

RAMAYANA retold by C. Rajagopalachari

(Edited by Jay Mazo, American Gita Society)

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan has added to the debt of gratitude owed it by undertaking the publication of the English version of my Tamil Ramayana. They achieved great success in the distribution of my Mahabharata book and I trust this book of the story of Rama and Sita will receive similar welcome.

Once again, I repeat my confession that in the evening of my busy life during a great and eventful period of Indian history, the writing of these two books wherein I have retold the Mahabharata and Ramayana, is, in my opinion, the best service I have rendered to my people.

At any rate, they embody the best joy I have experienced; for in these two books I helped our great sages to speak to our dear men and women again in their own language, elevating their minds through the sorrows borne by Kunti, Kausalya, Draupadi and Sita. The real need of the hour is a reconnection between us and the sages of our land, so that the future may be built on rock and not on sand.

In presenting this English version to a wider circle of readers spread all over the world, I think I am presenting to them the people of Bharat just as they are, with all their virtues and their faults. Our classics really embody our national character in all its aspects and it is well the world sees us as we really are, apart from what we wish to become.

The Ramayana is not history or biography. It is a part of Hindu mythology. One cannot understand Hindu dharma unless one knows Rama and Sita, Bharata, Lakshmana, Ravana, Kumbhakarna and Hanuman. Mythology cannot be dispensed with. Philosophy alone or rituals alone or mythology alone cannot be sufficient. These are the three stands of all ancient religions. The attitude

towards things spiritual which belongs to a particular people cannot be grasped or preserved or conveyed unless we have all these three.

The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan has achieved great work by the very wide distribution organised by it of my Ramayana and Mahabharata books, which seek to bring Valmiki and Vyasa near to those who have no access to the unrivalled original classics. The characters and incidents of these two itihisas have come to be the raw material for the works of numerous poets and saints that came later to write dramas and sing poems and hymns to keep this nation in the straight path.

Oral discourses have further played with them in order to entertain and instruct pious audiences and not a few variations and additions have been made to the original. All the languages of India have the Ramayana and Mahabharata retold by their poets, with additions and variations of their own. They are the records of the mind and spirit of our forefathers who cared for the good, ever so much more than for the pleasant and who saw more of the mystery of life than we can do in our interminable pursuit for petty and illusory achievements in the material plane.

We should be thankful to those who preserved for us these many centuries-old epics in spite of all the vicissitudes through which our nation passed since Vyasa and Valmiki's time. Even the poets who wrote these epics in the original did not create but built out of the inherited bricks of national memory prior to their own time. Reading the Ramayana and Mahabharata even in the form I have given them, we go back to live with our ancient forbears and listen to their grand voice.

Mythology is an integral part of religion. It is as necessary for religion and national culture as the skin and the skeleton that preserve a fruit with its juice and its taste. Form is no less essential than substance. Mythology and holy figures are necessary for any great culture to rest on its stable spiritual foundation and function as a life-giving inspiration and guide.

Let us keep ever in our minds the fact that it is the Ramayana and the Mahabharata that bind our vast numbers together as one people, despite caste, space and language that seemingly divide them.

1. THE CONCEPTION

To the north of the Ganga was the great kingdom Kosala, made fertile by the river Sarayu. Its capital was Ayodhya, built by Manu, the famous ruler of the Solar dynasty. From Valmiki's description of the capital Kosala, it is clear that ancient Ayodhya was not inferior to our modern cities. Even in ancient India city civilisation had reached a high level.

King Dasaratha ruled the kingdom from the capital city of Ayodhya. He had fought on the side of the Devas, and his fame spread in the three worlds. He was the equal of Indra and Kubera. The people of Kosala were happy, contented and virtuous. The land was protected by a mighty army, and no enemy could come anywhere near

It contained forts with moats around them as well as many defensive intallations, and true to its name, Ayodhya defied all enemies. (Ayodhya means that which cannot be subdued by war). Dasaratha had eight wise ministers, ever ready to advise him and execute his orders. Great sages like Vasishtha and Vamadeva and other Brahmanas taught the dharma and performed rituals and sacrifices.

Taxes were light and punishment of crime was just and inflicted according to the capacity of the wrong-doer. Surrounded by the best counsellors and statesmen, the king's splendor shone as the rising sun. Many years rolled smoothly by. In the midst of all this prosperity Dasaratha had one regret; he had no son.

One day in early summer he thought of performing a horse sacrifice for progeny. He consulted his religious masters and on their advice, got sage Rishyasringa to perform the Yaga. The Yaga was a grand affair and the invitees included many of the kings of the day. It was no easy thing to perform yagas. The location and erection of the sacrificial platform had to be attended to in detail strictly according to prescribed rules. There were experts whose guidance was sought in arranging things.

It meant the building of a new camp-city, capable of accommodating tens of thousands and providing hospitality and entertainment for the invitees who included the princes and sages of the land. In short, yagas in those days were something like our present-day State-sponsored big scale conferences and exhibitions.

When all arrangements were complete the ceremonies were set in motion strictly as enjoined by the Shastras.

Contemporaneously with the yaga in Ayodhya, there was a conference of the Devas in heaven. The Devas complained to Lord Brahma that Ravana, king of the demons, drunk with the power acquired by the boon granted to him by Brahma, was causing them untold misery and hardship. They represented to Brahma: "It is beyond our capacity to subdue, conquer or kill Ravana. In the security of your boon, he has grown wicked and insolent and ill-treats all, even women. His desire is to dethrone Indra. You are our only

refuge and it is for you to devise a method by which Ravana can be slain and his despotism ended."

Brahma knew that he had granted to Ravana the boon prayed for by him that he should be invulnerable and invincible against Devas, Asuras, Gandharvas and other such beings. In his arrogance, Ravana did not care to ask for security against mankind. As Brahma revealed this fateful omission all the Gods rejoiced and turned to Vishnu.

Absolutely surrendering themselves to Hari, the Devas begged him to be born as a man and put an end to Ravana and his atrocities. Hari agreed and assured the Devas that he would be born as four sons of King Dasaratha who was then performing a sacrifice for progeny. As the ghee was poured into the fire and the flames shot up to meet it, from out of the flames came a majestic figure, resplendent like the noonday sun, holding a bowl of gold.

Calling King Dasaratha by his name, the figure said: "The Devas are pleased with you and are answering your prayer. Here is payasam sent by the gods for your wives. You will be blessed with sons if they drink this divine beverage." With joy unbounded, Dasaratha received the bowl as he would receive a child and distributed the payasam to his three wives, Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi.

He asked Kausalya to drink a half of the payasam and he gave a half of what remained to Sumitra. Half of what was then left was drunk by Kaikeyi, and what remained was given to Sumitra again. Dasaratha's wives were happy, even as a beggar suddenly coming upon buried treasure. And in due course all of them were expectant mothers.

2. SAGE VISWAMITRA

In course of time, Dasaratha's sons were born Rama of Kausalya and Bharata

of Kaikeyi. Sumitra gave birth to twins, Lakshmana and Satrugna. She had drunk the divine payasam twice.

In proportion to the quantity of payasam drunk by the respective mothers, the sons are traditionally considered to be parts of Vishnu. Rama was thus half-Vishnu.

But such calculations have no meaning, as it is impossible to measure the Infinite arithmetically. Sruti tells us that even a fraction of the Supreme Being is whole and complete by itself.

"Om Poornamadah Poornamidam Poornat Poornamudachyate Poornasya Poornamadaya Poornamevavasishyate."

"What is whole, this is whole; what has come out of the whole is also whole. When the whole is taken out of the whole, the whole still remains whole."

Dasaratha's four sons were given all the training prescribed for princes. Rama and Lakshmana were specially devoted to each other and so were Bharata and Satrugna. We can imagine that this special attachment arose out of the way the divine payasam was divided among the King's wives. Dasaratha was happy to see his four sons grow up strong, virtuous, brave and lovable and with all other princely qualities.

One day as the King was contemplating his sons' matrimony, ushers rushed in to announce that the great Sage Viswamitra had arrived to see him. Viswamitra was held in awe by all as the most powerful among rishis.

Viswamitra's arrival at Ayodhya was unexpected; and King Dasaratha stepped down from his throne and advanced a few paces respectfully to receive the sage.

Viswamitra was a king who attained sainthood through terrible austerities. He had long ago exhibited his spiritual powers by starting to create another Brahma and a rival universe. He had gone

as far as the creation of new constellations, but was prevailed upon to stop by the entreaties of the alarmed gods.

Viswamitra, while he was king once went out with his army and chanced to visit Vasishtha's ashrama. The rishi cordially welcomed his royal guest and his huge entourage and extended to them all hospitality so sumptuous that the King wondered where all the rich abundance came from in a forest hermitage.

Questioned by him, Vasishtha called his cow Sabala and explained that she was the fountain of unfailing plenty.

Expressing gratitude to the sage, King Viswamitra said: "You must give me this cow as she would be more useful with me than with you. Such things of power and wealth by right belong to the King."

Now Vasishtha could not part with the divine cow. He gave many reasons and asked the King not to press his request. But the more unwilling Vasishtha was to give the cow, the more eager the King became to possess her.

Failing in his efforts to tempt or persuade the sage to part with the cow, Viswamitra became angry and ordered his men to seize the cow by force.

Sabala could not understand why she was being roughly handled and she was unwilling to go away from the sage and his ashrama. Shedding tears, she wondered how she had offended Vasishtha that he should stand by and look on while she was being dragged away. The cow easily put to flight the soldiers and sought refuge at the feet of the sage.

Moved by the piteous appeal of his beloved cow, who was like a younger sister to him, the sage said: "Bring forth soldiers to resist Viswamitra's men."

Sabala instantaneously did so, and the aggressors were soon worsted. Wild with rage, Viswamitra got into his chariot and,

taking up his bow, rained arrows on the soldiers brought forth by the cow, but their strength was inexhaustible, and the royal forces suffered utter defeat. The sons of Viswamitra now chose Vasishtha himself as their target, only to be reduced to ashes.

Defeated and disgraced, Viswamitra then and there entrusted his kingdom to one of his sons and proceeded to the Himalayas to perform tapas, directing his devotions to Lord Siva to gain power with which to subdue Vasishtha.

So firm and steadfast was Viswamitra in his austerities that Lord Siva was pleased and appeared before him. He asked the king what his object was in performing tapas.

Viswamitra replied: "If you, Umapati, are satisfied with my tapas let me be blessed with divine arrows and be master of every weapon."

"So be it," said Siva, and gave Viswamitra all the weapons available to the Devas, Gandharvas, Rishis, Yakshas and the Demons.

Swelling with pride like the ocean, Viswamitra considered Vasishtha as already vanquished. He straightway made for the abode of the sage. Frightened at the fearful sight of the onrushing Viswamitra, Vasishtha's disciples and the animals in his ashrama ran helter-skelter.

Hit by the fire-weapon of Viswamitra, Vasishtha's ashrama was reduced to cinders.

Vasishtha regretted the turn of events, but determined to end the haughtiness of the erstwhile king, he faced him calmly with his Brahmadaṇḍa (holy staff) in hand.

Mad with rage, Viswamitra shot at him all the divine weapons he had acquired, but they were quenched as they approached the rishi's staff and were absorbed by it.

Viswamitra had but one more weapon in his armory, and that was the most powerful of all, the Brahmastra. As he hurled it against Vasishtha the world became wrapped in gloom as in some huge eclipse, and the very immortals trembled with fear. But the terrible astra itself was merged in the rishi's staff, making both it and the holy man glow with the glory they had absorbed.

Viswamitra stood dazed. Openly accepting defeat, he said: "Of what use is the Kshatriya's might in arms? With but a staff in his hand, this Vasishtha has nullified all my weapons. Lord Siva has indeed fooled me. There is no alternative for me but to become a Brahma Rishi like Vasishtha." So saying, he withdrew from the field of battle and proceeded south for more rigorous tapas.

For years and years Viswamitra went through terrible austerities. Pleased with his perseverance, Brahma presented himself before him. Advising Viswamitra that, as a result of his tapas he had risen to the position of a rishi among kings, Brahma vanished from the scene.

Viswamitra was disappointed that all his penance could get him only the status of Raja Rishi. Not content with anything but the highest the rank of a Brahma Rishi, he subjected himself to still more rigorous austerities in order that he might be acknowledged an equal of Vasishtha.

3. TRISANKU

That was the time when the famous king of the Solar dynasty, Trisanku, was reigning, who was so much in love with the beauty of his body that he could not bear the thought of parting with it at death and desired to ascend to heaven in that very body.

Vasishtha, his preceptor, whom he approached for help in realising his wish, advised him to give up attempting the impossible. Dissatisfied with Vasishtha's

response, the King approached the sage's sons and sought their help. They were wroth at being asked to do something which their father had pronounced impossible, ridiculed his vanity and curtly bade him begone.

King Trisanku would not give up his aim and told them that, since they and their father were too poor in merit to help him, he would find others who were richer. Vasishtha's sons were provoked beyond endurance, and said: "Be you a chandala."

The curse began to act and the next morning Trisanku woke up a different person altogether, an untouchable, ugly of form, attired in dirty clothes.

His ministers and his people could not recognise him. Driven out of his kingdom he wandered hungry and weary almost to death, till his destiny took him to Viswamitra's ashrama.

The king's appearance moved the heart of the sage, who enquired: "Aren't you King Trisanku? What has brought you to this plight? Whose curse?"

Recounting all that had happened he fell at the sage's feet and said: "I have been a good king and never swerved from the path of dharma. I have committed no sin and wronged none. My preceptor and his sons have deserted me and cursed me and you see me thus before you."

Viswamitra took pity on the King converted by a curse into a chandala. This was Viswamitra's great weakness; he was impulsive and easily over-powered by emotions like anger, sympathy and love.

In sweet words, he made the king happy: "O, King, I have heard of your righteous rule. I offer you refuge; be not afraid. I will arrange for the sacrifice which will enable you to enter heaven in your own body. And in this very chandala form you shall reach heaven despite your Guru's curse. Of this you may be sure."

And he made arrangements for a great and unprecedented yaga.

Viswamitra directed his disciples to invite all the sages and, their disciples for the proposed yaga. Afraid of saying "No" to what was more or less a command, all the rishis agreed to be present.

But the sons of Vasishtha declined the invitation and made merry about a yaga at which the officiating priest was a once upon-a-time Kshatriya and the yajaman a stinking chandala.

This reply, duly conveyed, enraged Viswamitra who exploded into a curse that Vasishtha's sons do die and be reborn for seven generations in a tribe given to eating dog's flesh.

The sage then began the yaga. Extolling Trisanku's eminent virtues, Viswamitra sought the help of the other rishis in effecting the bodily translation of Trisanku to heaven.

Well aware of the sage's mighty powers and fulminous temper, the invitees lent their support, and the yaga went on. It reached the stage when the gods were invoked to descend and accept the offerings. But no god came. It was clear that Viswamitra's yaga was a failure. And the rishis, who had attended the ceremony, laughed within themselves at Viswamitra's discomfiture.

Wild with rage, Viswamitra held the ladle of ghee over the flames and said: "O Trisanku, here behold my power. I now transfer for your benefit all the merit I have earned. If my austerities have any value, they should lift you to heaven in your physical frame. I care not if the Devas reject my offerings. King Trisanku! Ascend!"

A miracle followed. To the astonishment of those assembled, Trisanku in his chandala body rose heavenward. The world saw the power of Viswamitra's tapas.

Trisanku reached Swarga. But Indra forthwith pushed him down saying, "Who are you, entering heaven with a chandala body? You fool that earned the curse of your preceptor, go down again."

Trisanku fell from heaven, head down wards, screaming, "Viswamitra! Save me!"

Viswamitra, seeing this, was beside himself with rage. Determined to teach the gods a lesson, he shouted to Trisanku. "Stop there! Stop there!" and, to the amazement of all, Trisanku's earthward descent came to an abrupt stop and he stopped in mid air, shining like a star. Like a second Brahma, Viswamitra proceeded to create a new starry horizon to the south as well as a new Indra and new Devas.

Alarmed at their supremacy, the Devas now came to terms and humbly entreated Viswamitra to desist. They said: "Let Trisanku stay where he is at present. Let the other stars, of your creation shine forever, like your own fame and honor. Control your anger and be friends with us."

Gratified at this submission, and as easily appeased as provoked, Viswamitra baited his creative process. But his stupendous activities had consumed the whole of the power that he had thus far acquired by his austerities, and he found he had to begin again.

Viswamitra now proceeded westwards to Pushkara and resumed his austerities. For years the rigorous tapas continued, but once again as it was about to bear fruit something happened to rouse his anger and he lost his balance and cursed his own sons. Soon recovering himself, he firmly resolved never again to yield to anger, and resumed his tapas

After many years of austerities, Brahma and the Devas appeared before him and said: "O Kausika! Your tapas has

borne fruit. You are no longer in the ranks of kings; you have become a real rishi." Having thus blessed Viswamitra, Brahma returned.

This was again a disappointment. He wanted to become a Brahma Rishi and Vasishtha's peer and he had only been acknowledged an ordinary rishi. It was recognition as futile as the missiles of power, which Vasishtha's Brahmada had swallowed.

He therefore decided to go on with his tapas, making it more severe than ever before.

The Devas did not like this. They sent the heavenly damsel Menaka to tempt him with her celestial beauty and allurements. She went to Pushkara where Viswamitra was undergoing austerities and played, to catch his eye with a hundred wiles of charm and grace. Viswamitra saw her and was fascinated by her beauty. His vow was broken and he spent ten years in a dream of joy, forgetful of his high resolve.

Awaking at last, he looked at the trembling Menaka sorrowfully and said he would not curse her, for it was his own folly, and not her fault, as in tempting him she was only carrying out the orders of her master. And sadly he wended his way to the Himalayas to resume his broken tapas.

There, for a thousand years, controlling his senses, he performed rigorous tapas. At the request of the Devas, Brahma appeared before Viswamitra, and spoke to him thus sweetly: "I welcome you as a Maharishi, my son. Pleased with your soulful tapas I confer on you that title and the sanctity it imports."

Unmoved alike by gratification or disappointment, Viswamitra folded his hands in adoration and asked the Father of the Universe if the boon meant conquest over the senses.

"By no means", said the Creator, "but strive to subjugate the senses, tiger among munis!"

Resolved on the supreme conquest, Viswamitra entered on another thousand years of even harder tapas which threw the Devas into even greater consternation.

Indra called unto him the celestial damsel Rambha, and enjoined on her as a vital service to the Devas, to employ all her art to bring Viswamitra under the spell of her charm, and divert him from his purpose. She was sorely afraid, but Indra assured her that she would not be left alone, but be accompanied by the God of Love and the Spirit of Springtime would be with her for support.

Unwillingly she went and as she entered the precincts of the hermitage, the forest blossomed into vernal beauty, and the south wind blew gently laden with the scent of flowers, and kokilas burst into song. Love and Spring were both there to assist Beauty. Disturbed by stirrings to which he had long been a stranger, Viswamitra opened his eyes and saw a smiling damsel of surpassing beauty, who seemed the very soul of the spring with its flowers and fragrance and song.

At this vision of soft voluptuousness a white heat of anger surged through him as he recognised in it another temptation thrown in his way by the envious gods, and he cursed the temptress: "O Rambha, for seeking to tempt me who am striving to conquer anger and desire, be thou frozen to an image of stone for ten thousand years."

But this explosion of rage made him see how far he was from the fulfilment of his purpose and sadly he quitted the Himalayan forests, and sought the solitude of the east.

There, he restrained his breathing, gave up all thought of the things of the world, and performed austerities so stern that

smoke and flames issued from his body and enveloped the universe. Then at the prayer of the panic-stricken gods, Brahma again appeared before him, and hailed him as Brahma Rishi: "All hail, Brahma Rishi, I am pleased with you. Blessed be your life." Viswamitra was happy.

But humbly he said: "How can I be happy unless from Vasishtha's lips I hear that I am a Brahma Rishi?"

Vasishtha smiled remembering his fight with Viswamitra, and said to him: "You have achieved the fruit of your great austerities. Indeed you are a Brahma Rishi, my brother." There was joy all round.

This was the story of the sage that arrived suddenly at Dasaratha's court.

4. RAMA LEAVES HOME

King, Dasaratha received Viswamitra as Indra would welcome Brahma and touching his feet, the King said: "I am indeed blessed among men. Your coming can only be due to the merit of my ancestors. Like the morning sun that dispels the darkness of night, your face brings joy to my sight. My heart is full. Born a king, you have become through tapas a Brahma Rishi. And you yourself have come seeking my dwelling. Is there anything in my power that I can do for you? If so, command and I shall obey."

Viswamitra was rejoiced to hear these words of Dasaratha, and his face brightened. He said: "O King, your words are worthy of you. Born in the Ikshvaku line, with Vasishtha for your Guru, what else could you say? You have said 'yes' before I asked. This fills my heart with joy." And he straightway explained the purpose of his visit.

Viswamitra said: "I am engaged in performing a sacrifice. As it nears completion, two powerful Rakshasas, Maricha and Subahu, defile it. They shower unclean blood and flesh on the

sacred fire. Like other rishis we could curse and destroy them. But that would be a waste of all our tapas.

"Our troubles will end if you send with me Rama, the eldest of your warlike sons. Under my care, he will grow in princely stature. He will surely defeat these Rakshasas and his name will gather lustre. Entrust Rama to my care only for a few days. Do not refuse my request. Fulfil the promise you gave me unsought. Of Rama's safety you need have no anxiety. You will earn undying fame in the three worlds. Vasishtha and your ministers will agree with what I say."

Dasaratha trembled with fear and anxiety. He had a hard choice to make; either to give his well-beloved son to be killed by the Rakshasas or himself incurs the terrible anger of Viswamitra.

For a few moments, Dasaratha stood speechless, for he was stunned and bewildered. But recovering from the shock, he begged the sage not to press his demand, and said: "Rama is not yet fully sixteen years of age. How can he fight with Rakshasas? Of what use is it to send him with you? What does he know of the wiles of Rakshasas? It is not right that I should send a mere lad to fight them, I am here, and my army is ready to march. How can a lad protect you and your yaga? Tell me all about your foes. I shall go with you at the head of my army and do your bidding and serve your need. Do tell me about these desecrators."

Viswamitra described Maricha and Subahu and Ravana their master. And he demanded again that Rama should be sent along with him.

Dasaratha persisted in refusal. "Parting from Rama will be death to me," he said. "I shall go with you, I and my army. Why, it seems to me the task proposed is pretty hard even for me. How then can my son

cope with it? Indeed, I cannot send him. If you please, I am ready with my army."

Dasaratha's attempt to go back on his hasty word, enraged Viswamitra. The King's pleas and reasons were like oil poured on the fire of his anger.

"This conduct is unworthy of your lineage", the sage said. "Tell me if this is your final word. I shall go back the way I came. Long may you live with your kith and kin, having swerved from the path of Truth!"

The earth quaked and the gods were afraid of the possible consequences of the sage's wrath.

Vasishtha now turned to the King and spoke gently: "It ill becomes you, King, to refuse having promised once. Born in the Ikshvaku line, you cannot do it. Having once said, 'I will do', you have no option but to do it. Failing, you will lose the merit of all your great gifts and deeds. Send Rama with the sage, and send Lakshmana too. You need have no fear for their safety, When they are protected by Viswamitra, no Rakshasa can hurt them. As the drink of the gods, shielded by the wheel of fire, so will Rama be by Viswamitra. You have no idea of Viswamitra's power; he is tapas in human form. Bravest of the brave and wisest of the wise, he is master of every weapon. In the three worlds there is not, and there will never be, any to equal him in martial or spiritual prowess. When he was king he obtained from the gods mastery of all weapons. He beholds the past, the present and the future. Then why does he want the princes, you may wonder. He can well take care himself of his yaga; but it is for the good of your sons that he has come here and appears to seek your help. Do not hesitate. Send your sons with him."

Listening to the wise Vasishtha, Dasaratha saw things clearly and made up his mind to send Rama and Lakshmana.

The two princes were then brought to the presence of the sage. The King, the Queen-Mothers and Vasishtha blessed them and sent them with Viswamitra.

A pleasant breeze wafted and flowers were strewn by the denizens of the heavens. Auspicious sounds were heard. Bow in hand, the two lads strode proudly on either side of the Sage.

Valmiki and Kamban revel in this picture of the two handsome princes marching out to their first adventure under the guardianship of a great rishi who had also been a renowned warrior a teacher who could create a new world; and beside him, head erect, two princely pupils born to end the Rakshasa race.

With swords of victory hanging from their waists, bows and quivers mounted on strong shoulders, they moved, each like a three-headed cobra with uplifted hood.

5. RAMA SLAYA THE MONSTERS

Viswamitra and the two princes spent the night on the bank of the river Sarayu. Before retiring Viswamitra initiated the princes in two secret mantras Bala and Atibala, which had the virtue of guarding them from fatigue and harm. They slept on the verdant bank that night and rising at dawn proceeded on their journey. They reached Kamashrama in Anga Desa. After presenting the princes to the rishis there, Viswamitra recounted to them the history of the ashrama.

"This," he said, "is the place where the Lord Siva was long engaged in austerities. It was here that the foolish god of love Manmatha aimed his arrow at Siva and was turned to ashes by his wrath. Hence this place is known as Kamashrama."

They were the guests of the rishis that night, and the following morning, after performing the usual rites, the sage and his pupils set out on their journey and

reached the Ganga. They crossed the river on a raft got ready for them by the rishis.

In midstream, the princes heard a noise and asked Viswamitra what it could be. He explained to them that it was the sound of the Sarayu flowing into the Gangs. The princes paid silent homage to the confluence of the two holy rivers.

A river or a hill, a tree or a cloud, indeed any object of beauty may raise one to contemplation of the Supreme Being and silent worship of Him. In particular, sacred rivers, temples or images, which have for generations been the objects of devotion and worship, possess this power in a special degree, in virtue of the sacred thoughts they have witnessed and absorbed as garments retain perfumes.

Having crossed the Ganga, Viswamitra and the princes made their difficult way through a dense forest made dreadful by the reverberating roar of wild beasts.

"This," Viswamitra said, "is the Dandaka forest. What is now a terrible forest was once a well-peopled country. Once upon a time, Indra was contaminated by sin, having killed Vritra, and had therefore to exile himself from the world of the Devas. The Devas set to themselves the task of cleansing Indra. They brought waters from the sacred rivers and bathed him to the accompaniment of mantras. The waters which cleansed Indra flowed into the ground and enriched the earth and the land became tremendously fertile."

All dead things, rotting corpse or stinking garbage, when returned to the earth are transformed into things of beauty such as fruits and flowers and the wholesome things that nourish life. Such is the alchemy of Mother Earth.

Viswamitra continued: "For long people lived here happily till Tataka (wife of Sunda, a Yaksha) and her son Maricha wrought havoc and changed this into the

dreadful wilderness it now is. They are still in this forest. And none dare enter it for fear of Tataka. She is equal in strength to a score of elephants. I have brought you here to rid the forest of this great enemy. There is no doubt that this monster, who is a source of trouble to the rishis, will be destroyed by you."

Rama, who listened to this, asked the sage: "You say she is a Yaksha. I have never heard that Yakshas are particularly strong. What is more, how does a woman happen to possess so much strength?"

Viswamitra replied: "You are asking a very pertinent question. Her strength comes from a boon granted by Brahma. There lived a Yaksha by name Suketu. Having no progeny he performed tapas and won a boon from Brahma thus: 'You will have a beautiful daughter of great strength of body, but you will have no son.' Suketu's daughter, Tataka, beautiful and strong, was married to Sunda, a Yaksha, and their child is Maricha. Sunda at one time incurred Sage Agastya's curse and died. Provoked by this, Tataka and Maricha pounced on Agastya who cursed them to be monsters living on the carcasses of men. So Tataka is now an ugly monster. Thenceforward, she and Maricha have been harassing the dwellers in this region of Agastya. Do not hesitate to destroy her on the ground that it is against Kshatriya dharma to kill a woman. Her atrocities are intolerable. To punish the wicked, whether male or female, is the duty of kings. It is right to kill her, as to kill a wild animal for the sake of human safety. This is a duty cast on rulers. Many women have been punished with death for their crimes. Hence do not hesitate."

Rama said to Viswamitra: "Our father's behest is that we should obey you without question. Bidden by you and for the general welfare, we shall kill Tataka."

So saying, he strung his bow and twanged it till the forest echoed to its shrill note and the wild animals scattered in all directions in terror. It reached Tataka in her fastness, filling her with amazement at the audacious intruder who dared enter her domain. Raging with anger, she ran in the direction whence the sound came and sprang on Rama. The battle began.

The prince at first thought of cutting off the limbs of the monster and sparing her life. But Tataka attacked fiercely and, rising in the sky, she rained stones on Rama and Lakshmana. The two princes defended themselves against the attack. The fight continued and Viswamitra cautioned Rama against delay in dealing the death-blow to the monster.

"She deserves no sympathy," he said. "The sun is about to set and remember that at night Rakshasas grow stronger. Do not delay to slay her."

Thus advised, Rama decided on killing Tataka and pierced her chest with a deadly arrow and the huge, ugly monster fell down, lifeless.

The Devas cheered, and Viswamitra, filled with joy, embraced Rama and blessed him.

With Tataka's end, the forest was freed from the curse and became beautiful to see. The princes spent the night there and next morning they proceeded to Viswamitra's ashrama.

At dawn the next day, Viswamitra called Rama to his side and blessing him said: "I am very happy indeed. What is it that I can do in return for all that you have done? I shall teach you the use of all the astras."

So saying, Viswamitra gave Ramachandra the divine astras which he had obtained through his tapas. Viswamitra taught Rama the use, control and recall of the various divine weapons

and Rama in his turn imparted the knowledge to Lakshmana.

As they continued the journey, Rama pointed to a big hill with a lovely forest on its slopes and asked: "Is that the place whereto we have to go? And who are the evil ones who hinder your yaga? And what should I do to destroy them?"

Ramachandra was eager to fight and win the blessings of the sage.

"That is the place we are going to," replied Viswamitra. "There the Lord Narayana performed tapas and it was there that he was born as Vamana. It goes by the name of Siddhashrama. Mahabali, son of Virochana and grandson of Prahlada the good Asura, was such a powerful ruler that of him even the Devas were afraid. Mahabali had by his deeds acquired the power of Indra himself. Kashyapa and his spouse Aditi, of whom all the gods were offsprings, prayed to Vishnu and begged Him to be born as their son and protect Indra and the Devas from Mahabali. In answer to the prayers, Vishnu was born of Aditi as Vamana. Vamana in the form of a young student went to the yaga that was being performed by Mahabali and whereto all were welcome, to ask for and receive anything they wanted. When Vamana presented himself as a suitor, Mahabali's guru, Sukra, the preceptor of all the Asuras, knew who he really was and warned Mahabali against promising to grant the young Brahmana his request since indeed he was the Lord Hari in disguise, come to undo him. Mahabali did not pay heed to this. It was his wont never to turn down a request. Besides, he was at heart a devotee of the Lord, and felt that he would indeed be blessed if the Lord should deign to accept a gift from him. With a smile, Mahabali bade him ask for what he pleased without hesitation. 'All have is at your disposal, money, jewels, the wide

earth and all it inherits.' Vamana answered that wealth was of no use to him, and all he begged for was three paces of ground, as paced by him. The monarch smiled as he looked at the diminutive brahmachari's legs and said, 'So be it; pace and take it.' The little Bachelor suddenly grew in size into Trivikrama and with one step measured the earth and with another the entire heavens. And there being no room left for the third step that had been granted, he set his foot on Mahabali's devoted head. In the eyes of God, the head of a bhakta is as wide as the earth or the heavens. And Mahabali, whose head was blessed by the touch of Narayana's foot, became one of the seven immortals of the world."

After narrating the story of Mahabali, Viswamitra added: "This is where at first Narayana and later Kashyapa performed tapas, resulting in the incarnation of God as Vamana. In this holy place I live. And here the Rakshasas come and obstruct our worship and our austerities. Your coming here is to end this evil."

"So be it," said Rama.

The arrival of Viswamitra and the two princes was a signal for rejoicing at the ashrama. The rishis offered water and fruits according to custom. Rama told Viswamitra that he might begin the preparations for his yaga immediately and Viswamitra took the vows that very night.

Getting up very early the next morning, the princes went to Viswamitra and asked when the Rakshasas were expected so that they might hold themselves in readiness to receive them.

Viswamitra was under a vow of silence, and could not answer, but the rishis, his juniors, told the princes that they should be ceaselessly vigilant for six nights and days to safeguard the sacrifice.

The princes, fully armed, kept vigil for six days and nights. On the morning of the

sixth day Rama told Lakshmana: "Brother, now is the time for the enemies to come. Let us be wary."

Even as he was saying this, flames shot up from the sacrificial fire, for Agni, the God of Fire, knew that the Rakshasas had arrived. As the rites were being performed, there was heard from the sky a great roar.

Rama looked up and saw Maricha and Subahu and their followers preparing to shower unclean things on the sacrificial fire. The army of Rakshasas covered the sky like a great black cloud.

Rama said, "Look Lakshmana," and let go the Manavastra at Maricha. As was intended, it did not kill Maricha, but wrapping him up in resistless force hurled him a full hundred yojanas near the sea.

With the Agneyastra Rama killed Subahu; and then the two princes utterly destroyed the entire army of Rakshasas.

The sky was bright again.

Viswamitra was supremely happy at the completion of his yaga. "I am grateful to King Dasaratha," he said. "You have fulfilled the promise, princes. I admire your fortitude. This ashrama has through you become again a scene of success, Siddhashrama." (Siddha means success).

The next day, Rama and Lakshmana, after their morning prayers, went to Viswamitra and asked for further orders.

The purpose of Rama's birth was not unknown to Sage Viswamitra. And he knew too the powers of the weapons he had given to Rama. Still the actual fact when experienced is something more than expectation. Sage Viswamitra was happy beyond words, and his face glowed like a flame. He then thought of the service that he still had to do for Rama. This was the prince's marriage with Sita.

The rishis assembled there said to Rama: "We intend proceeding to the kingdom of Videha, where in the capital

city of Mithila, Janaka, the illustrious philosopher king, intends to perform a great sacrifice. All of us are going there and it will be good if you and the prince, your brother, accompany us. It is meet and proper that the Prince of Ayodhya should see the marvellous bow in the court of Janaka."

So it was decided, and Rama and Lakshmana went with Viswamitra to Janaka's city.

6. SITA

Janaka, king of Mithila, was an ideal ruler. He was a much revered friend of Dasaratha who, when he planned his yaga for progeny, sent not mere messengers but ministers to Mithila to invite King Janaka.

Janaka was not only a brave king but was as well-versed in the Sastras and Vedas as any rishi and was the beloved pupil of Yajnavalkya whose exposition of Brahmana to him is the substance of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. In the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna cites Janaka as an illustrious example of the Karma yogin. Janaka was thus worthy to be the father of Sita who was to be the wife of Vishnu come down on Earth in human form.

Desirous of performing a yaga, Janaka at one time ploughed the chosen site. As usual, this was done by his own hand.

As the field was being cleared and leveled, Janaka saw among shrubs a baby divinely beautiful. Janaka was childless and accepted the infant as the goddess Earth's gift to him.

Taking the child in his arms he went to his beloved wife and said: "Here is treasure for us. I found this child on the yaga site and we shall make it our own." And she joyfully consented.

The beauty of the goddess Earth mortal eyes cannot see in its fulness, but we get glimpses of it as we gaze with grateful hearts on the emerald green or golden

ripeness of spring time or autumn fields, or with awe and adoration on the glories of mountain and valley, rivers and ocean.

This loveliness was Sita in its entirety. Kamban would have it that Sita's beauty threw into the shade Lakshmi herself who came up with Nectar as the Ocean of Milk was being churned. This child of divine beauty was brought up by King Janaka and his dear queen.

When Sita reached the age of marriage Janaka was sad that he would have to part with her. Though he tried hard, he was for long unable to choose a prince worthy of Sita. Many kings came to Mithila, seeking Sita's hand, but in Janaka's view none of them was good enough. The King anxiously thought over the matter and came to a decision. Long ago, pleased with a yaga performed by Janaka, Varuna, presented to him Rudra's bow and two quivers. That was an ancient heavenly bow, which no ordinary man could even move.

This was kept by him as an honored heirloom. Since only a very exceptional man could be considered worthy of Sita, Janaka issued this proclamation: "Sita, my daughter, will be given in marriage to the prince who can lift, bend and string the bow of Siva which Varuna gave me and to none other."

Many princes who had heard of Sita's beauty, went to Mithila only to return disappointed. None could fulfil the condition.

Led by Viswamitra, the rishis from Siddhashrama were proceeding to Mithila, with bullock-carts transporting their luggage. The animals and the birds in the ashrama set out to follow Viswamitra, but he gently bade them stay behind.

It was evening when they reached the river Sona. There they rested for the night, Viswamitra recounting to Rama and Lakshmana the history of the place.

Getting up in the morning, they continued their journey and crossed another river, not very deep, and by noon they were at the Ganga.

They bathed in the holy river and the rishis made lustrations to their forbears. They improvised an ashrama there, performed their pujas and cooked their food. Meal over, they sat round Viswamitra who, at the request of the two princes, told the story of the Ganga. Himavan, king of mountains and his spouse, Menaka, had two daughters of whom Ganga was the elder. Himavan sent her to the land of the Devas in response to their request and she dwelt with them. Uma, the younger, won the favor of Siva and became his spouse.

Sagara, a former King of Ayodhya, had no son for a long time. With his two wives, Kesini and Sumati, he went to Himalaya and performed tapas. Sage Bhrigu, pleased with the king, blessed him and said: "You will get a number of children and will acquire undying fame. One of your wives will give birth to an only son, and through him your lineage will be continued. The other queen will bear sixty thousand strong-armed sons."

Sagara's wives bowed low before the sage and asked which one of them would get an only son and which the sixty thousand children. Sage Bhrigu asked each of them their own desire.

Kesini said she would be satisfied with one son who would continue the line; Sumati chose the other alternative. "Be it so," said the sage.

Satisfied, the king and his wives took leave of the sage and returned to Ayodhya. In course of time, Asamanjas was born to Kesini; Sumati gave birth to a fissiparous mass which divided out into sixty thousand babies. This army of children was then taken care of by nurses.

Years rolled by; and while the sixty thousand grew into strong, handsome princes, Asamanjas turned out to be a cruel lunatic. He indulged in the pastime of throwing little children into the river and laughed merrily as they struggled and died.

Naturally people hated this maniac and banished him from the country. To the great relief of all, Asamanjas' son, Amsuman, was the opposite of his father and was a brave, virtuous and amiable prince.

King Sagara launched a great horse-sacrifice and prince Amsuman was in charge of the sacrificial horse, but Indra, in the guise of a Rakshasa, managed to carry off the animal. The Devas regarded yagas by mortals as a challenge to their superiority, and lost no opportunity of throwing obstacles in their way. If, however, all obstruction was overcome and the yaga was completed, they accepted offerings made to them. And then he who performed the yaga got due reward.

The king was greatly upset when he heard that the sacrificial horse was stolen. He sent out the sixty thousand sons of Sumati to go in search of the animal all over the earth and to spare no pains to retrieve it.

"The loss of the horse," he impressed on them, "not only means obstruction to the yaga; it casts sin and ignominy on an concerned. You should, therefore, recover the horse, wherever it may be kept hidden."

Eagerly the sons of Sagara proceeded to search the entire earth, but the horse was nowhere to be found. They even started digging the earth as for buried treasure, and in their anxiety respected neither place nor person and only succeeded in earning the hatred of all they met. The horse was not to be found; and

when they reported their failure to the King, he bade them ransack the nether world also. The princes did as they were told and in Patala they saw the horse grazing in a corner of an ashrama, not far from the place where Sage Kapila who was Vishnu sat in meditation.

The princes at once jumped to the conclusion that they had not only found the stolen horse but the thief also, and they rushed on Kapila shouting, "Here is the thief pretending to be a yogi." Kapila thus disturbed opened his eyes and the sixty thousand princes were reduced to a heap of ashes. Indra, the real thief, had artfully left the horse here with this very intent.

7. BHAGIRATHA AND THE STORY OF GANGA

KING Sagara waited in vain for the return of the princes who had gone in search of the sacrificial horse.

After some days he called his grandson, Amsuman, and said: "I am anxious to know what has happened to the princes who went to Patala. You are brave; go thither, well-armed and find out what has happened and come back crowned with success."

Amsuman went closely following the path of the princes and reached the nether world where he saw and paid salutations to the mighty elephants standing guard at the four quarters. These guardians of the quarters uttered encouraging words and said he would succeed in his mission.

When in due course Amsuman entered and went round Patala he was delighted when he found the sacrificial horse grazing contentedly there, but was perplexed and distressed when he saw heaps of ashes all over the place. Could they be all that remained of his valiant uncles?

