had had no rest after the fierce engagement with Meghanada. So 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 sage, who was reciting Rama's name and extolling his exploits and excellences. He was delighted; he too sang the name "Rama! Rama!" The disguised Kalanemi told him, "O monkey! A war is 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." Hanuman was elated. He told the sage that he was thirsty. The sage told him that his water vessel had cool refreshing water and offered it to him. Hanuman said, "Master! This little quantity cannot quench my thirst to any appreciable degree." Then the sage 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 went to the lake indicated. He walked 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, for 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?" The person answered, "O 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 Indra's court 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 demons (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, in the last quarter of the Thretha Age. The Lord will be incarnating as Rama, and a terrible battle will ensue between Rama and the ruler of Lanka. During the battle, Lakshmana, Rama's brother, will get fatally hurt by the weapon called Sakthi, and Hanuman, a devoted servant of Rama, will journey to Sanjivi Mountain, green with bushes of drugs; you will both be liberated from the demon encumbrance by contact with him.' O monkey! The sage (rishi) who lives nearby, who directed you here, is no sage at all. He is a demon 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." 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 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 toward the Drona mountain range. Reaching Sanjivi Hill, he 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, and he was conscious of the urgency of Rama's command. So he resorted to another plan. He plucked the entire hill and leapt through the sky carrying it on his palm.

Hanuman encounters Bharatha

Hanuman had to pass over the city of Ayodhya on his way to Lanka at night. At this time, Bharatha was 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 demon (rakshasa) that had assumed that form while 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!" Bharatha stood up, shocked, and ran toward the fallen monkey. From Hanuman he learned the story of his mission and the urgency of his errand. He was overcome with grief, but 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 monkey 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 Bharatha's sincerity. 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, "O 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.

Hanuman told 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 Bharatha's feet and raised aloft the hill on his palm. When he took off and flew into the horizon, Bharatha watched him with unblinking eyes until he disappeared from view. He was glad that at last he had some knowledge of Rama's movements, 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, Lakshmana's mother, though saddened for awhile, quickly recovered her composure, reminding herself that Rama was at her son's side. 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 Lakshmana's fate; this 'loss of consciousness' must be affecting him; separation from his brother might cause him grief. Son! Satrughna! Go to Rama and be by his side." 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 can't 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.

Rama cares for Lakshmana

Meanwhile, in Lanka, Rama was guarding Lakshmana. The day rolled into evening and night and even into midnight. The monkeys were squatting around Rama. Rama, acting as merely human, expressed anxiety at Hanuman's non-arrival. "It's midnight, but there is no sign of Hanuman yet! Has he lost his way by any chance?

Lakshmana is still critically unconscious!"

He turned Lakshmana's face tenderly toward himself 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 toward me.

Without even a blink 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 a common mortal.

"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 wouldn't take food at meal time, 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 have been deprived of loving care, don't you realise this? Lakshmana!

Open your eyes just once and look upon me; that is what I most need now."

Rama held Lakshmana's chin in his loving hand and prayed most touchingly for one glance from his eye.

The monkeys shed tears of sorrow at the anguish that Rama experienced. Many of them climbed the hill-top trees and peered into the distance to discover signs of Hanuman's approach.

Lakshmana recovers

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 monkeys.

The monkeys 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's death 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 Sauvarnakarini and the Sanjivakarini - from the peak and administered them to Lakshmana. And Lakshmana sat up, fully awake.

Rama was overcome with joy. He embraced his brother and caressed him very fondly, exclaiming, "Brother!

Brother! Where had you been all these hours?" His eyes streamed 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 into their midst, the monkeys 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 monkeys, who danced in glee, embracing their revived companions and kinfolk.

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 monkeys. Hanuman praised Sushana's 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.

Demon generals are killed

Another day dawned. War drums could be heard from the demon camp. The monkeys 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 general was Dhumraksha. He fought desperately, but he was killed the next day by Hanuman.

Akampa stepped into the breach and fought ferociously at the head of the demonic horde. Angada led the monkeys against Akampa, and he was able to kill the demon general that very day.

Hearing that Akampa had died at the hands of the enemy, Prahastha rushed into the battlefield, raising great hue and cry. Nila took him on and, remembering ever more keenly the name of Rama, 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 demons. 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 demons of Lanka were stricken with panic. They struggled to hide themselves somewhere in order to save their lives. Many surrendered and sought refuge in the camp of monkeys. 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. the redoubtable warrior Makaraksha continued the battle. Lakshmana fought him and killed him. When such signal success was accomplished in a trice, the monkeys leaped in joy and shouted, "Victory! Victory! (jai! jai!)" Kumbhakarna berates Ravana Ravana wailed and wept when he heard that his unbeatable generals had all, one by one, fallen dead! He ran to where his brother Kumbhakarna lay asleep and tried to awaken him by urgent and drastic means. Vast crowds of demons gathered near his ears and beat huge drums wildly. Ravana brought hundreds of boxers to hit the sleeping demon; hundreds rained punches on him; many dealt heavy thrusts on his thighs, with gigantic maces. At last, his 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 Kumbhakarna rise in red vengeance, as if he was the very embodiment of time, the universal destroyer.

He exclaimed, "Fool! Can you ever achieve victory? 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, 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 this calamity on your head by the mischief of your own hands." Kumbhakarna laid the blame on his own brother and advised him for a long time, but Ravana was in no mood to accept the blame. "Don't desert me in disaster. Prepare yourself to lead our armies into the war; save my life," he pleaded.

The demon brothers meet

Finding no means of escape, and overcome by affection for the brother, Kumbhakarna got ready. They placed cauldrons of liquor and mounds of meat before him, so that he might breakfast on them. Gulping the whole lot in a moment, Kumbhakarna went 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 counseled him in various ways. He discarded my advice and gave ear to power-mad foolish ministers; he hurled unbearable abuses on me, within hearing of those people. 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." Kumbhakarna replied, "Well, brother! The shadow of death is already on Ravana, so how 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 demon 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 to confine yourself to loyalty to Rama." Receiving this advice

and the blessings of his brother, Vibhishana returned to Rama's presence. He told Rama, "Lord! That mountain of a demon (rakshasa) is Kumbhakarna; he is a ferociously brave fighter. He has come to engage you in battle." Kumbhakarna attains liberation When the monkeys heard these words, they were so angry that they spouted fire and leaped under Hanuman's leadership on the enemy forces. They threw huge trees and enormous boulders at him. But Kumbhakarna stood firm and unaffected. The monkey 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. Recovering soon he returned the blow and felled him to the ground. Nala and Nila joined the fight, but they also couldn't withstand the might of Kumbhakarna. Fear seized the monkey 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 off the king, he had vanquished the monkey army.

Hanuman regained awareness of the state of things. He found Sugriva was not around, and he got anxious to discover his whereabouts. While being carried away, pressed under the mighty Kumbhakarna's arm, Sugriva recovered consciousness and tried his best to wriggle out of the hold. Hanuman found him engaged in this desperate bid and ran to help him.

However, Sugriva separated himself from his captor and started a valiant fight against him. He bit off Kumbhakarna's nose and ears, making it extremely difficult for the monster to breathe. Soon, a horde of monkeys yelling "Victory to Rama" "Victory to our Master," surrounded Kumbhakarna and rained rocks, hills and trees on him.

The infuriated demon leaped on the monkeys. Catching whoever he could lay his hands on, he crunched them and swallowed them. Many were crushed to death. Thus, Kumbhakarna was able to scatter the monkeys in panic.

At this, Rama told Lakshmana and others that the time had come for himself, Rama, to enter the fray; his intercession could be delayed no longer.

"Lakshmana! Bring that 'inexhaustible' arrow-sheath here," he said. Bearing the command of Rama on his head, he immediately brought the sheath and placed it in his brother's hands.

Armed with the Kodanda Bow, Rama walked into the battle area, like a lion toward 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 demons 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 demon forces, Kumbhakarna was terribly enraged; he roared like a wounded lion and jumped into the midst of the fray. The monkeys 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 toward 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 didn't 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; to prevent this movement, Rama shot another arrow, which cut it in two.

Suddenly, a splendour arose from the body and, advancing toward Rama, merged in him. The demon attained liberation without performing any spiritual practice (sadhana) or recitation of the name or austerity for sense control and mind control (tapas). 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 fight. They retired to their camps. The grace bestowed by Rama reinforced the spirits of the monkeys. Like fire fed by dry grass, the flame of their ardour rose high.

Meghanada tries to trick the monkey hordes

The demons lost strength, night and day. Ravana wailed inconsolably. He was a cobra that had lost its crestjewel.