Garuda, the bird-king, brother of Sumati, Sagara's second wife, who

chanced to be there told Amsuman: "Those ash heaps are all that is left of the sixty thousand sons of Sagara who were consumed by the wrathful glance of Sage Kapila. Dear child, take the horse and complete the yaga. If these ashes are to be watered according to custom so that the souls of the princes may rest in peace, Ganga should be brought down here from the land of the Devas."

Amsuman rushed home with the horse and told the king all that he had found and learnt.

Sagara was immersed in sorrow at the fate that had overtaken his sons. However, the horse having been brought back, he completed the yaga. Grieving over his lost sons and despairing of ever bringing Ganga down to the nether world, he died disconsolate.

According to the Ramayana, Sagara lived for 30,000 years. Figures like 30,000 and 60,000 need not confuse us. Thirty thousand may mean either a very large number or just thirty. If we so like, we may take these figures literally.

Amsuman succeeded Sagara as King of Ayodhya and was, in turn, succeeded by Dilipa. Bhagiratha came after Dilipa.

Amsuman and Dilipa though happy and blessed in other respects, died grieving that they were unable to bring Ganga to Patala for the salvation of their forefathers.

Bhagiratha was a valiant king. He was childless. Desiring progeny and hoping to bring Ganga down, he left for Gokarna for performing penance, leaving the kingdom in the hands of his ministers.

Bhagiratha went through severe austerities. With fire on all sides and head exposed to the hot sun, and taking food but once a month, he continued his tapas. Bhagiratha's name has come to signify great perseverance in any good cause.

Brahma, pleased with the tapas, appeared before Bhagiratha and asked: "What would you have?"

Bhagiratha told him two wishes: "If you have pity on me, bless me with a child to continue the line of my forebears. Secondly, cursed by Kapila Muni, my ancestors lie a heap of ashes in Patala. The ashes should be washed by the waters of Ganga so that their souls may ascend to heaven. May you be pleased to order Ganga to go down."

Brahma replied: "The Devas are pleased with your tapas. Your wishes are granted. But there is one difficulty. The earth cannot withstand the force of Ganga's descent. Siva alone can stand it. Therefore direct your penance and prayers to him."

Bhagiratha renewed his tapas and continued long without food or water, and at last won Siva's grace. Siva appeared and said to Bhagiratha: "I shall fulfil your wish. I shall receive Ganga on my head. May her grace be upon you."

When Mahadeva promised help to Bhagiratha, Ganga began her descent as ordered by Brahma. In her arrogance, she thought she would fall on Mahadeva's head and sweep him away towards Patala.

The three-eyed God decided to teach Ganga a lesson. And the moment he willed it, the flood of waters that fell on his head were held by his matted hair as in an infinite receptacle. Ganga tried her best but not a drop could emerge from the tangled maze of Siva's matted locks.

This was a lesson to Ganga to be sure, but a heart-braking disappointment to Bhagiratha. There was nothing for him but to propitiate Siva with tapas. This he did to such good purpose that Siva took pity on him and gently let out the waters of Ganga in Bindu Saras from where they flowed down in seven small separate streams.

Three of them flowed west and three east; and the seventh river followed Bhagiratha who was full of joy at the approaching salvation of his ancestors.

Ganga followed Bhagiratha's triumphal chariot; the waters danced and shone like lightning flashes as the river made its course and the Devas and Gandharvas assembled above to witness the grand sight. Sometimes slow and sometimes fast, now sliding down and now jumping up, the river went on dancing behind Bhagiratha's chariot and the folk of heaven enjoyed the sight all the way.

On her course, Ganga damaged the yaga platform of a rishi by name Jahnu. The rishi took the entire flood in his palm and sipped it off. Ganga disappeared again and Bhagiratha was sorely perplexed.

The Devas and other rishis approached Jahnu and begged him to forgive Ganga and allow Bhagiratha to reap the fruit of his great austerities and perseverance. The sage relented and let Ganga out through his right ear. The Devas were glad and blessed Ganga thus: "Coming out of the rishi's body as out of your mother's womb, you are now Jahnavi, Jahnu's daughter."

There was no further hindrance or mishap and Ganga reached Patala through the ocean. With the holy waters, Bhagiratha performed the funeral rites for his ancestors and secured for them their entry to heaven.

Bhagiratha's efforts having brought Ganga down, she is known as Bhagirathi.

After concluding this narrative, Viswamitra blessed the princes. "The sun is setting," he said. "Let us say our evening prayers in the waters of Ganga whom your ancestor brought down to this world."

Those who bathe in the holy waters of Ganga or read or listen to this divine story with devotion, will be cleansed of sin and

endowed with virtue, strength and unflagging zeal.

8. AHALYA

After a day's stay in the City of Visala, Viswamitra and his party left for Mithila. On the way, not far from Mithila, they saw a beautiful ashrama which seemed untenanted. Rama asked Viswamitra: "Whose is this ashrama with ancient trees? Why does such a beautiful abode stand deserted?"

Viswamitra replied:

"This ashrama is subject to a curse. Sage Gautama lived here with his wife Ahalya, spending his days in peace and holy meditation. One day during the sage's absence from the ashrama, Indra, filled with unholy desire for the beautiful Ahalya, entered it disguised as Gautama and approached the lady with urgent solicitation. She was not deceived by the impersonation, but vain of her beauty and proud that it had won her the love of the lord of the celestials, she lost her judgment and yielded to his desire. When the sin had been sinned, realising its heinousness and the fierce spiritual energy of her betrayed husband, she warned Indra of his terrible peril and begged him to be gone in the instant. Indra was fleeing in guilty panic; but unfortunately for him he almost bumped into the rishi who was just returning from his ablutions, clad in wet garments and radiating spiritual lustre. Pretence was hopeless before that all-seeing wisdom and Indra bowed in abject supplication, and threw himself on the mercy of the rishi. The sage looked at him with wrath and loathing and cursed him: 'Lustful beast as you are, dead to all truth and righteousness, may your manhood fall away from you.' Indra at once became an eunuch and went back to the Devas in ignominious shame. Then the sage turned to his erring wife and prescribed a long penance for her. He said: 'Living on air,

you shall stay here, unseen by anyone. After a long time, Dasaratha's son will pass this way. When he sets foot in this ashrama, you will be freed from the curse. Welcome him as a guest. You will then recover your lost virtue and get back your own beauty.' The sage then left his violated ashrama for Himalayas to engage himself in austerities there."

Viswamitra said to Rama: "Let us enter the ashrama. You will bring redemption to Ahalya and rekindle the light in her as the sage promised."

And they went into the ashrama. As Rama set foot in the ashrama, the curse was lifted and Ahalya stood before them in all her beauty. Having lain concealed behind leaves and creepers and kept her vow for many years, she now shone, says the poet, in Rama's presence, like the moon emerging from the clouds, like a flame issuing from smoke and like the sun's reflection in rippling water.

Rama and Lakshmana touched the feet of the sage's wife made pure by penance. She welcomed the divine princes with all the customary rites of hospitality. A shower of flowers descended from the heavens as Ahalya, cleansed of sin, shone like a goddess. Simultaneously the sage Gautama returned to the ashrama and received his repentant and purified wife back to his affection.

That is Ahalya's story as told by Valmiki. There are in other Puranas and popular stories slightly varying versions, but the differences need not trouble us.

Now, a word to those of our times who read Ramayana and Bharata and other Puranas. In these works, there are frequent references to Devas and Rakshasas. The latter were wicked, had no regard for dharma, and reveled in evil deeds. Asuras were also like Rakshasas. But even among Rakshasas there were a few wise and virtuous people. There spring up bad men

even in the best of races and vice versa. On the whole, Asuras and Rakshasas were those who rejoiced in doing wicked deeds. It is a pity that some people in their ignorance identify the Asuras and Rakshasas with ancient Indian tribes and races, a view not supported by any literary work or tradition or recorded history.

The conjecture of foreigners that the Rakshasas were the Dravidian race, is not borne out by any authority in Tamil or other literature. The Tamil people are not descendants of the Asuras or Rakshasas.

The Devas were generally upholders of dharma and took on themselves the task of putting down the Rakshasas. According to the Puranas, they had at times to deviate from dharma in dealing with the Rakshasas, some of whom had attained great power through tapas.

The Devas were generally good; and those among them who swerved from the path of righteousness paid the price for it. There was no separate code of conduct for the Devas; the law of Karma admits of no distinction between the Devas and others. The law dealt with the Devas as with others.

Wedded to virtue as the Devas generally were, lapses on their part appear big to us, like stains on white cloth. The Rakshasas' evil deeds are taken for granted and do not attract much attention, like stains on black cloth.

The honest, when they happen to go astray, should evoke our sympathy. It is however the way of the world, but it is not right, to condemn in strong terms casual lapses of the virtuous, while tolerating habitual wrong-doers.

It should be noted that in the Puranas we see the gods getting entangled in dilemmas of Dharma. Indra and other Devas are shown often as committing serious sins.

Why did the sages who told the Puranas involve themselves in such difficulties? Their aim was to awaken people to a sense of the dangers of adharma. Else, the sages need not have deliberately attributed sinful acts to their own heroes and created difficulties for themselves.

Some persons take pleasure in jumping to wrong conclusions from the incidents in the Puranas. They argue: "Ravana was a very good king. Valmiki has falsely accused him of wicked deeds." They ask: "Did not Rama act unjustly on a certain occasion? Did not Sita utter a lie?" and the like. Valmiki could well have omitted incidents which are not edifying. Both Rama and Ravana were first presented to us by the poet Valmiki.

There was no earlier work referring to Ravana that can be quoted to contradict Valmiki and stamp him as being partial to Rama, Sita and the Devas, and twisting facts to deceive people. Valmiki's Ramayana is the fountain source of the story of Rama; in it, one comes across seemingly wrong deeds.

Calm consideration of such situations would show that they are just portrayals of similar difficulties in our day-to-day life. It is for us to benefit from the moral trials contained in them. The lesson of the Ahalya episode is that, however deadly one's sin, one may hope to be freed from its consequence by penitence and punishment. Instead of condemning others for their sins, we should look within our own hearts and try to purify them of every evil thought. The best of us have need for eternal vigilance, if we would escape sin. This is the moral of Ahalya's error.

9. RAMA WINS SITA'S HAND

All arrangements for Janaka's yaga had been completed and to Mithila had come many rishis and Brahman's from various kingdoms. Viswamitra and the princes

were duly welcomed. Janaka's preceptor, Satananda, was the first to pay honor to Viswamitra. Janaka followed him.

The King said to the sage: "I am indeed blessed that you should attend my yaga."

Pointing to Rama and Lakshmana, Janaka asked Viswamitra: "Who are these god-like youths who resemble each other, and carry their weapons with the proud ease of seasoned warriors? Who is the happy father of such sons?"

Viswamitra told Janaka that they were the sons of King Dasaratha. He narrated how they had protected his own yaga and destroyed the Rakshasas. "They have come here," the sage went on, "to see, if they may, the great bow of Rudra in your palace." Janaka understood the meaning of Viswamitra's words and rejoiced.

The King said: "The prince is welcome to see the bow. If he can string it, he will win the hand of my daughter. Many were the princes who saw this bow and went back, unable even to move it. I shall indeed be happy if this prince succeeds where so many have failed and I am thereby enabled to give Sita to him."

Janaka then ordered his men to bring the bow which was kept safe and sacred in an iron box. It was brought on an eight-wheeled carriage and dragged like a temple chariot during a festival.

"Here," said Janaka, "is Rudra's bow worshipped by me and my ancestors. Let Rama see this bow."

After obtaining permission from Viswamitra and the King, Rama stepped out to the iron bow-case, while all eyes were fixed on him in wishful expectation. Opening the box, he lifted the bow effortlessly, as if it were a garland of flowers, and resting one end of it against his toe, he bent and strung it and drew the string back with such irresistible force that the mighty bow snapped with a crash like

a clap of thunder. And there fell from heaven a shower of flowers.

Janaka proclaimed: "My beloved daughter shall be wedded to this prince."

Viswamitra said to Janaka: "Send your swiftest messengers to Ayodhya to give the news to Dasaratha and invite him."

Janaka's messengers reached Ayodhya in three days. They met King Dasaratha who was seated, like Indra, on his throne and said to him: "Sage Viswamitra and King Janaka have sent you happy news. Your son who came to Mithila has won our princess Sita by fulfilling the condition set for her hand. He not only strung Rudra's bow which none before could so much as lift, but bent its tough pride till it broke. King Janaka eagerly awaits your gracious consent for the marriage, and your presence and blessing at the festivities. May it please you to start for Mithila with your retinue."

Dasaratha, who had sent Rama with Viswamitra with a heart not altogether free from anxiety even after the sage's assurance, was thrilled with joy on hearing this good news. He told his ministers to prepare for the journey and left the very next day for Janaka's capital.

Dasaratha and his following reached Mithila and were received with enthusiastic welcome. Exchange of courtesies over, Janaka said to Dasaratha: "My yaga will soon be over. I think it best to have the marriage as soon as the yaga is over," and sought his approval.

Dasaratha replied: "You are the bride's father and it is for you to order things as you wish."

At the appointed day and hour, giving away the bride, King Janaka said to Rama: "Here is my daughter, Sita, who will ever tread with you the path of dharma. Take her hand in yours. Blessed and devoted, she will ever walk with you like your own shadow."

Iyam Sita mama suta
sahadharmacharee tava
prateechchha chainam bhadram
te
panim grihneeshwa panina
pativrata mahabhaga
chhayevanugata sada.

This sloka is uttered in every wedding in upper India when the bride is given away.

Thus was Sita given by Janaka to Rama. Were they not Eternal Lovers reunited? And so they rejoiced like lovers come together after separation.

10. PARASURAMA'S DISCOMFITURE

Having thus safely handed back to Dasaratha at Mithila the princes entrusted to him in Ayodhya, and after attending the wedding celebrations, Viswamitra took leave of the two kings and went to Himalaya. In the story of Rama, Viswamitra has no further part.

Viswamitra may be said to be the foundation of the grand temple of Rama's story. After Rama's wedding in Mithila, we do not see him again. It should be noted that characters that play a leading role in one canto of Valmiki almost fade out in subsequent cantos. Viswamitra who dominates the Bala Kanda does not appear again. Similarly, Kaikeyi and Guha are prominent only in Ayodhya Kanda. The same thing can be said of Bharata whom we do not come across in the chapters intervening between the Chitrakuta meeting and Rama's return to Ayodhya.

The poet hardly brings Bharata before our eyes during the period of Rama's distress. The characters in Valmiki Ramayana (unlike those in the Mahabharata and in ordinary plays and novels) do not present themselves off and on. Critics should bear this general characteristic of Valmiki's epic in mind.

King Dasaratha returned to Ayodhya, accompanied by his retinue. On the way, there were bad omens and anxious Dasaratha asked Vasishtha what they portended. Vasishtha replied that there was no need to be alarmed, for though the birds in the air indicated approaching trouble, the animals on the land promised a happy consummation.

As Dasaratha and Vasishtha were thus conversing, there broke out a great storm. Trees were uprooted; the earth quaked and clouds of dust went up and hid the sun and there was an all-enveloping darkness. Everyone was terror-struck. Soon they knew the reason for the strange phenomenon. There stood before them the awe-inspiring figure Parasurama, the sworn enemy of Kshatriyas, with a bow on one shoulder and a battle-axe on the other, and with an arrow shining like lightning in his hand.

Terrible in appearance, with his matted locks gathered overhead, he looked like Rudra exulting in the destruction of Tripura. His face emitted flame-like radiance. The son of Sage Jamadagni struck terror among Kshatriyas, many generations of which he had annihilated. Wherever he went he was preceded by storm and earthquake. And the Kshatriya race trembled in fear.

The Brahmanas in Dasaratha's retinue said to one another: "Because his father was killed by a king, Parasurama took a vow to destroy the Kshatriya race. We dared to hope that his vengeful wrath had been quenched in the blood of the innumerable kings he has slain. Has he again started his cruel campaign?" However, they honored him with the customary offering of water.

After receiving it, Parasurama addressed himself to Rama: "Son of Dasaratha, I have heard of your prowess. I was somewhat surprised to learn that you

strung the bow in King Janaka's court and that you drew the string till the bow broke. Here is my bow, equal in all respects to the one that you broke. This is the bow of Vishnu which was entrusted to my father. If you are able to string this bow, you will be worthy of my battle."

Dasaratha was perturbed at this turn of events and he begged that his son Rama should be spared the trial. He said to Parasurama: "You are a Brahmana. We have heard that, satiated with your revenge, you have gone back to tapas as becomes your order, in pursuance of your plighted word to Indra, after giving away the earth you had conquered to Kashyapa. Is it proper that you should break your vow, and seek to injure a prince of tender years who has done you no wrong, and who is dearer to us than life?"

Parasurama heard him unmoved without so much as looking at him, and addressed himself solely to Rama, as though the others did not exist: "Viswakarma originally made two exactly similar bows. One of them was given to Rudra and the other to Vishnu. This is the one given to Vishnu. What you are said to have strung and bent to the breaking point was Siva's bow. See if you can, string this bow of Vishnu; and if you do, it will be proof of your skill and strength and I will then honor you by fighting with you."

Parasurama spoke in a loud and arrogant tone. To him Rama replied in courteous manner, yet in firm tones: "Son of Jamadagni! You have been vengeful because your father was killed by a king. I do not blame you for that. But you cannot put me down as you have humbled others. Please give me your bow."

So saying, he took the bow and arrow from Parasurama. He strung the bow and setting the arrow to it, drew the string. Addressing Parasurama, he said with a smile: "This mighty Vaishnava arrow

placed on the string cannot be put back idly. It must destroy something. Tell me, shall it destroy your powers of locomotion, or would you rather that it consumes the fruits of your tapas?"

As the son of Dasaratha strung the bow of Vishnu, the glory on Parasurama's face faded, and he stood, no longer the warlike conqueror, but a self-subdued rishi, for the purpose of the Parasurama avatar was over.

Parasurama said mildly to the Prince of Ayodhya: "I realise who you are. I am not sorry that you have quenched my arrogance. Let all my tapas go to you. But because of my promise to Kashyapa, I cannot remain in his domains and have therefore to hurry back to the Mahendra Mountains before the sunsets. Let me use my power of locomotion for this single thing. Subject to this, let the arrow which you have set to the bow consume all my power earned through tapas."

So saying, Parasurama went in reverent circumambulation around the prince and departed. Ayodhya's citizens were overjoyed to hear that Dasaratha and the royal princes were returning to the capital. The city was festive with flowers and shone like the deva-loka.

Rama and Sita lived happily in Ayodhya for twelve years. Rama had surrendered his heart to Sita. It was difficult for one to say whether their love grew because of their virtues or it was planted in their beauty of form. Their hearts communed even without speech. Sita, rejoicing in Rama's love, shone like Lakshmi in heaven.

Long afterwards, when their forest-life began, Anasuya, the great sage Atri's holy wife, extolled Sita's love for Rama.

And Sita answered: "How else could it be? Rama is a perfect being. His love for me equals mine for him. His affection is

unchanging. Pure of heart, he has mastered the senses."

11. FESTIVE PREPARATIONS

RAMA and Sita spent twelve happy years in Ayodhya. But now the Lord and his consort in human form had to experience the hardships, sorrows and conflicts of life on earth.

As Bhagavan himself explains: "Whatever avatar I assume, my play must go through the feelings and experiences appropriate to that incarnation."

Who was the Prince of Ayodhya who through his body, life and experience, suffered the sorrows of mankind and saved the gods? The ever-present, all-pervasive Being who rules the world from within and without.

Kamban, the Tamil poet, begins the Ayodhya Kanda referring to this marvel of how the King of Kings allowed himself to suffer the cruel machinations of the hunchback maid-servant and of a step-mother which deprived him of the sceptre and banished him to the forest and beyond the sea.

Dasaratha loved all his, four sons and yet he had a special affection for Rama. And the latter deserved it by his royal qualities and adherence to dharma. Queen Kausalya, like Aditi, the mother of the gods, was proud that she had such a son as Rama. Valmiki has filled pages with the tale of Rama's virtues. The muni is never satiated drinking from the ocean of Rama's qualities. He describes Rama's gifts and graces sometimes directly, sometimes as seen and admired by others. Thus and in many other ways he dwells on the qualities that made Rama the ideal man.

Rama's graceful frame and virile beauty, his strength, his courage, the purity of his heart, his perfect life, his compassion, sweetness of speech, his serenity, his deep wisdom and his states

manship were admired by the people and made them eagerly look forward to his becoming king.

And Dasaratha knew and rejoiced in this expectation. Hence, considering his old age, he wished to crown Rama as Yuvaraja and entrust him with the de facto rule of the kingdom. Informing his ministers of his desire, he had the Raja Sabha convened. Rishis and wise men, leaders of the city and kings from neighboring lands, attended the Raja Sabha. When all were seated, each in his appropriate place, Dasaratha rose and addressed them.

His deep manly voice, like the sound of a trumpet or the roar of rain-bearing clouds, filled the great hall. A royal radiance shone from his face. His words were full of meaning and charmed all ears.

"Like my ancestors, I have tended this kingdom as a mother cares for her child. I have worked unremittingly for the people. Now my body is old and infirm. I wish therefore to appoint my eldest son as Yuvaraja and transfer to him the burden of responsibility. Following the holy custom of my forefathers, I hope to spend the rest of my life in austerities in the forest. Rama is fully equal to the task of kingship. He is expert in administration and statecraft and he is unequalled in valor. I can transfer this trust of sovereignty to him without any anxiety and I hope that this honored assembly will permit me to do so."

Shouts of joyous acclaim rose from the great assembly and with one voice the gathered princes and nobles exclaimed: "So be it."

The King spoke again: "You agree with my proposal but give no reason. This will not do. Let the wise men explain why they agree."

Then several speakers rose and explained Rama's virtues and fitness to rule. The King's heart was filled with joy to hear these praises of Rama.

At last the whole assembly rose and said with one voice: "Let there be no delay. Let Rama be anointed Yuvaraja."

The King answered that he was happy and would forthwith carry out their wishes. Then turning to Vasishtha, Vamadeva and the other holy men and guardians of the sacred rites, he said: "This is the auspicious month of Chaitra, the season when the trees in the forest are covered with flowers. Revered elders, make all preparations for the anointing of Rama."

The assembly was glad to hear these prompt orders. As bidden by the King, Sumantra, the minister in charge of the household, went to fetch Rama. Rama, ignorant of all these happenings, came and stood before his father.

Hearing of the decision to anoint him Yuvaraja, he humbly bowed acceptance, saying, "I am in duty bound to carry out your orders, whatever they be."

Dasaratha blessed Rama and said: "You are a good prince beloved of the people. Let not your courtesy and your consideration flag but increase with your opportunities of doing good, and earn you enduring glory." And Rama returned to his dwelling.

Hardly had Rama returned home when Sumantra called in haste and told him that his father wished to see him. Asked for the reason, Sumantra could not tell; he only knew he had been enjoined to fetch the prince at once.

Rama thought: "The King must have taken counsel over the coronation ceremony and perhaps met with some difficulty. But whatever happens is for the best." Rama was not eager to assume authority, but looked on it as only a duty

to be done. If the King wanted him to take it up, he was ready to do so. But if the King wanted him to give it up, he was equally willing. In this mood, Rama went to his father

12. MANTHARA'S EVIL COUNSEL

THE King embraced Rama, seated him beside him on the throne and said: "I am old. I have enjoyed my life as a man and a king. I have discharged all my duties to my ancestors. There is nothing left for me to do. My only desire is to install you on the throne of our fathers. Last night I had bad dreams. Those who read, the future advise me that a great sorrow, even death, may overtake me very soon. Hence I wish to have the coronation performed tomorrow. Tomorrow, the readers of the stars say, is auspicious. Something within me says, 'Do this at once.' You and Sita should prepare for tomorrow's anointment by fasting tonight. Lie down on a bed of darbha grass and have trusty and vigilant friends to look after your safety. It seems to me that the present time when Bharata is away is particularly opportune for your installation. Not that I do not know that Bharata is the soul of righteousness in thought and conduct alike, and that he is devoted to you, but the minds of men are changeful and open to unexpected influences."

And so the King decided that the coronation should be performed on the very next day and told Vasishtha of his decision. Bad dreams added to the reasons for fixing the day for the coronation at once.

Taking leave of his father, Rama went to Kausalya's apartment to give her the news and seek her blessing. But the Queen had heard the news already. Sumitra, Sita and Lakshmana were all there with Kausalya, who, clad in

ceremonial white, sat offering prayers for her son.

Rama reported to his mother the King's latest command. She answered: "This I have heard. May you live long. Be a good ruler. Conquer your foes and protect your subjects and kinsfolk. You have pleased your father and you have made me happy."

Then bidding farewell to his mother and step-mother, Rama went to his own apartment. As directed by the King, Vasishtha came to Rama's place. He was welcomed by him at the entrance, Vasishtha initiated Rama with due mantras in his pre-coronation fast.

As Vasishtha returned to the King, he saw groups of people on the royal road, cheerfully discussing the great festival of the morrow. Houses were being decorated with flowers, festoons and flags. It was with difficulty that Vasishtha could make his way through the crowds to the King's palace. The King was pleased to hear that the fast had begun duly and all was being got ready for the ceremony.

But in his heart of hearts there was a fear that some mishap might come between him and his one wish.

The city was in a joyous commotion of expectancy. In every house, in every street, men, women and children looked on the coronation as a great and auspicious occasion in their own lives and awaited it with enthusiasm.

Rama and Sita in their dwelling meditated long on Narayana, fed with ghee the sacrificial fire, and reverently sipped what remained of the ghee, and slept on grass spread on the floor. Early the following morning, they were roused from slumber by music and held themselves in readiness to proceed to the palace and in expectation of the auspicious call.

But the summons that came was of an entirely opposite nature.

In accordance with the practice in royal households, Queen Kaikeyi had a woman companion and confidential servant. She was a hunchback named Manthara. Being a distant relation of the Queen, she claimed great intimacy with her.

Manthara is one of the best known characters in the Ramayana. Every man, woman and child in our land knows and detests her, as the cause of Rama's exile, Dasaratha's death and all the sorrows which befell the royal family.

On the day on which Dasaratha summoned the Assembly and decided to anoint Rama as Yuvaraja, Manthara happened to climb up to the terrace of the women's apartments and stood surveying the town below. She saw the streets were sprinkled with water and gaily decorated. Flags flew from the house-tops. Wearing new clothes and bright jewels, smeared with sandal paste and decked in flowers, people moved about in crowds, engrossed in happy talk.

Musical instruments played in the temples. Manthara could not understand the reason for all this, for she did not know what the King had decided. Some celebration was on, she guessed. Manthara turned to a servant and asked her: "Why are you wearing this silk dress? What is on in the City? Kausalya seems to be distributing gifts to Brahmanas. She is a thrifty lady and would not be doing this for nothing. There are festive sights and sounds everywhere. Do you know what all this is about?"

The little servant girl answered, dancing with joy: "Why, do you not know that our Ramachandra is going to be anointed Yuvaraja tomorrow morning?"

This was news! Manthara was overpowered with sudden anger. Quickly she hobbled downstairs. Straight she

entered Kaikeyi's room. Kaikeyi was resting on her bed.

"Rise, rise, foolish woman! A flood of misfortune is rising to drown and swallow you! You are betrayed and ruined. Your star is setting. Foolish girl, is this the time to sleep?"

Kaikeyi, fearing that some calamity had overtaken Manthara, asked her gently: "What is troubling you? Why are you thus upset?"

And the clever Manthara began: "Destruction has come upon both you and me, my girl. Dasaratha has decided to make Rama Yuvaraja, the real ruler of this land. What greater cause for sorrow need I have? When grief comes to you, how can I remain unconcerned? I have come running to you. You were born and bred in a royal family. You were married into a royal family. Now, alas, all is over. Like the simple woman you are, you have been deceived. Your husband has cheated you with sweet words. It is a deep plot, as any one can see. He put Bharata out of the way by sending him to the distant place of his uncle, and is taking advantage of his absence by hurriedly crowning Rama. By tomorrow it will all be over. And you watch all this, lying in bed and doing nothing, while you and all who depend on you are being destroyed."

And so, Manthara went on talking. Kaikeyi's ears heard the words without quite heeding their drift. Like the rest of the royal household her mind was overwhelmed now with the joyous expectation of Rama's coronation, for she loved and esteemed Rama like everybody else.

"Manthara, you have brought me good news," she said. "Is my son Rama to be crowned tomorrow? What greater joy can come to me? Here, take this. Ask me for anything else." So saying, Kaikeyi took the necklace off her neck and gave it to

Manthara. It was a royal custom at once to reward with a rich gift the bringer of any important good news.

Kaikeyi thought Manthara, like any other officious personal attendant, was ingratiatingly jealous in her mistress's interests. How could this woman understand the goodness of Rama, or affairs of State? And so she thought her foolish fears would be banished if she saw that her mistress was happy at the event. Kaikeyi's mind was still uncorrupted. She had the culture of her noble lineage and was not easily amenable to low thoughts.

This but increased Manthara's grief. She flung away the necklace and said: "Woe to you, stupid woman. All is lost and stupidly you laugh with joy. How can you be blind to the misfortune that is coming to you? Am I to laugh or cry at this folly? Your rival, Rama's mother, has conspired to making him King. And you jump with joy. Insane woman! What would be Bharata's state when Rama reigns? Would not Rama fear and ever look upon Bharata as a dangerous enemy? Rama knows human nature. He knows that Bharata alive would be a constant threat to his power and therefore must be killed. Does not one kill a cobra out of fear? Hereafter there is no security for Bharata's life. Tomorrow morning Kausalya will be a happy woman and you will bend before her as a well-dressed slave. You will stand before her, hands clasped in obedience. From tomorrow your son too will be a subject and a slave. In these apartments there will be no more honor or joy."

And she stopped, unable for grief to continue. Kaikeyi heard all this and wondered "Why should Manthara have such fears? Does she not know Rama? Is he not dharma embodied in human form?"

She said: "Manthara, have you not known and rejoiced in Rama's

truthfulness, right conduct and humility? He is the elder prince and he gets the kingdom. Bharata will get it one day after him. What is wrong with all this? Why, dear friend, do you feel such grief? After Rama, Bharata will reign for a hundred years. Do not cry. You know how affectionate Rama is to me. Indeed he cares for me more than for his own mother. Does not Rama hold his brothers as dear as life? It is not right that you should fear any harm from Rama."

"Alas, Alas!" said Manthara. "Why are you so foolish? Once Rama is crowned king, what chance has Bharata? Do you not know the rule of succession? When Rama ascends the throne all prospects of royalty for Bharata and his line are at an end. After Rama, Rama's son will be king, and after him that son's son will be king, and so the succession will go on. Eldest son succeeds eldest son. There is no chance for a younger brother, no matter how good or manly he is. My dear, you know not even this. What is one to do?"

"Once Rama is crowned," she continued, "he will not leave Bharata alone. There will be danger to Bharata's life. If you want Bharata to live, advise him to remain away, an exile from home; for if he returns he will be coming to his death. It would be safest for him to leave even his uncle's house, and hide his head in obscurity in some more distant land. And Kausalya is no friend of yours. She bears you a grudge because you are the King's favorite and have often slighted her. And now she is sure to wreak vengeance on you. You know the wrath of a rival wife is a raging fire when it finds its chance. You may take it that, if Rama is king, Bharata is as good as dead. Therefore, think hard. Be firm. Decide something and stick to it. Somehow Bharata must be crowned. Rama must be banished from the kingdom."

Fear now entered the heart of the Queen. Manthara won. Kaikeyi's face was flushed; her breath became hot. Helpless she clung to Manthara for comfort and safety.

Because his first two wives had borne no children, Dasaratha, following the royal custom, married Kaikeyi. At that time Kaikeyi's father secured from Dasaratha the promise that the child of her womb should become king after him. In such a promise given by a childless king there was nothing surprising and nothing wrong. At that time, his then queens had long been childless. The King took a third wife for the sake of progeny. Even then his wish for a son to be born was not fulfilled. Many years passed.

After the great sacrifice was performed, all three wives bore children. The son of the Queen Eminent, Rama, was the eldest among four sons. He was also great in virtue, fully equal to the burden of Kingship, acceptable to ministers, citizens and vassal princes. How could Dasaratha violate the royal custom and ignoring Rama's claim anoint Bharata?

Moreover, neither Bharata nor Kaikeyi had ever thought of or wished for the fulfilment of this old and forgotten promise. During all the intervening years, no word had been spoken on this subject. Hence the King thought there could be no difficulty in installing Rama as Yuvaraja in accordance with the custom of the dynasty and public expectation. And there was no cloud in Kaikeyi's mind. This is clear from Kaikeyi's behavior. And Bharata was too noble to raise this question.

And, yet, as Dasaratha told Rama, even the purest of minds is mutable. When fate conspires with bad counsel, any one of us might be corrupted. And this happened to Kaikeyi. The gods in Heaven had received

an assurance, and the sages had performed tapas or the destruction of Ravana. What we call destiny, therefore, ordained that Kaikeyi's pure heart should be changed by Manthara's evil counsel. So says Kamban in the Tamil Ramayana in his own inimitable style.

Fearing that delay might bring some unpredictable obstacles, Dasaratha had ordered the coronation to be done without waiting for Bharata's return to the capital. This same fear and hurry were used by Manthara to persuade Kaikeyi to take the wrong path. "Think, my Queen. Why this haste? Why does your husband rush through the ceremony when your son is absent? Is it not to cheat him of his right? Is not the motive plain? The King pretends to be enamored of you. But this is only his hypocritical shrewdness."

Thus tempted, Kaikeyi thought over Manthara's advice. Kaikeyi was weak like any other woman. She had good feeling and good culture, besides a keen intellect. But she had little knowledge of the world. She was also terribly obstinate. Easily deceived, she did not have the power to foresee the full consequences of her action. Thus began the charter of grief in the Ramayana.

13. KAIKEYI SUCCUMBS

Kaikeyi, who had looked upon Rama as her own son, was enmeshed in Manthara's arguments and became helpless.

"Indeed, I am afraid," she said. "Tell me what we should do. Am I to be a servant to Kausalya? Never, Bharata must be crowned. You are quite right. And Rama must be sent to forest. But how shall we get all this done? Tell me. You are clever and know the way."

And she clung to Manthara. In Kaikeyi's eyes at that time Manthara's crooked frame appeared handsome. This

is not a joke; it is a subtle psychological phenomenon,

"This is indeed strange, Kaikeyi," said Manthara. "Is it for me to tell you how this could be brought about? Have you really forgotten? Or, are you only pretending? But if you want me to say it, I shall do so. Listen."

And then she paused. Kaikeyi, all impatient, cried: "Tell me, tell me. Somehow Bharata must be crowned and Rama's coronation must be stopped."

"Very well," said Manthara, "I shall tell you. Do not be impatient. You remember how your husband Dasaratha, long ago, fought against Sambara in the South? And you were with him, were you not? Your husband went, did he not, to help Indra? Sambara of Vijayanti was too powerful for Indra, who sought Dasaratha's help. Did not Dasaratha get wounded in battle and lose consciousness? Then, you drove his chariot skilfully out of the battlefield, gently removed the arrows from his body and revived him and saved his life. Have you forgotten all this? And what did he tell you then? He told you in gratitude: 'Ask me for two boons. I shall give you anything you want.' Then you answered: 'I shall ask for my boons later. I want nothing now.' Then he promised, did he not, 'You will have your two gifts whenever you want them'? You told me all this long ago yourself. You may have forgotten it, but I have not. The time has arrived to get him to redeem his promise. Demand that he should crown Bharata instead of Rama. This will be the first of two gifts he promised. For the second gift, ask that Rama be sent to the forest for fourteen years. Do not be frightened. Do not fear to ask. Do not think it sinful to demand this. Do what I tell you. It is only if Rama is sent into the forest that his hold on the people will relax and disappear in course of time and your son's position will

be secure. Go now and lie down in the sulking room. Throw away your fine dress and your jewels, wear an old sari and stretch yourself on the floor. When the King enters the room, do not speak to him. Do not even look at him. I am sure he cannot endure your sorrow. You will then have your way with him. The King will try to get round you. Do not yield. He will offer many alternatives. Accept none of them. Insist on the two boons. Be firm. Bound by his promise the King will finally come round. I know how passionately he loves you. He would give up his life for your sake. To please you he would jump into fire. Do what I tell you. Do not be afraid. Unless Rama is sent to the forest, your wish will not be fulfilled. Rama must be sent away. Only then the position you get for Bharata will be real and lasting. Remember this and mind you do not weaken."

Listening to this exhortation, Kaikeyi's face shone with hope. "What a brain you have, Manthara," exclaimed Kaikeyi. "You have been the saving of me." And she jumped about in joy like a filly.

Manthara repeated again and again that Rama must be sent to the forest. "Do not delay. What needs to be done, do at once. It is no good strengthening the tank-bund after the waters have flown out. Remember what I have told you. Everything depends on your firmness. Victory is yours if you do not yield."

Kaikeyi assured Manthara of her firmness and forthwith entered the sulking room, removed her jewels and scattered them on the floor, changed her clothes and stretched herself on the floor. Then, assuming a broken voice, she said:

"Manthara, you will yourself carry the news to my father Kekaya. You will yourself tell him one of two things: either that Bharata is to be crowned or that

Kaikeyi is dead. My dear, dear Manthara!"

Kaikeyi in her anger believed that Dasaratha had really been treacherous to her. Even then, stretched on the ground divesting herself of all ornaments and putting on a face of grief and anger, she looked inexpressibly beautiful. So great was her beauty.

The sinful thought had found lodgment in her mind and her whole nature was transformed. The fear that she would lead a slave's life, and that even Bharata's life was in peril, had got hold of her. For the first time in her life she cast aside the sense of shame and sin and hardened her heart. Heaving heavy sighs, perspiring, and with eyes closed, Kaikeyi, beautiful like a Naga goddess, unbraided her hair and lay on the floor with dishevelled tresses and sprawling like a bird shot down by a hunter. The flowers and shining jewels, which once adorned her person, lay scattered in the dark room like stars in the midnight sky.

Having dismissed the Assembly and given orders for the due celebration of the coronation ceremony, Dasaratha, relieved of care and wishing to relax, sought the apartments of his favorite consort. He had decided on the coronation of Rama after receiving the approval of all those who had a right to be consulted and he felt happy and free, as after laying down a heavy burden.

He entered Kaikeyi's chamber to tell her the happy news and spend in pleasant talk the night before the coronation. The junior queen's residence was a beautiful palace with lovely gardens and tanks, birds playing in the water and peacocks dancing with tails spread out and trees resplendent with bright flowers. In Dasaratha's happy mood it appeared unusually beautiful that night.

Like the full moon rising brightly before an eclipse, without knowing of the eclipse that lies in wait for her, the poor old King entered Kaikeyi's dwelling with a beaming face. The incense pots and drinks were in their usual places but he did not see the Queen whom he was eager to meet.

Of all his consorts Kaikeyi was the one whose company he sought for joyous relaxation from all cares of state, for she never interfered in public affairs, and always waited for him at the entrance and welcomed him with a warm embrace. But, today, she was nowhere to be found.

The King was perplexed. He went around and looked in vain for her in all her favorite haunts thinking that she was playing a sweet game of hide and seeks. He did not find her. This sort of thing had never happened before! He asked a maidservant where the Queen was. Folding her hands in reverence, the girl said: "Lord, the Queen is angry. She is in the inner chamber."

The surprised King entered the room. And he saw a sight which amazed and distressed him, for there she lay on the bare floor, with draggled robes and disheveled hair, like one in mortal pain. She seemed too full of anguish even to look at him as he entered.

The poor guileless King, all unconscious of having given any cause for offence, behaved with the doting fondness of an old husband and seating himself by her on the floor stroked her hair and strove to console her with loving words and caresses:

"What has come over you? Are you ill? Do you feel any pain? Have I not the best doctors in the land? I shall send for them at once. They can cure any malady. Do not be afraid."

Kaikeyi sighed heavily, but would not speak.

The King proceeded: "Was anyone in the palace guilty of discourteous behavior? Tell me and I shall punish him. Did anyone slight you or was there anything you wanted which I neglected to give you? Tell me."

In this way, he mentioned faults that might have occurred in the running of a big house and asked her what the matter was and why she was upset. Kaikeyi paid no attention to his questions and was mute like one possessed.

The King begged her more importunately: "State your wish. It shall be done. Do you want anyone punished? I shall punish him. Do you want anyone freed from punishment? I shall free him, even if he be a murderer. You know my absolute authority, I can give and I can take, as I please. Anything, to anyone, I can do what I wish. Ask me anything and it shall be done at once."

Kaikeyi sat up. The King was pleased. And she began: "No one slighted or dishonored me. But there is something which you can do and you must do it for my sake. Give me your word that you will fulfil my desire. Then I shall tell you what it is."

Hearing this, the unsuspecting old man was filled with joy. Possessing absolute powers, he had no doubt that he could fulfil her wishes whatever they were, and so boldly and joyously he said: "Well, Kaikeyi, tell me your wish. It shall be done. I swear it. I swear it on all I love most on you, the dearest among women, and on Rama, dearest to me among men! I swear in the name of Rama: Whatever you desire, I shall do, I promise, I swear."

Guileful wickedness and trustful misfortune were reaching the climax in their unequal encounter. The King's swearing in the name of Rama filled Kaikeyi with supreme delight. She was now sure that she had won, for the King

would never break a promise coupled with that beloved name.

"Do you promise? Very well!" she exclaimed. "Swear again in the name of Rama that you will do what I wish without fail. Swear it!"

The King said: "My beloved queen, I promise. I swear it on Rama. Whatever you wish I shall do. This is my sworn word."

At this stage, as she thought of the tremendousness of her intended request, Kaikeyi's heart misgave her and she feared that on hearing it her horror-stricken husband would exclaim: 'God forbid! No oath or promise is strong enough to justify so heinous a sin!' and recoil from her with abhorrence.

She stood erect and with folded hands, turning in the four directions, invoked in a solemn voice the heavenly powers to witness and confirm the oath: "Oh, Ye Gods! You have heard and witnessed the promise given to me by my husband. Sun, Moon and Planets, you are my holy witnesses. Ye, Five Elements! You have heard the promise. He who has never broken his word, my husband, has sworn to do my wish. Bear witness to this."

Dasaratha was looking at her with hungry, joyous eyes. She knew her man and she began boldly: "Do you remember, King, how, when long ago in the field of battle you were about to lose your life, I drove your chariot in the dark night, took you out of the battlefield, removed the arrows from your body and comforted and revived you? When you came out of your faint, you said something, did you not? You said: 'You have restored to me the life which my foes had taken from me. I shall give you any two gifts you ask.' Then I said: 'I want nothing now. It is joy enough now for me that you are alive. I shall ask for my gifts later.' Do you remember this?"

The King answered: "Yes, I do remember this. Ask for your two gifts. You shall have them now."

Kaikeyi said: "Remember you have made a vow. You have given a pledge. You have sworn in the name of Rama. The gods and the five elements have witnessed your promise. I shall state my wishes. Your ancestors never broke their word. Prove yourself their worthy descendant by being true to the word you have given. With the preparations now afoot for the coronation, crown my son Bharata. This is my first wish. The second boon that I demand is, send your son Rama to live in the Dandaka forest for fourteen years. Remember your solemn vow that you cannot break. The good fame of your great dynasty is in your hands."

14. WIFE OR DEMON?

Dasaratha was thunder-struck.

When his mind resumed its function, he doubted the reality of what had happened. "Could it be other than a hideous dream? Or the phantasmagoria of a disordered brain? Or the sudden materialisation of the sins of some past birth called up for my chastisement? I am certainly the victim of an illusion. I cannot believe this to be reality."

Unable to stand the confused agony of shapeless terrors, he closed his eyes and became unconscious. Opening his eyes a little later, they fell on Kaikeyi and he trembled like a stag at the sight of a tiger. He sat up on the floor and moaned, swaying helplessly this side and that like a cobra held by the spell of a potent charm. Again he swooned.

After a long interval, he recovered his senses and, with eyes turned to his tormentor and inflamed with helpless anger, cried out: "O wicked ogress! Destroyer of my dynasty! What harm has Rama done to you? Has he not looked

upon you as his own mother? I thought you were a woman. I now see you are a venomous serpent brought from far away and cherished in my bosom only to sting me to death!"

Kaikeyi was unmoved and spoke not a word.

The King went on: "On what pretext can I banish Rama, whom all the people love and praise? I may lose Kausalya and survive. I may lose the pure-minded Sumitra and survive. But if I lose Rama, I cannot live thereafter. Without water, without sunlight, I may live for a while, but never without Rama. Expel from your mind this sinful thought. With my head bowed at your feet, I beg of you. Have you not said many a time, 'Two dear sons I have. And of them Rama, the elder, is dearer to me'? In deciding to crown Rama, what have I done but carry out in action your unspoken wish? Why then do you demand these cruel boons? No, no, it cannot be really that you mean this. You are only testing me to find out if I indeed love your son Bharata. Do not, through a great sin, destroy our famous line of Kings."

Even then Kaikeyi spoke no word, but her eyes blazed scornful anger.

The King continued: "Till this day you have done nothing to cause me sorrow, never spoken an unworthy word. Who has corrupted you now? I cannot believe that this evil thought is your own. How often have you told me, my dear, that, noble as Bharata is, Rama is nobler still? Is it the same Rama that you now want to be sent to the forest? How can he dwell in the forest? How can you even entertain the thought of his going away into the wilderness infested by ferocious beasts? How lovingly has Rama treated you and served you! How can you forget all this and steel your heart and utter the words, 'Send him to the forest'? What fault has he

committed? Of the hundreds of women in the palace, has anyone ever uttered a word against his honor or virtue? The whole world loves him for his great and good qualities. How did you alone among so many find cause to dislike him? Is not Rama like Indra himself? Is not his face radiant with goodness and spiritual light like a rishi's? The whole world praises his truthfulness and friendliness, his learning and wisdom, his heroism and humility. No one has heard a harsh word from his lips. How can I, his father, say to him 'Son, go to the forest'? This can never be. Have mercy on me, an old man nearing the end of his days. Kaikeyi, ask for anything else in this kingdom, ask for everything else, and I will give. With folded hands, I beg you, do not send me to Yama. Clinging to your feet I beg you, I beg you humbly, save Rama! Save me from sin!"

To the King thus struggling in a sea of grief, pitiless Kaikeyi spoke cruel words:

"King, if having promised the boons you regret it and will be forsworn, what sort of king would you be and what right would you have to speak of satya and dharma? How can you face other kings? Will you shamelessly confess to them, 'Yes, Kaikeyi saved me from death and I gave her a promise. Later, I was sorry I gave it and I broke it'? What else could you tell them? All monarchs will shun you as a disgrace to their order! And common people will laugh in scorn at their rulers and say, 'Kings break promises even when given to their queens. Do not expect kings to keep their word.' Do you not know that Saibya, to redeem the pledge he gave to a bird, cut the very flesh off his bones and gave it away? Have you not heard of Alarka who plucked his eyes out to keep his word? The sea stays within its limits and does not overflow the land, because it feels bound by its agreement. Do not violate your solemn pledge. Follow the

path of your royal ancestors. O, I fear that you, their unworthy descendant, will forsake dharma; you will crown Rama and you will dally with Kausalya. What do you care what happens to dharma? What do you care what happens to satya? If you deny me the gifts you promised on oath, I shall this very night drink poison and end my life. You may anoint and install Rama, but before your eyes, O, promise breaker, I shall be dead. This is certain. And I swear it in the name of Bharata. It will be well and good if you fulfil your promise and banish Rama to the forest. Else, I shall end my life."

With this firm declaration, Kaikeyi stopped. Dasaratha stood speechless, staring at his pitiless wife. Was this lovely creation really Kaikeyi or a demon? Then, like a huge tree felled by a forester with his axe, the King shook and toppled down and lay stretched unconscious on the floor in pitiful ruin.

Regaining his senses after a while, he spoke in a low voice: "Kaikeyi, who has corrupted your mind to see me dead and our race destroyed? What evil spirit has possessed you and makes you dance in this shameless fashion? Do you really think that Bharata will agree to be king after sending Rama to the forest? He never will, and you know it. Can I possibly bear to tell Rama to go to the forest? Will not the kings of the world despise me, saying, 'This uxorious old dotard has banished his eldest son, the best of men'? Don't you see that they would laugh at me? It is easy enough for you to say 'Send Rama away to the forest,' but can Kausalya or I survive his departure? And have you thought of Janaka's daughter? Would it not kill her to hear that Rama is to go away to the Dandaka forest? Cheated by your face I thought you a woman and took you for my wife. Like a deluded man, tempted by

the flavor of poisoned wine, I was lured by your beauty into marrying you. Like a deer ensnared by a hunter, I am caught in your net and perish. Like a drunken Brahmana in the streets I shall be universally despised. What boons have you demanded? Boons that forever will taint the fame of our dynasty with the ignominy of lustful dotage that drove an old fool to the banishment of a beloved and peerless son. If I tell Rama to go to the forest, yes, he will cheerfully obey and go to the forest. Myself and then Kausalya and Sumitra will die. How will you enjoy the kingdom thus secured, O sinful, foolish woman? And will Bharata agree to your plans? If he does agree, he shall not perform my obsequies. O shameless woman, my life's enemy, kill your husband and attain widowhood to enjoy the kingdom with your son. O, how sinful are women and how pitiless! No, no. Only this woman is cruel. Why should I insult other women? What a pity that my Bharata should have this monster for a mother! No, I can never do this. Kaikeyi, I fall at your feet and beg you. Have some pity on me!"

The King rolled on the ground and writhed in agony. What shall we say of this scene? A great emperor, famous for his long and glorious reign, crying and rolling on the ground, clasping his wife's feet and begging for mercy. It was like Yayati, thrown back to earth when, his accumulated merit exhausted, he was ejected from Swarga.

No matter how humbly he begged, Kaikeyi was obstinate and said firmly: "You have yourself boasted that you are a truth speaker. But now having sworn before the gods that you have granted a boon, you attempt to retract your promise. If you break your word, I shall surely kill myself and that, will not add greatly to the

glory of your dynasty, of which you are so proud!"

"Very well, then," said Dasaratha. "Let Rama go to the forest and let me die. Having destroyed me and my race, a jubilant widow, you will gain your wish and seek joy in your life!"

Again, after a while, the old King cried: "What good you will gain by sending Rama to the forest, I fail to see. The only result will be that the whole world will despise you. After many years of prayer and penance, I had Rama by the grace of God. And him I now banish into the forest, I, most wretched of men!"

Lifting his eyes to the sky, he said: "Oh night! Stay on. For when you pass and day dawns, what shall I do? What shall I say to those eager crowds, who, full of love for Rama, will be awaiting the coronation festivities? O heavens! Stay still for my sake with your stars! No, no. Stay not, for then I must keep looking at this sinful woman. Depart at once, O night, so that I may escape this face."

Thus delirious and conscious by turns, the poor old man suffered agony, a king who had reigned for sixty thousand years.

"Pity me, Kaikeyi," he said. "Forget the harsh things I uttered in anger. I beg you in the name of the love you bore me. You may take it that I have given the kingdom to you. It is yours. And you can give it with your own hands to Rama and see that the coronation goes through. The Raja Sabha has decided and I have announced to the elders and to Rama that his coronation is to take place tomorrow. Let not this announcement become false. Have pity on me. Give the kingdom as you own to Rama. The fame of this magnanimous gift will last as long as the world endures. My wish, the people's wish, the Elders' wish, Bharata's wish, they are all that Rama should be crowned.

Do this, my love, my life." Again the King clung to the feet of Kaikeyi.

But she answered: "Have done with this foolery, see that you do not break your word and drive me to keep mine, and kill myself. It is useless for you to try to evade."

The King said: "With due rites and in the presence of Fire, I took your hand and called you wife. Here and now I renounce you, and with you the son you bore. Night is gone; the dawn is near and the morning will see not Rama's coronation, but my funeral." Kaikeyi cut him short: "You are prattling vainly. Send at once for Rama. Let him come here. Tell him the kingdom is Bharata's and he should go to the forest. Keep your promise. Do not waste time."

Dasaratha groaned: "Very well. Let me at last set eyes on Rama's face. My death is near. Let Rama come. Let me see his face before I die. Tied down by dharma this old fool is helpless."

And again he fell unconscious.

15. BEHOLD A WONDER!

POOR Dasaratha was in extreme agony, pulled by natural affection on one side and by the moral obligation to fulfil a pledge on the other. He had fondly hoped that Kaikeyi would relent and that somehow the conflict of duties would be resolved. But now he saw that this was not to be.

He had still one faint hope: "Rama is in no way bound by my promises and pledges. Strong as he is in people's love and in his peerless prowess, he may disregard my promise, and stand on his own rights. But I cannot conceive his doing so, for my slightest wish has always been sacred to him. Yet, if by some chance he did so, it would save the situation."

In the confusion and anguish of his heart, the old King consoled himself with such false hopes, forgetting that Rama

would never think of disregarding his father's promise and that filial obedience was a fundamental rule of his life.

But the false hopes did not persist long. He felt that his death was near. In this agonising conflict of duties, death would be a relief, and save him from the disruption and sorrows to come.

As death drew near, his mind recalled past events. He remembered a great sin committed by him in youth. He felt that he was now reaping what he then sowed: "I killed the Rishi's son and brought grief to his aged parents. How could this sin be wiped off except by my suffering the anguish of losing a dear son?" Thus Dasaratha resigned himself to his fate as a just retribution for the wrong he had once done.

He concluded that he had no alternative but to fulfil his word to his cruel wife and left the ordering of things entirely to Kaikeyi.

Day dawned. The hour fixed for the coronation was approaching. The procession of Vasishtha and his disciples carrying the golden vessels containing the waters of holy rivers was coming towards the palace.

The great street was decorated and was crowded with eager men and women. They rejoiced to see Vasishtha and his disciples march to the palace with the holy waters, and the paraphernalia of installation. As they saw the honey, curds, clarified butter, fried rice, sacred grass, flowers, maidens, elephants, horses and chariots, the white umbrella, the bull, the horse and the tiger-skin seat moving to the accompaniment of music from many instruments, the people made loud and jubilant acclamations which filled the air.

Vasishtha, approaching the palace gate, saw Sumantra and said to him: "Pray, go in at once and inform the King that the

people are waiting and all preparations are complete."

Sumantra approached the King's bed-chamber and chanting the morning hymn, conveyed Vasishtha's message. "Oh King," he said, "arise from slumber to the hymn of your charioteer as the king of the gods does to Matali's waking songs. May all the gods be gracious unto you. The elders, generals, and chief citizens are waiting for your darshan. The goddess of night has withdrawn. The day's work awaits your ordering. Oh King of kings, be pleased to rise. Holy Vasishtha and his men are waiting."

At that moment the King was speechless with agony, but Kaikeyi boldly answered for him and told Sumantra: "The King spent the night talking of Rama's coronation and had no sleep. So now he is in a slumber. Go at once and bring Rama."

Thus the clever woman sent Sumantra to fetch Rama to convey the King's command. She knew that Dasaratha had agreed but had not the strength to do what had to be done. Hence Kaikeyi resolved that she would herself do what needed to be done.

Sumantra went to Rama's palace. Sita and Rama were getting ready for coronation. Then Sumantra gave to Rama the message that the King and Queen Kaikeyi wanted his presence. Rama hastened to obey.

The unexpected delay and these strange goings and comings roused doubts, but no one dared to talk of them. The men concerned hoped that somehow things would turn out right and went on with their allotted work.

The streets were brightly decorated; the great hour was approaching as in the Queen's chamber strange and sinister events were developing.

"Why this long delay?" the people wondered. "Perhaps the preliminary rites are more elaborate than we had thought."

The crowds in the streets grew bigger and bigger and more impatient.

Sumantra accompanied Rama to Kaikeyi's palace, treading the way with difficulty through the throng. Rama entered the Queen's apartment. As he stepped over the threshold, he started as if he had set his foot upon a snake, for he saw with awe-struck amazement his father lying on the bare floor in anguish. The King evidently had been struck down with some great sorrow. His face was like a parijata blossom wilted in the sun.

He touched his father's feet and paid the same filial worship to Kaikeyi.

Dasaratha uttered in a low voice the name of Rama and stopped. He could speak no more. He could not look straight into the face of Rama.

Rama was perplexed and filled with apprehension at the sight of his father, lying there unable to speak, in the grip of some great agony. What it could be Rama could not even guess.

He turned to Kaikeyi and said: "Mother, this is indeed strange. No matter how angry he was, my father would speak sweetly to me. Have I without knowing it offended him in any matter? Has some sudden sickness struck him down? Has someone spoken rudely to him? Do tell me what has happened. I can bear this suspense no longer."

Bold Kaikeyi seized the chance and said: "The King is angry with no one. There is nothing wrong with his health. But there is something in his mind which he is afraid to tell you. That is all. He is afraid to say it to you, lest you should feel hurt. That is why he is silent. Once upon a time, pleased with me he offered, and I accepted, the gift of two boons. Now, like an uncultured person, the King regrets he

did so. Is this worthy of him? Is it not unbecoming of a King to pledge his word and then regret it? You have the power to fulfil his promise, but he fears even to tell you of it and is thinking of violating it. Would it be right? If you assure him that he need not be anxious about your attitude and that he should keep his word at all costs, you will give him the needed strength to behave righteously. You must give him the help he needs. The thing is in your hands. I shall tell you what it is, but after you promise me that you will help the King to fulfil his pledge."

Rama, saddened at the thought that he should in any way be the occasion of distress to his father, said to Kaikeyi: "Mother, am I indeed the cause of all this trouble? I do not deserve that you should have any doubts about me. If my father asks me to jump into the fire, I shall not hesitate to do it. If he asks me to drink poison, I shall drink it without hesitation. You know this. You know well enough that at his bidding I would drown myself in the sea. Here mother, I give you my solemn promise that I shall fulfil the King's promise to you, and I never break my word."

When Rama uttered these words, Kaikeyi exulted, for she knew she had conquered. The King for his part was in despair, seeing that all escape was now barred.

Thereupon the pitiless Kaikeyi uttered these terrible words: "Rama, your words are worthy of you. What higher duty has a son than helping fulfilment of the word his father has given? Now I shall let you know your father's promise to me. When in the battle with Sambara your father was wounded, I rescued and revived him. Your father in gratitude for having been rescued by me when grievously wounded gave me two boons to be claimed and specified when I choose. I have claimed

and specified them now. They are that Bharata should be anointed Yuvaraja and that you should be sent away this very day to the Dandaka forest, to remain in exile for fourteen years. You have sworn solemnly to carry out his promise to me, and now it is your duty to prove true to your pledged word. If you find right conduct as hard as your father did, that is another matter. Otherwise, listen to what I say. It is for you now to relinquish the installation and to go out into exile with matted locks and hermit weeds, leaving the preparations now ready to serve for Bharata's installation."

When she uttered these cruel words the King writhed in agony, but Rama heard her untroubled. Kaikeyi beheld a miracle. There was not the slightest sign of disappointment or sorrow in Rama's face. Smiling, the Prince said: "Is that all, mother? Surely, the King's promise must be fulfilled. My hair shall be twisted and I shall wear the bark and I shall go this very day to the forest."

Kaikeyi spoke prophetic words when she said Rama's dutifulness would bring him glory undying. That glory will continue as long as the Himalaya stands and the waters of Ganga flow and as long as the ocean-waves beat on the solid earth.

Rama said to Kaikeyi, in unperturbed tones: "I am not in the least annoyed. Would I not be happy to give anything to Bharata? Even if no one asked me, I would cheerfully give him my all. And how can I hold back a moment when my father commands it? What pains me a little is that father should have entertained any doubt about my willingness. Why should he have hesitated to tell me what he wanted and left it to you to say it to me? Am I not his son, bound to do his behest? What glory or what joy can I look for except to make good his word? How did I deserve it that my father should avert

his face from me and refrain from speaking loving words to me? My grievance, if at all, is that he did not send for me straight and give me his command. I shall go to the forest this very day, with no regret. Send swift messengers at once to fetch Bharata home."

The Prince's face glowed like a sacrificial fire bursting into flame as the ghee is poured into it. Kaikeyi felt glad at her apparent success. She could not look into the future and its sorrow, for what greater grief can come to a woman than the scorn of her own son? Greed deceived her into folly. It prevented her from understanding aright the mind of her own son Bharata.

Like a captive elephant hemmed in on all sides, Dasaratha lay in anguish. With needless harshness, Kaikeyi hurried Rama saying, "Do not wait for the King to speak and prolong the affair."

At this Rama said: "Mother, you have not, it seems, known me. I value no pleasure higher than to honor my father's pledge. Let Bharata carry the burden of kingship, and look after our aged father. It will indeed give me the greatest joy."

Dasaratha, silent till now though listening intently, moaned aloud. Rama touched the feet of his father and Kaikeyi and hurried out of the chamber. Lakshmana had been standing outside. He knew what had happened and with eyes red with anger he followed Rama.

On the way Rama saw the vessels holding the consecrated water for the coronation. He walked round them in worship. With calm majesty he left behind the white umbrella and other royal insignia and advised the crowds to disperse. The Prince, in whom desire had been vanquished, went to the house of Queen Kausalya to give her the news and take her blessings before departing to the forest.

Readers should exercise their imagination and build up in their own hearts the passions and sorrows of the persons figuring in this epic. Dasaratha's anguish, Rama's cheerful renunciation and the greedy passion of Kaikeyi which smothered all noble impulses these are familiar phases in our daily lives.

Valmiki and Kamban saw with the vision of genius and made the events in Rama's story live again in song. We too should see them through imagination. This is the meaning of the tradition that wherever Rama's tale is told Hanuman himself joins the gathering and reverently stands listening with tear-filled eyes. May everyone that reads this chapter receive by Rama's grace and strength to bear the sorrows that have to be faced in life.

16. STORM AND CALM

RAMA went to Queen Kausalya's dwelling. Many visitors were assembled there, eagerly awaiting the coronation. In the innermost apartment, the Queen, clad in white silk, was before the sacrificial fire invoking blessings on her son.

As soon as Rama entered, she embraced him and showed him, who she thought, was to become the Yuvaraja, to a specially raised seat.

"Mother, this seat is now too high for me," said Rama. "I am a hermit and should sit on grass spread on the floor. I have brought you news, which may sadden you. Listen, and give me your blessings."

And he told her briefly what had happened: "The King wishes to give the crown to Bharata. His command is that I should spend fourteen years in the Dandaka forest. I must leave today, mother, and I come for your blessings before I go."

When Kausalya heard this, she fell on the ground like a plantain tree suddenly

cut down. Lakshmana and Rama gently raised her.

She clung to Rama and cried: "Is my heart made of stone or iron that I still live?"

Lakshmana could not bear the sight of the Queen's grief. Angrily he spoke: "This old King has pronounced on Rama a doom that is reserved for the most wicked evil-doers. What sin or crime has Rama committed? Not even his worst enemy could find any fault in Rama. The doting old man has lost his senses over his young wife and is not fit to be king any more. How can a king listen to a woman and violate dharma? Even your enemies, O! Rama, when they look at you begin to love you, but this dotard of a father sends you to the forest. Look here, brother, let us together throw out this King and take charge of the kingdom. Who will dare oppose us? I shall make an end of anyone who dares. Only give me leave and I shall do this single-handed. A young brother to become King and you to go to the forest! The world would laugh at this absurdity. Don't consent to this. I at any rate won't stand this. I shall put down all opposition and see that you rule the kingdom without delay or hindrance. Never doubt but I have strength to do it. Instead of the sun rising, a great darkness has descended upon the land this morning, for when we were expecting your coronation the King sentences you to banishment! In the face of such injustice there is no use being nice and polite. I cannot stand this. I must do my duty. Mother, now you will see the strength of my arm and so will you, brother."

Lakshmana's words were some solace to Kausalya, but yet this strange talk of ousting the King and seizing the throne frightened her.

She said: "Rama, consider well what Lakshmana says. Don't go to the forest. If

you go away, how can I stay here all alone among enemies? I too shall go with you."

Rama had listened in silence to Lakshmana's outburst, for it was wise to let the pent up passion find outlet in words. Then, turning to Kausalya he said: "Mother, let there be no talk of anyone going with me to the forest. It is your duty to stay here serving the King and sharing the sorrow that has come to him in his old age. How can the crowned Queen of an Emperor wander with me like a widow in the forest? This cannot be. I shall return after my term of forest life. It is my duty to fulfil my father's word. It is all the same to me, whether it is just or unjust, spontaneous or extorted by force or fraud. If I fail in this primary duty, I can gain no satisfaction or good name through any amount of wealth or power. Lakshmana, your proposals are quite wrong. I know your great strength and I have no doubt that you can vanquish and destroy all opponents and secure for me the kingdom. I know also your affection for me. But the way in which you propose to use it is not worthy of the dynasty to which we belong. Our highest duty is to fulfil our father's word. If we fail in that, no other achievement can make up for it."

Rama tried to console both his mother and his brother, but Lakshmana's anger could not be easily put down. Perhaps it could have been, if he himself, not Rama, were the sufferer. But it was Rama who was the victim of this cruel injustice. And so Lakshmana writhed in anger like a wounded cobra. Rama took him apart, made him sit down and tried to calm him:

"Lakshmana, are you not my other self, my very soul in another body? Listen to me. You are courageous and strong. Control your anger and grief on my account. Don't allow these evil spirits to possess you. Holding fast to dharma, let us convert our present disgrace into a

great joy. Let us forget all about the coronation, and think worthily as becomes our race. Consider our father's condition. Our hearts should go out to him in sympathy, for he is stricken with a great sorrow. Whatever be the reason, he gave a promise and if he should break it, he would be committing a shameful sin which would besmire and blot out all his great and glorious deeds. He is heart-broken at the wrong he feels he has done me. But I do not feel it a wrong at all, for a king must keep his word and a son must obey his father. You should show that you too are free from any sense of injury. Only so can we bring him mental relief. He gave us the life that we hold and we should give him peace of mind. He is afraid about the other world. We should free him from this fear. So far, we have never given him cause for sorrow or dissatisfaction. Now we have become the cause of a great fear in his mind about what is to happen to him in the other world. We can easily relieve him. Instead of doing this, are we to add to his troubles? For this reason my mind has altogether turned away from the coronation and is intent on the journey to the forest. My sole desire now is to go to the forest and see that Bharata is crowned. This would please me best. If I delay, Kaikeyi will grow suspicious. Hence I should go to the forest this very day and bring peace to her mind. Rid of the fear of the sin of breaking a promise and assured of my willing and cheerful acceptance of his command, our father will be happy. And we should not be angry with Kaikeyi either. Has she not been kind to us all these years? That she should suddenly conceive this idea is surely the working of fate. We should not blame her for it. One proposes something and fate decides otherwise. In this, Kaikeyi is but a passive instrument in the hand of fate. Our little

mother will have to bear the grievous burden of the world's blame, but our love for her should remain the same as ever. If, before this, there had been evil in her thought, her conduct would have shown it. There is no doubt that some higher force has made her say suddenly and harshly, 'Rama, go to the forest.' Otherwise how could a high-minded woman who so far looked upon us as her own children now behave so brazenly before her husband? Who can oppose destiny? Even steadfast sages have swerved suddenly from their tapas. How can poor Kaikeyi hope to resist fate? Let us resolve firmly to change this sorrow into joy. That would be a proof of our nobility and courage, Lakshmana. With the blessings of my mothers and elders, I shall go to the forest. Bring here the water, the water from the Ganga for the coronation. I shall use it for ablution before departing for the forest. No, no, that water belongs to the State and is intended for the coronation. How can we touch it? We shall go to holy Ganga ourselves and fetch the water for my ablution. Brother, be not sad thinking of kingdom or wealth; life in the forest will be my highest joy."

So Rama revealed to his brother his inmost thoughts. In these passages Valmiki uses the word *daiva*. In Sanskrit literature, *daivam* means fate. *Daivam*, *dishtam*, *bhagyam*, *niyati* and *vidhi* are all words conveying the idea of something unexpected and inexplicable. Because of the belief in God as the Prime Cause, a natural confusion arises between fate and God's will. What Rama said to Lakshmana on the present occasion does not mean that he thought that the gods contrived Kaikeyi's action for their own benefit. Rama offered no more than the usual consolation: "It is the work of fate. Do not grieve. No one is to blame for this."

In the Kamban Ramayana also, addressing his brother 'raging like the fire of dissolution,' Rama says: "It is not the river's fault that the bed is dry. Even so, my going hence is not the King's fault, nor Queen Kaikeyi's nor her son's. The wrong is the work of fate. Why should one be angry then?"

This explanation calmed Lakshmana for a while. But soon his anger boiled up again. He said: "Very well, then. This is the work of fate. Fate, I grant, is the cause of our step-mother's sudden folly. And I am not angry with her. But are we, on that account, to sit still and do nothing? It is Kshatriya dharma to overcome evil and establish justice. A hero does not bow down before fate. Having announced Rama's coronation by beat of drum to the town and country, the treacherous King invokes some old forgotten boon and orders you to go to the forest. Is it manly to call this fate and obey it meekly? Only cowards go down under fate. Heroes should oppose and vanquish it. I am no weakling to yield to fate. You will see today the might of a hero matched against fate. I shall tame the mad elephant fate and make it serve me. I shall banish to the forest those who conspired to banish you. If you wish to visit the forest for a change, you can do so later. The proper time for it will be when you have reigned as king for many years and then entrusted the crown to your sons. That was the way of our ancestors. If anyone questions your kingship now, I stand here to annihilate him. Are these two shoulders merely for beauty? This bow, these arrows and this sword hanging on my side are they mere decorations? Or do you think they are theatrical equipment put on for show? I await your orders. Give me the word and test my prowess."

Rama gently pacified Lakshmana's rage which was flaming up into a

conflagration. "As long as our parents are alive," said Rama, "it is our duty to obey them. I cannot dream of disobeying my father. It is our prime duty to do his bidding and enable him to fulfil his pledge. What joy is there in getting a kingship after insulting our parents and slaying Bharata, the embodiment of dharma?"

And he wiped with his hand the tears from Lakshmana's eyes. When Rama did this, Lakshmana grew calm for the affectionate magic of Rama's hand could work wonders.

17. SITA'S RESOLVE

What took place in the inner apartments of the palace was not yet known to the town-people. But Rama for his part lost no time in preparing for forest life.

He went to Queen Kausalya to receive her blessings before leaving the city. Kausalya said to him again: "How can I stay in Ayodhya after you are gone? It is best that I go with you to the forest." Of course, she knew that her duty was to serve her husband in his old age and share his sorrow in Ayodhya. And yet her mind was now so confused by grief that she did not see things clearly.

But Rama would not hear of it and put her in mind of her duty to be with the heart-stricken old King in his sad solitude.

She recognised the justice of this counsel. She gave him her benedictions in sweet words diluted with the salt of broken tears. "Do as your father has decreed and return in glory." Rama put heart in her with a smile saying: "The fourteen years will pass quickly and you will see me back."

The poet says that, as Rama received his mother's benedictions, his bright face glowed with added effulgence. How truly he pictures the sublime loveliness that comes of a great renunciation that

illuminates one's being as with an Inner Light!

We saw that Rama left Sita and went to the King in answer to the message brought by Sumantra. Sita was expecting Rama to return in a chariot with the royal umbrella, followed by a great retinue. But now she saw Rama return alone, unattended, with none of the royal insignia. And she noted on his face the glow of some fixed resolve. Rama was thinking as he came how he could break to his beloved the news that his father had decreed that he was to go to forest.

"Something troubles the mind of my lord," thought Sita, "but what can anything matter so long as there is our love?" And she asked him: "What is the matter? Why do you look so strangely?"

Rama told the story briefly and then added: "Princess, my love, I can well imagine your sorrow at having to part from me and stay here. Janaka's daughter requires not my guidance to her duty. Be thoughtful of the comfort of the King and the three Queens, your mothers. Do not expect any better treatment than that given to the other princesses in the palace. Be respectful to Bharata who will be ruler and guard against any offence to his feelings. Your love for me, I trust, will not grow any less during this absence. I shall return from forest after these fourteen years. Till then do not neglect customary rites and ceremonies. Mother Kausalya in her sorrow will need your attentive care. Bharata and Satrugna are dear to me. You will look upon them as your brothers. Conduct yourself as befits your royal race and your own nature. Avoid extolling me so as to give possible offence to other good men. I must go to the forest today. Keep your mind steady and calm."

When Sita heard this unexpected speech, her love for Rama manifested itself as anger that he should for a moment

conceive that she could consent to part from him and live in comfort in the palace while he was a homeless wanderer in pathless forests. "A fine speech you have made, knower of dharma. It is to me a strange doctrine that a wife is diverse from her husband and that his duty is not hers, and that she has no right to share in it. I can never accept it. I hold that your fortunes are mine, and if Rama has to go to the forest, the command includes Sita also, who is a part of him. I shall walk in front of you in the forest ways and tread the thorns and the hard ground to make them smooth for your feet. Do not think me obstinate. My father and mother have instructed me in dharma. What you tell me is totally opposed to what they have taught me. To go with you wherever you go, that is my only course. If you must go to the forest today, then today I go with you. There is no room here for any discussion. Do not think that I cannot bear forest life. With you by my side it will be a joyous holiday. I shall not be a source of trouble to you. I shall eat fruit and roots like you and I shall not lag behind as we walk. I have long wished to go to the woods with you and rejoice in the sight of great mountains and rivers. I shall spend the time most happily among the birds and flowers, bathing in the rivers and doing the daily rites. Away from you, I do not care for Heaven itself. I shall surely die if you leave me behind. I implore you to take me with you. Have pity on me. Do not forsake me now."

Beginning in anger, her speech ended in sobs. Rama explained to Sita that life in the forest was not as easy as she thought and set out at great length the difficulties and dangers and again insisted that she should not think of accompanying him.

Sita's eyes filled with tears. "Tigers, lions, bears, snakes none of them will come near me. They will flee from us at

the sight of you. The sun, rain, wind and hunger and the spikes and thorny shrubs you speak of, I shall endure them all cheerfully. I am not in the least afraid, and on the other hand you may be certain life will depart from this body if you leave me here and go."

"When I was in Mithila," she said, "the Brahmanas and astrologers told my mother that I was destined to live in the forest for a while. Can I fulfil this prediction alone in the forest? Here is the opportunity for me to fulfil it in your company which will make the forest a garden of delight. For whom is forest life unpleasant? Only to those men and women who have not controlled their senses. You and I can be masters of our senses and miss nothing. I implore you, put me not away from you, for parting from you is more cruel than death."

There is a strength in supreme love which defies reason and laughs at death itself. And Rama suffered himself to be persuaded, partly because his love was great as hers and every passionate word she spoke found ready lodgment in his heart, and partly because he was confident of his ability to protect her. It was settled that Sita should accompany Rama to the forest.

She sent for the poor and gave away all her belongings and prepared herself for life in the forest. Lakshmana also decided to go with his brother and be of service to him in the forest, and Rama had to agree. The three went to take leave of the aged King.

In the streets and on the balconies were crowds of people looking on. Through the windows and from the terraces of mansions, men and women saw Rama and Lakshmana and the princess proceeding on foot, like the poorest in the land.

Filled with boundless grief and indignation, the people said to one

another: "What kind of a King is this who sends so noble a prince to the forest? And their Sita walks a princess that should command the service of the royal chariot. Can she bear the heat and the rain of the forest? This is monstrous! We shall go then to the forest too. Let us gather up all we have and get away to the forest with these princes. The forest where Rama dwells shall be our Ayodhya. Let these houses here henceforth deserted be infested with snakes and rats. Let Kaikeyi rule over the ruins of Ayodhya. Wild beasts and vultures of the forest will come to stay here. This will become a forest, and the forest will become Ayodhya."

Rama heard people talking thus, but took no notice. At the entrance to Kaikeyi's palace, Rama saw Sumantra seated sorrow fully aside in a corner. Rama tenderly spoke to him: "The three of us have come to meet the King. Sumantra, crave leave for us to enter his presence."

Sumantra went, in accordingly to announce them to the King. What a sight met him there! Like the sun in eclipse, like an oven filled all over with ash, like a tank gone dry, the King was stretched flat on the floor, his glory gone and his face shrunken and distorted with anguish.

Sumantra, his voice trembling with grief and his hands clasped together, said: "The Prince waits at the entrance and seeks audience to take your blessings before he gives away all he has to the Brahmanas and starts for the Dandaka forest."

The King bade Sumantra let the Prince in.

Rama came and bowed to the King from a distance. As soon as he saw Rama, the King suddenly rose and rushed with out stretched arms to embrace him, but dropped in a swoon before reaching his son.

Rama and Lakshmana tenderly lifted him up and put him on the couch. "My Lord," said Rama, "we have come to seek your leave to go to the forest. Vaidehi and Lakshmana too are going with me in spite of all I could do to make them desist. Pray give us your benedictions and leave to depart."

Dasaratha then said: "Rama, I am bound by the boons that I have given to Kaikeyi. But you are not so bound. Why do you not brush me aside and seize the kingdom by force?"

That had long been in the King's mind as the best and only solution of this cruel problem and came out now clearly in words.

But Rama said: "I have no desire for kingdom or power, father. May you reign for a thousand years more. My heart is now set on going to the forest and I am even now in readiness to start after receiving your blessing. When the fourteen years have passed I shall return and tender obeisance."

The King's faint hope, it was now clear, must be abandoned. "My son! Bring glory to our line of kings. Go, but come back unscathed. May danger flee from your path. Cling to dharma. You are unshakable in resolution. Firm and unchangeable is your will. But do not go away today. Spend but this night here with me. Let me fill my eyes with the sight of you. You can go away at dawn. Like one handling a live coal deceptively covered with ash, I gave the promise to Kaikeyi not knowing what was in her mind. I am now helpless and caught in her net. And you say, 'I shall fulfil my father's promise. I shall not let dishonor blot the name of my father. I shall give up the kingdom and go to the forest.' Where in the world can one find a son like unto you? I swear to you, I did not intend this great wrong."

Thus piteously spoke the King. It was Dasharatha's wish to die without losing, even in his last moments, the respect of Rama.

"Father, send for Bharata at once and fulfil the promise you have given to mother Kaikeyi. Do not be troubled by the thought that you are doing me a wrong, for I had no desire for the throne, and do not feel it a deprivation to be denied it. Untroubled by grief or doubt, have Bharata crowned and give him your blessings. Cast all grief aside. Shed no tears. Can the ocean dry up? So may you too not lose your balance ever, great father. My sole wish is to make good the word you gave. If I got all the wealth of the world, but falsify your word, what joy would that be to me? I shall spend my time happily in the forest. Where but in the forests can one find beauty or joy? Father, you are my God. I take it that it is God that sends me to the forest. When the fourteen years are over, you will see me again. Do not grieve. What profits it that I stay here a night longer and go tomorrow? Time is made up of a succession of tomorrows and one day is just like another. Inevitable sorrows do not become joys by postponement."

"Well then, send for the commanders," said the King to Sumantra, "and order them to get ready the chariots, elephants, horses and foot soldiers, to go with Rama to the forest. And along with the army send all the necessary stores for Rama to live with the Rishis of the forest. Let there be nothing wanting in men, money or things."

Poor Dasaratha imagined that he could make Rama's exile to the forest something like a royal tour affording a pleasant change from routine and enlivened by exchange of gracious hospitalities with the sylvan population.

As he spoke Kaikeyi's face paled with anger. She glowered at the King, and in a voice tremulous with scornful wrath she said:

"A good and generous monarch surely! You will give Bharata this kingdom after squeezing out of it all the good it holds, as one might offer in mockery an empty drinking vessel to a man dying of thirst! What pleasure or glory will my son have in ruling a deserted state?"

Dasaratha groaned in helpless chagrin and marveled at a cruelty that could stab a man already crushed under an intolerable burden. Angry words rose from the mouths of those around, for even the courtiers found this open heartlessness more than they could suffer in silence. Rama put an end to all recriminations by saying he would not agree to take paraphernalia incongruous with what was intended in forest life.

"Honored Lord," he said, "what use have I, who am departing to the forest to live on what sylvan nature yields, for an army or the glittering equipage of a royal pageant? After gladly renouncing the throne, what use have I for its restraints? Would it not be covetous folly, after having parted with the elephant, to burden oneself with the ponderous chain? Father, I have cheerfully relinquished my claim to the kingdom in favor of Bharata and his mother, and with it all the incidents of royalty. For my fourteen years of forest life I require nothing but bark garments such as Rishis wear and simple necessities of forest life such as spades and baskets."

Hardly had Rama spoken these words when the unabashed Kaikeyi hastened to produce the forest dress! She had kept it ready and gave it herself without a blush to Rama. Then and there Rama dressed himself in bark. And in these garments he shone like a Rishi. Lakshmana too

changed into bark dress, while Dasaratha watched all this in helpless anguish.

Then Kaikeyi brought a bark dress for Sita too. She received it and stood bewildered, for she had never worn such garments before and did not know how to change into them.

Approaching Rama, who stood there resplendent with divine effulgence, Sita said shyly: "Pray tell me, how does one put this thing on?" As Rama took up the bark dress and, wrapping it over Sita's silk, made a knot over her shoulder, the ladies-in-waiting wailed aloud and Dasaratha fell into a swoon.

When he regained consciousness, he loudly reviled Kaikeyi, but she only smiled scornfully. She surely was not responsible for Sita going to the forest. The princess sought her own pleasure by going to the forest with her husband and would not be dissuaded.

Lowering his eyes as he was leaving, Rama said: "Father, I leave behind my mother Kausalya, blameless and tender-hearted lady, bereft of her son in her old age. This sudden fate is bitter to her as death, but she consents to live only for your sake, to share your sorrow and console you. She is incapable of harboring an unkind thought towards anyone, and she has never before felt the pang of such poignant parting. Be kind to her when I am no longer here and, when I return after my long exile in the hope of putting my head on her feet, let me not hear that she has died of sorrow." Thus Rama spoke, unable to bear the thought of his mother's grief. As Rama went out speaking thus, Dasaratha could not endure the sight and covered his face with his hands.