Pressing his brother's severed head to his bosom, he wept aloud. Meghanada tried to soothe him in various ways; "Tomorrow I shall demonstrate before you my heroic might. I shall, in a trice, smash this monkey 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 demons into the struggle; they marched forth to meet the enemy. Each fought with whomever 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, and the roar felled the monkeys, 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. Accosting him, Meghanada shouted, "Listen, Hanuman! This Sita, to recover whom you are waging this war, I am going killing her right now. Look. With her death, this war must

end." Drawing his sword, he cut her to pieces and cast them away.

Hanuman was plunged in vengeful rage; he called upon the monkeys to fight on, with no thought of survival, and exterminate the demon brood. The monkeys attacked them so ferociously that the demons fell back into the city.

Hanuman reported to Rama the wicked deed performed by Meghanada. Rama pretended to be affected by the news, although he knew that it was a pseudo-Sita contrived through the magic skill of the demons. Still, he acted as though he was just a "man among men". Lakshmana 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 Rama and said, "Master! You know the truth of this. The entire incident is a fake. Sita is alive and guarded with great care. Only Ravana has access to the place where she is kept under guard. Meghanada designed a 'Sita' and killed her in order to deceive us into despair.

Among us demons, 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 demons. In order to confirm Vibhishana's statement and to satisfy himself all the more, Hanuman assumed another form, entered Lanka City unnoticed by anyone, and went to the park where Sita was kept under guard. Upon returning, he assured the monkeys that all was well. This urged the monkeys to greater enthusiasm in battle.

Meghanada is defeated

Meghanada returned to the battle. This time, he rained on the monkeys not only sharp arrows but spears, maces, axes, pestles, and boulders. The monkeys heard terror-striking shouts and commands reverberating all around them - "Beat," "Hold," etc. - but they couldn't see who was 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 where the danger came from 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 and showered hissing serpent-arrows on Rama.

It was the renowned dragon weapon, the Sarpastra. And Rama, the Supreme Actor come in the human role, the mighty hero who destroyed Khara, Dushana, and their phalanxes, allowed himself to be bound by the effects of that powerful weapon! 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 monkeys were rendered helpless and worried, because Rama had been overpowered by the weapon of the dragon. Meghanada was overjoyed; he rushed among the monkeys, spouting vulgar abuse.

Jambavan saw him. "O you vicious worm! Stop," he cried. Meghanada brushed him aside, saying, "Fie on you, I 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 demon circled round himself a few times and fell on the ground.

Jambavan rushed to him, held, swung him round very fast by his feet, and 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 didn't die. He rose with great difficulty and moved away. He hadn't fulfilled his boast, so he felt ashamed to show his face before his father. He went straight to a garden Nikumbala, where many demons had performed penance and endured austerities in the past.

Lakshmana kills Meghanada

Four of Vibhishana's courtiers who were watching the movements of the enemy leaders incognito came to know about this and 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 ritual (yajna) 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 sacrifice (yajna) that Meghanada is observing." Turning to Lakshmana, he 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 said this than Vibhishana, Sugriva, and Hanuman - the three - collected a huge force of monkeys and followed Lakshmana in order to give him support. Lakshmana armed himself with the bow and the ever-full arrow-sheath. 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 Nikumbala Park, they found the sacrifice already on and the flesh and blood of buffaloes being offered in the ritual fire. So they started disturbing the ceremonies. However, Meghanada didn't desist, so they began to loudly caricature the hymns being uttered, but that didn't persuade the priests to stop the rituals either. So the infuriated monkeys rushed into the sacrificial area, caught Meghanada by the hair, pulled him to the ground, and kicked him.

Meghanada took hold of the trident and pounced upon them. Angada and Hanuman fell on him but 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 and hit Meghanada with all their strength.

However, the demon didn't quail; he didn't 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.

Using his magic skill, Meghanada rendered himself invisible. He assumed many a mysterious role and escaped.

Lakshmana's patience ran out at last; he fixed sacred arrows on his bow and, invoking on it Rama's might and majesty, aimed it at Meghanada, wherever he might be. That arrow entered Meghanada's heart and ended his life. Since he had the image of Rama and Lakshmana in his mind during the last moments, 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.

9. The Nether Region

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. Rama's compassionate look fell upon the monkeys, and the monkeys were delighted at the sight of His happy face.

Sulochana berates Ravana

Sulochana, Meghanada's wife, heard the news of her husband's death through her maids, who ran to her with the tragic information. Ravana talked to her, saying, "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'm ashamed that Meghanada fell a victim to the attack of monkeys. How can those who are killed by monkeys claim to be heroes?" Ravana said.

He tried to console Sulochana. "Respected consort! Give up your grief. Don't think that I am a hero of that type. I'll bring you solace within an hour or so. You can witness my terrific might on the battlefield - I'll pluck the heads of those who caused your husband's death and bring them with me. This shall be done, without a doubt." Ravana boasted and raved in the presence of Sulochana. His anger burned his frame, and he was beside himself with rage.

The wise and virtuous Sulochana replied, "O Ten-headed One! Is there any trace of hope in your heart that you can win victory? You are sunk in the deep darkness of delusion. I had swallowed my resentment and my disappointment for so long, for I felt that opposing one's father-in-law was improper, and in this case it was also useless to try to convince you. Your rage is the prime cause for the destruction of the demon 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. Wailing alone, she moved toward the apartment of queen Mandodari, the mother of Meghanada. There,

she fell at the feet of her mother-in-law and said, "This calamity was brought about by your husband and by no one 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 was also pained when she contemplated Ravana's evil desires and his pride at his own wickedness.

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

Ravana couldn't bear to witness the agony of his bereaved daughter-in-law, 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 beat his heads on the ground in despair. 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, "O 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 illumines 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 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, fell on the floor of the temple in reverent homage.

Ahi-Ravana kidnaps Rama and Lakshmana!

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 worshiped no other god but the goddess Kamada. Immediately, he meditated on her, and she revealed Ravana's whereabouts to him. So, he could appear before Ravana right in the Siva Temple. He fell at Ravana's feet, announcing his name while doing so.

Ahi-Ravana was another of Ravana's sons. He asked why his father was so disheartened. Ravana told him all that had happened since Surpanakha's nose and ears 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 don't 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 tell you one thing: I shall capture Rama and Lakshmana and take them with me to the nether regions. I shall sacrifice them as offerings to my god Kamada. I shall thereby bring immense fame to the demon (rakshasa) name." With these words, he prostrated before Ravana, and made obeisance to Kamada.

Then he entered the camp of Rama. With his supernatural power, he invoked the spirit of darkness and enveloped the monkeys in thick blackness. No one could see his own palm, held before him! Such was the thickness of the pitch darkness around all. The monkeys were extremely vigilant in camp; even death dared not enter the place. Hanuman, the monkey 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 out-manoeuvre this defence. Suddenly, getting a brainwave, he changed himself into the likeness of Vibhishana and accosted Hanuman at the gate. He told him, "Friend, I must go to Rama. With his approval I had gone outside the camp to perform my evening prayers and rites. I have finished them now. If I don't go without delay, I will incur the sin of disobeying His command. So allow me to enter the camp." Hanuman was taken in by those words and the form, which were to his ears and eyes the same as Vibhishana's.

He allowed him into the camp.

Ahi-Ravana found Nala and Sugriva fast asleep, exhausted by the day's fighting. Rama was also sleeping, with his hand clasping his brother Lakshmana's hand.

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 demon (rakshasa) species.

His task would remain unfinished if Ravana's descendents survived in the nether regions. So, he played the role as if he didn't know the trick in which Ahi-Ravana was about to indulge. 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 demon recited the mantra for bewildering (the mohana mantra), which would make whomever he wanted swoon and become unconscious. That made the monkey 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.

Vibhishana uncovers the plot

After some time, the monkeys woke up. They 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 monkeys were rendered as miserable as the sky without the moon, or lotus blooms without water. The monkeys started moving in all directions to seek out the brothers and recover them.

Many ran toward the shore of the sea; many searched the borders of the campus. No one could discover any clue.

The monkeys lost hope and courage; they were overcome by sorrow and despair. "All the demon warriors have been destroyed. Only Ravana has survived; his days were also nearing the end. At this juncture, this misfortune has overtaken us." Thus, the monkeys lamented their fate.

Sugriva, the king of the monkeys, 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 monkeys ran toward him and told him that Rama and Lakshmana could not be found in the camp. Vibhishana was struck with sorrow for one instant, but since he was conversant with the tricks that the demons 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 my permission to do so." It was now clear to Vibhishana. He could picture in his mind what had happened. So he addressed the monkeys, "Monkeys! There is no need to be anxious. Ahi-Ravana, Ravana's son, is a master at such tricks. He lives in Patala, in the nether regions. Judging from the depth of this pit, I am sure it is he who carried Rama and Lakshmana to his own place underground. I have no doubt on this point, for no one else can assume my form. Don't be disheartened. It is best that someone from among us who is mighty proceed there." He looked around. 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.