18. TO THE FOREST

AFTER Rama left his father's presence with these words, the stricken King lay prostrated in speechless sorrow, and it was

some time before he could muster his faculties sufficiently even to think.

When he recovered some strength, he muttered half unconsciously: "Surely I must in a previous birth have inflicted hideous suffering to loving hearts. I must have torn calves from their mothers, children from their parents, husbands from their wives. How else could I suffer thus? And death does not come when we want it. And I have to endure the torture of always having before my mind's eye my godlike son deprived of his birthright and forced into the bark-garments of a hermit. O life, how bitterly you cling to those who would be rid of you! Rama has gone into exile and yet I do not die! Rama ... Rama ... Have you gone? ..."

A little later, his mind clearer, the King said: "Sumantra, get ready the chariot and take my sons and Janaki to the frontier of the kingdom."

Lakshmana touched the feet of his mother Sumitra and uttered the single word "Mother." She embraced him, kissed his head and said: "Your devotion to your brother has filled your mother's heart with pride and joy. It is your duty, child, to guard and serve Rama. Always stand in vigilant watch by Rama's side in the forest. Your elder brother is to you both preceptor and king. This is the dharma of our race. Go with my blessing, Lakshmana. In the forest, regard Rama as your father and look upon Janaki as myself and the forest will be to you as Ayodhya. Go cheerfully, my dear son, and God bless you."

In the Ramayana, Sumitra is a woman of few words and mature wisdom and great tact and infinite courage, full of faith, in whom 'hope shines like a fame when it has gone out in all others.' The tradition is that Sumitra knew Rama's divinity and the purpose of his incarnation and that this enabled her not only to

comfort Kausalya but to see a holy ministration in Lakshmana's sharing Rama's exile.

Sumitra said: "Ascend the chariot, O Prince. God blesses you. Tell me where I am to drive, for the fourteen-year period has begun, my Prince."

Sita got up the chariot cheerfully. Kausalya had made up for her a packet of personal requirements. The shields, bows and arrows and other weapons of the two brothers together with pickaxes and baskets were placed in the chariot. Pickaxes and baskets are essential in the forest. Rama and Lakshmana ascended the chariot. Sumantra drove it forward.

Let us pause a while at this stage when Rama's forest life begins, and pray that we may be purified of our sins. Truth, courage and love are the gospel of the Ramayana to us. To give it to us was Rama born. We shall gain these gifts if we meditate on the Princes and Janaki in the bark habiliment as they left the city.

The crowds in the street cried to the charioteer: "Go slow, go slow. Let us have a look at Rama's face. Alas, Alas, who could send such children to the forest? How could their mothers endure this sorrow and survive? Look at Vaidehi's face. She is indeed blessed. And Lakshmana is happy to have such a brother to whom he can give devoted service. He is indeed a hero and a knower of dharma." So the people of the city talked among themselves as they followed the chariot. And their grief swelled like a flood.

Rama was saying to the good charioteer, "Faster, faster" The people were saying, "slow, slow." And the crowd became bigger and bigger. Sumantra managed somehow to take the chariot out of the press of the mourning town where, in addition to the loud sorrow of the

crowded streets, the houses were full of mourning women and children.

The King stepped out of Kaikeyi's apartment and looked at the departing chariot. A long time he stood there watching the cloud of dust as though he saw in it the beloved form of Rama. When even this went out of sight, he fell down, moaning. Kausalya and Kaikeyi sat on either side.

"Do not touch me," said Dasaratha to Kaikeyi. "I hate the sight of you, sinful woman! Everything is at an end between you and me. I renounce you here and now."

"If Bharata agrees to your arrangements and accepts the kingdom," he said again, "he need not perform my obsequies, and even if he did, my departed spirit would reject his offering of waters. How can Rama live in the forest? Will he sleep on the bare ground with a stone or a log for a pillow? Will he eat fruits and berries?"

Thus the king went on lamenting helplessly.

Sometimes he would turn to Kaikeyi and say, "May you be happy in your success! Long may you live a happy widow."

Heart-broken and empty like one returning home from the cremation ground, he entered Kaikeyi's apartment by force of habit; then suddenly he said, "Not here. Take me to the dwelling of Kausalya."

And so they did, and there he lay waiting for his end.

At midnight, he said, "Kausalya, are you there? Touch me with your hand. My sight is gone with Rama."

Poor Kausalya did her best to comfort the King, but what comfort was there in her wounded heart to give? For as the slow sorrow-laden hours crawled from watch to watch, the cold night seemed to

her a devouring flame, and the gentle moon fierce as the noonday sun.

To her thus sorrowing Sumitra said: "Sister, you have heard the Shastras and know dharma. Why should you grieve like this? It is your office to put courage in others, you should not lose heart yourself. Rama has gone to the forest for guarding the King's honor. You are indeed blessed among women, for you are the mother of a hero who has scorned a kingdom and preferred to uphold his father's honor. Why should you grieve for a son who fulfils a difficult duty to perfection? We should not feel sorry for one who walks in the path of his ancestors and wins undying fame. I am proud that Lakshmana has accompanied Rama. Janaki, though knowing well the hardships she has to face, has also gone with her husband. Rama's glory will shine like an undying lamp. This is no occasion for grief. His purity, his virtue shall be a shield and armor to them. He is so great and holy that the sunrays falling on him will not burn him and the wind that blows will caress him with its coolness. His pure frame, as he sleeps at night, will be embraced and protected by the moonbeams as an infant is by its loving mother. Shed all anxiety over your heroic son. No foe can encounter him and escape with life. Our Rama is endowed with all auspicious qualities. Your hero son will surely return to Ayodhya and ascend the throne. The Lord of the world, and no other, is Rama. Sita is with him, and Sita is no other than the Goddess Lakshmi. Rama will return and ascending the throne will fill with delight the kingdom which now laments his exile. You saw the grief of the citizens as they watched his departure. My heroic son, the devoted Lakshmana, armed with bow and sword, has gone with him to guard his person. No harm, no danger can approach Rama. You

will see with your own eyes Rama returning after fulfilment of his vow. Believe me, Rama will return, beautiful like the full moon, and touch your feet with joy and devotion. You will then shed tears not of grief but of joy. Dear, dear Kausalya, give up your grief. You will see the three of them returning. You should console and encourage the other women in the palace and not stand broken-hearted yourself. Who else in this world stands firm by dharma like Rama? Is this a cause for grief? No, be proud of your son, Kausalya!"

Listening to Sumitra's words, Kausalya was somewhat consoled.

The people of the city followed Rama's chariot in a huge crowd. They tried to stop the chariot, shouting, "Do not go to the forest. Return to the city."

"I am going to the forest to uphold my father's word," Rama said. "There is no time for sorrow here and you should not seek to hinder me."

But the people would not listen to him, and went in crowds after him shouting wildly: "Do not go to the forest, do not go to the forest!" Rama stopped the chariot and addressed them with his eyes full of love for them: "Citizens of Ayodhya, I know the love you bear for me. You will show it best by transferring it on my behalf, and at my behest, to my beloved brother Bharata. Nothing else will please me more. Bharata is good and noble, has all royal qualities and is fully worthy of love. So conduct yourselves as to please him. Young in years, he is old in wisdom and his heart is at once heroic and tender. He has the strength to protect you. He is your king, and you owe him loyalty and affection. I am going to the forest to fulfil my father word and the King has appointed Bharata as Yuvaraja. He is in every way fitted for that position. You and I alike should obey the King's commands.

You should go back and try to mitigate the sorrow of my father at parting from me."

Thus Rama spoke to them in kindly tones. But they loved him all the more because of this and would not be consoled. Some Brahmanas, old in years and excellent in virtue, looking at the chariot wept and cried: "Why, O horses, do you carry our Rama into the forest? We have heard it said that horses are sharp of hearing. Listen to us then and bring back our Rama."

Hearing these words of yearning from old Brahmanas, Rama stopped the chariot. The three descended from it and went forward walking.

The common people, leading citizens and wise elders, men of penance, why, even the birds on wings, tried to prevent Rama from going to the forest. The river Tamasa, says the poet, seemed to conspire with them, for now it flowed across his path. The chariot stopped on the riverbank. Sumantra unyoked and watered the horses and let them loose to graze.

Rama said: "Lakshmana, this is the first night of our forest life. Let us spend it on the bank of this holy river. Life in the forest holds no hardship, as you and I know. Look, the birds, the animals and even the trees seem to sympathise with us. The only pain is when we think of the grief of our parents in Ayodhya, though I feel reassured as I think of Bharata's nobility and goodness. He will assuredly tend our parents with true affection. Sumantra, go, look after the horses."

Then, Rama offered the evening prayers by the river and said: "Let us fast on this first night of our forest life, Lakshmana. Your presence by my side rids me of all care."

Lakshmana spread some grass on the ground for Rama and Sita to sleep on but

he himself spent the night in vigil talking with Sumantra.

Long before dawn Rama rose from sleep and told Sumantra: "The citizens who have followed us, fatigued by their long journey, are fast asleep. I am deeply moved by their affection; but I cannot permit their love to force me to go back. Let us therefore, move on even now, while they are yet asleep."

The horses were harnessed and the chariot slowly crossed the river. Standing on the southern bank, Rama told Sumantra:

"If you take the chariot to the other shore, where the people are asleep, and drive it for a little distance towards Ayodhya and then bring it back to this side, we can proceed on our journey before they wake up. They will see the track of the chariot going towards the city, and thinking that we have returned home, may themselves go back. Unless you do this the crowd will go on following us."

Sumantra did this and, when the chariot returned, the three got into it again and proceeded southwards.

19. ALONE BY THEMSELVES

The citizens who had slept on the bank of the Tamasa woke up in the morning and looked round. They were surprised to see that Rama and the chariot had disappeared. They followed the track of the chariot-wheels but were disappointed to find that it was lost in the main road to the capital.

They returned home to their own houses and sought satisfaction in reviling Kaikeyi. Without Rama, the city was bereft of beauty and wrapt in gloom.

Sumantra and the princes had crossed the Tamasa long before dawn and travelled far into the forest. Crossing several streams, they approached the southern boundary of the Kosala country. As they journeyed on, Rama said to

Sumantra: "I wonder when I shall hunt again in the forest of Sarayu. Is hunting good for princes? Perhaps, it is, in moderation."

Thus conversing on many matters, they went forward. When they reached the southern boundary of the kingdom, Rama stopped the chariot and facing north towards Ayodhya, bent his head in a prayer, saying: "O, jewel among cities! O ancient capital of the Ikshwakus! Shall I finishing my penance in the forest, live to see my father and mother and you? Grant me that supreme joy."

The chariot reached the bank of the Ganga. They proceeded along the bank, admiring the beauty of the river. Finding a spot of surpassing charm, Rama said: "We shall spend the night here."

Untying the horses, they sat under a tree. Guha, the chief of the region, having learnt already from his men that Rama would be coming there, came forward with his retinue to greet Rama and Lakshmana.

He had unbounded love for the royal family and for Rama. Being the chieftain of the tribes who dwelt on the banks of Ganga, he was a man of great prestige and power. Rama and Lakshmana rose to greet Guha, even while the latter was still at some distance from them. Guha welcomed them with a hearty embrace, saying: "Regard this land as your own. This place is as much yours as is Ayodhya. Who can hope to have a guest like you? It is indeed my good fortune."

Guha had prepared a lavish entertainment. He said, "Feel perfectly at home and happy in my kingdom. You may spend all the fourteen years with us here. You will not lack anything I assure you. Looking after you will be a pleasure and privilege to me. Be gracious enough to accept my hospitality."

Warmly embracing Guha again, Rama said: "Brother, I know how deep is your love for me. Your wish is itself as good as hospitality rendered. I am bound by my vows and must refuse anything more. I have come to dwell in the forest and not to enjoy life as a chieftain's guest. These horses are my dear father's favorites. Pray feed them well. We shall be content with simple food and rest for the night."

They lay under the tree for the night. Guha and Lakshmana kept awake, conversing with Sumantra.

Said Guha to Lakshmana: "Brother, do go and rest. There is a bed made ready for you. My men will keep careful watch. None dare do anything in the forest unknown to me. Have no anxiety regarding Rama. Do sleep."

Lakshmana replied: "How can I find sleep, Guha? Here, lying on the bare ground, is Sita, daughter of the great Janaka and daughter-in-law of the great Dasaratha. The great Purushottama himself who could subdue the three worlds lies stretched on the grass. How can I sleep who sees this? I wonder how Ayodhya is bearing it. He queens' apartments must be loud with wailing. I even doubt if at this moment Kausalya and my mother are alive. My father indeed found strength somehow to say to Rama, 'Go to the forest,' but I doubt if he has strength enough left to survive Rama's actual departure. And if he has passed away, our mothers too will have given up their lives. And here we are, deprived even of the privilege of doing the last offices to the dead. In any case it is hardly possible that our father and mothers will be alive to greet us, when we return to Ayodhya after our term in the forest."

Thus spoke Lakshmana in sorrow. Guha was in tears. The night was spent in such sad conversation.

Early next morning, Rama told Lakshmana: "We must now cross the river. Ask Guha to make ready a boat big enough for crossing this broad river." Guha ordered his men to get this done and informed Rama.

Sumantra bowed low and stood before Rama seeking his further commands.

Rama understood Sumantra's unuttered grief and, laying his hand on Sumantra's shoulders, said: "Sumantra, return to Ayodhya with all speed and be at the side of the King. Your duty is now to look after him."

"O Rama," exclaimed Sumantra, "rectitude, learning and culture seem to be of no value. You and your brother and Vaidehi are going to live in the forest. What is going to be our lot? How are we going to fare under Kaikeyi's rule?" He now wept like a child.

Wiping the tears from Sumantra's eyes, Rama said: "Our family has known no nobler friend than you. It will be your task to console my father. His heart is river by grief. Whatever his commands carry them out dutifully. Do not ask yourself whether he wants a thing for himself or with a view to pleasing Kaikeyi. Avoid giving him any pain of mind. Have no anxiety about us. You should say this on my behalf to my aged father who is stricken with a grief he never knew before. Clasp his feet as you have seen me do, and assure him from me that none of us, not I nor Lakshmana, nor Sita, feel injured or sorry at having been sent away from Ayodhya. We look forward to fourteen years of forest life which will speed on happy wings, and then surely we shall return to his feet for blessings. Give our love to my mother Kausalya, and tell her that protected by her blessings we are well and give a like message to my stepmothers, especially to Kaikeyi, lest she should think we have parted in anger.

Tell the Maharaja that it is my earnest prayer that he should hasten with the installation of Bharata, so that he may be a comfort to him in our absence."

But Sumantra, unable to restrain his grief, burst out: "How am I to return and with what words can I give comfort?" And when he looked at the empty chariot, he wept and said: "How shall I drive this chariot that stands desolate without you?"

Once again Rama spoke words of comfort and courage to Sumantra and urged on him the duty of patience, and sent him home.

"Guha", said Rama, "I could indeed spend fourteen years in your kingdom as you desire. But would that be fulfilling my vow? I have left Ayodhya to fulfil my father's pledge. I must therefore lead the life of a tapasvi. I must not touch dishes daintily cooked and served. We have to live only on fruits, roots and permissible kinds of meat such as we offer in the sacrificial fire."

Comforting Guha thus, the brothers got their locks matted with the milk of the banyan. They helped Sita into the boat and then got into it themselves. Guha bade the boatmen to row it across.

The boatmen took them quickly across the river. At midstream Sita offered a prayer to the goddess of the river: "Devi, help us fulfil our vow and return safe to our homeland."

They talked as they went on. They reached the farther bank of Ganga. And there for the first time, the three stood alone, unattended by friends!

"Lakshmana, you are my sole armed guard now," said Rama. "You will go first. Sita will follow. And I shall walk behind you both. We must save Sita as far as possible from the hardships of forest life. Hereafter there will be none to keep us company and no fun or amusement."

Rama's thoughts went to his mother Kausalya.

"Lakshmana," he said, "should you not go back to Ayodhya and look after mother Kausalya and Sumitra Devi? I shall manage my forest stay somehow."

Lakshmana replied: "Forgive me, brother; I am not going back to Ayodhya." Rama indeed expected no other answer.

Thus now and again we shall see the human element come up and the divine prince grieve and talk as common people do. This is the fascination of the Ramayana. If Almighty God remains almighty and does everything Himself, then where is room or need for an avatar and how could the dharma of common men be established?

This is the difference between the earlier avatars and the later. In the Rama avatar, the course of human conduct and the dharma governing it come linked together. This has been made explicit by Valmiki.

On the occasion of Sita's ordeal by fire at the end of the battle, Rama says to Brahma who appeared then among others and deprecated the idea of putting Sita to proof:

"I regard myself only as Rama, son of Dasaratha, an ordinary human being. Who I am in reality, where I belong, why I took birth, are matters on which you must enlighten me, and I do not know."

While Rama was plunged in thinking of the mothers left behind, Lakshmana ministered to him with loving words of courage and hope.

They spent that night under a banyan tree and left early next morning for Bharadwaja's ashrama which they reached at sunset.

Partaking of the hospitality of the sage, they besought him to tell where they could spend the years quietly in the forest and

on his advice and with his blessings left for Chitrakuta.

20. CHITRAKUTA

Rama spent the night in Bharadwaja's ashrama. Getting up in the morning, they paid their respects to the Maharishi and, taking leave of him, set out for the Chitrakuta hill. The muni treated them affectionately as if they were his own children and sent them forth with his blessings after explaining to them the way they should take through the forest.

The three followed his topographical instructions closely and in due course came upon the river Kalindi. They constructed a raft with logs and bamboos and creepers of the forest and on it Lakshmana made a seat for Sita with little twigs and leaves on which she sat. The passage of the river was accomplished in safety.

In midstream Sita offered salutations to the river goddess and prayed that Rama might fulfil his vow and the three be enabled safely to return home.

After crossing a few more streams, they came to a big banyan tree which had been described by Bharadwaja. And under this tree Sita again offered prayers saying: "Grant, O holy tree, that my husband may complete his vow and that I may see again the queens Kausalya and Sumitra."

Rama asked Lakshmana to walk in front with Sita behind him while he himself followed in the rear. "Whatever, flower or fruit she asks for on the way," he said, "get it for her and keep her spirits up."

As Sita went she showed an eager curiosity, asking about forest trees and creepers and was lost in admiration at the many-sided beauty of forest life.

They greatly enjoyed the journey and rested for the night on the bank of a river.

Here and in other places, Valmiki describes how Rama and Lakshmana

secured food by hunting. He makes it quite plain that they had to subsist largely on meat. Some good men are troubled by this. But meat was not prohibited for Kshatriyas. Indeed, it has always been the rule in India to permit any food legitimately obtained and consecrated as a sacrifice. Rama was a Kshatriya and he lived in the forest in the Kshatriya way, though abstemiously.

The following morning Rama woke up Lakshmana and said: "Listen, the birds are singing to the morning sun. It is time for us to start."

The popular story that Lakshmana spent the whole period of forest life without food or sleep is not found in Valmiki. Sometimes, even, through fatigue Lakshmana did not get up quite early in the morning and Rama had to rouse him from slumber!

They performed their ablutions and worship and resumed their journey in the path indicated by Bharadwaja. The season was summer and the trees and plants were ablaze with multi colored flowers. The branches bowed under the weight of fruits and blossoms.

Rama pointed out the beauty of the forest to Sita from time to time, saying as they walked: "How beautiful is the forest unspoilt by human interference! Look at the beehives hanging there! Look at the ground entirely covered with fallen flowers! Listen to the birds! How beautifully they sing to one another and live in joy! Life would indeed be pleasant if we could always enjoy such sights and sounds."

Then they saw at a distance the Chitrakuta hill. They were glad and began to walk briskly towards it. "How beautiful this region is!" exclaimed Rama. "The forest here has fine edible roots and fruits. The water is clear and sweet. Rishis dwell in ashramas in this forest and we may

most certainly live happily here in their holy company."

They proceeded to put up an ashrama there for themselves. Lakshmana was a clever workman. He soon constructed a strong hut, which was weather-proof and made it comfortable and convenient. Single-handed, he completed the mud hut with windows and doors all made of bamboos and jungle material.

Kamban and Valmiki vie with each other in their accounts of this episode. Kamban says that when Lakshmana had completed the structure, Rama embraced him weeping and asked him: "When and how did you learn all this?" One can imagine the scene.

Rama, his eyes filled with tears of joy, said, according to Kamban: "The flower-soft feet of the Princess of Mithila have traversed the hard forest floor. If her feet have done a wonder, why, Lakshmana, your hands too have wrought a miracle of house-building! I have seen today the gain that is in misfortune."

Here, beside the lovely Chitrakuta hill, on the bank of the river Malyavati, in that cottage the three young people lived, free from care, performing their daily devotional routine. They forgot that they were in exile and spent the time happily, like Indra in Heaven surrounded by the gods.

The happy life in Chitrakuta is a wonderful background to set off the later sufferings and sorrows of the three.

21. A MOTHER'S GRIEF

Sumantra and Guha stood watching the three figures as long as they could. When they disappeared from sight, they were plunged in sorrow and went back to Guha's town. After a while Sumantra returned to Ayodhya.

As the charioteer approached the city, he found it desolate and devoid of the usual cheerful bustle of urban life. As

soon as he crossed the fortress-gate and entered the city, his chariot was surrounded by a crowd eagerly asking: "Where did you leave Rama? How was he when you left him?"

"Dear people of Ayodhya," said Sumantra, "Rama and Lakshmana have crossed the Ganga. Ordering me to return home, they entered the forest on foot."

A great cry of grief rose from the multitude and many cursed themselves and attributed the catastrophe to their own sins. On both sides of the streets, women stood as the chariot passed and cried: "Look at the car which departed with the princes and Sita and has come back empty."

Sumantra drove forward covering his face with the end of his upper garment, ashamed of himself. He stopped the chariot in front of Dasaratha's palace and alighted.

There in front of the palace a great crowd had gathered. Women were saying, "How is Sumantra going to meet Kausalya and tell her that he left her son in the forest? How will she survive the report?"

With increasing sorrow and confusion, Sumantra entered the Queen's apartment. There he saw the King more dead than alive. In low tones, he spoke of Rama's message to the King who heard it in heart-broken silence.

Then Kausalya, unable to control her wrath, addressed the King: "Here stands your minister who has returned from the forest after leaving my child to fulfil your command. Why are you silent? It was easy and pleasant to give boons to Kaikeyi. Why are you ashamed of it now? Did you not know that this would be the result of what you did? You have honored your word. You may be happy over that. But who can share my sorrow with me? I have to bear it all. My grief cannot be reduced by your pain. No convention

binds you to feel or appear to be grieved for what you have deliberately done. Why are you silent? You need not refrain from giving expression to sorrow for fear of offending Kaikeyi, for she is not here. Surely you should inquire of Sumantra about Rama. Have you no humanity? Why do you try to suppress even natural feelings?"

Her grief and love for Rama blinded her to the state of her husband's body and mind. Instead of lightening, she aggravated his suffering.

Dasaratha opened his eyes and Sumantra reported duly Rama's message in his own words.

Sumantra tried his best to console Kausalya. But she went on repeating: "Take me and leave me where Rama is. Young Sita is there with him facing the hardships of the forest. I cannot bear this agony. Let me go to Dandaka and be with Sita."

Sumantra answered: "Queen, be brave. Banish this grief. Rama spends his time even more happily in the forest than he did in Ayodhya. He feels no sorrow. Lakshmana finds joy in the supreme job of dutiful service to the brother he loves. He is very happy. As for Sita, there in the forest, as here in the palace, she lives for Rama with every breath and knows neither fear nor sorrow. She spends her time as though she was a sylvan goddess and is as happy there as she was here playing in the groves and gardens of Ayodhya. The beauty of her face is still like the rising moon's. Like a forest fawn she lives there with care-free grace, spending the, golden hours with Rama by her side. Every sight and sound is a new source of joy to her and the theme of talk with Rama and Lakshmana. Walking barefoot, her feet are red like the lotus, and need no painting with henna. She walks in the forest as if she were dancing.

She only lacks the tinkling anklets to make it complete. All that I say is true. There is no need for you to grieve. The three of them are fulfilling their sacred duty and offering an object lesson to the world. They are making the King's word good. Their life will be remembered and praised forever. Why, then, should we grieve for them?"

With such talk, Kausalya would be consoled for a while. But soon she would break down again and cry: "Alas, alas, Rama, my child." Her grief seemed redoubled when she saw Sumantra come back, leaving Rama in the forest.

22. IDLE SPORT AND TERRIBLE RESULT

Dasaradha had been driven ruthlessly by circumstances to an action which not only broke his heart but made him hate himself and deprived him even of self-pity. The only way out of the dilemma of either breaking his plighted word or doing a great wrong to Rama would have been for the latter to disobey him and insist on his rights. But Rama placed his duty to his father high above all other things. And Rama was all the world to Sita and Lakshmana. So they had all gone together.

To Dasaratha, agonising on his bed of pain in desolation and remorse, Kausalya spoke reproachful words.

The stinging words in which Kausalya's sorrow found expression caused excruciating pain to Dasaratha, but she seemed to find some relief in giving vent to her feelings in this way.

"Proud of having kept your word and happy in young Kaikeyi's approval and gratification, have you any thought for others? You have been my world and my god, my joy in this world and my hope for the next and you have forsaken me. My son, the light of my life, has been wrenched away from me and banished. I live here alone, old, helpless woman,

without the love of my lord or the sight of my only son. Was ever a woman left more desolate? But you, are you not delighted with what you have done? It is enough for you that Kaikeyi and Bharata are happy. You need not entertain any fear that Rama will mar that happiness, even if he returned from the forest after fourteen years. He will not touch the kingdom once ruled by Bharata. The tiger does not touch the leavings of another animal's. Like a fish, eating its offspring, you have killed your own child."

Touched to the quick, the King even in the intensity of his anguish turned to his wife with a humble prayer for forgiveness with clasped hands.

"Have pity on me, Kausalya," he moaned. "You have been kind and forgiving even to strangers. Do have some compassion on your husband who has always loved and honored you and whose heart is broken by a sorrow which knows no remedy!"

These piteous words and the sight of her husband in supplication and the memory of happier hours pierced the noble queen to the heart and she fell at his feet imploring forgiveness for unbecoming words forced out of her by grief.

As the leaden hours crept slowly on, Dasaratha remembered something that had happened long ago and it aggravated the anguish of his heart.

The King turned to Kausalya and said: "Are you still here, my dear? The fruit of one's action can never be escaped. I now endure the result of a great sin that I committed in the days that are gone. Men in their ignorance sometimes do great evils for the sake of some slight momentary pleasure. Then when the time comes, the price has to be paid. When I was young, I had the skill to use my bow against unseen targets aiming by sound

only. For the pleasure of exercising this skill, I once killed an innocent man and committed a great sin. Listen, I shall relate to you that sad adventure. It was before you came to me. One night I went, out in my chariot to hunt on the banks of the Sarayu. It had been raining heavily and, from the mountainsides, the streams were running dyed with the rich colors of minerals and fresh soil. The birds were silent. The forest seemed asleep. I could take the aim by the ear and shoot, without seeing, a tiger or bear or other wild beast that might come to slake its thirst in the stream. I wanted to test this skill of mine. It was dense darkness. I waited for some wild animal to come. Then I heard a gurgling sound as of an elephant drinking. At once I aimed an arrow in the direction whence the sound came. Like a venomous serpent, swish went my dart and hit the object. But I was shocked to hear a human voice exclaim 'Alas! I am dead!' I heard the man cry again piteously, 'Who can be my enemy? Never have I done any harm to anyone. Who then could want to kill me thus as I was filling my pitcher with water? What could he gain by this? Why should anyone bear hate against one living his innocent hermit life in the forest? What is to happen to my old blind parents now, with none to look after them? O misery!' Horror-struck, I stood trembling in every limb. My bow and arrow slipped from my hands. I approached the place from where the voice came and I found a young ascetic lying on the ground with dishevelled hair, covered all over with blood and earth. Beside him lay an upturned pitcher. The look of his eyes was as fire. When he saw me, he cried, 'O Sinner that has killed me! Why did you aim your arrow at me that was taking water from the stream? My old blind parents are thirsty and are waiting for me in the ashrama, thinking that I would

return with my pitcher filled. Why did you kill me? O God, my penances and my devotions have all gone to naught. My parents do not know that I lie here stricken and helpless. They will go on waiting for me and even if they knew it, what could they do, blind and helpless? Who are you? What! Are you not the King of Kosala? And so, you, the King, who should by right protect me, have slain me. Very well, O King, go yourself and tell them what you have done. Fall at their feet and beg for forgiveness. Else, their anger will reduce you to ashes. Go straight to the ashrama. Take that path there. Go at once and save yourself. But this arrow is a torture. Pull it out and relieve me of the pain before you go.' I knew that if I pulled out the arrow from his body, his pain would end indeed, but so would his life in a gush of blood. My hand refused to do the deed. For a while I stood, not knowing what to do. Then, the young ascetic said: 'Do not hesitate. Do end my pain. My mind is now clear and I have calmed myself. Boldly pull out the arrow and release my life.' Gently I pulled the arrow out. The young ascetic turned on the ground, heaved a sigh and, with his eyes fixed on me, breathed his last. It is this crime of mine that is now pursuing me. The agony of those blind parents who were deprived by me of their son has come now for me to endure."

23. LAST MOMENTS

Dasaratha continued: "Listen, I shall tell you what followed. Having committed a sin and seeing the young ascetic die, I stood wondering what-to do next. Finally I decided that it was my duty and my interest to do what he advised me. I cleaned the pitcher, and filling it with fresh water, took it and went along the footpath he had pointed out. I reached his cottage and there I saw the old couple waiting for the return of their son. They

sat there like two birds with broken wings shrivelled in body and unable to move. Both were blind. They were speaking to each other about the long delay of their son in fetching water from the stream. I was filled with terror as I slowly approached them. The old man, hearing my footsteps, mumbled: 'Why this long delay, my son? Quickly give me some water to drink. Your mother too is athirst. Were you making your pleasure in the stream? Was this the cause of your delay, son? Why are you silent? Even if your mother or I have offended you in any manner, you should not take it to heart. You are a perfect son and our only prop. We have lost our eyesight and you serve as our eyes. Indeed you are more than our life to us. Why are you still silent? Are you still angry. I trembled in fear when I heard the toothless old man talking thus. Gathering courage I began: 'O, holy one, I am Dasaratha by name, a Kshatriya, bound to obey and serve you, though not your son. Driven by my former karma, I have committed a terrible sin and stand in abject humility before you. I went to the riverbank for sport, hoping to shoot wild beasts. I thought I heard in the darkness an elephant drinking water. I aimed my arrow, as I am a marksman that can aim by sound as well as by sight. It was my misfortune and his fate that my arrow struck your son as he was filling his pitcher, with the gurgling I had mistaken for that of an elephant drinking. Thus, without intending it, I fatally wounded your beloved son. When I went to the spot and saw him rolling in blood with my arrow stuck in his breast, I cursed myself. I was filled with horror and stood not knowing what to do. At his request I pulled the arrow out to release him from the mortal pain. He is dead. I have told you the horrible sin I have committed. I throw myself at your mercy. I await your

judgment.' The miserable couples were struck dumb by my dreadful tale about their son. Tears poured from their sightless eyes, and the old man said: 'King, your sin is indeed great. But it was done in ignorance. And you have come yourself to tell me your crime. So you shall live. Now take us both to the spot. Let us touch our beloved son with our hands and send him into Yama's keeping.'

I carried them to the river bank where their son lay dead. They felt his body all over, cried and blessed his soul and performed the cremation. Then before ascending the funeral pyre and giving them selves up to the fire, they turned to me and said: 'This great grief you have brought about for us, you too, will endure in good time. You will die of grief parted from your son.' Saying this, they burnt themselves and their souls joined the gods. My sin has pursued me and I am now in its grip. My old crime is killing me now. As food prohibited by they doctors foolishly consumed by a sick man kills him, what that old father uttered in unbearable grief has now come true. I have sent my innocent son to the forest and, unable to bear the grief, I now enter Yama's abode. How else could these unnatural events occur? How else could I be thus deceived and betrayed? Even if I ordered Rama to go to forest, why should he obey my unjust command? Why should he insist on being exiled? It is the curse of that old blind couple, nothing else. Kausalya, I do not see you. My sight is gone. Death is fast approaching. Come nearer and let me feel you. All is over. The messengers of Yama are calling me. Will Rama come? Shall I see him before I die? Oh, I am dying. The oil is all consumed and my light is going out! Ah Kausalya! Oh Sumitra!"

His life slowly ebbed away and that night at some time unobserved by any, the King breathed his last.

As described by Valmiki in the early pages of the epic, Dasaratha was one who had mastered all the Vedas and Shastras, was a farsighted person, the hero of many battles, the performer of many sacrifices, follower of dharma, a far-famed king with many friends and no foes, and one who had conquered his senses. His power was like Indra's. His wealth was like Kubera's. In statesmanship, he was like Manu. Fate had ordered that such a one should exile his beloved son and die of a broken heart, with none by him in his last moments but two faithful women stricken by himself with a common sorrow.

Since the King had so often fainted and recovered, his death was not immediately noticed by Kausalya or Sumitra. They were weary, too, with grief and watching, and fell into a sleep of fatigue in a corner of the apartment. At dawn, the musicians and singers, whose duty it was to rouse the King from slumber, came to his bedchamber and played on instruments and sang the usual hymns.

But they saw no sign of the King waking. The royal servants who attended to the King's morning needs waited long and wondered why he slept till so late. Then they made bold to enter the apartment and saw him lying dead.

Soon the news spread and filled the palace with grief. The widows of the great Dasaratha cried like orphaned children, embracing one another in unavailing lamentation.

24. BHARATA ARRIVES

Kausalya clung to the King's body and cried: "I shall go with the King to Yama's abode. How can I live without my son and without my husband?"

The elders and officers of the palace managed to separate her from the dead

King and take her away. Then they discussed about the funeral rites. They could not be performed immediately, for Rama and Lakshmana had gone to the forest and Bharata and Satrughna were far away in their uncle's place. It was decided to send for Bharata and to keep the body immersed in oil till his arrival.

The great monarch's remains were thus kept waiting for Bharata's arrival. Ayodhya, the city of splendor, was sunk in darkness and lamentation. Crowds of women met here and there and reviled Kaikeyi. There was anxiety in men's hearts. The crown prince had gone to the forest. Bharata too was far away. Anarchy was feared, for no one in those days could imagine a people going on without a king.

After the long night had passed, the ministers, officers and elders assembled in the hall in the morning. Markandeya, Vamadeva, Kashyapa, Katyayana, Gautama, Jabali and other learned men, with Sumantra and the other ministers, bowed to Vasishtha and said:

"Sir, the night we have passed was like a century. The King is no more. Rama and Lakshmana are in the forest. Bharata and Satrughna are in far off Kekaya in their grandfather's house. Someone must forthwith be asked to take up the responsibility of rule. A land without a king cannot survive. Order will disappear, son will not obey father, nor wife her husband. The rains will hold back. Thieves and robbers will range at will. There will be no mutual trust among people. Neither agriculture nor trade can flourish. Without a king, the land must lose its prosperity. The springs of charity will dry up. Festivals and services will cease to be performed in temples. There will be no expounding of Shastras or epics, nor any listeners. People will no more sleep with doors open. Culture will decline and soon disappear. Penances,

vows, enjoyments, learning, all depend on the king's protection. The beauty of women will vanish. The sense of security will be lost. Men will eat one another up as, fish do. Cruelty and misery will grow apace and lay waste the land. For good to prosper and evil to be restrained, a king is essential."

Thus Valmiki describes at length the dangers of anarchy through the mouths of leaders in that assembly.

"It looks as if a great darkness has enveloped the land," they said. "Dharma is in danger. Let us forthwith secure a king."

Vasishtha sent for tried messengers and said to them: "Start at once. Go straight and swift to Kekaya. See that you wear no sign of sorrow on your face or show it in your behavior. Bharata should not know that the King is dead. Tell him simply that the family preceptor and ministers want his presence at once in Ayodhya and bring him along with you with all the speed you may. Tell him nothing about Rama and Sita going to the forest or the King's death on account of grief. To avoid all suspicion, take with you the usual gifts of jewels and precious garments for presentation to the King of Kekaya."

From this we can understand the meaning of what the Shastras and Kural say about Truth. Truthfulness should be such that it needlessly hurts no being in the world. The test for right conduct including truthfulness is harmlessness. This does not mean that truth is underrated.

Soon the messengers were provisioned and equipped for the long journey and furnished with gifts of honor. Mounted on swift and sturdy horses, they sped past rivers and forests, up hill and down dale, and reached Kekaya, which was somewhere to the west of the modern Punjab, and found themselves in Rajagriha, its capital, where the Ikshvaku

princes were residing in the palace of their maternal uncle. They decided to wait on the princes the next morning.

The night the messengers arrived, Bharata had evil dreams and woke up in the morning filled with anxiety as to what they might portend. His face showed the state of his mind. His companions tried to entertain him with dance and mirth to make him forget his cares, but did not succeed.

We still do not know all the secrets of nature and the telepathy of affection. Maybe, Dasaratha's mental anguish and death throes reached Bharata across space and caused him his bad dreams. He said to himself: "It seems to me that death is approaching my brother Rama or Lakshmana or myself. They say that an early morning dream does not fail to be fulfilled. And mine has been a terrible dream. I am full of fear. I know not what to do."

Just then the messengers were announced. The King of Kekaya and his son Yudhajit received the envoys with due courtesy.

They paid their respects to the King and that princes, then turned to Bharata and said:

"The priests and ministers send you their blessings and request you to return at once to Ayodhya. They want us to convey to you that the need for your presence there is most urgent. Please touch for acceptance these garments and jewels to be given to your uncle and to the King as gifts from the palace of Ayodhya."

Bharata questioned the messengers after the welfare of all at home. The manner of his inquiry suggests that he had an uneasy premonition that his mother's headstrong and ambitious nature might have had something to do with this hasty summons home. "And is my mother, the haughty and irascible Queen Kaikeyi who

believes herself all-wise and must always have her way, is she in good health?"

The messengers must have been at their wits' end for an answer. The best they could make was: "O tiger among men, all are well whose welfare is dear to you. Lakshmi, the goddess of sovereignty, whose abode is the lotus, woos you. Get into your chariot without loss of time." There was an enigmatic thought in this greeting, for according to them Bharata was to be installed on the throne.

The prince took leave of his uncle and grandfather for returning home and preparations were made for his departure. The old king and Yudhajit collected rare and valuable things of their country to be sent as gifts to King Dasaratha and Prince Rama of Ayodhya. Bharata and Satrughna mounted their chariots and started with a big retinue towards Ayodhya. They travelled fast, unmindful of fatigue, and by forced marches reached Ayodhya on the morning of the eighth day.

As he approached the city, Bharata's mind was filled with misgiving. Nothing seemed to be as it was before, and the air seemed heavy with disaster. He asked the charioteer: "Why does the city wear such a strange look? I do not see the usual crowds of people going in and coming out in the gardens outside the city. One used to see young men and women with bright, cheerful faces. But now they all seem sad."

Bharata's chariot entered the city through the Victory Gate. The streets, houses and temples were bare and unadorned. The faces of the people looked drawn and famished.

"Why are the musical instruments silent?" he asked. "Why are the citizens not decked with flowers and sandal paste? These are all bad signs. I cannot repress my anxiety."

Inauspicious omens were seen everywhere. Bharata concluded that some great misfortune had overtaken the city and that was the reason why he had been so hastily sent for. He entered Dasaratha's palace. The King was not to be seen. His anxiety increased.

He then entered Kaikeyi's palace. When she saw her son after a long absence, she jumped from her golden couch to embrace him. He bent down and touched her feet. She kissed his head and welcomed him with maternal blessings.

"Did you have a good journey?" she asked. "Are your uncle and grandfather well? Tell me all about them."

He answered: "The journey took seven days. All our people at Kekaya are happy and well. Grandfather and uncle send you their love. They have sent rich gifts for you, but these will arrive later. I have come in advance. The envoys hurried me, saying there was urgent work demanding my presence here. What is all this about? I went to the King's palace to pay him my respects. He was not to be found there and here too his couch is empty. Perhaps he is with one of my senior mothers. I must go and see him and tender my respects."

When Bharata, innocent of heart and unaware of what had happened, said this, the foolish queen intoxicated with a new sense of power answered: "My child, your father had his full share of the blessings of this life. His fame was great. He performed all the sacrifices enjoined by tradition. He was a refuge for the good. He has now entered the higher world and joined the gods."

On hearing this, Bharata fell down uttering a cry, his long arms stretched out on the ground. Rising, he looked at his father's empty bed and sobbed like a destitute orphan. The mighty hero threw his god-like frame on the earth and wept like a child in uncontrolled grief.

Looking at her son, who lay on the ground like a big tree fallen to the axe, Kaikeyi said: "Arise, O King. Stand up. It is not right for a king thus to mourn and roll on the ground. Honor and glory are waiting for your acceptance. You are to uphold the dharma and perform sacrifices in the way of your royal fathers. Your intelligence shines like the noonday sun. No misfortune dare come near you. Son, strong of limb and brave-hearted, stand up."

Bharata's mind was immaculate, spotless. He did not see all that Kaikeyi had put in this her appeal!

After lamenting long, he got up and said: "When I went to my uncle's house I had hoped that Rama's installation as Yuvaraja would come off soon and that on my return I would see the great festive ceremonies. How differently have things turned out! How am I to bear this calamity? No more shall I see my father's 'face. What did he die of? How did he get the illness? And I was not by his side when he lay sick! It was given to Rama to tend him in his last moments. How affectionate the King was towards me! If some dust settled on my body, he would wipe it with his hand. And how soft and pleasing was his touch! And it was not given me to serve him in his need. But mother where is Rama? Hereafter he is both father and preceptor to me. I must see him at once and kiss his feet. He is now my sole refuge. What was my father's last message to me? I want his very words."

Kaikeyi's answer had to be consistent both with truth and her designs. She was pulled in contrary directions by her culture and her ambition. She found words which conveyed that the King did not think of Bharata in his last moments. She also wished to prepare him for the rest of the news. She said: "Your father breathed

his last crying, 'Ha, Rama, Ha, Lakshmana, Ha, Janaki.' These were his last words." He died saying: "It is not given me to live to see Rama, Lakshmana and Sita return. Happy they who will see their return."

Listening to this, Bharata gathered that Rama and Lakshmana too were absent from the Kings side. His grief increased and he asked Kaikeyi: "Where. Were they? What business took them away from our father's side during his last moments?"

Hoping to pacify him, Kaikeyi said: "My son, Rama put on the garments of an ascetic and, taking Lakshmana and Sita with him, went to the Dandaka forest."

Bharata's amazement now knew no bounds. He asked: "I understand nothing of what you are saying. What sin did Rama commit that he should undertake such expiation? Did he rob any Brahmana or cause bodily hurt to any innocent person or desire somebody else's wife? Why did he have to go to the forest? Who laid on him this penance?"

In those days people went of their own will or were sent to the forest as a purifying punishment for such and other heinous crimes. Now Kaikeyi shaken out of silence by this tempest of questions came out with the truth foolishly hoping for the best.

"Rama committed no crime. He neither robbed nor harmed anyone. And it was not in Rama's nature to cast eyes of desire at other people's wives. What happened was that, seeing that preparations were afoot for installing him as crown prince and regent, I approached the King for your sake and secured the fulfillment of two boons he had long ago granted to me. I asked that the kingdom should go to you and that Rama should be exiled to the forest. Bound by his past promise, the King agreed. Rama has therefore gone to the forest with Sita and Lakshmana.

Unable to bear this separation, your father expired of grief. Do not waste yourself in vain lamentations now. Think now what you should do. You know dharma. Your duty is to accept the burden of kingship. I did all this for your sake and you should accept the fruit of my action in the spirit in which I acted. The city and kingdom have come into your possession without your wanting or working for it. Following the injunctions of Vasishtha and other learned men, perform duly your father's obsequies and then prepare for the coronation. You are a Kshatriya. You have inherited your father's kingdom. Attend to what has fallen to you as your duty."

25. INTRIGUE WASTED

Now Bharata understood everything and realised the enormity of the harm wrought by his mother.

Overwhelmed by grief and near, he could not control himself. At the thought of what she had done and the eternal infamy she had incurred, his grief grew wild and he hurled cruel words at her.

"What have you done?" he cried. "Did you ever hope to make me accept the kingdom? Deprived of such a father and such a brother, am I likely to care for power? After causing the death of the King and the banishment of Rama, you ask me to take their place and rule the land. This is like pouring oil into the fire of my grief. How unfortunate was my father to have chosen you for a wife! Kausalya and Sumitra will also die of grief. Oh, how could you bring yourself to do this to Rama who was so devoted to you? Revered mother Kausalya treated you like her own blood-sister. How could you think of plotting against her beloved son? And did you not know how much I loved Rama? Greed destroyed your understanding. How else could you so foolishly plan for my happiness? Even the

great King relied on Rama and Lakshmana. How could you believe that in their absence I could rule the kingdom? And, even if I could, would I agree? Never will your wish be fulfilled through my cooperation. I can no longer regard you as my mother. I cut myself off from all relation with you and decline to regard you as my mother. How could you ever think of setting aside rule and custom and getting a younger son crowned? Would not the world revile us for all time? The general law of kings and the tradition of our family cannot be violated. I will not carry out your wish. I shall go to the forest and bring Rama back. I shall set the crown on his head and rejoice in being his loyal servant."

To understand Bharata's feelings, we should keep in mind his innate noble nature, his love for Rama, his grief for his father and the sense of guilt and shame that for his sake his mother had done this grievous wrong. We should not weigh his words in dry air and a chemical balance. In such contexts, poetry flashes fire. One sees it both in Valmiki and Kamban.

Bharata raised his voice and spoke again: "Banish Rama indeed! It is you that ought to be banished, cruel woman, who have forsaken the path of dharma. So far as you are concerned you may take it that I am dead, for I would rather be dead than be son to a murderess! Murderess of your husband! You are not the daughter of the good King Asvapati. You are a Rakshasi. To what hell should you go, you, who banished the only child of mother Kausalya? What punishment would be too great for the grief you have caused her? Kamadhenu, the cow-mother, had hundreds of thousands of children, yet she shed tears at the sight of the suffering of two bulls yoked to a plough and her tears scalded Indra on his throne in high Heaven. And Kausalya's only child you

sent to the forest, hoping thus that you and I could be made happy! I shall do the obsequies and go to the forest and fall at the feet of Rama and bring him to his kingdom. And then, to cleanse

myself of the sin and the shame you have brought on me, I shall lead the life of an ascetic in the Dandaka forest. What a flood of sorrow have you let loose on the earth? By what penitence, by what self-mortification, can you redeem yourself? I shall go myself at once to Rama and get rid of my guilt by restoring the kingdom to him."

Finding no relief for his anguish by angry words, sighing like a young elephant newly captured, hot tears-falling from his eyes, he felt he could bear no longer the sight of his mother and rushed to Kausalya's apartment, there to find a better place to give vent to his sorrow.

Thus did Kaikeyi's castle in the air go up in smoke. She lay down on the floor and wept. The most painful of all reflexions is that of a crime perpetrated in vain.

Among the characters in the Ramayana, Bharata is the perfect embodiment of virtue. In the villages of the North, the people celebrate an annual festival for the episode of the meeting of Rama and Bharata at Chitrakuta, which they consider the most sanctifying part of the Ramayana epic. There have been through the ages great and noble souls whose virtue shines eternally in the midst of the sordid self-seeking of a sinful world, as a beacon light to seekers of the right path, and as a token of the god in man.

Soon the news of Bharata's arrival spread throughout the palace. Kausalya, still laboring under her grief, heard this, and was glad and told Sumitra, "Come, let us go and meet Bharata." Hardly had they taken a couple of steps when they saw

Bharata himself rushing wildly towards them to plead for mercy.

Kausalya's first thought when she heard of Bharata's arrival was that he had hastened back to assume the fortune which had come to him. Had not the elders and ministers, led by Vasishtha, decided to send for Bharata so that he might perform his father's obsequies and be crowned king? Hence, seeing Bharata, Kausalya, her heart desolate with her loss of husband and son, said in a low voice: "Bharata, the kingship is waiting secured for your sake by Kaikeyi. You need not fear any let or hindrance from us. Take it, and may all happiness be yours. Only one boon I crave of you to let me join your father on the funeral pyre."

These words were like stinging poison in Bharata's ears. He fell at her feet and clung to them, unable to speak.

Kausalya said again: "Oh Bharata, at least take me where Rama is in the forest."

Unable to bear all these piteous words of Kausalya and unable to speak, Bharata fell into a swoon. After a while he sat up and said: "Mother, why do you thus torture me who am innocent? You know I was far away and knew nothing of the wicked things going on here. Do you not know the love I bear for Rama? Would I ever do such a thing to him? May all the sins of the world descend on me if I had the least notion of the evil brewing here! I had nothing to do with it. I have no desire to reap its fruit."

He raised his hands and recited all the horrible sins that one could commit and invoked on himself the punishments due to them if he had any part in the plot.

In those days as now it was hard for a son to prove that he knew nothing of a scheme carried out by his mother for his benefit. Bharata could only swear his innocence again and again. He cared nothing for kingdom or wealth or power

and it was a terrible torment to him that Kausalya should think him capable of greed for them at the expense of his brother. Indeed such a thought was hardly less cruel and unjust than Rama's exile! He could never accept the crown which was his beloved brother's birthright.

His passionate sincerity convinced Kausalya of the injustice of her suspicions, and her heart went out to him. Tenderly she raised him from the ground and took his head on her lap and caressed him as though he were Rama himself.

"My dear son, my grief is doubled by seeing the pain raging in your innocent heart. What shall we do child? We are the playthings of fate. May the reward of goodness come to you in this world and the next!"

Kausalya had not believed Bharata privy to the plot, but she feared that he would condone it and yield to the temptation of its results. Now she was convinced that Bharata's heart was completely free from stain. Though her own son had gone to the forest, she was pleased that such another son had come to her in his place.

Here, Kamban beautifully sings how Kausalya shed tears of joy over Bharata and embraced him imagining that Rama himself had returned from the forest. Kausalya said amidst her sobs: "Many were your ancestors who attained fame. You have surpassed them all in glory by renouncing the kingship that has come to you. You are indeed king among kings."

The Kausalya and Bharata portrayed by Kamban embody a culture. May these heroic figures and that culture live forever in the land of Bharata!

The obsequies of the dead King were duly performed. Vasishtha and other learned men and elders offered grave shastric consolation to Bharata and Satrughna. Fourteen days after the King's

demise, the ministers called the Assembly and addressed Bharata thus:

"The King has gone to the world above. Rama and Lakshmana are in the forest. The land is now without a king. It is right that you should assume the rule at our request. The preparations for the coronation are all complete. The citizens and ministers are awaiting your acceptance. This is your kingdom lawfully descended from your ancestors, It is for you to be anointed and rule righteously over us."

Bharata went with folded hands round the materials gathered for the coronation and said in grave tones to the assembled elders:

"I do not consider it proper that you should ask me thus to accept the kingdom. According to the custom of our house, the throne belongs to the eldest son. With all respect to you, I have decided to go to the forest and bring Rama back to Ayodhya with Lakshmana and see that Rama is crowned. Please get ready the men and materials for this purpose. Prepare the road for the journey. Let laborers be mobilised for it. It is my final and irrevocable decision not to accept the crown."

Listening to the prince's words, the whole assembly was beside itself with joy. They applauded Bharata's suggestion. The army and a big retinue were got ready to accompany the prince to the forest. Quickly an army of workers with their tools went forward to prepare the road.

Men who knew the forest, pioneers who could dig wells and canals, builders of rafts and boats, carpenters and engineers, worked enthusiastically, because they were engaged in getting beloved Rama back. Culverts were built, trees felled, a broad road for the prince and his retinue was soon laid. Ups and downs were levelled, marshes drained,

resting-places for the army and facilities for drinking water and all other conveniences were soon made ready.

Though thus preparations were made for Bharata's journey to the forest, Vasishtha and the other ministers formally summoned the Assembly again. They did not give up their desire to get Bharata to agree to be crowned. They sent messengers to Bharata palace and invited him to the Hall. They approached him with music playing on many instruments. All this pained him.

He stopped the musicians and sent the messengers back and told Satrugna: "Why should they still persist in tormenting me when I have refused the kingdom? This is the result of our mother's intrigue. My father has gone to Heaven leaving me to bear all this alone. The land needs a king; without one it drifts like a rudderless and derelict ship. We must soon get Rama back."

The Assembly sat eagerly looking for the entrance of the blameless prince. He entered the Hall as the full moon rises in the sky. He bowed to the elders and sat down.

Vasishtha said: "This kingdom has been given to you by your father and your brother Rama. Accept it and protect us according to ancient custom."

Bharata's heart was far away with Rama. Tears fell from his eyes. The young prince wept aloud in the midst of the royal Assembly and in a voice struggling with tears, he addressed words of respectful reproach to the preceptors:

"How can you ask one of my race and upbringing to usurp what belongs to another far nobler and more worthy than I? Can any son of Dasaratha possibly dream of such iniquity? This kingdom and I, and all else in it belong to Rama. He is the eldest son, the noblest among us, a lover of dharma, an equal to Dilipa and

Nahusha of old. He is the rightful king. He is fit to be sovereign in the three worlds. Standing here I pay my homage to Rama there in the forest. He is the King, not I."

The Assembly burst into tears of joy when they heard Bharata speak thus.

And Bharata continued: "If I am unable to persuade King Rama to agree, I shall stay there performing penance. It is your duty, O Elders, to use every means to bring Rama back. I shall do all I can to make Rama come back to Ayodhya and make him King."

He then ordered Sumantra who was standing near him to hasten the preparations for going to the forest. The city rejoiced in anticipation of Rama's return, for all felt sure that nothing could resist the force of Bharata's dutiful love.

26. BHARATA SUSPECTED

GAZING across the river Ganga, Guha, the hunter-king, noticed unusual commotion on the bank opposite. A great army had encamped there. He pointed it to his kinsmen standing by his side and said:

"Who is this and why has he come here with a large army, apparently to cross the river? The flag suggests that it is Kaikeyi's son Bharata and his army. Yes, I see the flag flying on the top of the chariot and I can recognise the tree painted on it. That is the flag of the King of Ayodhya. Is not Rama's enemy, Bharata, the King of Ayodhya too? Having secured the kingdom unjustly through his mother Kaikeyi, it looks as though he has pursued Rama here to slay him. Get together our warriors and kinsmen and friends. Let them stand ready on this bank. Gather all the boats and fill them with armed men ready for battle. Let us wait and see. If the newcomers are well disposed towards Rama, we shall help them to cross the river and come over to this side. But, if

their intention is hostile, we shall prevent them from crossing the Ganga."

And so having made all preparations, Guha, in accordance with rules of courtesy, took some presents, got into a boat and went to meet Bharata.

On the other bank at the same time Sumantra, was telling Bharata:

"Look! Guha, the hunter-king, devoted friend of Rama, has come with his people to welcome us. He is the ruler of this region. He and his kinsmen are well acquainted with every nook and corner of this forest. They could tell us where Rama is to found and lead us safely and swiftly to the place."

Meanwhile Guha crossed the stream and, approaching Bharata, bowed and said: "Though we have been taken by surprise by your unexpected visit, still all that is mine here you may consider as your own and command me. I consider it an honor to be able to welcome and entertain you and your army."

Bharata answered: "It is very kind of you, O friend of my brother, to offer hospitality to such a large army. I wish to proceed to the hermitage of Bharadwaja. We do not know the way, and, we also need to cross this great river."

Guha bowed before him with clasped hands and said politely: "My lord, my servants and myself are ready to go with you and act as guides. But you must excuse me for expressing a doubt which occurs to me on seeing this large army you have brought. Surely you have no intentions hostile to Rama?"

Pained by these words and from a heart clear and pure as the summer sky, Bharata said: "Alas, what greater shame can come to me than this, that men who love Rama should fear and suspect me? Have no misgivings, Guha. Rama is my father now, for he has taken the place of my lost father. I have come here to beg of him to

return to Ayodhya. I swear, I have no other purpose in my mind."

Guha rejoiced to see in Bharata's face his intense love for Rama and his grief at what had happened. He said: "My Lord, who in the world can equal you in sacrifice? Who but you would renounce such wealth and power coming to him unsought? Your glory will shine forever."

The hunter-king supplied Bharata's army with all it needed. The hosts and the guests retired for the night.

The meeting with Guha only increased Bharata's sorrow. Bharata was endowed with a heart of utter innocence. He sighed and said: "Alas, that it should come to this," and rolled sleepless on the ground. His whole body burned with thoughts of the infamy that had come as a cloud over him, his father's death and the parting from Rama. Guha spoke words of comfort and tried to console him. This meeting of Bharata and Guha and the way they shared their sorrow is an episode dear to the Vaishnava Alvars and other true Bhaktas.

Bharat questioned: "What food did Rama take when he was here? Where did he sit? Where did he sleep? What did he say? And what did he do?"

Guha answered every question lovingly and pointed the spot where Rama had slept. And when he was asked, "Where did Lakshmana sleep?" He replied: "Lakshmana said, 'When Rama and Sita lie stretched on the bare earth, how can I sleep?' and he shed tears and, like me, stood on guard the whole night, bow in hand."

As Bharata pictured this scene, his grief became unendurable. He saw the spot where Rama and Sita had slept that night and showed it to the weeping queens.

Asked what Rama ate, Guha answered: "My Lord, they fasted that night.

Lakshmana brought some water and Rama drank of it and handed it back to Lakshmana to drink. The food brought was returned untasted. The following morning, they matted their locks and walked into the forest."

Bharata had found some relief from sorrow in his resolve to seek out Rama and persuade him to return, but his talk with Guha and the sights he saw brought it back in full flood.

"For my sake, Rama, you slept on the grass. I have seen the spot and still live. And they want me to wear a crown, on top of all this!" Thus he lamented inconsolably.

Then he told himself: "I shall somehow take Rama back and seat him on the throne. If he wants his vow fulfilled, I shall replace him in the forest for fourteen years. He will agree to this arrangement as it is only right and proper." Thus he calmed himself.

Early next morning, Bharata woke up Satrugna: "What are you still sleeping? The day has already dawned. The army has to cross the river. We should send quickly for Guha and arrange for the journey."

Satrugna answered: "I am not asleep, brother. Like you I spent the whole night thinking of Rama."

While they were speaking, Guha arrived and after courteous greetings announced that he had a fleet of many boats ready. All the baggage and the whole army were put on boats. The loaded vessels crossed the great river. The transport across raised a joyous clamor like some great festival.

The people did not see the sorrow in Bharata's heart for they had concluded, even when Bharata set out, that Rama would surely return. They went forward rejoicing that soon Rama would be in their

midst as crowned king and all their recent sorrows would pass like a bad dream.

Valmiki describes the scene on the bank of the Ganga in a way that recalls to one a crowded railway station during a popular festival. When the whole army had crossed the river, Bharata followed it in a boat specially fitted up for him.

They reached the ashrama of Bharadwaja.

The story of Bharata in the Ramayana portraying a character of unrivalled purity and sublime selflessness is something, more than an episode, and stands out by itself even in that noble epic, as holy shrines do on the banks of the Ganga.

It uplifts the heart, and gives one a glimpse of the heights to which human nature can rise when cleansed by love and devotion. Whether Rama and Bharata were incarnations of the Deity or merely supreme creations of a nation's imagination this episode is among the masterpieces of the world's literature.

Jnana and bhakti will automatically grow by a contemplation of the personality of Bharata. In order to recreate the scene and the person in his own mind the reader must bring into play his reverent imagination. We bring with us into this world as our inborn gift some wisdom and reverence. This gift is always in us and though sometimes obscured by prejudice or passion it keeps alive the divine in man which prevents him from reeling back into the beast.

Bharata and his retinue went on towards Bharadawaja's ashrama. When they reached the Prayaga wood, they saw at a distance a beautiful grove with a cottage in its midst. Learning that this was Bharadwaja's ashrama, Bharata left his retinue behind and, accompanied only by Vasishtha and a few other elders, walked towards it with due humility.

Divesting himself of his silk garments and his weapons and accompanied only by the ministers he went on foot behind Vasishtha. A little further on, he left behind even the ministers, and he and Vasishtha alone went forward.

When Bharadwaja saw Vasishtha, he rose from his seat and went to meet the illustrious visitor and bade his disciples to bring the customary water for the feet of the guests.

Bharata offered humble salutations to Bharadwaja. Learning who he was, the rishi received him with the respect due to a king and made inquiries concerning his welfare. He thoughtfully refrained from making any mention of the sad fate of Dasaratha.

The narration that follows is as told in Valmiki's epic. A few words by way of explanation may be useful. Bharadwaja suspected and questioned Bharata, just as Guha had done earlier. This is, however, not so put in the Tulasidas Ramayana which is a poem of pure bhakti. There is nothing that was not within the knowledge of rishis. How then could Bharadwaja (in the Tulasidas Ramayana) entertain any doubt about Bharata?

Kamban, the Tamil poet of the Ramayana, follows Valmiki closely not only here but in many other places where Tulasidas differs. Although Kamban carefully follows Valmiki, he adds many beautiful passages out of his own imagination. With a touch here and a touch there, Kamban manages skilfully to disentangle many knots. The changes he makes are very few, while Tulasidas deals freely with the story, taking such liberties as he likes with the story as a great bhakta may who has made his god his own by self-forgetting surrender.

Following Valmiki, Kamban reports the conversation between Bharadwaja and

Bharata and very beautifully expresses Bharata's indignation.

We may not, reading it all today, appreciate Bharadwaja's doubts about innocent Bharata. Such suspicion was perfectly natural to Guha, but not so in a wise rishi. Valmiki makes the rishi justify himself saying: "Don't I know you, young prince? I put you these questions only the more clearly to reveal your innocence."

Valmiki pictures rishis not as omniscient sages, but as very human wise men and seekers after truth, liable to love and fear somewhat like the rest of us. Just as Valmiki delineates Rama as a hero rather than as an avatar, so he makes Bharadwaja doubt Bharata because of his tender affection for Rama. Bound by his attachment to Rama, he hurts Bharata. Seeing the latter suffer, he at once consoles him with an explanation.

All Valmiki's characters are human beings with heightened human qualities. It is only under great stress or in exceptional circumstances that divinity shines faintly through the human nature. In the time of Tulasidas, bhakti had reached its noonday height. It shone dispelling every shade. Though bhakti predominates in Kamban's picture also, he contrives to retain the humanity of Valmiki's characters and in places makes them even more beautiful.

Bharadwaja, after making the usual personal inquiries, asked Bharata: "Why did you leave your kingly duties and go over here? Should you not stay in Ayodhya? Listening to his young wife, Dasaratha ordered Rama to live for fourteen years in the forest and the prince accordingly left the city with his brother and Sita. Do you feel that even now the way is not clear for your rule and have you come to complete what Dasaratha began and make assurance doubly sure?"

Hearing these words, Bharata wept. The tears gushed and he could hardly

peak. "Death," he said, "would be better than such a life as this."

"Do you doubt me, master?" he asked. "Do not blame me for what was done by my mother in my absence without my knowledge or consent. I have come now to do my utmost and persuade Rama to go back with me to Ayodhya, and there to be crowned King. And it is my purpose to be his humble slave all my life. I have come here to ask you where Rama dwells, to go and beg of him to return home. And me, you suspect!"

Bharadwaja said: "Bharata, I know your real nature. You are a scion of the race of Raghu. I questioned you because I wished to draw out a revelation of your affection and loyalty and thereby establish and spread your glory. Do not grieve. The Prince is dwelling on Chitrakuta hill. Stay here today. Tomorrow, you and your ministers shall go there. You will please me by accepting hospitality for a day in the ashrama."

Bharata said: "My Lord, your wishes and words of affection are a feast. What more is required?"

Bharadwaja smiled because he could see that Bharata was unwilling to cast the burden of feeding an army on a poor ascetic. He said: "I am bound to entertain you in a manner worthy of your status and goodness. Why have you left behind your army and retinue?"

Bharata answered: "I followed the rule that one should not approach a rishi's dwelling with a retinue. There is a big crowd following me. It would be a great disturbance to you if they all come here."

The rishi said: "Nothing of the sort. Order them all to come up."

And so Bharata ordered.

Bharadwaja went to the sacrificial fire and, uttering mantras, sipped water thrice and called on Viswakarma, Maya, Yama, Varuna, Kubera, Agni and other celestial

beings and ordered them to produce a great feast for Bharata and his followers.

Then a miracle happened. The feast that was ready in Bharadwaja's ashrama was like that which Vasishtha gave of old to Viswamitra. The only difference was that here, there was no quarrel or commotion. Everyone had ample accommodation. Sandal paste, flowers, food and drink, music and dance by divine performers were all provided.

Bharadwaja's feast was more sumptuous than that given by emulous kings to one another. Dwellings, vehicles, servants rose suddenly into being. The guests forgot themselves in the feast. The soldiers in Bharata's army in the ecstasy of present enjoyment exclaimed to one another: "We shall not go to the Dandaka forest. We shall not return to Ayodhya. We shall stay here forever."

How were they to know that the good things they enjoyed were for a day, and would disappear at dawn, like the stage and the crowd after a village play is over?

The guests ate fully and soon fell fast asleep.

The following morning Bharadwaja said to Bharata: "At a distance of two-and-a-half yojanas from here runs the river Mandakini. On its banks is an unpeopled forest with Chitrakuta hill to its south. On the slope of the hill, in a hut your brothers and Sita are dwelling." And he explained in detail the way they should follow.

The three queens were presented to receive the sage's blessings. "This is Queen Kausalya," said Bharata, "the mother of Rama and here, to her right and supporting her, stands the mother of Lakshmana and Satrugna, sorrow-stricken and limp like a creeper stricken by summer winds." "And here is my mother, the cause of all our sorrow," said Bharata, pointing to Kaikeyi who along

with the other Queens prostrated before the sage.

"Do not judge your mother harshly," said Bharadwaja casting his gentle eyes on the sorrowing lady. "All that has happened has happened for the good of the world."

This episode of introducing the mothers is placed by Kamban in the earlier scene with Guha. Guha reverently inquires about the queens and Bharata explains. What Valmiki describes as having taken place in Bharadwaja's ashrama is, with more poetical effect, transferred by Kamban to its proper place.

Introducing Kausalya to Guha, Bharata says, in the Ramayana of Kamban: "This is the mother of Rama. Her treasure was Rama and she lost it because of me." Of Sumitra he said: "This is the mother of Lakshmana, truer brother to Rama, who has a happiness beyond the reach of poor me." Kaikeyi in Kamban, as in Valmiki, is introduced by Bharata in harsh terms.

Bharata and his great retinue took the forest path as directed by Bharadwaja. They saw from afar the Chitrakuta hill and as they proceeded eagerly a column of smoke indicated the spot where the prince's dwelling was and shouts of joy arose from the crowd. Leaving his following behind, Bharata went forward accompanied only by Sumantra and Vasishtha.

27. THE BROTHERS MEET

WHILE Bharata was thus engaged in trying to undo the mischief wrought by others, in the forest hut at Chitrakuta, life went on fairly cheerfully. With Lakshmana and Sita by his side, Rama lacked nothing. The grandeur of the mountain scenery and the forest and the sweet songs and play of the birds pleased his heart. He forgot the sorrow of his exile from kinsfolk and city.

"Look, Sita, at those birds playing," he would say. "Look at that rock on the hill with the blue, yellow and red veins shining on it. Look at these plants and creepers with their flowers. We feared life in the forest, not knowing how pleasant it would be. I am so happy here. And I have in addition to this pleasure the feeling that I carry out my father's promise. We have the joy of duty done besides leading a happy life here. Over and above all this, I am happy that my brother Bharata is ruling the kingdom."

Thus Rama, free from sorrow himself, made Sita happy. Descending from the hill they would sometimes go to the river Mandakini and spend time there.

"Look at those sand hillocks," Rama would say. "Look at the swans playing among the lotuses. The stream is as lovely as yourself, beloved. The fords where animals come to drink are beautifully red with new earth. Even the river in Kubera's kingdom cannot be as beautiful as this. See the rishis bathing there and standing in supplication and offering hymns to the sun. Look at the flowers falling from the boughs on the water. Look at that pearl-scattering cascade. We are indeed lucky to be far away from the crowded city here in the forest. There, we cannot see rishis and pure souls such as we see here bathing everyday. This hill is our Ayodhya. The birds and beasts are our subjects. The Mandakini is our Sarayu. With you and Lakshmana by me, I am so happy and content. How pleasant it is to see the animals drinking water in the stream without any fear! Plunging in the water here, eating fruits and roots, walking about in the forest and climbing the hills, why should I think of kingdom or power?"

Thus, in the company of Sita and Lakshmana, Rama was spending happy days.

One day as they were sitting as usual on the slope of the hill in utter peace, suddenly at a distance, they saw a cloud of dust rise in the sky which seemed moving towards them. And soon they heard a great noise as of a big crowd. Rama saw the forest animals stampeding hither and thither in fear. It looked as if an army entered the forest.

"Do you hear that noise?" Rama said to Lakshmana, "The elephants, bisons and deer are running helter skelter. What could it be? Could it be some king come here hunting? Or is it that some tiger or other fierce wild beast has come rummaging? Just see and tell me."

Lakshmana climbed up a tall tree and looked all around. He saw a large army approaching from the north, a complete force of all limbs, chariots, elephants, horses and foot soldiers.

He shouted to Rama in warning: "Listen, brother. A great army is approaching with flags flying and in complete formation. Let us be careful. Put out the fire. Take Sita into the cave for safety. Let us don our armor and get ready for battle."

Rama said: "Do not be in such hurry. Look again at the flag on the chariot and tell me which king is leading his army here."

Lakshmana looked and was filled with anger. "O my brother, it is Bharata. Not satisfied with getting the kingdom, he is pursuing us here. I can see the tree on our flag flying in the breeze. He has come to slay us. But the son of Kaikeyi shall not escape with life from me today. What sin is there in killing this destroyer of dharma? The only question now is, shall we wait for them here, or shall we give them battle on the top of the hill? We will make him pay for all the harm he has done us. It is surely no sin to kill one who comes to slay us. With him will be

destroyed the greed of his mother. You will soon see the forest paths running with blood. Like a tree uprooted by an elephant, Bharata will be felled to the ground by me. We shall destroy this army. We shall feed fat the beasts of prey in the forest. " Lakshmana spoke thus, beside himself with rage.

Rama proceeded to calm him. "I know you can destroy the seven worlds if you are so minded. Listen, you can easily kill Bharata and his army, but there is a thing to consider before you set to work. Disobeying and disgracing our father and killing our brother and earning infinite obloquy, what good shall we gain by battling for and winning the kingdom? What we gain by killing our kinsfolk will be like food with which is mixed poison. Why and for whom do we seek wealth and kingdom? Is it not for the sake of others, whose joy is our own? Who would want to acquire a kingdom by wrong means? And what joy is there in a kingdom which you cannot share with those you love? Truly I tell you, I will never look at wealth and power that you and Bharata and Satrugna cannot enjoy with me. I know why Bharata is coming here now and I will tell you. He knows the way of dharma. He is coming here to give the kingdom to me. If he had been in Ayodhya instead of in the far-away land of his uncle he would have dissuaded Kaikeyi, and saved our father from the great sorrow which has befallen him. I am certain he is coming now to take me back to the city. It is wrong of you to think ill of Bharata and speak such harsh words about him. If it is desire for the kingdom that makes you so cruel in your suspicion, tell me. I have only to tell Bharata to pass it on to you, and I have no doubt he will do it with pleasure."

Rama said this laughing, and Lakshmana shrank into himself with shame.

"Perhaps our father, the King," Lakshmana said. "Is himself coming to see us."

After listening to Rama, he was convinced that his fear was improper. He wondered then why the army was marching and thought that perhaps Dasaratha was coming to visit them in the forest and a large retinue followed the King. The commentator remarks that Lakshmana, realising his folly in having spoken ill of Bharata, was trying by some explanations to cover up his shame.

Rama cheered up Lakshmana saying: "Yes, it may be as you say. Thinking that life in the forest was hard, the King might have come to take us, and specially Sita, back to the city. But then, we do not see the King's great white umbrella. But whatever be the case, you should be calm." Lakshmana stood humbly with folded hands by Rama.

Halting the army at some distance, Bharata sent a few men to observe and report on the place whence the smoke rose. They brought the news that this was the very spot described by Bharadwaja and that the cottage was very probably Rama's forest abode.

Bharata started forward with Satrugna, Vasishtha and Sumantra. As they advanced, they saw indications that the ashrama was habited. There was a path that led to the river and the trees were blazed on either side of it as though to make it easy to find it in the dusk. Presently they came to a cottage thatched with leaves, near which were stacks of faggots and the dry dung of deer and wild buffaloes heaped for use in winter.

In the cottage, on the walls were mighty bows and quivers full of deadly arrows, swords which seemed to radiate

victory and other weapons all of superlative excellence. They saw also, spread out to dry on the branches of trees, garments of bark. Bharata beheld all these sure signs of his brothers' residence in the hermitage with a swelling heart.

From inside came smoke from the oblations of daily worship. Entering, Bharata saw the altar with its blazing fire and Rama himself seated by it with matted locks, majestic, though in deer-skin and bark, a ruler of the world, with his mighty arms, breadth of chest and a countenance made to command love and obedience. By him were Sita and Lakshmana. He had been thinking all the time of the infamy that had gathered on his head, and wondering what to say and what to do when he met Rama.

But now when he saw Rama, he forgot all this in the great love that surged within him and submerged all other thoughts and fears. He sprang forward to the spot where Rama was seated. He could utter no word, beyond "Brother," and fell at his feet, and sobbed. By this time, Sumantra and Guha joined him.

Rama saw before him lying on the ground Bharata with hands clasped in supplication, with matted locks and in garments of bark. With grief and fasting, his body had grown lean and he was tanned with fatigue and exposure. Rama embraced him, and kissed him on the head, and said: "Brother beloved, why did you leave our father's side and come all this way into the forest? And why have you grown so thin?"

Bharata was speechless. Rama put to him the formal questions which members of the royal family asked each other when they met after an absence.

After an interval, Bharata gathered strength and gave answer. "Why do you question me about the kingdom, brother, as though I were its ruler? What

connection is there between the kingdom and myself? When you are the rightful king, how could I call myself king or rule over the land? My duty is to do you humble service. It has not been given to me to do it. The eldest son should bear the burden of the kingdom. **This is the law and custom.** Come with me to Ayodhya, wear the crown and shower your grace on our family and people. The old King's work in the world is over and he has entered Swarga. When you had left Ayodhya for the forest and before I returned from Kekaya the King gave up his life, slain by the grief of separation from you. Do not give way to sorrow. Perform the obsequies of our father. Thinking of you, he gave up his life. The obsequies you perform will alone satisfy his spirit." Thus Bharata steadied himself and spoke.

When Rama heard that his father was dead, he fell down like a tree felled by an axe. Bharata had no need to repeat before Rama all the apologies and explanations which he had to give to Kausalya, Guha and Bharadwaja. Where was the need for explanations when Rama set his eyes on that grief-stricken body and that ravaged face? Bharata, whose one concern was to take Rama back to Ayodhya, spoke only of this and not at all of himself.

The princes, with Sita and Sumantra went to the river and offered libations for the peace of the departed soul of the King. After other customary ceremonies, the princes returned to the cottage. They held each other's hands and relieved their sorrow by loud lamentation.

In this episode, where Bharata meets Rama, we read in Valmiki a long lecture on the art of government, delivered by Rama to his brother. Often in our epics, we come across such long dissertations on politics or morality. Modern fiction gives high priority to narrative vigor, dramatic

suspense and surprise. In old works, in addition to plenty of these qualities, there were generous doses of didacticism.

It may be added here that even old commentators noticed that the chapters of this episode have got mixed up and displaced in Valmiki. Kamban has of course regularised and modernised the narrative. In Tulsidas the meeting of Rama and Bharata is steeped in bhakti and there is no room for any complications.

28. BHARATA BECOMES RAMA'S DEPUTY

WHEN it was known that the four princes and the three queens were reunited and could be seen together in one place, a chorus of joy went up in the army and retinue and they came surging forward to witness that happy spectacle. They were sure now that Rama would return to Ayodhya and the people embraced one another for the very joy.

The sage Vasishtha conducted the three queens to the hut. On the way, they saw the river Mandakini. When he showed them the spot where the princes daily took water for their use, Kausalya and Sumitra broke down and sobbed. Said Kausalya:

"From this pool in the river, Sumitra, your son takes water to the ashrama every day. Lakshmana is prepared to do the commonest task cheerfully for his brother. He does not mind the weight of the water pot on his princely shoulder."

They saw the spot where Rama and Lakshmana poured out libations for their father's Spirit. The darbha grass lay with the ends facing south, beside the oil cake.

Kausalya clung to Sumitra and said: "O Sister! This is the food that the mightiest kings have to be content with after death."

They reached the hut. There they saw the princes with faces clouded with sorrow, seated under a thatched roof. Unable to bear the sight, the royal mothers sank to the floor.

When Rama lifted Kausalya tip, she stroked him with her flower-soft hands and was at once sad and happy. She embraced Sita and said: "My child, Janaka's daughter, daughter-in-law to the King of Ayodhya, do you live in this hut in the forest? O, faded lotus-flower! O, golden image covered with dust! My heart melts at the sight of you."

Rama reverently touched the feet of Vasishtha who seemed another Brihaspati, the preceptor of the gods, come down to earth, and then sat by his mother. Bharata humbly sat apart facing Rama. The elders surrounded them, eagerly awaiting what Bharata would say and how Rama would react.

"Bharata, why have you left your kingly duties and come here in deer skin and with matted locks?" asked Rama. Bharata attempted to speak several times, but at first could not get beyond the word 'Brother.' Then he pulled himself together with a great effort and said:

"Sending you to the forest, but unable to bear the pain, our father's soul fled to heaven. All the good my mother has got from her evil plan has been that she has become a sinner and a widow and is in deep sorrow. Despised by the world, she experiences hell on earth. Only you can save us. Undo all the evil that has been done and wipe off our tears by agreeing to be crowned. It is to implore you for this that we and the citizens and the army and the widowed queens have come and are all here waiting on your word. Grant us our prayer. This alone will put an end to our sorrow and re-establish the dharma of our race. Without a rightful king, the land is like a widow, desolate and helpless. You must come back and make it happy and secure. Like the full moon rising, dispel our darkness. The ministers here and I fall at your feet and beg of you. Do not refuse, O, brother!"

Saying this, the great Bharata, with tear-filled eyes, clung to the feet of Ramachandra.

Rama raised him from the ground and embracing him said:

"Child, we were born in a noble family and brought up in good ways. Neither you nor I can do anything wrong. I see no fault in you, my blameless brother! Do not feel sad and do not speak unkind words about your mother. It is not proper that we should blame her. Surely our father had the right to tell us what to do, aye, even to decree banishment, just as he had the right to order a coronation. Our duty is to honor our father and our mother. How could I disobey or question their command? Was it for me to refuse my father's command that I should go to the forest? He gave you kingship and he ordained for me life in the forest. He certainly had the right to settle the manner of our lives. What right do we have to alter or reject his plans? Far from being wrong, it is your duty to rule the land. And I too shall do my duty and fulfil our father's last command by living fourteen years in the Dandaka forest. Failing to fulfil our father's wish, can I find contentment in the possession of the whole world?"

Bharata repeatedly besought and importuned Rama. Rama realised that Bharata grieved that it was for his sake injustice had been done and that he endeavored to remove the blot.

"Do not blame yourself," he said. "Do not think that all these things took place for your sake. Destiny rules everything. Give up your grief. Return to Ayodhya and rule the kingdom. Let us each perform the duties assigned to us by the father we love and revere."

The people who watched the talk and saw the determination of the prince were filled with joy and sorrow in equal

measure. Bharata's affection and purity filled them with pride and joy.

Rama told Bharata his unalterable decision. "I cannot possibly disobey my father's word. You will please me by not persisting in trying to persuade me. Satrugna is there to help you in ruling, as Lakshmana is here to help me in forest life. With Lakshmana by my side, I lack nothing. Let us all four, brother, do our other's will."

The learned Jabali, one of the priests who had accompanied Bharata, here interposed a lesson on worldly wisdom for the benefit of Rama. "You talk again and again of your father's command. Dasaratha was a physical body which has now rejoined the five elements. You talk as though there is some continuing relationship between that person who is now no more and yourself. This is sheer illusion. Why do you like the foolish prating of dharma and seek to give up the good fortune to which you were born? Like a woman mourning with dishevelled hair, the city of Ayodhya is plaintively longing and waiting for your return. Go back. Accept the crown. Enjoy life's pleasures. Listen to Bharata. Do not fail in your proper duties."

This lecture angered Rama. He said with much sharpness: "Sir, you seem to set little value on truth and rectitude. Your materialist talk fills me with such abhorrence that I wonder that an unbeliever like you should have been tolerated in the court."

Jabali hastened to explain that, far from being an infidel, he had all his life been a teacher of the Shastras and that he had only spoken as he had done out of an earnest wish to persuade Rama to return. Vasishtha also intervened on his behalf and that unlucky interlude came to an end.

Vasishtha then put the case for Rama's return this way:

"On the whole, my opinion is that you should return to Ayodhya and accept the throne. Of course, your father's command also has to be considered, and reconciled to this step. You have obeyed that command at once and unhesitatingly, but now a new situation has arisen. Bharata in his helplessness, fearing infamy, has sought shelter at your feet. How can you spurn him? We all know that you love him as your life. You never refuse those who approach you for help. How then can you deny it to Bharata now? Is it not your life-principle to help those who seek refuge at your feet?"