Sugriva, Angada, and Jambavan clasped Hanuman to their breasts and shed tears of joy. Hanuman solicited permission from his royal master, Sugriva, and, before starting on his mission, he told the monkeys, "Don't fear.

Don't be anxious in the least. Whoever he is, I shall destroy him, even if I have to sacrifice my life. Pretty soon, I shall stand before you with Rama and Lakshmana. Be assured." With these words and with the acclamation "victory to Rama (Jai Rama)" emanating from his tongue, Hanuman started off.

Hanuman rescues the brothers

Reaching the Patala region, Hanuman rested for awhile under a tree. He heard two birds sitting above him, conversing aloud. Hanuman knew the language of birds, and 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 them both 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 Makaradwaja, 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, to be offered as a human sacrifice to her.

Hanuman asked Makaradwaja, 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 would not allow him to enter the area, for he had to obey his master and be loyal to him and to his interests. "Whatever suffering I have to endure, I won't let you in," he said. "If I showed you special consideration because you are also a monkey, I would thereby dishonour 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. So, however near you may be to me, I won't 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 Makaradwaja had taken the proper attitude. He took up the challenge and fought him. After some time spent in fierce combat, Hanuman decided that protraction was not desirable, so he twisted his tail around Makaradwaja's body 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 go, he suddenly assumed a molecular form and occupied the garland he 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 around 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 demons saw the food disappearing, and they were delighted that their goddess had deigned to accept their devotion. Ahi-Ravana 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 demon warriors held them by their arms on either side. Hanuman saw them forced 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 had to 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 this knowledge induced them to look on 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 don't begrudge 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 required that victims be permitted to pray to their guardian for peace after death. The demon 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 and smiled.

Just then, Hanuman let out a terrific roar. Hearing it, the demons imagined that their goddess had manifested 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 and hit him all over, hacking him to pieces. But his body was of diamond strength, and he had won a mysterious boon that 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 of Victory to Rama (Jai Rama), he caught the head in one hand and sliced the neck with the other. Before they could join, he threw the head into the blazing fire, in the sacrificial pit before the idol.

Just then, Makaradwaja managed to reach the temple and the presence of the

goddess. Hanuman saw him, recovered the golden crown from Ahi-Ravana's head, and placed it on Makaradwaja's head, proclaiming him ruler of Patala and advising him to be ever grateful to the brothers and to be always loyal and devoted to them.

Hanuman had Rama and Lakshmana seated on his shoulders and, at one jump, he rose from Patala and landed safe in the midst of the monkey 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 Rama and Lakshmana's feet; they clasped Hanuman in their arms and shed tears of gratitude. The monkeys praised Hanuman in a thousand different paeans. They lifted him on their shoulders; they fed him and fondled him. They embraced him and poured their love on him.

Vibhishana stood before Rama and said, "Lord! What shall I say of your divine plays (leelas)? Only You can reveal to us the meaning of your acts and activities. You have come with the resolution to wipe off the demon denizens even in the nether regions. All this stage-acting, is, I know, to fulfil that resolution." Ravana's last surviving son dies Ravana learned that Rama and Lakshmana had been brought back by Hanuman from Ahi-Ravana's kingdom.

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 just 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 Ravana on various moral virtues and on the mortality of people and things. Ravana didn't listen to his words, and he even treated them with patent disgust.

The minister was sad when he saw his reaction. He felt, "In times of misfortune, intelligence also gets warped.

Poor fellow! He is heading for disaster, so even sweet counsel tastes bitter to him." Still, out of compassion, he continued with his words of sympathetic advice.

Ravana said to himself: "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 720 million demons with him. 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 for a messenger, Dhumakethu, 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. Narantaka went immediately with his hordes, and as soon as he reached the field he fell upon the monkey 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 Dhumakethu 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 Hanuman caught them all by the hand and broke them to pieces. He came close to Narantaka and pounded his breast heavily with his clenched fist. He lifted Narantaka aloft and, turning him around fast, threw him deep into a nether region named Rasatala. Millions of his demon followers were thrown into the sea. He broke the chariots in Narantaka's army into smithereens; the charioteers were also decimated.

10. Ten Heads Roll

When Ravana heard the news of this holocaust, he exclaimed, "Whoever expected the war to 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 just waste of time; their advice didn't enter Ravana's heads.

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, although Ravana did not notice it. The monkeys gathered at the four gates of the city and were, as usual, getting ready to storm them and enter.

Ravana himself heads the army

Ravana assembled the demon (rakshasa) warriors and addressed them, "Soldiers! If your hearts shudder at the prospect of battle, it is best you leave the ranks this very instant. Don't flee when the battle is on; if you do, I shall slaughter you with my own hands." Threatening them thus, he felt they would fight to the last. Then, he ordered the war drums to be beaten and trumpets to be blown.

Like darkness intensifying mountain peaks, the demon warriors marched forward in serried ranks. A series of bad omens assaulted them, but 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 demon 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.

The monkeys and bears pounced on the demons 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 demons (rakshasas) shudder in mortal fear.

Very soon, the battle became a series of duels between the demons and the monkeys. The cry "victory to Rama" was met by the cry "victory to Ravana." The demons fought like the emissaries of death; the monkeys 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 the decimation of his army with alarm. He took up his bow and shot arrows at the soldiers of his army fleeing for life from the field of fury. The monkeys were inspired when they saw Ravana filled with anger at his own warriors. They yelled in joy and leaped toward him in large numbers. They aimed peaks and trees at him.

Ravana turned all round him and encouraged his soldiers to stand firm. The monkeys fled in all directions unable to meet the onrush. They wailed, "O Lord, Sugriva! Sugriva, save us, save us." Earth and sky were darkened by the showers of Ravana's arrows. The monkeys 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. "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 have been looking out for you for many days. My heart will find solace only on my killing you today." 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 Ravana's chariot to pieces. Lakshmana rained arrows in deadly groups of a hundred and more. They found their mark on Ravana's faces and on his chest, so that he was felled to the ground, consciousness with the blow and the pain.

Yet, he recovered very quickly. He 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 Lakshmana, he rolled to the ground.

Hanuman saw the fall, and he hastened to Lakshmana's side, 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 with an even more power-filled one. Ravana was stunned by the impact. He said within himself, "May this fellow's fist be burned to ashes. I never dreamed that a monkey's fist could discharge such a thunderbolt." Meanwhile, Lakshmana recovered from the swoon and rose, ready for the fray.

Ravana tries to hold a victory-ensuring ritual

Ravana had to be helped into another chariot, having become unconscious again. His charioteer cleverly drove the chariot in the direction of Lanka.

Ravana 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 he was! Could he ever achieve victory in a fight with Rama? Those who were spying his activities on Vibhishana's behalf 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 one that Meghanada began in the past. This ceremony has also to be defiled and desecrated by the monkeys so that Ravana is deprived of the benefits he hopes to secure through it. In case this ritual (homa) is allowed to reach its conclusion, without interruption, it will be very difficult to defeat Ravana." Very soon day dawned. In accordance with Rama's orders, Angada and Hanuman went to the ritual enclosure with a large following. They leaped in great hilarity and surrounded Ravana's palace. "Sacrilegious sacrificer!

Fleeing from battle and finding safety at home, are you sitting cosily, performing meditation?" Angada dared to 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 sacrifice 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, 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 monkeys.

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 fights again

Ravana was badly disappointed that his sacrifice did not succeed. 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 the war drums to be beaten and the clarions sounded. Hundreds of thousands of demons (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 demon hordes.

The monkey 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 monkey hordes moved fast toward the demon forces, bent upon annihilating 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 demon armies were destroyed.

Thousands and thousands of demons fell on the ground. Blood flowed in 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 a vast ocean of monkey hordes wherever he turned, with Rama and Lakshmana in the vanguard, leading the forces. Ravana realised that his magic could not produce any effect.

Rama fights and kills Ravana

Soon, Rama called the monkeys to his presence and told them in grave seriousness: "You are all exhausted by the long and hardy battle. Go and rest. Watch the fight between Rama and Ravana." No sooner had he said these words than Ravana encountered Rama with a challenging roar.

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 people in the world. The first are like the patali tree, whose blossoms are fine but don't turn into fruit. Those who indulge in mere speech and don't practise a mite of what they talk about are of this type. The second group are like the plantain tree. It gives flowers and fruits, both. Those who speak and act and practise what they assert are of this type. The third type is like the jack tree - it has no flower, but only fruits. The best type are like this. They don't 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. "What? Dare you teach me?" he said, pouring out a stream of abuse. Suddenly, he shot a bunch of hard-hitting arrows at Rama. Rama replied with the fire arrow, and Ravana's arrows were burned to ashes. Ravana directed millions of sharp-edged wheels and three-pronged spears against Rama, 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 Sugriva?" The heads that remained on the trunk were gnashing their teeth and asking for Vibhishana, 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 fiercely and with unequalled valour. Lakshmana, Sugriva, and Angada watched him and admired his prowess.