But Rama showed no signs of relenting. Then, Bharata turned to Sumantra and said, "My brother has no pity for me. Please spread a bed of darbha grass here for me. I shall take the pledge of fasting unto death."

Sumantra hesitated and looked at Rama. Then Bharata himself fetched and spread the grass and sat on it.

"My child, this is not right," said Rama firmly. "Rise. Go to Ayodhya and fulfil your duties. Do not go against Kshatriya dharma."

Bharata got up and as a last resort appealed to the people who had accompanied him, a representative crowd of soldiers and citizens from Ayodhya: "O, citizens of Ayodhya! Why do you stand mutely looking on? Do you not want Rama to return? Why then are you silent?"

The people answered: "Rama will not swerve from truth. He will stand firm by his father's promise. He will not return to Ayodhya. What is the use of pressing him further?"

Rama said, "Listen to them, brother. They wish well by both of us. Virtue dwells in their hearts."

Bharata said: "Here I am as guiltless as Rama and a fit substitute for him. If the King's word should be fulfilled let me stay

here in the forest in place of Rama. Let him fill my place and rule in Ayodhya."

Rama laughed and said: "This procedure of exchange cannot apply here. This is not trade or business for barter and agreement. It is true that sometimes one discharges the duties of another, when the latter is too weak and unable to do it. But how does it fit on this occasion? Can any of you say that for life in the forest I have no capacity but only Bharata has?"

Then the wise Vasishtha found a solution for the problem in which righteousness struggled with righteousness as to which should be more right. "O, Bharata, rule the kingdom under Rama's authority and as his deputy. No blame would attach to you then and the pledge would be kept."

Rama took Bharata on his lap and told him, "Brother, look on the kingdom as my gift to you. Accept it and rule it as our father wished."

A glory descended on Rama and Bharata at that moment at they shone like two suns.

Bharata said: "Brother, you are my father and my God. Your least wish is my dharma, Give me your sandals. That token of yours shall reign in Ayodhya till you return. And for fourteen years I shall stay outside the city and discharge the King's duties in your place, paying reverent homage to your sandals. At the end of that period, you will return and accept the kingship."

"So be it," answered Rama.

He placed his feet on the sandals and handed them to Bharata who prostrated himself on the ground and accepted them and put them on his head.

Bharata and his retinue turned back towards Ayodhya. On the way, they met the sage Bharadwaja and reported what had happened. He blessed Bharata saying:

"Your virtue will be for ever remembered. Are you not a son of the solar race? As water flows downwards, the virtue of your family runs its inevitable course in you. Your father Dasaratha is indeed happy. He is not dead but lives again immortally in you."

They met Guha again and crossed the Ganga and reached Ayodhya. Bharata and his followers entered Ayodhya. The city, bereft of the King and Rama, appeared desolate to Bharata. It seemed to be enveloped in the darkness of a moonless night. When he returned in haste from Kekaya, he had entered the city in fatigue and shapeless fear and suspense; but today he entered it again fully realising all the tragedy.

He remembered the past and thought of the present and grieved afresh. He went to the palace and took the queens to their desolate apartments. He went to the assembly hall, and said: "Great is my sorrow. But I shall bear it. I shall stay in Nandigram and carry out my tasks as I have promised Rama. Make all arrangements for this purpose."

This was done and he solemnly announced in the assembly, "This kingdom is Rama's. For the time being, he has asked me to be in charge. In my brother's place I have installed his sandals. Deriving my authority from them I shall do my work as king."

Accordingly, Bharata stayed in Nandigram and with the help of ministers ruled the kingdom as a religious duty until Rama should return after completing his forest life. And indeed, is it not the law laid down in Scripture that one should serve the world unselfishly and without attachment, leaving the fruit of one's work at the feet of the Lord? Rama did his penance in the forest for fourteen years and all the time Bharata too

did his penance at Nandigram near Ayodhya.

29. VIRADHA'S END

NOT far from Chitrakuta was an outpost of the Rakshasas, called Janasthana, in charge of a famous warrior named Khara, who was a brother of Ravana. From this station, fierce Rakshasas ranged the forest round, molesting the rishis in their isolated ashramas. They made life so insecure that the rishis abandoned their hermitages in the Chitrakuta region in spite of all that Rama could do to dissuade them.

After Bharata's departure Rama was not quite happy in Chitrakuta. The face of his beloved brother tearful with disappointment and the sad drooping form of his widowed mother were ever before his mind's eye. Now that the going away of the rishis had deprived him of even their companionship, the lonely hut was so full of sad memories that he made up his mind to seek some other resting place in the Dandaka forest.

So they left Chitrakuta and proceeded to the hermitage of Atri, a rishi who knew the country, to seek his advice as to where they might establish themselves. They were most affectionately received and Sita won the heart of Atri's wife, the saintly Anasuya. Anasuya delighted at finding in Sita a perfect embodiment of wifely virtues, blessed her and presented her with beautiful garments and auspicious cosmetics that set out the charms of lovely young wives.

Anasuya was the embodiment of pure womanhood and her gifts added beauty and inner strength to Sita. She received the gifts and said: "My Lord the prince loves me with the love of a mother and a father. I am indeed blessed."

Then they made inquiries concerning the way and resumed their journey.

Walking, through the great Dandaka forest, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana reached a spot where many rishis lived. Even as they approached the place, they saw the sacrificial materials, bark garments and deerskins spread out to dry and they knew it was a colony of holy men.

The place was beautiful to look at. Birds and animals moved about with the freedom from fear born of affectionate familiarity with their human neighbors. Ripe fruits hung from the trees. The beautiful sound of Vedic chanting was heard.

As they came near, they saw the radiant faces of the rishis. They welcomed Rama. "O, King! You are our protector," they said. "Whether we are in the town or in the forest, you are our king." And they gave the new comers all they needed and a place in which to rest.

The following morning, the three took leave of the rishis and re-entered the forest, which was now denser than before and there were tigers and other wild animals. They proceeded slowly and cautiously.

Suddenly, a gigantic form distorted like a broken fragment of a hill rushed at them making a blood-curdling noise. It was a man-eating rakshasa and his roar was like thunder. He was unutterably ugly and the tiger-skin he wore was covered with blood and gobbets of flesh of the slaughtered beast were sticking to it still.

The corpses of three lions and the head of an elephant recently slain were impaled and strung in a row on the great spear which he shook menacingly at them.

The rakshasa lifted his weapon, roared horribly and, springing forward lifted Sita and as he held her, shouted at the princes: "Who are you, little fellows? How dare you enter this forest? You look young but wear matted locks and bark garments. You have disguised yourselves as

ascetics; yet you carry bows and arrows, and go about with this woman by your side. Whom are you trying to cheat? Are you not ashamed of yourselves? You are besmirching the good name of the rishis by your conduct, you hypocrites! Know that I am Viradha himself. The flesh of rishis is my daily food. I shall have this lovely damsel for my wife, do you understand? I shall now drink your blood, you villains!"

Held in his grasp, Sita trembled with fear. Rama lost his usual self-control and said: "Lakshmana, this is unbearable. Kaikeyi must have known all this when she sent us to the forest!"

Rama was bewildered and did not know how to meet the Rakshasa. But Lakshmana, hissing like an angry snake, said: "Rama, you are strong like Indra and, with me by your side, you should not talk dejectedly. Look at what my bow and arrow can do. The earth will presently drink this monster's blood. My wrath which was denied outlet at Ayodhya, I shall now direct on this monster, and shatter him as Indra did the winged mountains of yore. I shall attack this creature and slay him."

Viradha roared again: "Who are you? Tell me at once." Rama's mind now cleared. His face glowed with courage and calmly he said: "We are princes of the Ikshvaku race. We have come to live in the forest. May we know who you are?"

The Rakshasa answered. "And so, you are the sons of Dasaratha, are you? My father's name is Jaya. And I am known among rakshasas as Viradha. You puny kshatriyas carrying arms, what can you and your ridiculous weapons do to me? I have secured a boon from Brahma that no weapon can hurt me. Leave this girl here and run away, if you wish to save your lives."

Rama's eyes grew red with anger. "It is time for you to go to Yama," he said and bent his bow and shot a sharp arrow at the monster. It pierced his body and emerged red with blood, glistening like fire, and fell on the earth beyond. But the rakshasa was not killed. Enraged by the pain, he placed Sita on the ground, and lifting his spear and opening his mouth wide rushed towards Rama and Lakshmana. The princes sent a shower of arrows at him. The arrows stuck so thick on his body that he bristled all over like a gigantic porcupine.

The rakshasa however laughed and shook his limbs, and down fell all the darts. He straightened himself and lifted his spear again. Rama and Lakshmana with two arrows broke the spear and rushed at him sword in hand. But he lifted them both up with his hands and put them on his shoulders and strode off into the forest. Sita saw them disappear in the darkness of the jungle and wept loud.

Rama and Lakshmana, seated one on each shoulder, knowing that weapons could not kill him, wrenched off his arms and threw them down. They then attacked him with their hands and feet. Still they could not kill him on account of Brahma's boon, but the agony of his wounds was so great that he howled with it. Unfortunately for him he had asked for immunity from slaughter, but not from pain.

The brothers threw down the exhausted monster and Rama planted his foot on his neck to prevent him from rising.

The touch of Rama's feet cleared the mist in which the curse incurred in a previous birth had shrouded his understanding, and in the sudden light of recollection he joined his hands and said humbly, "Your feet have touched me, Lord, and my eyes are opened. I have realised who you are. I am under a curse, but you can save me. I am not a rakshasa

by birth, but a Gandharva. The boon I secured prevents my liberation. If you could somehow kill me, I shall recover my original form and go to heaven."

Accordingly Rama and Lakshmana smashed him without weapons and buried him in a pit they dug in the earth. And the rakshasa returned to the world of Gandharvas.

Then the princes went back to the place where Sita stood terrified and told her all that happened.

They proceeded to the ashrama of Sarabhanga. Indra was there with other gods, talking to the rishi. Knowing that Rama had arrived, he cut short his talk and went away. Then Rama, with his brother and wife, approached the rishi and humbly saluted him.

The old ascetic said: "It is for you I have been waiting. It is time for me to leave the body but my wish was to see you first. And so I have been waiting. Now my desire is fulfilled, I pass on to you all the merit of my penances."

Rama answered: "My Lord, should I not earn my own merit? How can I receive what you have earned? I have renounced everything to live in the forest. Advise me where I can best find an abode in the forest and send me forth with your blessing."

The rishi knew the secret of Rama's avatar and told him: "Learn from the sage Sutikshna where in the forest you should dwell."

Then Sarabhanga kindled a fire and entered it. The gross body perished in the flames and a youthful ethereal form rose from the pyre and floated up the heavens.

When the rishis of that forest heard the news of Viradha's death they came to Rama and surrounded him. "It is our good fortune, O King," they said, "that you have come to dwell in this region. Hereafter, we shall perform our penance

untroubled by rakshasas. Look at those bones scattered all round. They are the remains of ascetics killed and eaten by the rakshasas. The rishis on the banks of Pampa and Mandakini live in constant fear of their lives from these man-eating monsters. The King's duty from which he may not fail without sin is to protect his subjects. Just as householders pay taxes, a share of the merit of our penances goes to the King's benefit. You are radiant like Indra, king of the gods. Protect us from this persecution of the rakshasas. You are our only refuge."

Rama answered: "I am bound, O great ones, to obey your command. I gave up kingship and came to the forest in obedience to my father's wish. If in discharging my duty as a son I can also serve you and do some good, I shall count myself twice blessed. I shall stay in the forest and destroy the rakshasas and free you from trouble. Shed your fear."

Rama's promise of help gave relief and joy to the rishis. Rama, Lakshmana and Sita then proceeded towards the ashrama of Sutikshna. They came to a big hill surrounded by a thick forest which they entered. There they saw bark garments drying in the sun and a little later came upon the old rishi himself.

Saluting him, the prince said: "My name is Rama, O holy sage. I have come to have darshan of you. I pray for your blessing."

The sage rose and embraced him. "Welcome, defender of dharma. My ashrama is fit up by your presence. It is now yours. When I heard you had left Ayodhya and taken up your abode at Chitrakuta, I knew you would come here, and have lived in hope of seeing you. Else I would have long ago given up this body. The merit I have accumulated I now pass on to you. Take it for yourself, your

brother and the princess." The sage's face was bright with the light of long holy life.

It was the custom of the rishis thus to offer their acquired merit to those who came as their guests. From Rama's answer, we can see how such courtesies were to be received.

"O sage, I must earn merit by my own good deeds. With your blessing, I still hope to do so. I wish to dwell in the forest. The sage Sarabhanga directed me here to receive your blessing and seek your instructions as to where I could build a home for the rest of my stay in the forest."

The rishi's face was bright with joy and he said meaningfully: "You may live in this ashrama. There are many rishis living round about. The forest is full of fruit and roots. But evil beasts are abroad molesting the rishis and obstructing their penance. The sages are unable to bear this trouble. But for this, the place is good."

The prince understood what the sage meant to convey. He bent and strung his bow and said: "Holy sage! I shall destroy these evil-doers. My bow is strong and sharp are my arrows. It is not proper that we should dwell in this ashrama. It may interrupt your penance. We shall find a place for ourselves in the neighborhood. Permit us to do so."

That night they stayed in the sage's ashrama as his guests. The following morning, the three got up and bathed in the cool water fragrant with flowers, lit the sacrificial fire, performed their worship and touched the feet of the sage.

"By your grace, we spent a good night. We desire to see the other rishis in the region and receive their blessings. It is good to set out before the sun grows hot. Pray, give us leave to go."

The sage embraced the princes and blessed them, saying: "Visit the good rishis in the Dandaka forest. They have all

gone through great austerities and obtained divine powers. The forest is indeed beautiful with deer and birds and lotus-filled tanks, and the hills with cascades and peacocks. Lakshmana, go now with your brother and with Sita. Come to this ashrama whenever you feel like it."

The three walked round the sage according to custom and took leave of him. Sita handed to them their swords, bows and quivers and the princes set out, more radiant than before because of the great sage's blessings.

30. TEN YEARS PASS

Now begins the Aranya Kanda. The poet begins with an episode that prepares us for the misfortunes of Sita. A new responsibility has been cast on the prince. He is to destroy rakshasas who molest the rishis in the Dandaka forest. A fear arose in Sita's heart like a shadow cast by events to come.

"Why should you and Lakshmana who are properly to be merely ascetics in the forest" asked Sita of her beloved husband, "take on yourselves this task of protection? You have come here to fulfil a promise of the late King. The duty of protecting the rishis belongs to the ruler who is actually reigning. It is not for you, engaged in penance, to protect rishis. To kill anyone, except in self-defence, is opposed to the vow of ascetic life. But you have rashly promised protection to the rishis. I wonder where this will lead us?"

Thus Sita argued in soft and affectionate words while they were going from Sage Sutikshna's ashrama towards some other ashrama in the Dandaka forest.

"Bear with me, my Lord," she said, "for seeming to counsel you. I speak but as a weak woman out of my infinite love for you. You know what dharma is. But, men, it is said, are driven by desire into

three kinds of sin: falsehood, lust and violence. Falsehood is unthinkable in one who for truth's sake has renounced a kingdom and is here in the forest. And as for lust do I know that you will not allow even the thought of another woman to enter your mind. But I am afraid of the third kind of sin. Should we kill one who does not attack us? Whether it is a rakshasa or anyone else, why should we kill anyone who leaves us alone? You were in a hurry, I feel, to give your word to the rishis. To destroy the wicked is no doubt the duty of a kshatriya but can that duty still cling to you when you have renounced the privileges that go with it, and elected the life of a recluse in the forest? The duties of kingship go with actual status. Dressed in garments of bark and with hair matted, you are now an ascetic, pure and simple. Of course, you know best. I am only asking you to think well before undertaking anything."

Rama's love and admiration of Sita rose all the more for her is misgivings. "Indeed, my love," he said, "you speak like a true daughter of Janaka. But, Sita, did you not once say yourself that the weapons borne by kshatriyas are for protecting others? When helpless people suffer persecution, how could a kshatriya sit still? When we came here the sages complained of their sufferings and entreated our protection. They could not endure the cruelties of the Rakshasas who looked on them as so much meat and made shambles of the hermitages. Did they not show us a great heap of bones to show what had been done? 'You are the king's son,' they said. 'Our troubles will now end as darkness before the rising sun. You are our only refuge.' Could we princes hear their piteous appeal and refrain from helping them? Every kshatriya, everyone has to do his duty, not the king alone. You are, of course,

solicitous for my safety. Even granting that what you say is right, I have given my word and I cannot go back. They said, 'You are our refuge,' and I have given my word to protect them. A pledge thus given cannot be withdrawn. What I have spoken cannot now be unsaid. You and I must tread together the path of dharma. How can we differ?" Talking thus, they went along the forest path.

This conversation occurs in the poem like the cloud that precedes the storm. It is the artistic creation of a changing atmosphere and not a random casting up of facile verses.

For ten years, Rama, Lakshmana and Sita lived quietly among the rishis. In the great Dandaka forest, there were a number of ashramas where the rishis lived practising their austerities and living their lives of abnegation. The princes spent a month in one ashrama, three months in a second and perhaps a year in a third as welcome and happy visitors.

The forest was indescribably beautiful, with deer and bison, boars and elephants. The birds, the trees, the creepers, the blue waterlilies, all live again in the beauty of Valmiki's poetry.

Rama was very happy these ten years, the joy of association with great and holy men being added to his joy in the quiet companionship of Lakshmana and Sita. These ten years are disposed of in a small chapter. Time happily spent seems short and needs no length in recording.

When after ten years had thus passed, the end of their forest life was approaching, Rama wished to have darshan of the sage Agastya who lived in the south. The sage was, like Vishwamitra, famous through the three worlds. It used to be said that if all the wisdom and spiritual merit between the Himalayas and the Vindhya were put on one scale and Agastya sat on the other, the

southern scale would go down by his weight.

There is also the story of Agastya's service during the wedding of Siva and Parvati. All the rishis had gone to Mount Kailas for the great event. Agastya alone, staying in the south, maintained the balance of the earth. Once the Vindhya Mountain steadily grew towards the heavens and threatened to obstruct the sun's passage between the northern and southern hemispheres.

The gods grew frightened and approached Agastya for help. The Sage stood before the mountain which bent low in reverence before him. Then he blessed it saying: "May you ever remain thus", and so the mountain stretches low and long even now. So goes the story.

Two Rakshasas, Vatapi and Ilvala, gave much trouble to the rishis. The former had obtained a boon that no matter into how many pieces his body was cut up, they would all reunite and his body would be whole and strong as before. Ilvala, disguised as a brahmana, would go to the ashrama of one rishi after another and say, "O Learned One! Go over to my humble home and oblige me by accepting the consecrated food prepared for my manes."

On no account, according to ancient rule, could one refuse such an invitation. The rishis therefore had to accept the invitation. To them Ilvala served as food his brother Vatapi cut up and cooked lusciously and after the unsuspecting guests had eaten the meat, the host would, according to custom, ask the guests, "Are you satisfied?" The answer would be "Yes. We are content." Then, Ilvala would shout, "Vatapi Come out!" And at the call of Ilvala, Vatapi reunited into life would come out tearing the bowels of the guests. Many rishis had to die in this way.

One day, Ilvala tried to play this trick on Agastya. As usual, Vatapi entered Agastya's entrails as meat. Agastya of course knew this, but he was a devotee of Ganapati and had obtained the power to digest the Rakshasa.

"Are you satisfied?" asked Ilvala.

"Yes, I am satisfied," answered Agastya.

Ilvala shouted, "Vatapi, come out."

Agastya, laughing, said, "Vatapi has been digested, my host!"

"What?" cried Ilvala. "Have you killed my brother?" And he rushed against Agastya.

The Sage opened his eyes in indignation and the rakshasa was reduced to ashes. No rakshasas would thereafter come near Agastya and he protected the other sages also. Rama first went to the ashrama of Agastya's younger brother and obtained his blessings before visiting Agastya himself. Proceeding south and approaching Agastya's place, Rama noticed the brightness of the whole region, the birds and animals playing about without fear and brahmanas gathering flowers for worship.

He told Lakshmana to go in advance and announce him to the sage. Lakshmana met one of the disciples of the sage and sent word through him: "Ramachandra, son of Dasaratha, has come with his brother and wife to seek the great sage's blessings.

Agastya warmly welcomed the princes. He said: "I heard of your having come to dwell in Chitrakuta, and I was looking forward to your visit. The end of your exile is approaching. Stay here during what remains of it in peace. This place is free from the fear of rakshasas."

Rama answered: "I am happy to receive your blessing and I thank you for your gracious welcome. But I have promised protection to the rishis in

Dandaka and now that I have received your blessings, I must return to that forest."

And Agastya answered: "What you say is right." Then the Sage gave to Rama the bow made by Viswakarma for Vishnu and an inexhaustible quiver, as well as a sword. He blessed him saying, "Rama, destroy the rakshasas with these weapons which of yore Vishnu gave me."

Agastya advised the prince to spend the rest of his exile at Panchavati.

"May God bless you, O, Prince," said Agastya, "take good care of Sita who for love of you cheerfully submits to hardships to which she was not born or accustomed. Women are by nature fond of comfort and averse to hardship but no such weakness is found in Sita. She is like Arundhati. Wherever you are, Ramachandra, with Lakshmana and Sita by your side, the place will be filled with beauty. But Panchavati is itself a beautiful spot and Sita will love to live there, secure in the protection of you both. Fruit and roots are there in abundance. Stay there on the bank of the Godavari. The period of your exile is coming to an end. You will soon fulfil your father's plighted word. Like Yayati, Dasaratha is served by his eldest son."

31. THE SURPANAKHA EPISODE

THE Princes and Sita, following Agastya's instruction, took the way to Panchavati. On the way they met a huge figure perched on a big tree. They took it to be a Rakshasa.

"Who are you?" asked Rama in an angry tone. The vulture however answered in a voice full of mildness and affection: "My child, I am your father's aged friend." Then he proceeded to tell his story.

Jatayu was the brother of Sampati, the son of Aruna the dawn-god, who was

brother to Garuda the great eagle-vehicle of Vishnu.

He said: "When you leave Sita alone and go hunting in the forest, I shall be looking after her safety."

The prince was pleased and accepted the offer of the bird with gratitude. They then proceeded on their journey.

Rama was thrilled by the beauty of Panchavati and gratefully offered praise in his thoughts to Agastya for recommending the spot to them. He told Lakshmana: "We can build our ashrama and enjoy our stay here for any length of time. Those hills are near and yet not too near. Look at those herds of deer. The trees with their flowers and the sweetly singing birds, the river, the clean sand, everything is beautiful. Choose for us a good site and build a cottage."

Lakshmana did as he was told. He constructed an ashrama.

Valmiki pauses here to explain the skill and swiftness of Lakshmana's workmanship. He describes in detail how the mud walls were raised and the thatched roof was made. Rama admires Lakshmana enthusiastically.

"You are more than a father to me," said the prince shedding tears of love and joy.

We, too, may pause to think how the noble prince Lakshmana acquired this skill. We may infer that in those days education even of princes included a knowledge of the realities of life and development of manual skill such as could enable one to collect materials in a forest and put a neat cottage for oneself.

In the ashrama at Panchavati, Rama and Sita lived happily, lovingly served by Lakshmana.

One morning in early winter the three went as usual to the Godavari for their bath and to offer their morning prayers and fetch water for the day's needs. They

walked conversing about the beauty of the season. Lakshmana thought of Bharata and how he would then be busy performing the ceremonies appropriate to the month.

He said: "Bharata is entitled to live in ease but he has taken on himself a life of hardship because we live a life of hardship in the forest. My heart is full of sorrow for him. Even in this cold weather poor Bharata no doubt eats sparingly and sleeps on the bare floor. This cold morning he too is probably walking towards the Sarayu. How fortunate we are to have such a noble brother! Pure in mind and speech and conduct, renouncing all pleasures, he lives a life of austerity for our sake. He is exactly like our dear father and quite the opposite of his mother. How could so cruel a woman as Kaikeyi bear so good a son?"

Rama stopped him, saying: "Talk as much as you like of Bharata and our father, but stop condemning Kaikeyi. All that you say of Bharata is true and my thoughts too today go to him in love. How long yet to see him again? When shall we have that pleasure, Lakshmana? When shall we four brothers live together again? Bharata's loving words are still sweetly ringing in my ears."

Thus thinking longingly of home and Bharata they bathed in the Godavari on that early winter morning.

After offering oblations to their ancestors and prayers to the sun, Rama rose transfigured like the Lord Siva and returned to the ashrama with Sita and Lakshmana.

Their morning duties over, they sat whiling the hours with wistful talk of old days and tales of long ago.

While they were thus recapturing the past in sweet companionship suddenly there came a Rakshasa woman who saw them. She was Surpanakha, Ravana's

sister who was roaming the forest full of the idle thoughts of well-fed ill-taught youth. She was horribly ugly, but had the magic power to assume any lovely form at will. When she saw the godlike beauty of Rama, she was filled with uncontrollable desire for him and accosted him.

"Who are you, dressed like an ascetic but accompanied by a woman and carrying warlike weapons and arrows? Why are you here in the forest that belongs to the Rakshasas? Speak the truth."

On such occasions it was the courtesy of those days for the person accosted to announce himself and recite his name, city and history and inquire of the newcomer concerning his or her family and the purpose of the visit.

Rama began, "I am the eldest son of the great King Dasaratha. My name is Rama. This is my brother Lakshmana. And this is my wife Sita. Obeying the behests of my father and mother and in fulfilment of dharma, I am now in the forest. And now please announce who you are. What is your family? You look like a woman of the Rakshasa race. What is your purpose in coming here?"

She answered, "Have you heard of Ravana, the heroic son of Visravas and the king of the Rakshasas? I am his sister. My name is Surpanakha. My brothers Kumbhakarna and Vibhishana are also renowned warriors. The lords of this region, Khara and Dushana, are also my brothers. They too are mighty men at arms and wield great authority in these regions. But I am not subject to their control, but am a free person, free to do what I like and please myself. Everybody in this forest is, as a matter of fact, afraid of me." She said this to strengthen her wooing position.

"The moment I set eyes on you," she continued, "I fell in love with you. You

are now my husband. Why do you wander around with this midget of a woman! I am the mate worthy of you. Come with me. Let us wander at will through the forest. I can take what shape I please. Do not mind this girl of yours. I shall cut her up in a trice and dispose of her. Do not hesitate."

Under the influence of lust, she thought in the manner of her race and prated thus. All this amazed and amused Rama. He smiled and said: "Oh beautiful one! Your desire for me will end in trouble for you. My wife is here with me. I do not care to live the life of a man with two wives. But my hefty brother here is untrammelled with a wife, and is as good-looking as myself. He is the proper husband for you. Offer your hand to him and leave me alone."

Rama said this, being confident that Lakshmana would deal with Surpanakha suitably.

The Rakshasi took Rama's advice seriously and approached Lakshmana saying, "Oh, my hero, come with me. Let us together wander at will in joy through this Dandaka forest."

Lakshmana entered into the humor of the situation and said, "Do not be foolish. He is trying to cheat you. What is your status and what is mine? I am here a slave to my brother, while you are a princess. How could you become my wife and accept the position of a slave's slave? Insist on Rama's taking you as his second wife. Do not mind Sita. Soon Rama will prefer you to her and you will be happy with him."

Some critic might ask whether it was proper thus to torment a woman, especially a woman in love. But if we exercise our imagination and have before us a monster of ugliness we can understand the situation. It is true that she could assume any charming form she chose, but in the intoxication of lust, she

seems to have omitted even this allurement.

"This ugly, corpulent and paunchy Rakshasi, with leering eyes blood-shot with lust, her red hair all dishevelled and her voice hoarse with passion, accosted the handsome, beautifully built and smiling Rama", says Valmiki. The Tamil poet Kamban varies the situation by making Surpanakha assume a lovely shape from the outset.

Impelled by brute passion, the Rakshasi did as she was told by Lakshmana and went again to Rama. She thought and acted like a Rakshasi for she knew no other way of life.

The sight of Sita enraged her. "It is this wretched little insect that stands between you and me. How could you love this girl without a waist? Look. I shall finish her off this instant. I cannot live without you. Once I have put her out of the way, you and I shall live together happily." Saying this, she sprang on Sita.

Rama intervened just in time to save Sita. The farce had gone too far and threatened to become a tragedy. Rama shouted to Lakshmana, "Look, I have just been able to save Sita. Attend to this monster and teach her a lesson."

Lakshmana at once took up his sword and maimed Surpanakha and drove her out. Disgraced and mutilated, Surpanakha uttered a loud wail and disappeared into the forest.

Bleeding and mad with pain and rage, she flung herself on the ground before Khara, as he sat in state with his colleagues. Yelling with anguish, she related the story of her wrongs. The scorn and mutilation she had suffered was an insult to the Rakshasa race which only blood could efface.

She said: "Look at me. Rama and Lakshmana have done this and they are

still alive and roaming in your domain. And you sit here doing nothing."

Khara stood up and said: "My dear sister, what is all this? I understand nothing. Calm yourself and tell me what has happened. Who dared to do this thing to you and is he in this forest? Who is he that wants to become food for crows and vultures? Who has stirred up the black cobra? Who is that fool? Where is he? Tell me, and he shall die at once. The earth is thirsty for his blood. Stand up and tell me everything as it happened."

"Two handsome young men," said Surpanakha, "have come into the forest, dressed like ascetics and accompanied by a girl. They say they are the sons of Dasaratha. These two together, making an excuse of the girl attacked me and have hurt me thus shamefully. I am thirsting for the blood of these villains. Slay them first. Everything else can wait."

Khara ordered his generals: "Go at once, slay these men and bring their lifeless bodies. Drag hither the woman also. Delay not."

Fourteen generals set out to do his bidding.

In Kamban's Ramayana, Surpanakha is delineated as having come in the shape of a beautiful young woman, entirely human, who tried to tempt Rama. Kamban departs widely from Valmiki in this episode and he makes a beautiful episode of it as will be seen in the next chapter.

There are some people who pose as critics of our holy books and traditions saying, "This hero killed a woman. He insulted and injured a woman who offered him her love. He killed Vali from behind, rather than face him and accept honorable defeat. He unjustly banished Sita to the forest at the end of all the adventures. If the banishment of Sita was not unjust and if he rightly suspected Sita's fidelity, why then, we too, must suspect her fidelity."

All such criticism is based on a mentality of hatred. We have unfortunately plenty of barren, heartless cleverness, devoid of true understanding. Let those who find faults in Rama see faults, and if these critics faultlessly pursue dharma and avoid in their own lives the flaws they discover in Rama, the bhaktas of Sri Rama will indeed welcome it with joy. If they exhibit the virtues of Rama and add to these more virtues and greater flawlessness, who can complain?

32. KAMBAN'S SURPANAKHA

RAMA and Lakshmana drove out Surpanakha, as one takes a stick and drives out a donkey straying into a garden. Such is the brief and simple treatment of this incident by Valmiki.

Kamban, the Tamil poet, however, deals with it more elaborately and has made a number of changes in the story.

Sitting on the riverbank, Rama watched a swan walking and then looked at Sita, also walking. Noting the similarity in the gait, Rama was pleased and smiled. Sita, for her part, observed an elephant returning from the river and, reminded of Rama's gait, smiled. Thus in Panchavati, beside the river Godavari, love flowed smoothly between the banks of dharma. Just then fate conspired with lust to drag Surpanakha to the presence of Rama. The Lord Vishnu had left the Ocean of Milk and taken birth as Dasaratha's son, to rid the earth of the enemies of the gods. But how was Surpanakha to know this?

Beholding the beauty of his person, she wondered: "Is this Manmatha or Indra or Siva or Vishnu? But Manmatha has no body. Indra has a thousand eyes and Siva has third eye in the forehead, and Vishnu has four arms; so he cannot be Indra, Siva or Vishnu. Perhaps, after all, this is Manmatha who has recovered his body through penance, after it had been reduced to ashes by Siva's wrath. If it be

Manmatha, why should this handsome hero still perform penance? Why should this lotus-eyed youth waste his time in tapas?"

So she stood there wondering, watching, unable to turn her eyes away. She thought, "My own form would fill him with disgust. I shall change my appearance and then approach him."

She transformed herself into a beautiful young woman and appeared before him like the full moon. Her slender frame was like a golden creeper climbing up the Kalpaka tree in Heaven. Her lovely lips and teeth were matched by her fawn-like eyes.

Her gait was that of a peacock. Her anklets made music as she came near. Rama looked up and his eyes beheld this creature of ravishing beauty. She bowed low and touched his feet. Then she withdrew a little with modesty shading her eyes.

Rama welcomed her, imagining that she was a visitor from some distant place and inquired: "Which is your place? What is your name? Who are your kinsfolk?"

She answered: "I am the daughter of the grandson of Brahma. Kubera is a brother of mine. Another is Ravana, conqueror of Kailasa. I am a maiden and my name is Kamavalli. And what is your purpose in coming here? It is not proper for a woman to speak out the trouble in her mind. And yet I suppose I must speak it out. The God of Love has invaded my heart. You can and should save me."

She paused. Rama remained silent. And she went on.

"You may wed me with Gandharva rites. You know it is permitted for lovers to come together in this manner. Once we are joined in this way, not only will happiness be ours, but friendship between you and my brother, the great Ravana, will follow. You are alone in this forest

and the Rakshasas will molest you. Even if you do not provoke them, they will give you trouble because you are dressed as an ascetic. If you marry me, you will be free from all this danger. Not only that, my powerful people will be ready to serve you in all ways. Consider this well."

Thus she pleaded for the fulfilment of her desire, citing authority and appealing to Rama's self-interest also.

Rama laughed revealing his beautiful pearly teeth. Just then, Sita was coming towards them through the plants and creepers, herself looking like another creeper. Surpanakha saw and marvelled at her loveliness.

Not knowing whom she was, Surpanakha angered by lust, told Rama: "This girl is a Rakshasi in human form. She has come to deceive you. Beware of her. Demonic is not her real form. She is a Rakshasi that eats raw meat. Throw her out. Have nothing to do with her."

Rama laughed again. "You are indeed wise," said he. "You have found out the truth about her."

Meanwhile, Sita had come and stood by Rama. Surpanakha could not understand what Rama was laughing for. In her lust, she had quite lost her wits. She hissed at Sita: "Why do you approach this hero of mine, oh Rakshasi? Go away from here."

Sita, bewildered and afraid, hung on the prince's shoulder, and she then seemed like a lightning flash hugging a rain-bearing cloud.

Rama now saw that the joke had gone too far and said: "Dear lady, please stop, lest my brother should hear you. He is quick-tempered and terrible when angry. I advise you to go back quickly the way you came." Saying this, Rama took Sita with him and went into the hermitage.

The fire of her desire unquenched, the Rakshasi spent the night somewhere,

somehow. In the morning, she thought: "I shall die if I do not get this man. So long as this girl is with him, he will never come near me. I must contrive to carry her off and put her away somewhere and then I may secure his love." Thus resolved, she came again to the ashrama.

Rama had gone to the river for his morning ablutions and prayer and Sita was alone in the ashrama. Surpanakha reckoned this was her chance to carry her off. She did not notice that Lakshmana was in the wood nearby. She rushed towards Sita. Lakshmana shouted and sprang on the Rakshasi. Catching hold of her hair, he kicked her and drew his sword. Surpanakha when attacked resumed her own shape and attacked Lakshmana. Lakshmana easily caught hold of her and mutilated her and drove her off.

Surpanakha ran into the forest, bleeding and loudly appealing to her kinsfolk: "Oh, brother Khara! Oh, brother Ravana! Oh, Indrajit! Oh, kings of the Rakshasa race! Are you all asleep? A mere man has insulted me and cut off my nose. Do you not hear my lamentations?"

This is Kampan's version of the episode. Surpanakha approaches and tries to attract Rama, hiding her true form and appearing like a beautiful human girl. This variation is supported in a way by Valmiki's description of Surpanakha as Kamarupini, that is, one able to assume what form she liked.

The Tamil poet appears to have felt something wrong or wanting in Valmiki's story and has woven an episode showing how bestial passion works.

33. KHARA AND HIS ARMY LIQUIDATED

ACCOMPANIED by the fourteen generals of Khara, Surpanakha came back to Rama's ashrama, determined to avenge herself and drink the blood of the princes.

Pointing to the two young men, she told her escort, "Look, there stand the men who insulted and mutilated me. Slay them immediately."

Rama understood the situation at once and told Lakshmana: "Take care of Sita for a while, while I deal with those fellows."

Saying this, he took up his bow.

Following the prevailing rules of war, Rama announced himself to Khara's generals and said, "Tell us the reason that you come here. Know that we are here in the forest at the bidding of the rishis for the purpose of destroying their enemies. If you wish to escape with life, leave us alone."

But the Rakshasas wanted not peace, but war. And the battle began. It did not take long for Rama's arrows to annihilate the Rakshasa generals.

Once again, lamenting loudly, Surpanakha went to Khara. The destruction of the powerful detachment he had sent was inconceivable. He could not believe it. He sought to soothe his disturbed sister with soft words.

"I have sent warriors unconquerable, each one like Yama. They must have by now fulfilled their mission. Why do you weep? Why need you bewail while I am here?"

Surpanakha rose, and wiping the tears from her eyes, said: "True, you sent your fourteen warriors with me. But the fourteen now lie stiff and cold in death, slain by Rama, whose skill with weapons baffles description. If you have a spark of pride in you, start at once, fight with Rama and save the Rakshasa race. If you do not, the destruction of our people is certain. But if you are afraid, tell me so and I shall understand. These young men who have entered your satrapy are determined to destroy your race, unless you first meet and destroy them."

These words, spoken by his sister in a loud voice before all his courtiers, pierced Khara's heart.

"Why do you speak thus terrified by a puny human being? Hold yourself in patience for a moment and you will have his blood to drink." So saying, Khara rose.

"Do not go alone!" she said. "Take your army with you."

Khara gave orders accordingly. A great army, fully armed, went in advance under the leadership of Dushana. Behind the army Khara proceeded majestically in a chariot. On the way he met with many bad omens which affected the spirits of his host. He laughed and reassured his army, saying:

"Never have I been so far defeated in battle. Do not mind these portents. We shall soon crush these two little men and return in triumph."

The army took heart at these bold words of their leader.

Hearing the tumultuous noise of the approaching army, Rama and Lakshmana prepared for battle. Rama told Lakshmana: "Do you see the signs? It is certain that the Rakshasas of Janasthana are coming here to their death! I see in your face the glory of the victory that awaits us. Arm yourself and take Sita with you to a cave in the hill and look after her. I shall encounter the Rakshasa hordes and destroy them. Go at once. I do not require any help." Saying this, Rama put on his armor and strung his bow.

Lakshmana did as Rama bade and took Sita to a mountain cave.

A great battle was to follow. So the Devas and Gandharvas hovered in the heavens to watch the fight. They uttered benedictions and prayed for Rama's victory. The rishis had misgivings. How was Rama, standing single, to meet and quell this huge army? As Rama stood there, bow in hand, the radiance of his

face was like that of Rudra himself when he bent his great bow Pinaka.

The Rakshasa force advanced in proud array, with drums and trumpets and the clanking pageantry of war filling the quarters with clamor and causing the denizens of the forest to stampede in all directions. Rama stood holding his bow with his band on the string. Like great black clouds disturbing the sun the Rakshasa hordes surrounded him.

The battle began. But while even the Devas wondered how he could withstand the yelling masses which rushed on him, a constant stream of deadly arrows sped from his bow before which the Rakshasa ranks withered and fell like moths before a blazing fire.

Dushana himself now stood in front of Rama. Rama bent his bow and sent his shafts in all directions in an unceasing stream. Like rays from the sun, and with the speed of light, arrows shot out from the spot where Rama stood, spread out in all directions and brought down warriors, chariots, elephants and horses.

The shafts pierced the bodies of the Rakshasas and came out, covered with their blood shining like fire. The army was utterly destroyed and Rama stood still, like Siva at the end of Time.

Dushana came again with another great army. For a while he seemed indomitable. But soon Rama's arrows laid low his chariot, drivers and horses. He jumped down and sprang towards Rama. Rama's arrows, however, severed his arms from his trunk. And the monster fell dead on the ground like a huge elephant. Other Rakshasas, who saw Dushana falling, rushed against Rama and were also slain by the arrows that sped from his Kodanda bow.

In this way, the whole army of Khara was destroyed. It had come roaring like an ocean and now it lay still, a mass of

corpses and severed limbs and derelict weapons and broken chariots.

Only Khara and Trisiras remained. As Khara rushed forward to meet Rama, Trisiras stopped him saying: "I shall go first and kill Rama. Or else, I shall be killed. After I am dead, you may meet him."

The three-headed Rakshasa mounted on his chariot attacked Rama with his arrows. Rama met them with arrows that hissed like deadly serpents. At last Trisiras collapsed and fell spitting blood. His followers fled like deer.

Khara, seeing this, cried: 'Hold' to the fugitives and directed his chariot against Rama. His confident pride was gone but he fought manfully. The shafts sent by the two warriors covered the sky. Khara stood like Yama in his chariot, sending his stream of arrows. For an instant, Rama leaned on his bow. In that interval Rama's armor was pierced by Khara's arrows and showed the prince's body shining like the sun.

Rama now took up the bow of Vishnu and laid low Khara's chariot and cut his bow in twain. Khara then took his mace and approached Rama. The Devas and rishis watching the battle became anxious and renewed their benedictions.

"You have been a terror and a plague to mankind!" exclaimed Rama. "Strength of body is no protection to an evil-doer. You have persecuted and killed rishis engaged in penance in the forest. You will now receive the punishment due for these sins of yours. The spirits of the rishis whose flesh you fed on are now witnessing your punishment from their aerial chariots. I have come to the Dandaka forest to destroy wicked Rakshasas. My arrows will pierce the bodies of all your kinsfolk. Your head will soon roll on the ground like a ripe fruit."

"Human worm!" exclaimed Khara. "Son of Dasaratha! Have done with boasting! You are proud because you have killed a few common Rakshasas. A hero boasts not as you do. Only a Kshatriya banished by his people can talk boasting like this. You have shown you can brag. Let us see now if you can fight! Your words have blazed up like burning straw with little heat or life. Here I stand mace in hand, like Yama to take your life. Evening approaches. Be prepared to lose your life. I am here to avenge the death of these my followers whom you have killed."

So saying, he whirled his mace, and hurled it at Rama. The mace was split by Rama's arrows into splinters which fell harmless on the ground. "Have you finished speaking, Rakshasa? Now you shall die. This forest will be safe hereafter and the rishis will live in peace," said Rama.

Even while Rama was speaking, Khara pulled out by its roots a huge tree, and gnashing his teeth, threw it at Rama. But this too Rama split by his arrows. And fearing further delay, he aimed deadly darts at Khara. The wounded Rakshasa sprang on Rama intending close combat with him. But the latter avoided contact by stepping back and laid him dead with a shaft which clove his breast.

The Devas showered flowers from on high and cried in joy: "Rama has killed the sinful Rakshasa. Men can live in peace in the Dandaka forest hereafter. Within an hour Rama has destroyed Khara, Dushana, Trisiras and their whole army. Indeed he is a hero."

Sita and Lakshmana returned from the cave. Lakshmana embraced Rama and rejoiced that single-handed he had fulfilled the promise of safety he had given to the rishis.

How did Rama all alone perform these feats? If one observes a cow guarding her calf and scattering a whole crowd of men, one can realise the power of love. Love is a supreme quality which according to occasion manifests itself in diverse heroic forms such as valor and self-sacrifice, just like gold which can be changed for silver or goods or other things of value. When God assumes human form and is engaged in fulfilling His promise to save the helpless, His limitless power comes into play.

34. THE PATH OF RUIN

AKAMPANA, one of the few Rakshasas who survived the great slaughter at Panchavati, fled to Lanka and seeking audience of Ravana, said: "Almost all our people who occupied Janasthana are dead and Janasthana is now an empty ruin. I alone have managed to escape with life."

Ravana was furious with anger. He stared and violently shouted: "Who destroyed my lovely Janasthana? Was it Yama or Agni or Vishnu? I shall deal death to the god of death. I shall burn up both the god of fire and the sun. I shall strangle and suffocate the god of wind. Tell me, who was it that destroyed Janasthana and killed my men heedless that I am here to avenge? Speak out at once."

It was ever dangerous to carry unpleasant news to tyrants. Akampana was frightened by the king's rage and said, "I shall speak, if you give me protection." He then told his tale. "Rama, son of Dasaratha, a young warrior, lion-like in fierce valor, a hero who has already acquired fame among men, fought with Khara and Dushana at Panchavati and destroyed them."

The Rakshasa king hissed like a cobra and said: "What are you talking? How did this happen? Did Indra and the divine

hosts come down to earth and fight on Rama's side?" Akampana answered: "No such thing happened, great king. Alone did Rama stand against our whole army and its commanders and destroyed them all. And Khara and Dushana too were slain. The deadly arrows issuing from Rama's bow like five-headed serpents pursued the Rakshasas wherever they went and destroyed them." And he went on to describe at length Rama's skill and speed in the use of his weapons.

And so Ravana learnt that Dasaratha's son, Rama, with his younger brother Lakshmana was at Panchavati and that he, alone without even his brother's aid, had done it all and that no gods had come to their aid.

"Well," said Ravana, "I do not understand this but I shall start at once. I shall destroy these little worms of men and return." And he rose. "Hear me, great king, before you go," said Akampana, and explained once again Rama's strength and courage.

"Listen to me. No one can fight with Rama and conquer him. When I say 'No one,' I mean 'No one.' Not even you can do it. Because you have promised me protection, I dare thus to tell you the plain truth. There is only one way of killing him. His wife is with him. The whole earth holds not her equal in beauty. If you contrive to carry her off, separation from her will kill Rama; so great is his love for her. Consider how you can do this. Do not think of battle with him."

When he heard of Sita's beauty, the Rakshasa's desire was kindled. He began to think that the defeat of Khara and his hosts was indeed a fortunate event that brought him an opportunity for gaining one more beautiful queen and wife. He welcomed Akampana's advice and said: "Tomorrow morning I shall go. I think your plan is good."

Accordingly Ravana set out in his mule-yoked flying chariot which gleamed like the moon among the clouds as it sped fast in the air. He went straight to Maricha's dwelling.

Maricha duly welcomed his king and inquired what urgent necessity brought him there. Ravana answered: "Hear me, Maricha. You and you alone can help me. Janasthana has been destroyed and so too the whole army I had stationed there. All this is the work of Rama, son of Dasaratha. Isn't it amazing? To avenge myself, I am resolved to carry off his wife. In this I need your advice and help."

Maricha, whose experience of Rama's prowess had seared into his soul, was horrified and tried to dissuade Ravana from his mad enterprise.

"What plan is this? Some enemy determined to destroy you, but pretending to be your friend, has given you this plan of carrying off Sita. Whoever gave you this advice wishes the end of the Rakshasa race. It is like advising you to put your hand into the mouth of a sleeping cobra and pull out its fang. Haven't you a happy home and devoted wives? Return to them, and enjoy your life and prosperity. To hanker after Rama's wife is the highway to disgrace and destruction and the annihilation of the Rakshasa race."

Ten-headed Ravana went back to Lanka, for Maricha's counsel appeared right to him. Ravana must have then remembered the omission in the series of boons he had secured. He had obtained immunity from the attacks of all beings except men. Rama's shafts had conquered and killed the whole army with Khara, Trisiras, Dushana and other mighty warriors. Thinking of all this, Ravana accepted Maricha's advice.

But fate would not let him be. Ravana was seated on his throne with his counsellors around him. Majesty shone on

his face like a sacrificial flame fed with ghee and his mighty body showed the scars of many wounds received in victorious battle against gods, asuras and others.

His strength and courage were limitless, so was his adharma. He had no equal in persecuting Devas, spoiling sacrifices and carrying away women. The hosts of Devas and asuras were mortally afraid of him. He was a terror to all creatures. Enjoying wealth and varied pleasures, freed from the fear of death, the ruler of Lanka knew no master or rival and feared neither God nor sin.

With his ten heads, large eyes and huge limbs, his figure was terrible, but it also possessed the marks of royalty. Gorgeously dressed and bejeweled as he sat on his throne, surrounded by his ministers in the midst of the splendor of the despoiled world, there suddenly appeared before him like the vision of the doom to be, his sister Surpanakha, bleeding and mutilated, a shape of pain and sorrow and shame. While all looked at her with horror struck eyes in stunned silence, her anguish broke out in burning words.

"What a fool are you that, sunk in sensual pleasures and arrogantly secure of sovereignty. You are not awake to the deadly danger that threatens your existence at your very doors! Surely that king who is drunk with self-importance and dead to all portents that threaten his state is doomed to shame and destruction! No object is of less account or more contemptible than a ruler who falls through his own remissness. Know you not that your brothers, Khara, Dushana and Trisiras and your gallant army of fourteen thousand fierce Rakshasas have been exterminated by Rama, a mere man, and that your outpost at Janasthana has been destroyed? One moment I saw a

single warrior stand proud in the glittering pageantry of war and the next, they lay dead slain by that man's arrows, strewn the ground like ripe crops devastated by a terrible hail-storm. And you see me, your own sister, disgraced, mutilated and heart-broken! Have you no thoughts of vengeance, you, a hero, a brother, king?"

Stung by her contempt and heart-struck by her suffering and sorrow, Ravana said: "Be sure you shall have vengeance. But this Rama, who is he? What sort of man is he? What are his weapons? How does he fight? What seeks he in Dandaka forest? And how happened it that you were so cruelly mutilated?"

She gave a description of the brothers and Sita, dwelling on the virile beauty and powers of the brothers, probably with a view to provoke the envious jealousy of the Rakshasa. And growing enthusiastically eloquent about the superlative loveliness of Sita, she said: "I have no words to describe her perfections. I have never seen such sublime beauty in any created thing, be it Gandharva or Kinnara or a daughter of man. And now, I will tell you why this ghastly outrage was perpetrated on me. On seeing this Sita, I felt that none but you deserved her and that she was fully worthy to share your bed and out of my love for you I tried to carry her off for you. Lakshmana, who was standing by, prevented it and, springing on me, disfigured and disgraced me thus. For your sake, all this I have suffered. If you wish to avenge this insult and protect the honor of the race, rise and go at once. Apart from revenge for the insult I have suffered, secure for yourself a wife worthy of you. If you capture her and disgrace Rama, the spirits of the warriors who were slain in Dandaka would be satisfied. I too shall feel that some amends have been made for the dishonor done to me. You do not know

your own strength. You can easily secure Sita, and make her your own. And can you remain indifferent to the insult to your race? Khara and Dushana lie dead in Janasthana because they dared oppose Rama. Think of all this and do what is right. Save, oh, save, the honor of our race."

Listening to these words of his sister and her praise of Sita's beauty, Ravana dissolved the council and retired to muse alone. He had to think and think again, because he remembered what Maricha had told him. He turned in his mind the pros and cons and finally coming to a decision ordered a chariot to be kept ready in secrecy.

It was ready, his golden chariot, drawn by mules bearing demon faces. Mounting it, he passed over sea and land and cities. As he looked from his magic chariot at the sights of the summer season down below, his passion grew stronger.

He reached Maricha's ashrama and met Maricha who, with matted hair and bark garments, lived the life of an ascetic. Seeing his king and kinsman, Maricha welcomed Ravana duly and said: "Why have you come all this way a second time and unannounced?"

Ravana, skillful in speech began: "I am in great trouble from which only you can save me. I beg you for help. Do you know how my brothers, under my orders, ruled Janasthana and how they and their warriors knew no opposition all these years? But now this man Rama has killed them and their whole army. Without a chariot, and standing on the ground, his arrows have pierced to death all our kinsmen. Today, in the Dandaka forest, rid of Rakshasas, the rishis live fearless lives. This Rama is a worthless prince banished by his father, no doubt for some crime. He has been wandering in the forest alone with his wife, Sita. This

fellow dressed like an ascetic but enjoying sense-pleasures, this renegade from dharma, proud of his strength and for no other reason, has mutilated the face of my sister and insulted our race. My sister who has suffered this pain and shame had come and complained to me. If, with all this, I sit still and do nothing, would I still be a king? To avenge myself I have decided to carry off Rama's wife from the Dandaka forest. To disgrace and punish this Rama is a duty I owe to my race. And for this I need your help. With you to help me, I have no fear. In courage, strength, skill and magic powers, none on earth can equal you. That is why I have come to you. You cannot refuse me. I will tell you how you can help me. You should turn yourself into a golden deer, a golden deer with silver spots, casting a spell on all eyes. In that shape romp in front of Sita near Rama's ashrama. True to the character of women, she will insist on Rama and Lakshmana pursuing and capturing you for her. When they are thus engaged and she is left alone, I shall easily carry her off. Sita is a most beautiful woman. Rama losing such a wife is sure to languish in sorrow and lose his manly spirit. It will then be easy to kill him and avenge ourselves."

Maricha stared at Ravana. His face became pale and his mouth grew parched. He was frightened by Ravana's plan. With his experience of Rama's prowess and his own wisdom born of penance, Maricha saw what was going to happen.

He knew that Ravana's sinful purpose had not the ghost of a chance of success. It was clear to him that the noose of fate was round Ravana's neck dragging him to inevitable ruin. He had spoken no doubt of the honor of the Rakshasas, of the duties of kingship and of the insult to Surpanakha. But he was really impelled

by a lustful desire to possess Sita. All this Maricha saw.

We should analyse Surpanakha's motives too. She had suffered because of her own uncontrollable carnal desire. Though it was Lakshmana who mutilated her she was not so angry with him as with Sita who stood between her and her desire and whose beauty and virtue she hated as darkness hates light.

The one desire that now burned in her heart was to avenge herself by bringing disgrace on Sita. In order to use Ravana for this purpose, she described Sita in such glowing terms to him and kindled his lawless passion. The rest of her talk was ancillary to her main purpose. Reference to the honor of the race, the security of his empire, the slaying of his kinsmen and so on was only to serve her main purpose which was to rouse Ravana's lust and make him desire Sita and he was caught in the snare.

35. THE GOLDEN STAG

MARICHA told Ravana, "I have listened, my king, to all that you have said and I am filled with boundless sorrow. It is easy to flatter. Flattery is ever pleasant to the ears. Those who utter good though unpalatable advice are few; and fewer still are those who welcome it when given. Yet it is my duty to speak to you the harsh truth. Sweet words might please you now, but will surely lead you to danger and ruin. Your informants have not told you the truth about Rama. Do not be deceived by what you have heard from others about this Rama. He is neither a renegade nor a criminal, but a dutiful son who is in the forest to honor his father's word. Far from being a weakling or coward, he is a mighty warrior, whose equal in arms does not exist. Do not make him your implacable enemy and bring ruin on your people and your kingdom. From what you are bent upon, it looks as though Sita was

born only to compass your ruin. The race of Rakshasas and Lanka itself will soon be destroyed on your account. Who is the enemy that has put this disastrous thought into your head? Who has given you this bad advice to take you, your kingdom and your race to danger and destruction? Who told you that he was a lover of pleasure and falsehood? Rama is the embodiment of dharma. He employs his strength and courage in the service of dharma. As Indra is surely the first among the gods, Rama is first among mortal men. How dare you, how could you, cast longing eyes on Sita? Will Sita ever yield to you? Take her from Rama indeed! Can one deceive the sun and steal from him his light? You will be reduced to ashes if you approach the blazing fire of Janaka's daughter. Do not fall a prey to Rama's shafts. Do not seek your own death. Do not approach the fire guarded by Rama. One should not launch on a course of action without full thought. You can never vanquish Rama in battle. O, Ruler of the Rakshasas, do not turn a deaf ear to my words. Do you remember how, in olden days, proud of my strength, I disturbed the rites and sacrifice of the sage Viswamitra. In those days Rama was but a boy; yet Viswamitra had, with Dasaratha's permission, taken young Rama to protect his sacrifice. That sage knew Rama's prowess. I approached the place to put out the sacrificial fire with contaminating blood and flesh and then I came up against the boy Rama. What do you think happened? He let loose an arrow which killed Subahu on the spot and with another he swept me off my feet and hurled me into the sea. Rama the boy is now a man, immeasurably stronger and more skillful in arms! Do not incur his wrath. Do not bring ruin on your people who are now enjoying wealth and pleasure. Do not harbor thoughts about Sita and bring down destruction on your

rich and beautiful city and certain death on yourself. If you persist in your foolish project, O Ravana, I see before my eyes the ruin that awaits you. I see Lanka in flames and her streets littered with death, and her widows and orphans loud in lamentation. Avoid this great sin. If you are angry with Rama fight him face to face and meet your death like a hero. Do not follow a fraudulent path and drag me into it. Go back and be happy with your numerous wives. Do not invite Yama to your land and race!"

Thus Maricha earnestly pleaded for the good of Ravana who, however, was far from pleased or convinced. How could good advice prevail on a victim of lust? Like a sick man rejecting medicine, Ravana refused to listen to Maricha's counsel.

"If a king" said Ravana, "wants to know whether a thing should or should not be done, it is open to his adviser to examine its advantages and disadvantages, but I have not come to you for such advice. I am king and I have come to tell you that I have decided to do this. I expect and want your help to carry it out. You forget the loyalty due from you and dare tell me that what I contemplate is wrong. On this matter, I have considered everything and reached a decision. This insignificant creature whom you extol is unworthy of the honor of a formal challenge to battle from me. What more is he than a man driven out of his own country, a fool who has allowed himself to be cheated by a woman and has been deprived of his rights? The proper treatment or such a fellow is to disgrace him by carrying off his wife. This is a matter determined and concluded. Your remarks are therefore irrelevant. You should do what I want you to do and that is not much. Transform yourself into a strange and beautiful stag and appear

before Sita and attract her attention. Sita will send Rama to pursue and capture you. You should draw Rama away to a distance and simulate Rama's voice and cry 'Ah, Sita, Ah, Lakshmana!' Hearing this Sita will conclude that Rama is in danger and she will force Lakshmana to go to his help. When thus she is alone, I shall carry her off to Lanka. Once you have rendered me this help, you will be at liberty to do what you like. But if you will not help me now, understand, your life shall be forfeit."

Maricha thought within himself. "My frenzied Ravana who is already under the shadow of doom will not listen to advice. Sinful desire is driving him to Yama. It is better for me to be killed by Rama than by Ravana. At least then I would yield my life to a foe."

And so be agreed to the proposal.

He said: "I have given you good advice, but you will not listen. If I carry out your wishes, I am sure to die. But not more sure than that you will also perish, not long after with all that is yours. So will our race. Some enemy of ours wishing our destruction has set you on this course, someone who envies you. I would rather be killed by a foe whom I respect than by you. Come, let us go to Dandaka."

Ravana was overjoyed and embraced Maricha saying: "Now you are again my dear old Maricha."

The two ascended the chariot and proceeded towards the Dandaka forest. They flew over cities, mountains, rivers and kingdoms. Reaching Dandaka, they espied Rama's ashrama in a banana garden.

They alighted at a distance and Ravana took Maricha by the hand and, pointing to the ashrama, told him to do his part according to their plan.

At once Maricha transformed himself into a wonderful deer. Every part of the

animal had its own different hue and exquisite beauty. Like a rainbow in the sky, it charmed the eye of the beholder. Gold, silver, diamonds, gems and flowers seemed to appear in succession on its beautiful skin. It was like a living stream of jewels flowing on a beautiful golden body.

With such surpassing beauty the magic deer wandered here and there, now resting for a while and now pursuing its graceful gambols. It would sometimes bend and nibble the grass on the ground, again lift its head up to eat the tender leaves of plants. Sometimes walk slowly near the ashrama and again jump away and disappear and reappear at a distance. Sometimes it would join a herd of deer; then it would part from it and walk alone. The other deer would smell him and move away in sudden terror.

Sita, who was then gathering flowers in the forest, looked at the stag and stared spell-bound at its wondrous beauty. The deer, too, stared back at her and ran here and there in front of her, shedding a new beauty on the landscape.

"Do come and look! Do come and look!" cried Sita, eager that Rama and Lakshmana too should see that wonderful stag.

"Come quickly, quickly!" she cried. Rama and Lakshmana came out of the cottage and saw the exquisite creature and marvelled at its beauty.

Lakshmana grew suspicious. It seemed to him it was no ordinary deer, but a Rakshasa in disguise. Both Rama and Lakshmana had heard about Maricha and had been told how, assuming the form of a deer, he would often beguile and destroy those who came for hunting deer in the forest.

Lakshmana said, "This is no ordinary animal. This is a trick of the Rakshasas."

But Sita said: "Do catch this deer for me. We shall bring it up as a pet in the ashrama. This is the most beautiful creature I have so far seen in this forest. Look! Do look at it. What color! What playfulness!"

And so she went on, talking of the deer and desiring to possess it. And she pleaded: "Do somehow catch it for me."

She begged Rama: "Soon we shall have to return to the city. Should we not take some rare thing from the forest to Ayodhya? How beautiful it will be, this exquisite creature moving in the inner apartments of our palace? Bharata would be so pleased. I should love to give it to him. Do my beloved, catch it for me. Somehow catch it for me."

Sita saw that Lakshmana did not seem to like her importunity. This only made her more determined to persuade Rama to get it for her. If a strong desire creeps into our heart and someone stands in the way of it, we are angry with him no matter how dear he may be to us.

This unfortunate truth about the way that desire works in the human mind is explained clearly by the Lord in the Gita. It was demonstrated by what happened in Sita's heart now.

"Look!" she exclaimed, "it is all gold! Look now! It is all silver! If you cannot capture the creature alive, at least bring it down with an arrow and let us take the skin home. We shall never again see such a beautiful skin. It would be a lovely thing to sit on. Look. It is going away. Do go and catch it alive. Or else, let me have at least the skin."

Again she said, "Look, look again. All these long years, I never saw such a beautiful thing in these forests. It is like a cluster of shining stars!"

Rama could no longer resist her entreaties.

He said to himself: "Even if Lakshmana be right and the creature is a Rakshasa so much the better reason for killing it. What is there to be afraid of? If I cannot catch it alive, I can bring it down with an arrow and give the skin to Sita. When she is so keen on having it, is it not my duty to get it for her?"

And he told Lakshmana to bring him his bow and arrows. Lakshmana's heart was not in it, but he obeyed.

And Rama set out saying: "Mind, Lakshmana, remain by Sita's side and guard her vigilantly. I shall come back soon with this stag alive or killed. Do not be anxious. Even if this is a Rakshasa, what does it matter? It will share the fate of Vatapi. If this has come here to cheat me, as Vatapi tried to cheat Agastya, why then, it will be the victim of its own deceit. What can this animal do to me? Stag or Rakshasa, it is all the same."

Again he said, "Be careful. Mind Sita. Anything might happen at any time. Be vigilant."

Destiny had set the stage for misfortune. Strangely enough Lakshmana, who was by nature hasty and quick to act, was suspicious on this occasion and Rama, who was usually circumspect now yielded to Sita's foolish wish, and disregarding Lakshmana's warning, went in pursuit of the Maricha-stag.

In order to give Ravana plenty of time and opportunity, Maricha kept within sight of Rama, but beyond his reach, and drew him on and on like fate. The deer would take a few steps, then stop and turn and stare at the pursuer. Then suddenly it would start as if in fear. Pricking its ears, it would spring drawing up its hooves to its breast. It would disappear for a while among the trees. Emerging soon on some tall mound, it would display its lovely outline framed against a passing cloud. Sometimes it allowed near approach as

though tired and so easy of capture but presently it would spring up and bound far away.

This went on until Maricha took Rama far out. Then the Rakshasa realised this game would not go on forever and that his end was near. Rama, tired of the pursuit, bent his bow and sent forth an arrow. It pierced the stag. Maricha resumed his natural form and simulating Rama's voice called out, "Ah Sita, Ah Lakshmana!" and fell dead.

"Lakshmana was right," said Rama to himself. "This deer was indeed a Rakshasa."

He thought further: "Hearing his last cry, maybe, Sita will be deceived. She is likely to be overwhelmed by fear."

He then said to himself again: "What if Sita entertains false fears? Lakshmana is there by her side."

His heart then swelled with pride and joy, that he had a brother like Lakshmana, so loving and so steadfast. How could Rama guess what was happening at that very instant in the ashrama, and what painful words Lakshmana had to bear from Sita? Truly, the way of destiny is cruel.

36. THE GOOD BIRD JATAYU

"ALAS, alas! Ah Sita! Ah Lakshmana!" So cried Maricha simulating Rama's voice. And Sita was deceived. Trembling like a plantain tree in a storm, she cried: "There, Lakshmana, do you not hear your brother's voice? Run, run at once to his help!"

Overwhelmed by fear and seeing Lakshmana unwilling to move, she appealed to Lakshmana again and again in an agony of anxiety: "I hear my Lord's voice in distress. Go, go at once! Do not delay!" she cried. "He is in some great danger. Did you not hear his cry for help? Why do you still stand here? Your brother is no doubt surrounded by Rakshasas and

cries for help. Instead of rushing to his rescue, you stand still here!"

Lakshmana knew the wiles of the Rakshasas and remembered his brother's command. He would not move.

Sita grew furious in her agony of fear and doubt. She beat her breast with both hands and shouted in uncontrollable fury: "Son of Sumitra! Have you too turned foe? Have you been an imposter all these years? Have you been with us waiting only for Rama to die? Pretending to be his friend, were you hoping all the time for his death to secure me thereafter? Why else do you stand here, wicked wretch, and refuse to go to his rescue when he cries for help? Traitor! Imposter!"

These cruel words pierced Lakshmana's heart like poisoned arrows. He closed his ears with his hands. He spoke gently to Sita, who was in tears of wrath: "Vaidehi, Rama can encounter and vanquish any foe in the world. There is no need to fear, O more than mother! Calm yourself. None in the universe is strong enough to touch our Rama or do him harm. What you have uttered is unworthy of you, my mother. Do not fear or grieve. You will surely see Rama return with the body of the stag you wanted. The voice we heard was not his. It is a Rakshasa's trick. Do not be deceived and grieve for nothing. My brother has posted me here to watch over you. Do not ask me to leave you alone and go. I cannot disobey my brother. Since we slew the Rakshasas of Janasthana, their people are trying to avenge themselves in various ways. We should not be misled by their false forms and voices. It was not Rama's cry for help. You need not be afraid in the least."

But Sita's fear grew to a frenzy and with eyes red with anger she uttered terrible words: "Taking advantage of what you call your brother's command, you stand unmoved by his cry of anguish and

are prepared to let him perish! Oh, how completely have you been deceiving us, Rama and me, all these years! Base, wicked, selfish wretch calling yourself brother! O, you false friend, do you rejoice that Rama is in dire peril? I now see why you followed us into the forest. Have you been set on by Bharata? Have you all become my lord's enemies? Have you all joined together in a wicked conspiracy? I, who have lived with Rama, shall I ever look at you or another? When Rama dies, I die with him. Know this for certain."

Sita burst into a rage which completely overwhelmed Lakshmana. Her cruel words pierced and burnt into him like poisoned arrows. His hairs stood on end. He clasped his hands in worship and said: "O Mother! O Goddess! How can such words issue from your mouth? Like red-hot iron they burn my ears. Cruel and unjust are these thoughts of yours. With all the gods for witness, I swear, your suspicion is wrong. I see now that after all you are a woman like other women quick to think evil of others. I fear a great tragedy is about to befall you. Otherwise you could not have thought and spoken evil of me."

And innocent Lakshmana trembled in fear of some dire calamity that was to come over them.

But Sita said: "Look here, here is plenty of dry fuel. I shall light a fire and fall into it. Or I shall drown myself in the Godavari. Or I shall hang myself dead, unless you run immediately to the help of Rama. Now, once again, I ask, will you not go? Or shall I perish?"

She beat her breast and cried. Lakshmana could bear this no longer. He raised his hands in solemn worship and said:

"Very well, sister. I shall obey you and disobey my brother. I shall leave you

alone. May you be safe and well! May the gods of the forest protect you! I shall do your bidding. I see bad omens. I fear greatly. I wonder if I shall ever see you with Rama again. Yet I shall go!"

And he went, unwillingly and looking back every now and then.

Lakshmana walked with his heart troubled and heavy with anger and sorrow. How could he bear to hear the cruel words of Sita? How could he forget them? Sorely wounded was the heart of the prince who had renounced everything to be with his brother.

Lakshmana went in the direction that Rama had taken. Ravana, who had been waiting for this, now approached Rama's ashrama. He transformed himself into a mendicant ascetic, clad in clean saffron clothes and his lips uttered beautiful Vedic hymns while in his heart was ugliest evil.

Sita was standing at the entrance of the cottage, her eyes fixed on the forest, eagerly looking for Rama. Ravana beheld Sita.

At sight of her, the desire planted in his heart by Surpanakha took good root and grew rapidly irresistible. He was more determined than ever to possess Sita.

Seeing this wandering ascetic, clad in saffron clothes, carrying his water-pot and staff, Sita greeted him respectfully, according to the courtesy due to holy men. He desired hospitality. As in duty bound, she offered him a seat and placed before him some fruits and roots as was the custom.

The ascetic sat and looked again at Sita. His desire grew stronger. Sinner and Rakshasa though he was, he had an instinct that made him wish to win her heart; he wished not to ravish but to secure Sita's willing consent and make her his wife.

The King of Lanka wanted and hoped to persuade Sita. He thought she would yield to him for his wealth and power, turning her back on poverty-stricken Rama. He thought also that this would be the best way of disgracing and punishing Rama. He expected Sita to behave like other women he had known.

Seated in front of the fruits and roots offered by Sita, the ascetic began to praise Sita's beauty in terms too warm for a genuine ascetic. He dwelt on the charms of her person and asked: "Who are you? Why are you here alone in the forest haunted by Rakshasas and wild beasts?"

She was astonished but answered his questions. She hoped the prince would return at once and kept her eyes fixed on the doorway.

Little by little the visitor revealed who he was and described the greatness of his origin and family, his power and wealth. After exalting himself, he proceeded to run down Rama and concluded.

"Be my wife and live a glorious life with me in Lanka. Come, let us go!"

In this unexpected situation, Sita's purity gave her courage to defy the powerful monster whom she now knew for what he was.

"Base and wicked fellow! Your destruction is near. Leave this ashrama if you would escape with life" she said, hissing like an angry cobra.

The Rakshasa was furious. He completely threw off all pretence of disguise and gentleness and assumed his real imperious wickedness. With one hand he caught hold of her hair and with the other lifted her up and carried her to the chariot which waited for him behind the trees. Forcing her into it, Ravana rose with her into the air.

Sita cried aloud: "O my lord! Where are you, my Rama? Oh Lakshmana, most

faithful of friends, why did I, with obstinate folly, drive you away?"

The Rakshasa held her firmly down and drove on in the aerial car. Sita addressed the trees and plants down below and begged them to tell Rama of her fate.

It happened that old Jatayu, half-asleep upon a tree, saw the chariot flying past. Startled by a woman's cry of distress he was wide awake in a moment and recognised Sita by her voice. She also saw him and appealed to him for rescue.

Jatayu's blood was fired by the sight of her piteous plight and he threw himself in the way of the aerial car crying: "Hold, hold! What is all this?"

"The King of Lanka is carrying me away by force," wailed Sita, "but what can you do to prevent it, my poor old friend? O fly to Rama and Lakshmana and tell them my helpless plight!"

But Jatayu's fighting blood, the blood of generations of lordly ancestors who ruled the air and knew not fear, was on fire. He cared not for Ravana and his might. He only saw a princess in distress. He thought of his friend Dasaratha and his promise to Rama and he was resolved that this outrage should not occur while he lived to prevent it.

Jatayu now addressed Ravana directly: "Oh king, I am Jatayu, king of the eagles, a king like you. Listen to me, brother king! Forbear from this wicked act. How can you call yourself a king and do this shameful wrong? Is it not the rule of kings to protect the honor of women? And Sita is a princess. I warn you, you shall surely perish unless you leave her and go. Her very look will reduce you to ashes. You are carrying a venomous cobra in your bosom. The noose of Yama is round your neck and dragging you to perdition. I am old and unarmed and you are young, fully armed and seated in a chariot. Yet I cannot look on, while you carry off Sita.

Why do you do this cowardly act behind Rama's back? If you have any grievance against him, meet him face to face. O, you would fly away from me, would you? You shall not escape while I am alive! I care not for your chariot or your ten heads, or your glittering arms! Your heads shall roll on the ground that you have polluted with your presence. Get down from your car, and fight if you are not a coward as well as a thief!"

Ravana flared up in a rage. He attacked Jatayu. It was like a clash between a mighty wind and a massive rain-cloud. The battle raged in the sky above the forest. Jatayu fought like a winged mountain.

Ravana aimed deadly darts at him. But the eagle intercepted them all and with his talons tore Ravana's flesh. The enraged Rakshasa despatched sharp, serpent-like missiles against the bird.

The bird-hero was desperately wounded, but fought on undauntedly while Sita watched the unequal combat with beating heart and tearful eyes. The sight of her made Jatayu all the fiercer in his attacks on Ravana. But his years were telling on him and he felt he must gather all his strength for a supreme attempt to conquer. Regardless of the wounds, he attacked Ravana fiercely and with his wings broke off and threw down his jewelled crown and deprived him of his bow. He attacked the chariot and killed the demon-faced mules and the charioteer and smashed the vehicle into a thousand pieces. Ravana fell on the ground, still clutching Sita. The elements rejoiced to see Ravana fall.

The gallant old bird swooped down on Ravana's back and tore great chunks of flesh off it, and tried to wrench off the arms which held Sita. But Ravana had twenty arms, and no sooner was one

pulled off than another took its place and Sita was held in writhing helplessness.

At last Ravana let go Sita and unsheathing his sword cut off the bird's wings and talons. The old bird was now helpless and fell on the ground unable to move.

Janaki ran and embraced Jatayu and cried: "O my father! You have given away your life for my sake. You are a second father to my Lord! And now you are no more. O our devoted brave friend!"

Then Ravana turned towards her to take her up again. Helplessly she ran hither and thither, crying. She clung to the trees and cried. "O my Rama, where are you? O Lakshmana, where are you? Won't you, come to my rescue?" The Rakshasa at last caught her and rose in the air.

As the dark and massive Ravana flew in the sky with her, Sita struggling in his grasp looked like a flash of lightning across a great black cloud. The Rakshasa carrying her appeared like a mountain covered by a forest-fire. The body of Ravana, lit up by Sita, coursed through the sky like a calamitous comet.

Thus was Sita carried away by the Rakshasa. The sun grew dim and untimely darkness descended on the earth. All beings lamented: "Dharma is destroyed. Righteousness has disappeared. Virtue and pity are no more."

The dumb creatures of the earth, looking upwards, shed tears. Ravana, cruelly clutching the princess, flew as towards his ruin. As she was carried away, the petals fell down from the flowers she was wearing at that time and as they were strewn along the path below, they seemed to announce the scattering of Ravana's fortune and affluence.

37. CLOSELY GUARDED

SITA opened her eyes red with anger and grief, and facing Ravana cried: "Base fellow! You boasted of your fame and

your great origin and your warlike qualities, but have you behaved like a brave warrior? Are you not ashamed of yourself? What sort of warrior is he who waits for the husband's absence to steal his wife and carries off a lonely helpless woman when no one is nearer to prevent it? What heroic deed to kill the old bird that tried to save me! How brave was your talk in the ashrama! The world will no doubt remember and praise this great hero who dares not fight but is prepared to steal! If indeed you come of a noble family, what a shame you have brought upon it! And what do you hope by thus carrying me off? How long do you hope to live? Very soon Rama's arrows will seek you out and end your life. Know that the moment Rama sets eyes on you, you are dead. Do not hope to escape. Your death is certain at his hands. What then do you gain by this cheating? I will never be yours. I shall die before I yield to you and you cannot escape my lord, having incurred his wrath. Very soon you will see the river Vaitarani in hell. The red-hot image is awaiting you there for your embrace. So is the tree with iron spikes. Rama within an hour slew your army of myriad Rakshasas in Janasthana. Will he let you escape? Soon will he send you to Yama."

While Sita was speaking words of contempt and warning, Ravana, chariotless, sped like an arrow across the sky towards Lanka. They went over many mountains and rivers and Sita saw some people below standing on a hilltop. She took off her sash and tying up her jewels in it threw the bundle down.

She did this hoping that the ornaments thus dropped may be seen by Rama and give him a clue of the direction in which she was carried away.

Crossing the Pampa and then the sea, Ravana entered the city of Lanka. He

went to his apartments with the grief-stricken Sita. The fool thought that he had secured the prize, but he was taking home his own death in a woman's form. Then, summoning some demon-like Rakshasis, he ordered them to keep watch over Sita, specially commanding them to let none approach her without his permission.

"Give her whatever she wants, clothes or gold or jewels. Serve her and do her honor as you would serve and honor me," he enjoined them.

And he added the warning: "Anyone who utters a word which might offend her will be punished with death. No one, knowingly or unknowingly, should cause her anger or grief."

Having thus installed Sita in the inner apartment, he considered what should be done next. He sent for some clever spies and gave them this mandate:

"Go at once to Janasthana where Khara lived. Watch carefully and bring me word what Rama is doing. So long as that Rama is alive I cannot sleep. He is my greatest foe. Somehow, he should be killed. Go boldly now and do your job and return."

Imprisoned within a fortress in a sea-girt island, Sita did not know where she was or how far from Rama. She expected that her lord would somehow arrive, kill Ravana and redeem her.

Though full of grief, thinking of the strength and prowess of her lord she was bold and steady in mind. It was also some consolation that the Rakshasa king did not behave like a beast with her.

Having despatched his men to Janasthana, Ravana returned to Sita's presence. He saw her overwhelmed by grief and shedding tears. The Rakshasis were watching her with care.

He thought that if she saw his wealth and power she would yield to him. She was therefore taken round in the great palace and shown the wealth and grandeur

there displayed. No king on earth had ever possessed such wealth and means of enjoyment.

Sita was shown gold and jewels and silks in plenty; curiously wrought platforms, vehicles and towers; thousands of maid servants and every symbol of wealth and royal power. But her thoughts were elsewhere.

Ravana tried to convince her also of the vastness of his army. But then she had already formed her opinion of his prowess and had described it to him in scathing terms.

Yet, Ravana argued: "All this you can count and enjoy as your own. You shall be my queen, dearer to me than life itself. I have many wives but you shall be mistress of them all. Hereafter my love shall be for you and you alone. Listen to me. Do my desire. For hundreds of miles the sea surrounds this island which is guarded by thousands of mighty soldiers. No one can enter this city. No one among the gods or asuras can match me in might; and they know it. What pleasure or honor is it for you to stick to a poor human creature banished from his kingdom, a destitute wandering in the forest? To match your beauty, you need my wealth. Do not waste the years of our youth. You are never again going to set eyes on Rama. Be certain of that. Rama cannot approach this city. Treat this kingdom as yours. Treat me and all the obedient gods as slaves. Till now, because of your sins in some previous birth, you have suffered hardship. Here after you will enjoy with me the fruits of your former merits. You will be the queen of Lanka and the wife of the Lord of Lanka, the conqueror of Kubera. Let us take our pleasure floating about the world in the Pushpaka vimana. Let the cloud of sorrow disappear from your face and let the moon of joy appear."

As Ravana went on speaking thus, tears flowed from Sita's eyes. She covered her face with the end of her sari as she did not want her enemies too think that she was afraid.

Ravana begged and importuned her: "Do not be shy. There is nothing wrong in accepting me, nothing to be ashamed of. It is laid down that one should accept the gifts of God. O beautiful one! I bow my head at your feet and beg you for your grace. I am your slave. Forgetting my greatness and power, I thus beg for your favor. Never in my life have I bowed in this way before anyone."

He really thought he could persuade her and gain her affection.

If one's mind is clear, one can courageously face any situation. In spite of her grief, therefore, Sita spoke boldly to the Rakshasa. She placed a little bit of grass between Ravana and herself before answering him.

Boastful words were uttered by Ravana in sanyasi garb, sitting in front of the fruit served by her in Panchavati. Imprisoned Sita now spoke as if in echo of those words.

"Know who I am. Dasaratha was famed in all the three worlds and reigned long years and stood as a bulwark of dharma and defender of truth. His son Rama, of godlike presence and lion-like valor, is my husband. He and his brother Lakshmana will surely take your life. You know how Khara and his army were destroyed in Janasthana by my lord. As easily as an eagle carries a venomous serpent, he destroyed your huge army in Janasthana. Because you have secured a boon that no god or Asura can kill you, you have dared to make Rama your enemy. You think your boon will save you. But I tell you, you cannot escape. You will surely meet your death at his hands. You are, like the goat tied to the

altar-post for sacrifice, doomed to death. The moment Rama sets his angry eyes on you, you will meet your fate. My lord will dry up the sea or bring down the moon, if necessary, to kill you and redeem me. It is certain. Your evil deed will bring destruction on yourself and your kingdom. My noble lord lived unafraid in the midst of the Rakshasas in the forest. Like a hero, he fought and killed the Rakshasas who encountered him. Like a thief, you stole me in his absence. But you cannot escape. Your fate impelled you to this sin because the hour of your ruin and the destruction of your race are near. You ask me to accept you. How foolish! Can the crow approach the swan? Can a heinous sinner be allowed near the sacrificial fire? I do not value life or body. Do you imagine I would wish to live despised by the world? Do not dream that out of fear or for saving my life I shall yield to you."

Having spoken those words, she was silent.

"Is that so?" said Ravana. "Very well then, I shall give you twelve months' time. If you agree to accept me, well and good. If at the end of that period, you refuse, my cooks will make meat of your body for my breakfast."