Finally, Rama resolved that Ravana's end should no longer be delayed. His iniquities were multiplying with every passing day. Nala, Nila, and other monkey 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 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 also remembers 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 monkeys 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 monkey 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 demon magic. He laughed within himself at Ravana's efforts 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 Rama's arrow entered it.

The monkeys 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. It 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 beasts set up piteous wails. Balls of fire dropped from the sky. Sudden bursts of flame became evident in all directions. Queen Mandodari's heart 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 demons was near, and they gathered overhead to witness the triumph of righteousness, shouting, victory, victory (jai! jai)!

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", which 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 a 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 Chaithra month (the second spring month).

That instant, a host of heavenly drums resounded from the sky. Ravana's splendourous spirit merged in Rama. Struck by that vision, the monkey warriors were aghast with wonder. They were amazed at Rama's valour and heroism in the battle against Ravana, which lasted a full 18 days. They exclaimed with one voice: "Victory, Victory to Rama." Mandodari grieves. Hearing that Ravana had died, queen Mandodari, collapsed on the floor. When she recovered, she hastened with her maids to Ravana's corpse and wailed aloud. She collected the heads and was stricken with grief at the tragic fate of her lord. She recited with fond reminiscence Ravana's exploits 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 couldn't 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 couldn't avoid this tragic end. Lust led you to ignore Rama and invited this calamity on your head.

"Ravana! Rama incarnated with the purpose of destroying by the fire of his anger the forest of demon (rakshasa) vice. I told you this many times, 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, vast treasures, and the vast numbers of demons you ruled over. Didn't I plead with you, holding your feet in my hands, to surrender to Rama, the ocean of mercy, and thus save the demons from annihilation? You didn't welcome my pleadings. You engaged constantly in inflicting injury on others, an activity that gave you great joy. You seldom attempted to confer benefits on others. Your urges were ever toward sinful deeds and thoughts. In spite of this, Rama has conferred his blessing and your spirit has merged in him. What great compassion this is! You died at his hands - 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 demon (rakshasa) race was laid by the demon 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 practice (sadhana)?

"Rama! Have you done this to prove that no one can escape the consequences of their 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 a long time, sitting by the side of her lord.

Mandodari had realised through her wisdom that Rama was the highest Brahman (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.

Ravana's funeral

Vibhishana was moved by Mandodari's wailing. 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 carried out all the prescribed rites and rituals, at the proper places and with correct ceremony. Mandodari and other women also offered water offerings, sanctified with mantras and sesame. Every item of the funeral rite was carried out 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, so there was no reason to lament the death.

Vibhishana becomes emperor of Lanka

Rama called Lakshmana with Sugriva, Jambavan, and Angada and asked them to go into Lanka with Nala, Nila, and others to install Vibhishana as the emperor of Lanka. He told them to proceed without delay, for the fourteen years' exile that 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 part of Ayodhya," he insisted.

But Rama didn't 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 for me to

go against it on the very last day. I am in 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 toward the city and reached the palace. They placed the crown on Vibhishana's head and put the auspicious mark of authority on his forehead.

Vibhishana prostrated before the assembly of monkeys 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 won't 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 monkey hordes, but he consoled himself by the thought that everything that had happened had been the "sport" of the Supreme Will, Rama. Soon, they returned to Rama and fell at his feet in reverential homage.

Hanuman visits Sita

Rama called Hanuman and told him, "O Hanuman, incomparable hero! Go into Lanka on my errand once more, tell Sita all that has happened, and return with authentic news about her condition." Accordingly, Hanuman entered Lanka, went to Sita, and fell at her holy feet. She asked him, "Are Rama and Lakshmana safe, with their monkey 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 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. "O leader of monkeys! 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." 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? What greater fortune can anyone need than the fortune of seeing Rama victorious over the enemy and happy with his brother?" He prostrated once again at Sita's feet.

Sita said, "O best among monkeys! I am sunk in agony these ten months of separation from my Lord, so I could not see or know anything about the external world. I don't know which day of the week it is, or 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 auspicious news; so, I shall name it the Day of Auspiciousness (Mangala day) - although it may generally be named otherwise. (It was Tuesday). 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." 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. Don't you 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 couldn't bear the anguish that was patent in Sita's words. He leaped into the sky and reached Rama in a trice. He narrated all that happened during the meeting.

Sita is brought to Rama

Rama gathered Angada, Vibhishana, and others and told them to go to Sita and bring her respectfully to his presence. They went to the grove of ashoka trees where she was so long interned; Vibhishana directed that Sita may take a bath, wear fine silk clothes, and be decked in jewels when she moved out of the garden (ashokavana).

But Sita cast aside the suggestion. "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 don't 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 said that Sita was desperately wishing for the sight of her Lord.

Soon, a palanquin was brought and Sita was seated in it. The monkeys bore the palanquin on their shoulders.

The demon women who had survived, the monkey warriors, and others jumped with excitement on both sides of the road when Sita passed by. They stood on tiptoe and even jumped high to get a clearer and nearer view. But Sita didn't 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 got off the palanquin, for she felt that she should go to her Lord in humility, walking the distance. She walked slowly toward Rama; as she neared Him, the monkeys standing along the path fell at her feet and cheered, "Victory, victory (jai, jai) Sita Ram." The ordeal of fire When Sita 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!

The monkeys 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 monkeys had carried on their shoulders huge mountain peaks and rocks before and during the war with Ravana; now, those very monkeys 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 spotless character and was the very embodiment of virtue. And, Vibhishana, Angada, Sugriva, and others knew that the fire ordeal was only to convince the world. The fact was that the divine power (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 vital core (sakthi) was all the while fostered in fire by fire. Now, she had to pass through fire so that she might emerge as the real Sita, embodied divine power (sakthi).

Sita welcomed the rite, for the world would be convinced that her heart was pure and unblemished. She was happy to see the flames leap up. However, Lakshmana 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 Rama's face, 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 toward the fire and, standing before it said, "O Receiver of Sacred Offerings! By word or deed or thought I have not dwelt in my mind on anyone other than Rama, my Lord, O 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 Rama's feet, just as the Lord of the ocean of milk offered Lakshmi at Lord Vishnu's feet. She shone on Rama's left 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.

Rama and Sita take their leave

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 monkeys grabbed whatever fell on them or near them. They mistook the gems to be red, ripe fruit. 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 monkeys 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; "O monkeys! 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 will 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 would be no occasion for them to fear anyone or any calamity.

The monkeys 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 and 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 the sun by its light?" The monkeys fell at Rama's feet and stood with tear-streaming eyes.

The monkeys and bears felt they had to obey Rama's orders, however unwilling they were to depart from his presence. They turned toward their homes with mixed feelings of joy and grief, praying to Rama for His continued blessing and with His form 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 Rama's face, 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. The aerial chariot (pushpaka) took off and turned north.

11. Happy Ayodhya

The trip home

When the aerial cart rose, there was great commotion on the ground; monkey hordes raised thunderous shouts of "victory (jai) to Rama, victory to Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana." Inside the aerial cart was a high throne, charmingly designed and carved, and Sita and Rama took their seats on it. They then appeared to all as a cloud with a lightning flash resting on the Sumeru Peak.

Rama drew Sita's attention to the battlefield below and said, "Here is where Lakshmana overpowered and killed Meghanada." He showed her other spots associated with similar exploits and victories. He showed her the bridge that the monkeys had constructed across the sea and described to her the monkey's heroism, devotion, and faith.

Very soon, the aerial chariot reached the Dandaka Forest. Rama had the vehicle land before the hermitages of Agastya and other sages. With Sita, Lakshmana, and other members of his entourage, Rama visited the holy sages and paid reverential homage to them. After taking leave of them, they ascended the aerial chariot and flew to the Chitrakuta Hill. There too, he offered prostrations to the sages. Soaring into the sky again, he showed Sita the city of Kishkindha from the chariot itself. Even while the aerial chariot was speeding fast, Rama indicated to her the sacred rivers, the Yamuna and the 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. From that position, they could get a far glimpse of the splendourous city of Ayodhya itself.

The chieftain of the Nishada tribe, Guha, was yearning most ardently for the return of Rama, his brother, and his consort. He saw the aerial chariot in the sky and immediately fell flat on the ground in grateful obeisance.

And, lo and behold, the chariot landed just then at the very place. Guha ran

forward and fell at Rama's feet. Tears streamed from his eyes; he couldn't 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 bathed in the sacred river and asked Guha to bring the ferryboat for them to cross the Ganga. The aerial chariot, 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, so Rama commissioned Hanuman to change himself into a brahmin and go to Ayodhya. He was to tell Bharatha the news about Rama and others and bring back news of Bharatha. Hanuman left immediately. Rama, with Sita, Lakshmana, and all who had come with him, moved into the hermitage of Bharadwaja and accepted the hospitality and gratitude of that sage.

Hanuman visits Bharatha

Hanuman found the residents of Ayodhya lean and famished, despondent and depressed, for they hadn't relished food or drink during Rama's absence. All over the town, one could hear their grievous groans and wailing.

No one could move toward another to console or nurse, for everyone was too weak to take a few steps, and no one had the desire or 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 grieved 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 tell him where he was. He told himself how fortunate Lakshmana was, since he was in Rama's presence and serving His lotus feet all the time. "The Lord cast me into this, 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 came within his sight, as a brahmin. Hanuman was thrilled at Bharatha's condition. 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. But he was repeating Rama's name 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.

Hanuman's thoughts ran in several directions, but he remembered his mission and poured the nectarine news he had brought into Bharatha's thirsty ears. "Bharatha! The person from whom you have been separated and for whom you have been pining without sleep or food all these days and nights, 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 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, "O Bharatha. I'm Hanuman, the son of Vayu, the God of wind. You seem to have forgotten. I'm the monkey who fell on the ground before you, while I was carrying the Sanjivi Hill. I'm a servant of Rama's lotus feet." Bharatha rose most respectfully, overwhelmed with joy. He bowed his head in reverence. "O leader of monkeys!

You have demolished my sorrow. Your very sight has ushered calm in my mind. Ah! How fortunate I am! I could see Rama's messenger 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 can't find anything of equal preciousness to offer you in gratitude. So, I will be ever indebted to you; I don't know how to repay the debt, or with what. Where is Rama now? Where is he staying? Tell 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. "Bharatha! Rama is very near to Ayodhya. You can see him soon. His achievements are indescribably wonderful. You know this. And He 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 and sharpness of intellect, and equipped so fully with all the virtues. How can those words be negated?" Bharatha was overcome with delight. "Did Rama speak of me thus? O! How fortunate I am!" He embraced Hanuman fondly and cried. Hanuman declared that he couldn't delay any longer; he took leave of Bharatha and returned to Rama. He told Rama what he had seen and heard.

Bharatha and Ayodhya prepare for the return

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 Nandigrama, offered prostrations to preceptor Vashishtha, and told him that Rama would enter Ayodhya soon. He rushed into the queens' apartments and announced that Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana were arriving. The three mothers rose quickly, filled with joy. Bharatha ordered the entire city to 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 Sumanthra, he walked forward with Satrughna by his side to meet Rama.

Home at last

While nearing Ayodhya, Rama was describing the beauty of the city to the monkeys and others around him.

"O Sugriva, Angada, Vibhishana! Ayodhya is a holy city. It is beautiful." In the midst of Rama's enthusiastic description of the city's charms, Bharatha appeared at the head of the armed forces, 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 mothers' feet; the joy of both parties knew no bounds. Rama drew Bharatha near him and, pained at his weakened frame, consoled and counseled him lovingly. He praised his brother aloud for his steadfast devotion and affection toward 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 let go 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 Rama's entourage. 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 monkeys and Vibhishana, introducing 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 womens' feet, saying, "O 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, "O monkeys! 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 golden pots filled with auspiciously coloured water. Flags were tied across the streets and on houses. When Rama came before them, the faces of the people, which were previously faded and shrunken with sorrow, like lotuses in moonlight, blossomed into freshness and beauty, like the same lotuses at sunrise. Their countenances shone with attractive effulgence. The sky resounded with their cheers and shouts of victory. The chariot that bore Rama entered the city streets, which were bursting with excitement and delight.

The auspicious flames of the lamps 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 windows and terraces. The ecstasy of the citizens broke all bounds. With his three brothers and three mothers and Sita by His side, Rama 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 house-hold came forward and received them with customary rituals, like washing the feet.

12. The Coronation

As soon as they entered the palace, Vasishtha, the royal preceptor, announced the date of the celebration of Rama's coronation as the emperor of Ayodhya, giving details of the auspicious attributes of the day that had persuaded him to choose it for the great event. He also invited all the pundits and priests to take part in the ceremonies that the Vedas had enjoined, to consummate the coronation. They appreciated Vasishtha's decision, for they said, "a coronation so celebrated would confer peace and prosperity on all mankind." Vasishtha called Sumanthra and addressed him, "Assemble the armed forces - cavalry, elephantry, chariotry, and infantry - at the city, for Rama's coronation is to be celebrated." The words filled Sumanthra 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 and posted in serried ranks outside the city gate. The horsemen and foot-soldiers wore colourful uniforms and stood at attention, ready to march into the city for the festival. Messengers were sent in all directions to gather 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 specially considerate toward the people 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 looking after their needs. Accordingly, servants from the palace rushed to perfect the arrangements designed for the comfort of the guests.

Rama called Bharatha. With His own hands, he combed his hair, which was matted since he hadn't paid any attention to it for years. The three brothers personally poured holy water and attended Bharatha while he bathed.

Then, Rama received Vasishtha's assent to disentangle his own matted hair

and had his auspicious bath. Meanwhile, the queen mothers had Sita go through her bath also. The mothers carefully combed her matted hair and dressed her in yellow silk; they made her wear jewels in plenty. She shone like Goddess Lakshmi. She went to Rama and took her seat to the left of her Lord.

The three mothers experienced the highest bliss, looking at Rama and Sita seated together. "Isn't this our luckiest day? Today, our lives have achieved fulfilment. Today, our dearest wish has come true. Today, 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 His divine consort, Lakshmi.

Vasishta, the great sage, was moved by the splendour that shone in Rama's face. He was delighted beyond measure at the divine effulgence of the Rama form. "Today, I achieved 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. The throne was set with multifarious gemstones, which shone like the sun, with dazzling brilliance.

Rama prostrated before Vasishta and other sages and fell at the queen-mothers' feet. Then, he prostrated before the entire assembly of elders and citizens and ascended the throne, with Sita following him closely. The vast gathering rejoiced at the unique sight, so full of majesty and glory. The sages (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 victory, victory (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 (April-May). Taking permission of the assembly and the assent of the brahmins, Vasishta wound the insignia of imperial authority round Rama's brow.

Kausalya, Rama's mother, turned her eyes on Rama every now and then and felt supremely happy. And 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 Rama's attendants. In fact, all through the years, they were 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, arrows, scimitars, and 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 is 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.

Hanuman and the silent gems

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 every one as a unique string of gems. But with the necklace in her hand, she cast a questioning glance at 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 Sita in great humility and stood before her with bowed head. Sita gave the necklace 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 this peculiar behaviour with increasing amazement. 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 so badly treats the diamond necklace that was 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 pulled it to pieces and cast the gems aside," he told himself.

Everyone in the hall surmised the reason for the 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 into so many bits? Was it right to do so? Tell us why. Give us some explanation and remove our doubts." Hanuman listened to him patiently and replied. "O 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 Rama's name, they are but stones and pebbles, so I cast them on the ground." The ruler was not silenced by this. He asked, "Hanuman! If you want Rama's name in every article and particle, aren't you asking for something impossible?" Hanuman replied. "Of what good, of what profit, is anything that doesn't have Rama's name in it? I don't need such." The valiant hero, Hanuman, dismissed the argument of the ruler thus.

The ruler, however, continued his objections. He said, "You wouldn't wear anything that doesn't have Rama's name in it. 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'll prove, see!" He pulled a single

hair from off his forearm and held it very near to the ruler's ear. He could hear the name, Rama, Rama, Rama uttered by the single hair! The ruler was overcome with a sense of wonder; he fell at Hanuman's feet and prayed for pardon.

Rama called Hanuman 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 hurrah hurrah (jai, jai)! at this unique act of grace. They praised Hanuman and declared that there was no one in all the worlds to equal him.

They praised his devotion and dedication.

Rama rose from the throne and moved into the open, where vast congregations were awaiting his appearance.

He gave them the divine sight (darshan) of His charming majestic form. They were all thrilled as never before with the bliss the sight 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.

The guests depart

Vibhishana and the monkeys were wonder-struck at the magnificent elaborateness of these events. They stayed on for six months, serving Rama both day and night, in full exultation. The time 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. He addressed them in soft, sweet accents. "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 toward 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.

"I require you to go 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'll 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 Rama's face; they shed tears of delight abounding. They could not utter a single word in reply; their tongues was unable to pronounce any.

Under Rama's orders, the servitors brought large quantities of clothing and jewels. Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna were asked to offer them to the members of the party and to personally help them put them on. The monkeys and Vibhishana shone with added charm and brightness. But the monkeys were unaffected by what was done; they stood unmoved and stiff, looking only at the feet of 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 monkeys and others, "Children! Friends! I am awarding you the embodied stage of liberation, by which you are endowed with powers and attainments approximating my own. Go back and carry out your duties 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 monkeys and others. As Rama commanded,

Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrugna 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 monkeys 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 that filled their hearts. They gave them company until the river bank and supervised arrangements for ferrying them across.

Then, the brothers returned to Ayodhya. Hanuman returned with them. He had 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 returned along with Lakshmana and others to Rama.

Rama discourses on good and bad

One day, Rama went 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 hesitated to ask some questions, though they wanted to. They looked at Hanuman and communicated their feelings to him. They knew that if Hanuman asked those questions, Rama would fain give the answers.

The omnipresent Rama recognised the situation. "Hanuman! What do you seek to know? Ask," he said.

Hanuman replied, "O 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 Rama's feet for having answered his query so bluntly, and in thankfulness that he was commanded to speak in the presence.

Rama then spoke. "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 Rama's feet and said, "O 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 treasurehouse of all the virtues. I desire to learn the distinction between good people 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 is as wide as that between the sandal tree and the axe. Note this: Even when the axe cuts the sandal tree, the tree confers the fragrance it possesses on the axe. 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 redhot, it is hammered into shape and sharpness. Wicked persons cause grief to good people in this manner. But the good always wish well and do good to the wicked, whatever harm is done to them. And what is their gain? They certainly attain heaven. That is to say, they are in constant bliss. The bad people, on the other hand, are constantly struggling in sorrow and discontent. That is to say, they are subject to hellish agony; though they may appear happy to observers, they are tortured inside by the infamy and the hatred they invoke.

"I'll tell you the characteristics of good men. Listen. They aren't fascinated by sensual pleasures. They possess all the best virtues and modes of behaviour. They will be happy at the happiness of others and sad when others are sad. They look upon all with equal affection. They consider no one an enemy and aren't 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 toward the weak and 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 they are of my own nature. They are myself, I am them. Take that to be the truth.

"Now, I shall tell you of the qualities of bad people. 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 people - lust, anger, greed, desire, pride, and hatred - are fostered by them and 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 quarrels with others for no reason or on no provocation. They develop enmity even toward 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 crave 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 people. 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 don't 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 toward 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

(the age of 'sin').

"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 people everywhere. Those who are benefited by birth as people, and yet indulge in injuring others, are degraded into lower bestial levels and have to be born and die as those beings.

Or, when they are born again as people, they commit further evils through their ignorance and the blindness it causes. For such, I meter out karma-consequences, 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, sages, and great personages don't engage in acts involving dualities; they are ever engaged in adoring me in a dedicated state of mind. They engage 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 that those activities deserve. When the fruits are not craved, and acts are still done sincerely and rightly and correctly, they don't bind; instead, they confer wisdom on the doer. The person will have their devotion and dedication advanced a great deal. And as a result, the person will be nearer to the Supreme and merge 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 ocean of life (samsara).

Brother! Know that all distinctions between good and bad are basically the result of attachment and development, due to considering the world as real, although it is neither real nor unreal. Those who have escaped this 'illusion'

and this duality are the great souls (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." Those who listened to this clarification attained equanimity. Their hearts were delighted with the upsurge of love. They acknowledged Rama's kindness by gratefully prostrating before him. This they did for each point that was clarified. Hanuman felt the ecstasy more than all others.

Later, Rama went to the palace, accompanied by the brothers and Hanuman. This became the normal routine every day - conveying counsel and then carrying on the duties of administration.

Rama discourses to the citizens

One day, Rama asked the citizens of Ayodhya to assemble in the palace, with the preceptors and brahmins.

They met at the reception hall and were provided comfortable seats. Rama came into the hall and addressed them.

"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, only those are dear to me. Only they are my brothers.

If I utter anything wrong, point it out instantly, without hesitation.

"Well. Birth as a human being is hailed in the Vedas and Puranas and by wise ones 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 previous lives.

Even gods yearn for the chance and find it hard to get born as people. Birth as a human opens the door to liberation.

It provides wide opportunities for undergoing spiritual disciplines (sadhana) and benefiting by them.

"The human body is not to be used for enjoying sensual pleasures. It is not to be treated as an instrument for reaching heaven and delighting 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 poison cannot be good people. 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 to cross the ocean of illusory existence (samsara), the person is indeed to be pitied as unfortunate and of dull intellect. The person is the slayer of their own self, the enemy of their own progress. Therefore, those who are born as people have to realise that God resides in all people as the Atma within; they should serve everyone as divine and regard that service as the most proper worship of God. Observe the dictates of God with 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. And even those who travel along the hard path of intellect (jnana) can become dear to me only if they have devotion and love in their hearts.

There is nothing equal to devotion (bhakthi). Devotion is not bound; it is free. It endows man with all joys and delights. And it must be emphasised that you

can progress in devotion only when you seek and stay in good company (sathsanga)." Continuing his discourse to the assembly, Rama said, "Listen, O 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 Universal Absolute Entity (divyatma) is the same. That divine Atma is in everyone in equal potency." Hearing these nectarine teachings from Rama's lips, 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 to you? Yet, you train us to attain 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.

Ayodhya was heaven on earth

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 every one. 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 Rama's benign reign cannot be adequately described by even a thousand thousand-tongued divine serpents (seshas). This was the result of the righteousness (dharma) that Rama fostered and guarded. Rama celebrated many a horse sacrifice (aswamedha). Millions and millions of brahmins were granted generous gifts and were made happy and contented. Rama, the promoter of Vedic rites and ceremonies and the guardian of the codes of dharma (but yet, above and beyond all obligations and attributes), and Sita, replete with all auspicious attributes and intent on helping all who craved to fulfil their beneficial obligations - both were 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 people, children - all were at all times reveling in thoughts of Rama.

"No calamity or natural catastrophe was 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 their 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 egotism in their heart.

The entire globe, with its seven world divisions (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 spiritual seekers (sadhakas). Attachment (raga), also meaning, tunes) could be noticed as attachments only in music. When no one had an enemy, how could "killing" be done? 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. O the pure waters! O 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.

Vasishta asks for a boon

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.

Vasishta raised his folded palms and said, "O ocean of compassion! I have a request to make. I have been watching most delightfully your 'play as man'. Now, I am beset with a big doubt. Your potency is limitless. Even the Vedas don't know your nature fully. Lord! How can I describe you or decipher you?

"This profession of family preceptor or priest is rather derogatory. The Vedas, scriptures (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 don't know what lies in the future. Accept the profession without demur. You stand to gain enormously in the coming years. The Supreme Brahman (Parabrahman) will incarnate in the Raghu dynasty.' Hearing this, I bowed my head to this profession and became the family priest of the Raghu dynasty. As a result of that decision, I have now attained that Supreme Principle, which can be won only by means of countless years of repetition of the name (japa), austerity (tapas), offerings (yagas), and sacrifices (yajnas), without putting myself into the hardship involved in these. All those good actions (karmas) have You as the goal to be won, and I have won You.

"What better work do have I than the one I have chosen? Lord of Lords! Repetition of the name, austerities, sacrifices, offerings, vows, rites, and ritual rules have been laid down in the Vedas. Through the cultivation of wisdom, compassion toward living beings, and virtuous conduct, your presence and grace can be attained.

"Lord! I pray for a boon. Grant me that boon 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." Later Vasishta took his leave of Rama and returned to his residence.

More on the heaven that was Ayodhya

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, one could not get the sight (darshan) of Rama.

The wise man, the ascetic, the hero, the poet, the scholar, the accomplished - no one of these were afflicted with greed in Rama's empire. 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 person tainted by enmity? Where was the person suffering from the paralysis of grief? Where was the person bitten by the serpent, anxiety? There was none such. Rama himself stood above and beyond these as an example for all to emulate. He was the embodiment of the Atma (Atmaswarupa), God Himself.

The redoubtable armies of illusion (maya) roam all over this world. The soldiers are passions - lust, greed, etc.; the commanding officers are pride, unbelief, etc. But the same illusion is the bond-slave of the Lord of the Raghus, Rama. She is 'unreal'; yet, unless you have Rama's grace, you can't escape from capture and bondage.

Only the grace flowing from the corner of His eye can liberate you from her grip.

Illusion "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. Like a skilled actress, she enacts her role with lust, greed, and others as supporting cast. Rama, however, as the embodiment of being-awareness-bliss (satchidananda), as the personification of the deep blue that characterises the sea and sky, the phenomenon that has no birth, as the highest Atma (Paramatma) Itself - Rama has no trace of illusion in Him.

In the city of Ayodhya, every day was a new festival, and every festival was marked 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 toward 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 also shone as people 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, so they got on as one, desiring each other's best interests and devoted to their realisation.

In Rama's time, no one tried 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 as glad as if they were looking on at the moon in autumn.

Women watched Rama from behind the doors of their enclosed apartments and were delighted. Bharatha, Lakshmana, and Satrugna 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 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 Rama's excellences and achievements.

A disaster happens!

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. Would a son ever die during his father's lifetime? Could such a disaster happen if the ruler is good? But today I saw this thing happen!" Rama, who is omnipresent, knew what had happened and was affected by the words spoken by the brahmin.

He probed within himself the reason for the death and assured himself that it had not occurred as a result of any administrative fault. He was aware that it was the consequence of evil thought, so he set about prescribing limits and regulations that 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 also 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 Rama's orders even by a hair's breadth. The Rama kingdom 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.

13. Exile For Sita

An unheard-of event in Ayodhya

It was the practice for messengers from the court to travel 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 strange hesitation; he prostrated before Him, and, rising up, stood mute and trembling on one side. Soon, he recovered confidence and courage and addressed Rama. "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 lived for a long time in another person's house; get out of here!".

These words struck Rama's heart like an arrow. He couldn't sleep that night. Toward midnight, he sat up on his bed and thought within himself. "It is now one full era (yuga) since I started ruling this land. I have to continue for a few years more." The subtle and gross Sita split. 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 to Sita and spoke to her pleasantly. He had a smile on his face when he told her, "Janaki!

You haven't asked a boon from me so far; yet, I shall grant you one. Go to your holy home." That very moment, Sita fell at Rama's feet and went to Vishnu's heavenly abode (Vaikunta) in her subtle body. No being, anywhere, nothing, was aware of this fact. Sita, but only in her gross physical frame, was standing before Rama on earth.

Rama asked the Earth-Sita (Maya Sita) "Pray for a boon."

Sita replied, "Lord! I want to spend some happy days in the hermitages of ascetics (munis)." Rama said, "So be it. Start your journey tomorrow morning." Sita collected and packed many articles of clothing and utensils for the daughters and wives of ascetics of the hermitages.

The brothers agonize over Rama's orders

Rama woke up early. Servitors and favour-seekers were singing praises of his virtues and excellences. His lotus-like face bloomed. His brothers paid homage to him, prostrating at his feet. But Rama didn't 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 couldn't 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." The brothers 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, and Lakshmana and Bharatha stood motionless, tears streaming from their eyes. They were speechless. Their lips quivered; their hands shivered.

At last, with folded hands, Satrughna prayed thus, "Your words pierced our hearts. Janaki is the Mother of all beings (Lokamatha). You live in the hearts of all living beings. You are the embodiment of being-awarenessbliss (satchidananda). Why does Sita have to be discarded now? She is eternally pure, in thought, word, and deed, isn't she? O, destroyer of the demon (rakshasa) race! She is now pregnant and, at this time, in this condition, is it right to forsake her alone?" 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. "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 divine serpent (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 calmly and then replied, "O Bharatha! You've spoken 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 shouldn't cause any crisis or revolution; he has to protect them with great affection." Rama disclosed the information that the messenger had communicated to him. "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. When there was a likelihood of its being tainted, he who hesitated to give up his life was certainly vile. Understand this well." 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 the slightest fault in her, even in dreams. Not knowing this, if anyone calls her a sinner, he will suffer the torture of hell for billions and billions of years." Bharatha couldn't control his resentment at the very mention of this

possibility.

Rama became visibly angry, and his eyes reddened. Lakshmana noticed it and, unable to withstand it, hid himself behind Bharatha.

But Rama addressed Lakshmana 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, leave her to herself in a deserted place with no human habitation on the bank of the Ganga, and then return." Lakshmana takes Sita away Lakshmana heard the command of the Lord; he prepared himself even for death, if it encountered 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 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 Lakshmana's crestfallen face saddened her. 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, and they got terror in their hearts. Seeing Lakshmana's 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, "O Lakshmana! Where have you brought me? No hermitage is visible here. Don't wild beasts and poisonous snakes roam about in this forest? No sign of human habitation can be seen here, Lakshmana! I'm afraid." When Sita lamented, Lakshmana was overcome with sympathy. He said to himself, "Rama! What have you done!" Gathering some courage, he looked at Sita, but a fatal thirst overcame him, 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 Lakshmana's heart. He folded his palms in reverence and

said, "Mother! What can I do? I have to 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 Sita lamenting in the distance. "Lakshmana! Are you abandoning me in the forest and leaving me alone? Who will protect me here?" She wailed like any common woman. Her cries pierced Lakshmana's ears, but, remembering his duty to follow Rama's commands, he made his heart as hard as rock and drove fast until he reached the city.

Valmiki to the rescue

Sita fainted in despair. Of course, it was all play-acting. She recovered consciousness after a little while, sat up, and poured out her grief in words. "O 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. He was surprised to hear woman's voice calling for help from the recesses of the forest, and he followed the voice to its source, searching all round, and, at last, came to her very presence.

She recognised him and told him all that had happened. "O monarch of monks," she appealed, "I am Emperor Janaka's daughter and the Sri Ramachandra's wife. The whole world knows this. I don't know why Rama 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 didn't tell me why he had to do so." Valmiki listened to her tale of woe; he consoled her and comforted her. "O daughter! Your father, the emperor of Mithila, Janaka, is my friend, my disciple. He has reverence and faith in me. Dear one! Don't worry at all. Feel that my hermitage is your paternal home. All will be well with you. You will certainly rejoin Rama. You'll achieve that desire." Taking Sita as his

own daughter, he told her to take 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 food and pressed her to eat. She couldn't 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 Valmiki's pupils and disciples 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.

The city grieves for Sita

Lakshmana reached the city with his eyes swollen with sorrow and his heart heavy with grief. He told the sad tale to the three mothers. They broke into inconsolable sorrow and sobbed at the calamity that had overtaken Sita.

They praised Sita's virtues and lamented that a lady of such sterling character should be subjected to this disaster.

They blamed Rama for harshness. The capital and palace were sunk in sorrow; no one was free from grief. Only the sound of wailing could be heard. All asked in sorrow, "Could such a mother ever be 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, consoled the queens, and counseled them along the path of spiritual wisdom (jnana). He also explained to the people that the true ruler considers only his people as his kith and kin and treats only them 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. Finally, it resulted in their death. 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. Then, the four brothers engaged in the administrative problems and assignments set apart for them, in conformity with the wishes of the people and to their full satisfaction.

Preparations for a horse sacrifice

Rama announced that he wanted to celebrate the horse sacrifice (aswamedha), which would ensure the destruction of all varieties of grief. He sent information to Angada and others. He went 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, who 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 Puranas and incidents from the epics.

Rama addressed him, "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 sacrifice (yaga).

The people of Ayodhya will be happy, filled with joy, when it takes place. I want to perform the horse sacrifice.

The city can be rendered calm if it is done. The people also want it to be performed. Bharatha hesitated to inform you of this, since he is afraid of your reaction. So I felt I must myself approach you and communicate this wish to you. We will 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 sacrifice." 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 of sacrifices 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 bazars and shopping centres. He wanted them to erect halls in many places. No sooner said than done; they executed the orders very soon, 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 Vasishtha had also been informed about what was being done.

Janaka and others visit for the sacrifice

Vasishtha advised Rama thus: "Send the news of the sacrifice to Emperor Janaka; he will attend the sacrifice 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 sages." When the guru agreed, Rama took him around Ayodhya to see the preparations; they were both very pleased at the decorations all over the city.

The official messengers visited kingdoms near and far and presented the invitations to the rulers of those lands. One messenger went to Mithila, Janaka's capital city.

Jambavan, Angada, Sugriva, Nala, Nila, and other monkey leaders arrived. Ascetics and monks came to the city and were welcomed and accommodated with due regard to their spiritual eminence. Soon, Viswamitra arrived; Rama honoured him, and offered reverential hospitality. The great sage Agastya also came. He was given proper reception, and arrangements were made for his comfortable stay in the capital. They saw the sanctified hall where the sacrifice was to be held and were delighted.

When the citizens of Mithila saw the emissary from Ayodhya, they were happy. He informed Janaka, the emperor, of the sacrifice that Rama was to perform. As soon as he heard the news, Janaka rose from his throne.

He was thrilled. His eyes streamed tears of bliss. He asked the emissary whether Rama and his brothers were well. The messenger replied that the letter he had brought would satisfy him on all scores, and he handed over the auspicious message. He couldn't speak more.

And who could describe the condition of the emperor? His kinsmen were transported with delight. The city resounded with shouts of "Victory (jai)!" The emperor read the message over and over and was overwhelmed with joy. He called a courier in and ordered him to, "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. The minister received it most respectfully and pressed it on his eyes before reading it for himself and being thrilled thereby. Bringing to mind Rama's glory, 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 told him to proceed fast to Ayodhya, accompanied by his entourage and army - the latter including all 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 rode in another himself.

The earth quaked when the entire party left for Ayodhya. Who could 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 close to the city, 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 Janaka's feet 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 replied with similar sentiments in felicitous language. He assigned aides to look after the comforts of Janaka and his entourage. He directed Bharatha to be at the service of the emperor.

Meanwhile, Vasishta also arrived in Rama's presence, accompanied by his disciples, ten thousand in number.

The golden idol of Sita

Vasishta said, "Ramachandra! Listen! The Vedas, scriptures (sastras), Puranas - all of them, without exception, proclaim that a sacrifice 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 sacrifice." Rama was surprised at these words spoken by the chief among sages. He kept silent, without explaining the truth or untruth of that belief. Finally, He said, "Chief among sages! You have to carry out my wish without causing a 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 won't marry just to have a wife for the sacrifice." Vashishhta 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 scriptures, thought it over for a while and announced that a golden idol set with gems be made of Sita and kept in Sita's place. He said that all the

scriptures supported this view and that there could be no objection to this procedure on any score. The ascetics, sages, and scholars versed in all fields of knowledge couldn't contradict this opinion. They were all surprised at the validity of the solution offered. They admired his omniscience and acknowledged that he was 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. When they saw the idol, many believed that Sita had returned. They praised the makers with a thousand tongues.

The horse sacrifice begins

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 they wish 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 sacrifice (yaga) hall was guarded on the outside by 500 warriors and inside by 500 masters of the Vedas.

The sacrifice began on the second day of the bright half of the month of Magha, after Rama had initiated himself with the necessary rites. Vasishta directed that the horse chosen for the sacrifice be brought so that it might be examined by experts for the prescribed auspicious marks.

Lakshmana prostrated before the guru and hurried to the stables of the palace to decorate the horse before leading it into the hall. A gem-set saddle was placed on its back. The horse was immaculately white - the horses of the sun would have felt ashamed to stand before it! When it was fully caparisoned, it was 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 sun-god (Suryanarayanamurthi) had turned into a horse and was prancing proudly. A peacock feather, with emerald gems shining in it, was placed on its forehead.

Like the stars shining in the sky, the 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 5000 great warriors - heroes of many a battle and 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 they cannot do either, they must flee into the jungles.

Rama inscribed thus on that gold plate and tied it on the brow of that horse.

The demon Lavana

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. He told him, "Use these weapons with the appropriate mantras on the enemy. Go, achieve victory and return triumphant." Then, Rama wanted Vibhishana to come to him. He fell at Rama's feet. Rama asked him, "Tell me all about this Lavana." Vibhishana described all he knew about Lavana's power and nature.

Vibhishana had a stepmother who had a daughter named Kumbhinasas; she was given in marriage by Ravana to a member of the Danava clan, Madhu. Madhu accepted her and in the course of time, she gave birth to the demon Lavana. He underwent severe asceticism, praying 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, Lavana has been terrorising gods, 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 he was making of 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 "thump, thump" shook the earth. Horses and elephants cried out in joy, and the soldiers blew conches and marched on Lavana's capital city. 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 Satrughna's son 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 to Lavana. He drew his last breath and ended his vicious career. The gods acclaimed the victory with a chorus of "victory (jai)" and showered blessings on Satrughna.

Kusa and Lava capture the horse

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.

The 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 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. Finding that it was done by the boys, they cooled down and 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, "O 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 warrior (kshatriya)." Hearing this, the guardian soldiers said, "Brave boys! Yes. Don't tarnish the fair name of warriors. 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 go 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 to Satrughna's camp and cried, "Maharaja! Two boys, evidently children of the hermits, have captured our horse and in the fight that ensued, they killed a large number of our soldiers." Satrughna was enraged at this effrontery; he gathered the four sections of his army and marched toward 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: "O ye children of hermits: Let the horse loose 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 do you come? Why are you moving through this forest at the head of an army? Why do you let 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.

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 Satrughna's chariot 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.

Rama sends Lakshmana to fight the twins

Soon, Rama was informed of the exploits of the two boys from the hermitage. Of course, he knew that they weren't children of the hermitage, but he didn't disclose that fact. He made them believe that what they said was true. He

doubted for a moment how anyone could fight tender boys belonging to monks. At last, he said, "Fighting cannot be avoided. Take Lakshmana with you and go." Those who had fled to Rama had to return. Rama also commanded, "Bring the boys here. Since they are from the hermitage, they don't deserve death in any case." Lakshmana marched 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. "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 to fight 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. "O 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 the children of monks was right. He tried to persuade the boys. "Boys," he said, "you have no reasoning faculty. You are mere boys. There is no profit in fighting 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 angry 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 Lakshmana's chest. Though it hit him straight, being a stronger and older hero, he didn't fall.

Lava jumped on him, and they had a personal duel with fists. The contest was balanced, with no one winning; both of them used many holds and evasive

tactics. Each 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.

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, so he could soon stand up. He recovered his bow and arrow and attacked Lakshmana. Though Lakshmana replied with an arrow that he had used against Meghanada, it couldn't 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.

Rama comes to the scene of the battle

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 will go into the field. Get me the chariot. Adjourn further rites in the sacrifice (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." Rama reached the spot where the fighting was going on. He was surprised to see the streams of blood.

At that very moment, Kusa and Lava, the unbeatable warriors, also came to the place. The monkeys 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, "O monkey! If you don't have the 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 monkeys cast trees, rocks, and mountain peaks on them. Lava pulverised all of them by means of a single arrow. In a short time, Rama's forces were in complete rout. The field was 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 near them and asked, "Boys! Who are your parents? Where are they living? Which is your native land? What are your names?" In reply, Lava said, "O king! Of what use are these questions? You brothers, all four of you, have the same mannerism, I believe. Come, take up your bow and arrow and fight. Why do you bother about parents and native place; this is no parley, preliminary to marriage negotiations. This is serious business." But Rama insisted on continuing. He said, "Boys, your bodies are so tender. I won't 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 that is coming behind me." Saying this, he raised up Angada, Jambavan, 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." 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 monkey 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 couldn't say or do anything more and 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 Rama's chariot and horses, and the twins bound Hanuman with them. They led Hanuman at the end of the rope and took him home. They also took other monkeys and a few bears, all with bright coloured clothes and decorations on them. And, 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.

14. Ending The Play

Janaki was amazed at the sight of the monkeys 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 to Sita all that had happened. He loosened the bonds on Hanuman, Jambavan, and others and cried,

"Boys! What have you have done? You came here after felling Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna."

Sita was shocked. She said,

"Alas, dear children! On account of you, the dynasty itself has been tarnished. Don't delay further. Prepare for my immolation, so I may ascend it. I can't 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 was amazed at what he saw there. He recognised Rama's chariot and the horses and, finding Rama, fell at his feet. Rama rose in a trice and sat up. Kusa and Lava were standing opposite to him.

Valmiki addressed Rama. "Lord! My life has attained fulfilment. O, 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."

Rama embraced the boys and stroked their heads. Through Rama's grace, the fallen monkeys and warriors rose, alive. Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna caressed and fondled the boys.

Lakshmana hurried to Sita, 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 wanted to fulfill the "vow" if that was Rama's wish, so she accompanied Lakshmana to the presence of Rama. Seeing the group, she made this pronouncement as the Truth: "O Gods! O elements five! I have not dwelt even in my dream on anyone other than Rama, in mind, speech, body, or deed. O Mother! Goddess Earth! Take me into yourself."

Immediately, the Earth sundered where she stood, with a great rumbling. 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. Lifting Janaki from the ground, she blessed her thus, "O 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 always moved 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 sacrifice (yaga) as planned. He gave away in charity the sixteen prescribed gifts in quantities that were beyond description.

Rama honoured Emperor Janaka as befitted his status and took the sons to his presence. Janaka was immensely delighted when he saw his grandsons. Since Janaka was replete with wisdom, and since he was aware through his divine insight of Sita's divinity, 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 Rama's presence, according to the message sent by him. And, they took leave of him. Happy that they were enabled to witness the great sacrifice; they returned to their homes fully content.

The lands are given to the heirs

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 Bharatha's son Thaksha over the Southern Kingdom; his second son, Pushkara, was given the Pushkara Kingdom. They destroyed the remnants of demons (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; destroying the demons 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, 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 toward their Lord. Lakshmana led them all.

The Kishkindha Kingdom was allotted to Angada, Sugriva, Jambavan, Vibhishana, Nala, Nila, and other individuals embodying parts of divinity, and billions of monkeys who had come to fulfil the divine mission came into Rama's presence at that time. Rama said, "Vibhishana! You have to rule over Lanka; you will attain my presence in the end"; he blessed him thus. Then Rama turned to Jambavan and told him, "Jambavan! Be on the earth till the end of the Dwapara age. Then, incarnated as Krishna, I will fight with you. You will then recognise me as now." He blessed him in that manner.

The play ends

Then Rama went to the bank of the Sarayu River. Bharatha walked on his right 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.