After warning Sita thus, he gave orders to the attendant Rakshasis: "You should break her pride and obstinacy by some means or other. Put her alone in the Asoka garden and skillfully use fear and temptation to bring her to her senses. As we tame a wild she elephant, you should train her to submission." And angrily he went to his palace.

The Rakshasis took Sita to the Asoka garden. It was a beautiful park attached to the women's apartments. The trees were full of flowers and fruits, and beautiful birds played among them. Here, surrounded and guarded by terribly ugly Rakshasis, Sita was kept prisoner.

Though overwhelmed by grief, she had the faith that Rama and Lakshmana would somehow discover where she was and rescue her, that her lord would destroy Ravana and take her back to a happy life with him.

Sustained by this faith, she was neither frightened by threats nor deceived by temptations. Not for one day, or two, but for months, Sita suffered thus a close prisoner in the Asoka garden.

The day was yet far off when the mighty Hanuman, crossing the sea, would visit Sita in her sorrow and bring her the message of hope and love and the assurance of relief: "Rama loves you infinitely. He will be here soon. Be not afraid."

All the women in our land who suffer sorrow in any way are so many replicas of Sita. May all the men be like Hanuman, pure and heroic helpers of such suffering women! We shall now go to Rama and Lakshmana.

38. RAMA DISCONSOLATE

WHEN Maricha was struck by Rama's arrow and was about to die, he resumed his own Rakshasa shape and cried aloud in a voice which was an exact imitation of Rama's: "Ah Lakshmana. Ah Sita!"

Rama now realised how the Rakshasa had beguiled them and how he had been drawn away a long distance by the crafty Maricha and he was full of anxiety as to what it all could mean.

"Alas, we have been badly deceived. It would be terrible if Lakshmana is also deceived by this cry and leaves Sita alone to come to my succour. It looks as though the Rakshasas have planned this ruse to carry off Sita and eat her. When Sita hears what she will take as my cry of distress she is sure to insist on Lakshmana leaving her and rushing to my help. The howling of jackals and the behavior of birds do portend disaster. There is trepidation in

my heart and it is a portent in itself of some danger close at hand."

Saying thus to himself, Rama hurried back to the ashrama. On the way, he saw Lakshmana running towards him. "Alas, the worst I fear has happened," exclaimed Rama.

He held Lakshmana's hands and cried in sorrow: "Why did you leave Sita alone in the forest, Lakshmana? You may be sure the Rakshasas have killed and eaten her. It was not right for you to leave her and come away. It is now all over with Sita!"

Fatigued and thirsty with the futile chase, and now overwhelmed with anger and unbearable anxiety, Rama cried again: "If I do not see Sita in the ashrama when we return, I shall surely die, Lakshmana. You will return to Ayodhya, the survivor of us three, and tell them what has happened. O, how will Kausalya bear her grief? Lakshmana, you have more than fulfilled Kaikeyi's wishes. The Rakshasas will by now have visited on Sita, poor unprotected Sita, all their pent-up hatred against us. They must have killed and eaten her up by now. How could you leave her alone and come away? How could you be deceived by Maricha's false cry? What shall I do now? I shall see Sita no more. The Rakshasas' plan has succeeded. My trust in you was misplaced and I shall never see Sita. How could you leave her and come away, how could you, Lakshmana?"

Lakshmana answered with tears in his eyes: "What else, brother, could I do? When Sita heard the cry, 'Alas Sita! Alas Lakshmana!' she was frightened. Quivering with fear she urged me to go to you at once and would tolerate no delay. She persisted, whatever I said to the contrary. I told her again and again not to be afraid and assured her that no foe was strong enough to do you harm, and that

the cry of distress was not yours, but she would not listen. She charged me with having turned traitor to you and with having come to the forest with treasonable intentions. And, O brother, she found it possible in her anguish to say I would be glad of your death out of sinful intentions towards herself! I was half-dead with horror on hearing those words of hers and then she announced that she would kill herself if I did not go on the instant. Mad herself, she maddened me with her words of reproach and I ran towards you not knowing what else to do."

But Rama was not satisfied. "Whatever a foolish woman might have said in her fright, you should have stayed and not left her unprotected. How could you do such a foolish thing? You have brought calamity on me. I shall never see Sita again."

The two hurried to the ashrama. Many bad omens appeared on their way. And Rama repeated, as he saw them one by one: "I fear, I fear we shall never see Sita again!"

Reaching the ashrama, they found it, as they had feared, empty. Sita was not there. The deerskin, the kusa grass, the mat spread as a seat, all lay scattered on the ground.

Rama wept and ran hither and thither in the grove round the cottage. The leaves and flowers on the trees had faded. Sita was nowhere to be seen.

He wandered about like one mad. His eyes were bloodshot. He cried, "Alas, have they eaten her up? Have they carried her away? O, how she must have trembled in terror! I cannot bear the thought of it. Could it be that she has gone to the river to fetch water? Could it be that she has gone out to cull flowers? Let us see."

And he went searching among the trees, hoping that perhaps she was hiding and playing a practical joke on him. His sorrow swelled like the sea and seemed to

have drowned his reason. He called the trees one by one by their names and beseeched them for help.

"Oh Asoka tree! Be true to your name, remove my sorrow you must know the truth. Tell me where Sita is now. Oh tall palm tree! You must be able to see where Sita is. Tell me where she is."

He talked to the animals too. "Oh tiger!" he said, "the elephant and the deer are afraid to tell me the truth. But you know no fear. You can tell me what has happened. You know everything. Tell me then the truth."

He cried: "Oh Sita, you are biding somewhere. There! There! I see you there! Stop this fooling. I can stand it no longer."

After wandering and weeping in vain for a long time he fell on the ground, moaning, "Ha Lakshmana! Ha Sita!" He cried like an elephant trapped in a pit.

"Lakshmana, Sita is nowhere. The Rakshasas have captured her and torn her to pieces and eaten her up. How can I live any more? My end is near. But when my father sees me in the other world, he will say, 'Why have you come here, my son, before fulfilling my command?' I have failed. In everything, I have failed."

Lakshmana could bear this sight no longer. "Brother, it is not right that you should cry like this," he said. "Let us search through the forest. You know how fond Sita is of entering caves and thickets. She may be bathing in the river or playing somewhere or culling flowers. Let us search again. She is only testing us. Come let us search again. Do not cry."

The two searched again all over the place on hills, by pools and on the river bank. But they did not find her. "Sita is not to be seen, Lakshmana," said Rama. "What shall I do now?"

Lakshmana tried to encourage him with words of hope, but Rama was inconsolable. "No, no, my brother. There

is no hope," he said, "Sita is nowhere. I have lost her forever. I shall live no more."

He lay unconscious for a time. Then he came to himself and lifted his voice and wept. Nothing that Lakshmana said could comfort him.

"Lakshmana, how can I go back to Ayodhya?" he cried. "Won't they laugh at me for returning alone after allowing Sita to be killed and eaten by Rakshasas? Having brought her to the forest and having failed to protect her, what shall I tell Janaka? No, you should go alone to Ayodhya. Go and look after our mothers. Greet Bharata from me and tell him it was my dying wish that he should continue to rule as king."

All Lakshmana's efforts to console him were in vain. He was convinced that the Rakshasas had carried away Sita and torn her to pieces and eaten her up. He pictured to himself in detail the horror of her suffering and cried in his grief: "I must have committed terrible sins. How else could such suffering come to me? Sita who accompanied me, thinking I could protect her, has been eaten by the Rakshasas and I can do nothing about it. Is there another sinner like me in the world?"

Lakshmana said: "Do not lose heart. You must be bold and energetic. A resolute mind can conquer fate. But you must first conquer your weakness. Let us make a more thorough search of the forest. Instead of yielding to unavailing sorrow, let us be manly and active." But Rama would not listen.

Rama behaved as a human being, not an avatar of Vishnu. Though elsewhere his words and actions give room for a different view, here Valmiki describes Rama as a mere man enveloped in the gloom of a supreme misfortune.

His feeling and behavior are exactly those of any noble and virtuous man who has lost his beloved wife, dearer to him than life itself, and that in a forest infested with Rakshasas. We see that all the efforts of Lakshmana to console him had no effect.

Our common human dharma is illustrated by the sorrow of Rama. We see here the picture of true and equal love between a virtuous man and woman and the anguish of loss.

The episode may also be interpreted allegorically. Rama's sense of privation, when he misses Sita, is a measure and image of the mind of God when a single human soul is lost through sin.

One may ask whether God can lose, or can suffer pain of mind. If one realises that all life is divine leela, the play of God, no further exegesis is needed. Sin, merit, devotion, all are aspects of that sport.

Each one of us is beloved of the Lord. If for any reason we are swept away from the right path, He suffers like a lover who has lost his love. And His sorrow too is a part of His great play.

39. A SECOND FATHER DIES

THE two brothers searched every mountain, forest and riverbank calling Sita's name aloud. But all in vain, and they did not so much as find a clue anywhere. Baffled and grief-stricken, Rama cried out against the river Godavari, against the gods and against the five elements.

The poet sage ascribes the silence of the rivers and the gods and elements to their fear of the powerful Rakshasa king. A herd of deer, however, moving southwards seemed to indicate to Rama and Lakshmana that they too should travel in the same direction. They did so and, after a time, found some flowers scattered on the way.

Rama at once recognised the flowers and cried excitedly: "These are the very flowers I gave her. They must have fallen from her hair."

His grief and anxiety grew greater and he sobbed aloud fearing the worst for Sita.

They searched the forest all around the spot where they found the flowers. They noticed the marks of a Rakshasa's big feet and little footprints that they knew were Sita's.

They found some gold beads spilt from Sita's jewels. Rama cried again: "Look! The Rakshasa has been chasing her like a beast of prey to tear her tender flesh!"

Then they saw several fragments of a chariot and great clots of blood, as also royal headgear and jewels scattered on the ground. They wondered what these things could mean.

Soon they came upon a large bow broken, flag torn and armor crushed. A little later they saw the dead bodies of a charioteer and of mules. It was clear that a vehement battle had been fought on that spot.

"Two powerful Rakshasas must have struggled here," groaned Rama, "each claiming the sole right to eat Sita."

Conjecturing and lamenting in this way, Rama went on: "Dharma could not save Sita! No god came to her rescue! It will be right to destroy this wicked world." Rama was beside himself and talked wildly.

Lakshmana did his best to calm the distracted Rama. "Great sorrow unbalances all minds, even the strongest," he said. "Else why should you thus lose self-control? Why should you hate and curse the whole world for the evil deed of one person? How often have you, my brother, calmed my anger and led me on the right path! But now a great grief has upset your mind and it is the turn of the younger brother to give courage and

counsel patience to the elder and restore him to his natural heroism. Let us find out who our enemy is and deal with him."

With such loving words Lakshmana sought to give courage and consolation and both walked on. They had not proceeded far when they came on Jatayu, bloody and mutilated, unrecognisable, lying on the ground.

At first Rama thought it was some Rakshasa disguising himself to deceive them and, wild with anger, cried: "Look! Here is a Rakshasa who has eaten Sita!" and rushed towards him, bow in hand.

Then raising his ruffled and gory head with great pain, Jatayu spoke in a feeble voice that seemed struggling with death. "Do not kill me, dear Rama, who has but a few moments more to live! The dear princess you are searching for has been carried off by Ravana and he could do so only by first robbing me of my life! Seeing Sita in his flying chariot in the air, I intercepted it and gave him battle. I struck down his bow and smashed his chariot. His charioteer I slew. The marks of my last great fight you can see all round this place. I did my best. How I wish it were better for your sake! At last, as, weary with toil, I was still waging a hopeless combat. Age against youth, beak and talons against keen weapons and panoply of steel, he cut off my wings and legs. And as I fell wounded to death, he lifted Sita and flew with her into the sky in a southern direction. Though racked with the pangs of death, I have clung to life for love of you to tell you what I know. Now that I have done this, bless me and let me die." Tears flowed from Rama's eyes as he listened to Jatayu's tale. He flung aside his bow and embraced the bird. The princes' sorrow knew no bounds. They lamented loudly, rolling on the ground.

"I am the most unhappy man alive, Lakshmana," said Rama. "Giving up the kingdom, I came to the forest, and here I have lost my Sita. This Jatayu, who was a second father to us, has, laid down his life for my sake. Why, if I fell into the fire, I fear my bad luck will put even the fire out. If I fell into the sea, I fear it would dry up. What a terrible sinner I am, Lakshmana! Who knows, one day I might lose you too, Lakshmana."

Embracing Jatayu, he said: "O, my father! Really, did you see Sita?" But Jatayu lay speechless on the ground.

After a few moments Jatayu spoke again in a low voice: "Be not afraid, Rama. You will surely find Sita. No harm will come to her. Regaining the treasure you have lost, you will greatly rejoice." With these words, he spat out blood and gave up life.

They were foolish and committed errors of omission and commission and lost Sita. Trying to save Sita from the calamity that their carelessness had brought upon her, Jatayu, old, unarmed, had fought with wing and beak and talon and given up his life. When their father died in Ayodhya, his obsequies were performed by Bharata and Satrugna.

Rama and Lakshmana. were denied this privilege because they were away in the forest. They regarded Jatayu as their own father and in performing his obsequies derived some consolation for not being by Dasaratha's side and performing the last offices to him. What other help or honor could they accord to heroic Jatayu?

The bhaktas worship Jatayu as the best of bhaktas. Exercising our imagination, we should behold with Sita's eyes the poor old bird's hard struggle against the Rakshasa king. Then we would realise the love and gratitude and sorrow that must have surged in her heart as she watched

his sufferings. Thus we shall be purified by the grace of the Mother. What wonder is there in the rank assigned to Jatayu among the bhaktas?

Later, when Rama fights and is victorious in Lanka, Sita does not see it; she is a prisoner in the Asoka forest. She has to be content with listening to reports of the battle and of the prowess of her lord. But Jatayu's devotion and heroism Sita saw with her own eyes in the Dandaka forest. Unarmed, he opposed the Rakshasa who had all his weapons and armor, and humbled his pride at the cost of his own life.

Jatayu's battle with Ravana is more important than the battles in Lanka. Hence the pious revere Jatayu along with Bharata and look upon him as an Alvar, a guide in the spiritual path.

"Lakshmana," said Rama, "gather dry faggots. I shall churn the fire. We failed to perform our father's obsequies, let us do it for the eagle-father who gave up his life for us."

The princes chanted holy invocations as they poured libations to the departed spirit: "O king of birds, may you enjoy all the bliss of the virtuous who perform great sacrifices! May you enjoy the bliss of Vanaprasthas who have performed great penance! May you enjoy the bliss of those who have made great gifts of land! May you enjoy the bliss of those who fight heroically in the field of battle! May the bliss of all good people be yours!" After the ceremony Rama became steadier and stronger in mind.

To millions of men, women and children in India, the Ramayana is not a mere tale. It has more truth and meaning than the events in one's own life. Just as plants grow under the influence of sunlight, the people of India grow in mental strength and culture by absorbing the glowing inspiration of the Ramayana.

When we see any helpless person in danger or difficulty, let us think of Jatayu and with firm mind try to help regardless of circumstance.

Rama's losing health and lamenting in sorrow may be compared to the behavior of another incarnation honored by another faith. It is said in the Bible that Jesus, nailed to the cross and about to give up his ghost, cried with a loud voice: "Eloi! Eloi! lama sabachthani!" which is Hebrew for "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The mystery of incarnations is ever the same. They are weighed with the dust and tears of the body they have taken and suffer and grieve like mortals.

40. LEFT EYELIDS THROB

IN face of the unexpected difficulties that overtook them one after another, Rama and Lakshmana often lost heart. Their fortitude yielded place sometimes to great despair. But they managed to encourage each other and proceeded on their way.

Passing through the forest, the two princes were suddenly caught by a tremendously big Rakshasa of ugly form without head or feet. His mouth was in his great belly and he had two enormous arms which, without moving from his place, he would stretch out and clutch tiger, bear or any other living thing within reach, and swallow them.

He had only one eye which was placed in his chest but which was terrible to behold.

Caught by this monster, the princes were, for a while, bewildered and did not know what to do.

Then Rama told Lakshmana: "Let us not be confused. You will cut off one arm, I shall cut off the other."

And so they did. The name of the monster was Kabandha, which means the barrel-shaped one. Once his arms were

severed, he was helpless and began to explain:

"On account of my evil deeds I was cursed by Indra to bear this form and this name. I believe you are Rama and Lakshmana. Indra promised me freedom from the curse when you two should come and cut off my arms and commit this body of mine to the flames."

The princes set fire to his body as desired by the unfortunate monster and there arose from the flames a lovely being which entered a heavenly chariot and ascended to the celestial world.

Before going, he said to Rama: "You will assuredly regain Sita. Go to the beautiful banks of the Pampa and seek the help of Sugriva living there on the Rishyamuka hill. Driven out of the kingdom by his brother Vali, he lives in constant fear and danger. Gain his friendship, and you will succeed in your attempt." Saying this Kabandha disappeared.

Rama and Lakshmana now set forward in the direction of the Pampa. In that lovely region they visited the ashrama of the aged sanyasini, Sabari, the disciple of Rishi Matanga, and accepted her hospitality. Sabari was a woman of a forest tribe and a faithful serving sister in the ashrama of the old saint Matanga. When he departed this life, she wanted to die too. But he said the time was not yet and she should await the arrival of Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu, for the bliss of his darshan was in store for her.

So the old and wrinkled woman lived her saintly life, looking faithfully after the ashrama as of old and keeping it sweet to receive the promised guest.

When the princes came, she produced the fruits she had gathered and kept for them, and described and showed to them the wonders of the Matanga ashrama.

Then with their leave, she kindled a fire and entering it ascended to heaven.

The meeting with this saintly woman and the waters of the river Pampa gave strength of mind to the princes. They thought over what should be done next.

Said Rama: "Lakshmana, I am beginning to think that we shall succeed. Let us search the forest for Sugriva whose help we should obtain."

They went all over the Pampa area. The place was lovely, but the loveliness of the spot and the animals, birds, trees and creepers only increased Rama's grief.

Every beautiful object wrung his heart and made him think: "How much would Sita have enjoyed this?" Try as he might, he could not control the human sorrow which by his incarnation he had undertaken to endure.

Lakshmana tried to revive his spirit. He said: "Even if Sita is kept hidden in the womb of Aditi, the mother of the gods, we will discover her. Ravana cannot escape. It is certain we shall kill him and redeem Sita. It is not proper that you should thus despair. How can you let anxiety or weakness come over you? If we lose a precious thing, we should work for its recovery with perseverance. Sometimes our very affection becomes our enemy. Too much love brings on grief and grief weakens effort. What need is there for me to tell you all this? You know it all. Let us not lose hope. Let us forget the grief brought on by love and bend our mind and body to exertion. Be brave. Be hopeful. We shall succeed. Get rid of your sorrow, brother!"

The younger brother thus advised Rama. Commentators look upon Lakshmana as Adisesha. Adisesha, the serpent, is said to be ever the protecting spirit of Vishnu. So Lakshmana ever tried to give Rama fresh energy and enthusiasm.

The fugitive Vanara prince Sugriva and his faithful adherents with the watchful vigilance of fear saw Rama and Lakshmana roving in the forests and were troubled with doubts. Having been ejected from his kingdom by Vali, Sugriva chose this mountainous spot because he believed that it was made by the curse of a rishi inaccessible to Vali. And now he feared that here, too, Vali in disguise was following him in order to kill him.

Or else, he feared, some Kshatriya warriors taking the side of Vali were there to kill him. The other Vanaras ran hither and thither in panic.

Hanuman was Sugriva's chief minister. He reassured Sugriva, saying: "This is not Vali, nor are they friends of Vali, it seems to me. There is no ground for fear. I shall go and talk to them and find out the truth."

Sugriva was pleased and said: "Do it, but be careful. Go, find out the truth and come back. Use all your skill. I am full of suspicion. They behave as if they are searching for someone. Could it not be that it is me they seek?"

Taking the form of a brahmana, Hanuman approached Rama and Lakshmana. As he went and stood in front of them, a confident feeling possessed his heart. Straight away he started speaking out frankly.

Hanuman went forward to learn the truth without discovering himself. But as he went on speaking, he threw all caution away and told in detail all about himself and the Vanara King.

Looking on Rama and Lakshmana, he was beside himself as a devotee in the presence of the Lord, and praised them. He said that he was a Vanara and had come there in disguise as desired by his King.

"Royal saints," he said, "your presence here fills my heart with joy. There is an aura round you as if you were gods. I take

it, you are here in the forest for doing tapas. But why have you come to this inaccessible spot? Please tell me who you are. This river and this forest are made lovelier by your presence. Your faces and forms are radiantly beautiful. The creatures in the forest look on you with reverence and awe. Your strength and courage are manifest. Who are you? From which country do you come? It is clear you are entitled by birth to rule some mighty kingdom and yet you are dressed like ascetics. With matted hair and bark garments you carry also bows and arrows. Why are you silent? Here Sugriva, the Vanara King, driven out of his kingdom by his brother Vali, is in hiding. He is full of grief. I am his minister. My name is Hanuman. I am the son of Vayu. As ordered by my king, I put on the appearance of a brahmachari and am now here before you."

Listening to these courteous words of Hanuman, Rama said to Lakshmana: "Brother, this speech of Hanuman has inspired me with confidence. I trust him absolutely. Did you notice the beauty of his language and how correct and rhythmic his enunciation is? He speaks like one who has mastered the Vedas and the science of grammar. An ideal messenger he is. Fortunate is the king who has such a messenger. He whom we are searching for is himself in search of us. We came here to see Sugriva and he has sent this messenger to us. Let us welcome him."

Then they began to talk freely to one another. Rama and Lakshmana on the one hand and Hanuman on the other related their history, their joys and sorrows, hopes and fears.

As a result of this talk, Lakshmana conceived a great affection for Hanuman.

He said to Hanuman: "My brother, born to great wealth, the eldest son of an

emperor, has left his kingdom and come to the forest. Here his wife, dearer to him than life itself, was abducted by Ravana, who had by a fraudulent trick inveigled us far away from the hermitage where she was. We seek Sugriva's help to rescue her and recover her, for a daitya, who under a curse took on the form of a Rakshasa, told us: 'If you secure the help of Sugriva, the Vanara King, you will regain the princess stolen by the Rakshasa.' And so we are here. We seek the friendship of your king."

Hanuman answered: "Sugriva too has been persecuted by Vali and deprived of his kingdom and his wife. It is now certain that he will regain both. My king will gain much by your friendship and with his help you will also succeed in your efforts."

Then the three went to Sugriva. The way was such that only a Vanara could traverse it. Hanuman resumed his natural shape and carried both the princes on his back.

The hearts of good men meet and instantly come together. As the Kural says, the spontaneous mutual attraction of two hearts and not long acquaintance creates friendship and this friendship was part of the divine dispensation. It was predestined that Hanuman's sublime devotion should be at Rama's service for the fulfilment of the purpose of the incarnation. And so there was acceptance at first sight.

His carrying the two princes on his shoulder was an outward symbol of inward union. As friends and lovers embrace each other, Hanuman, the loving servant, rejoiced in carrying his Lord on his shoulders.

Ascending the Malaya hill, Hanuman went in advance to Sugriva and, announcing the visit of Rama and Lakshmana, said:

"Rama is a prince full of wisdom and virtue. He is the eldest son of the famous Emperor Dasaratha. To fulfil his father's promise, he left Ayodhya with his brother and wife and came to the forest. King Dasaratha was compelled by his younger wife, in fulfilment of an undefined promise given long ago, to banish Rama. In the forest, taking advantage of the princes' absence, Ravana carried away the wife of Rama. Rama has come here, seeking your help in finding her. The princes are worthy of your friendship. You too will gain greatly from friendship with such heroes."

Sugriva assumed the form of a handsome man and had a long and heart-to-heart talk with the princes. Stretching forth his hand to Rama, he said:

"Princes, if you care for the friendship of a Vanara, here is my hand, accept it. Hanuman has told me all about your virtue and greatness."

Rama clasped his hand and embraced him. Soon Hanuman got together some faggots and kindled a fire. Circumambulating the flames Rama and Sugriva swore mutual friendship: "Let us share our joys and sorrows." They vowed: "Let our friendship be eternal."

They cut down the branch of a tree and sitting on it, Rama and Sugriva were engaged in cheerful talk and so, too, were Hanuman and Lakshmana seated on another. Sugriva narrated the story of his life. How greatly he and his elder brother, the mighty Vali, were once devoted to one another, and how malignant fate had through no fault of Sugriva's made deadly enemies of them.

It had come about this way. Once a Rakshasa named Mayavi came at midnight to the gate of Kishkindha, their capital, and vauntingly challenged Vali to instant combat in pursuance of an ancient feud.

Vali, who never refused a fight, rushed forth impetuously, followed by Sugriva; and seeing them, the Rakshasa fled. Pursuing him they saw him disappear into a great cave the mouth of which was overgrown with brushwood. Vali bade Sugriva, exacting an oath from him, to wait at the entrance for him and plunged into the darkness of the cave after the foe.

Sugriva waited long, but Vali did not come out. As he stood racked with doubt, indistinct shouts and groans, which seemed to his horror-struck ears his brother's, issued from the cave. Presently there gushed out of it foaming blood which made him sure that Vali had perished in the struggle.

To make sure that the victorious Rakshasa would not rush out in the elation of triumph and destroy Kishkindha, Sugriva blocked the entrance of the cave with a huge rock and returned to Kishkindha with his tale of Vali's death. As a rulerless state invites disaster, he was persuaded by the ministers and elders to occupy the vacant throne.

While he was enjoying the sweets of power, like a bolt from the blue, Vali burst on them. Haggard with wrath and wounds, and accusing him of treason and unnatural conduct towards one who was at once his brother and his king, Vali drove him out with scorn and contumely as a wretch too vile to live, but whom he forebore to slay only because he was unfortunately also his brother.

So by a cruel fate he had been deprived of his home, throne, and all, including even his wife, and had to seek asylum in the forest with a few faithful friends. Here at least he was safe, for Vali had been forbidden by a rishi from entering the precincts on pain of instant death.

This incident between Vali and Sugriva is a good example of the moral teaching conveyed in the Puranas. There was

nothing terribly wrong in the conduct either of Vali or of Sugriva. Anger confuses the mind. One who yields to anger loses the capacity to see the truth. That way lies destruction. Vali's anger led to his end. Sugriva humbly confessed the truth, but Vali would not listen.

He was beside himself with rage. Sugriva too, was guilty of imprudent haste. He concluded too quickly that his brother had died. He was afraid that the Asura who was victorious would come out and kill him also. So he closed the entrance of the cave and returned home. At first he was not keen on becoming king and yet he allowed himself to be persuaded by the people.

He yielded to a subconscious desire without sufficient thought. So difficulties came upon him. Thoughtless action leads to unhappiness. This is what we learn from the story of Sugriva. One should not desire what belongs to another. One has to exercise great care, and control one's desires.

In contrast to Sugriva, when the ministers and subjects in Ayodhya pressed Bharata to accept the crown, he was firm in his refusal. Bharata's strength of character was great. But Sugriva was different. He was weak, and suffered in consequence. Bharata had the courage to refuse and his name lives forever.

In every episode of the Ramayana some lesson which we should learn for our daily life is taught. The meaning is in some places plain; in others it may lie hidden. If we read with reverence and think deeply, we can always see the moral.

Sugriva concluded his story with a piteous appeal to Rama. "For fear of Vali I am a wanderer in the forest. I live concealing myself here. Could you, will you, kill Vali and restore to me my kingdom and my wife?"

Rama answered: "Certainly I will. Vali cannot escape this now. Be assured."

As Sugriva and Rama were talking thus, in the Asoka grove far away, the left eyelids of Sita throbbed, which is a good omen for women. At the same time, the left eyelids of the Rakshasa king also throbbed as an evil sign.

41. HE SEES HER JEWELS

THEN Sugriva heard the story of the calamity that had befallen the Raghu princes at Panchavati and how Rama's heart was breaking with the ache of separation from Sita and anxiety as to her fate. Deeply touched, Sugriva tried to console Rama. "I have heard everything from Lakshmana," he said. "Lay aside all doubts and fears. We shall surely discover Sita, wherever she may be concealed, and that, soon. My companions and myself noticed a Rakshasa carrying a weeping lady and speeding fast across the sky. She was crying 'O Rama! O Lakshmana!' She too noticed us and, removing her sash, tied up in it her jewels and threw down the little bundle. We picked up and have kept it. See if the jewels are Sita's."

On hearing this Rama excitedly shouted: "Fetch the bundle, fetch it."

They brought it from the cave and when Rama saw the sash he was beside himself with grief. The little bundle brought before his eyes the suffering of Sita at the hands of the Rakshasa.

He closed his eyes and told Lakshmana to untie the bundle and examine the jewels since he himself could not bear to look at them.

Lakshmana did so. "Indeed these are Sita's anklets," Lakshmana said. "There is no doubt they are hers. These I know, for often have I seen them while laying my head on her feet in worship. The others I am not familiar with, never having presumed to look closely at them."

How full of loving reverence is this speech which Valmiki puts in the mouth of Lakshmana and how cruelly must Sita's unjust words have pierced his heart on the fateful day when she drove him from her.

Rama took all the jewels in his hands and pressed them one by one to his eyes. He said: "They must have fallen on the soft grass and so they are intact."

Then, grief giving place to rage, he said: "Yama's gates are wide open to receive the Rakshasa. Soon will he be destroyed with all his people."

Seeing Rama's grief and wrath, Sugriva became somewhat anxious. Though their mutual friendship and help had been pledged in the presence of the sacred fire, Sugriva was concerned over the question of priorities.

Sugriva's heart went to Rama in his suffering, indeed, he himself knew what it was to lose kingdom and wife. But then, first thing must come first. He must approach the subject guardedly and not seem to place his own affairs before Rama's. That might jeopardise their newborn friendship. But it was not purely selfish to say that he, as King of Kishkindha and lord of his tribe, would be a far more serviceable ally than he could be as a fugitive pretender.

Besides, if he launched on the enterprise of reclaiming Sita when Vali was still king of the Vanaras, one could not guess what Vali's course may be. Oh no! There could be no doubt that the first move in the enterprise must be to secure the resources of the Vanara kingdom by killing Vali and placing himself on the throne.

This alone would bring success to Rama as well as himself. But realising Rama's state of mind, he resolved to act with circumspection.

He said: "I do not know the strength or the dwelling place of this wicked

Rakshasa. We do not know where he has taken Sita and where he keeps her hidden. Still, I promise you solemnly, wherever Sita may be, I shall find her and her captor and find ways of destroying him and recovering her. You will kill the wicked Rakshasa and win glory. Do not despair or yield to grief that weakens the spirit. Look at me. Like you, I have lost my wife. I have been turned out of my kingdom and disgraced. And yet I control my sorrow and keep my courage up. If I a Vanara, can do this, it should be far easier for you. If sorrow overwhelms, one becomes helpless and can do nothing. Therefore, friend, I beg of you to control your grief."

These words of Sugriva made an impression on Rama's heart. He wiped the tears off his eyes and embraced Sugriva. He got over the weakness that possessed him at the sight of Sita's jewels and recovered his fortitude and self-control.

"Sugriva, your friendship is dear to me," he said. "I shall follow your advice. Think out when and how we should begin the search for Sita. I shall make your cause mine, and place you on the throne of Kishkindha and I, who say this, have never uttered a vain or false word in my life and never will. Tell me frankly how I can bring you relief. I shall do it."

Sugriva and his ministers were overjoyed to hear Rama's words. They were convinced that soon their troubles would end and Sugriva would once again become king of the Vanaras.

42. SUGRIVA'S DOUBTS CLEARED

SUGRIVA was keen on regaining his kingdom and family, but he could not see how this was to be. Vali's strength stood as an impossible barrier between him and the fulfilment of his desire.

Hanuman, his minister, tried to convince him that he would succeed with Rama's help, but Sugriva's doubts

persisted. Could Rama's strength overcome Vali's? It all looked hopelessly impossible. Vali's body was like steel. How was Rama going to kill him?

Sugriva had these doubts about Rama. But he had none else to help him. And he was not prepared to give up his desire. He decided to test Rama's strength.

But how is one to subject a friend to a test without discourteously betraying one's suspicion? Rama had promised to get the thing done. How was an occasion to be created to measure his ability? Sugriva thought long and formed a plan.

He told Rama softly: "My Lord Rama! Your words have banished sorrow from my heart. I know your valor. An arrow from your bow can destroy the three worlds. How can Vali's frame stand against it? Still it is my duty to tell you all about Vali's strength. He can go round to the four oceans to take up in his palm and sip the water with the morning prayers. He can toss and play with a heavy rock as if it were a ball. He can pull out mighty forest trees as if they were blades of grass. Once Dundubhi, an Asura in buffalo form possessing the strength of a thousand elephants, challenged Ocean to a fight. Ocean evaded saying: 'You should fight with an equal. There in the north stands Himavan. Go and challenge him. Leave poor me alone'. Dundubhi agreed and, speeding northwards, met and challenged Himavan, going his rocky side with his horns. Himavan controlled his temper and said: 'Why do you assault me? I am not a fighter. I spend my life in the company of sages who love to stay with me.' Dundubhi answered: 'Very well, then. But tell me of some one I can fight with. I want a worthy foeman today.' Himavan said: 'There is one in the south who is a foe worthy of you. He is Vali, the Vanara King. His strength is like his father Indra's. If you care, you may go to him

and challenge him to fight.' Dundubhi went straight to Vali's place and raised a loud uproar at the entrance of Kishkindha. He tore up trees and pulled down the gate and roared, 'Come out and prove your strength in a fight with me.' Vali was then resting with his queen. On hearing the challenge he came out accompanied by the women of his palace. 'Why, O Dundubhi, do you raise this clamor at my city gate?' he asked. 'Are you tired of life?' Vali's scornful address enraged the Asura who said: 'Don't boast of your strength in the presence of your admiring women. I have come here for a fight with you. If you have any manliness in you, come out and show it. You will say you are too drunk now to fight; but I am willing to wait till you become sober. If you like you may spend the night in your pleasures and bid a tearful leave of all your dear ones and come to me in the morning to be slain by me.' Vali laughed at Dundubhi's words and said: 'My dear women, go inside. O Asura, I am not the worse for drink and if you want a fight, there is no time like the present. The drinks I have had are what the warrior takes before he goes into battle!' So saying and with a laugh he took hold of the Asura by his tail and whirled him round and flung him. Dundubhi spat blood and fell on the ground. After a while the Asura rose again and a great battle followed. Vali, son of Indra, pounded the Asura to death. And he flung the dead buffalo so that it fell on the ground at the distance of a yojana. Drops of blood from the Asura's body were carried by the wind and fell on the ashrama of Matanga. The sage was wroth and soon found out who was responsible for this contamination. He saw at once that Vali in his pride had flung a bleeding carcass and desecrated the holy spot. The sage pronounced a curse, 'If this Vali enters the precincts of this ashrama, he

will lose his life.' That is why, O Rama, with my friends I am living here in safety. Vali dare not approach this place for fear of the curse. Look at these sal trees. He can pluck one of them and just shake all the leaves off as one dusts a jacket. Such is his strength. How could I, having incurred this terrible brother's enmity, feel secure?"

Lakshmana understood that Sugriva needed a demonstration of Rama's prowess to give him confidence and he said: "How would you like Rama to show you his confidence to conquer Vali?"

Sugriva answered: "Indeed, I have no doubts. I know Rama's prowess though now it is hidden as embers in ashes. I have sought refuge under him. And yet, when I recall Vali's mighty deeds, I tremble. That is all."

Seeing Sugriva's faith in him and his great fear of Vali, Rama resolved to put an end to his doubts. By a playful flip of his toe he sent the enormous skeleton of Dundubhi which was lying there, flying in the air to a distance of ten yojanas. But Sugriva though impressed was not convinced. "When my brother sent Dundubhi's carcass hurling in the sky, it was full of flesh and blood and far heavier than this weather-beaten skeleton," he said.

Then Rama bent his bow and, pulling the string to his ear, sent forth an arrow. It pierced the sal tree pointed out by Sugriva and six other trees standing behind it. Piercing the seven trees the beautiful arrow touched the earth and returned to Rama's quiver.

Sugriva, seeing this, was beside himself with joy. He was now certain that Rama's arrow could pierce the adamant frame of Vali. He fell prostrate before Rama and said: "With my own eyes I have now seen your prowess. Even if all the gods with Indra at their head should come

and oppose you, your victory is certain. Why then talk of Vali? I have gained your friendship and I have no more use for fear or grief. Slay Vali and save me. Let us go to Kishkindha today."

Both Rama and Lakshmana agreed. They talked how to set about and it was finally agreed that Sugriva should appear in Kishkindha and challenge Vali to single combat. Vali was sure to come out, and as the brothers were fighting, Rama would kill Vali with an arrow. They proceeded to Kishkindha. Sugriva went ahead. Rama followed him and stood away behind a tree in the dense forest.

Sugriva shouted. Vali heard the shout and in great rage emerged from the fortress, radiant like the morning sun.

The two brothers fought each other fiercely.

But Rama, who was standing bow in hand behind a tree, was bewildered. As they wrestled together the brothers were so similar in form and feature, in equipment and method of fighting, that Rama could not distinguish Vali from Sugriva and was afraid to shoot lest he kill the wrong combatant.

Meantime Sugriva, having the worst of the fight, broke from his brother's grip with a desperate effort and, wounded and weary, disappointed and despondent, fled for life and reached Rishyamuka forest.

Even this he was able to do because Vali did not wish to slay him and was not unwilling to give his brother another lease of life.

Rama and Lakshmana rejoined the woebegone Sugriva. He looked down at the ground without lifting his eyes. He was angry that Rama had broken his word and failed to help him.

"If you did not like to kill Vali," said Sugriva, "you could have told me so earlier. In that case, I, who know Vali's might, would never have challenged him

to fight. On the contrary, you made me believe you, and I have had such a drubbing that it is a wonder I am alive."

"Do not be angry, Sugriva, but listen," said Rama. "There was a good reason why I could not send forth my deadly arrow. You and Vali were alike in height and girth, in gait and shouts, in dress and ornaments. Once the fight began, I could not tell you from Vali. And I stood bewildered and helpless. It would have been terrible if I killed you instead of Vali. Do not be angry. Challenge Vali once again. This time I shall surely slay him. Here, Lakshmana, fetch that flowering creeper. Tie it round Sugriva's neck as a garland. I shall then know who is our friend and who is Vali as they fight. Now, Sugriva, you shall see Vali rolling on the ground."

Sugriva was satisfied. His spirits recovered. Lakshmana tied the creeper round his neck. Once again, and handsomer than ever, Sugriva proceeded to Kishkindha. And Rama and Lakshmana followed him as before.

43. THE SLAYING OF VALI

EVENING was approaching. Once more Sugriva roared at the gate of Kishkindha and challenged Vali to fight.

Vali who was then resting happily was startled and for a moment paled with puzzled concern, but was presently overwhelmed with rage and sprung stamping the earth as though he would split it.

Tara, his queen, her heart full of loving fear, held him in arms in a close embrace and tried to restrain his impetuosity with affectionate counsel. "Put away this wrath, my dear lord, as one puts away a used garland, for you have had enough fighting today. Tomorrow would do as well for another battle, for you lack neither enemies nor valor. I pray you not to rush out on the instant. It seems to me that you

should think calmly before going out now to meet your brother. I am afraid there is a deeper game. Your brother was defeated and disgraced and ran for dear life and concealed himself for safety. Now he has returned and raises this noise. Your brother is not such a fool as to challenge you again so soon after the punishment you inflicted on him unless he was assured of help and protection from an invincible ally of tried prowess. Did you not observe that his very roar of challenge had a new note of confidence in it? I shall tell you what I heard from Angada who had it from our scouts who range the forests. Two princes of unrivalled valor, Rama and Lakshmana have come from Ayodhya and Sugriva has secured the promise of their assistance. After all, my lord, your brother is virtuous and brave. Why should you hate him? Who in the world is closer to us than he? He will be your devoted servant and strong ally. It is best to forget the past and make it up with Sugriva. My dear Lord, listen to my words!"

Vali disliked this advice. Anger clouded his intellect. Caught and dragged by the noose of death, he could not see reason and only became more fixed in his resolve.

Tara, bright and beautiful as became her name Tara meaning star, spoke in vain.

"What are you saying?" he said. "Am I to hear in silence the ringing challenge of this enemy-brother? When a foe calls to battle is a warrior to hang back? Death would be better than such cowardice. Don't you worry about Rama. He knows dharma; he is one brought up in the fear of sin. Oh, let me alone, will you? I may tell you I shall not kill Sugriva, only I will teach the presumptuous fellow a lesson he won't forget and let him go. Let me go, I tell you. You have spoken out of the

fullness of your love for me. I shall humble Sugriva and send him back and return soon with victory. Have no fear for me."

Thus Valmiki pictures Vali, his chivalry, his dauntless and impatient valor, his tenderness. It is true Valmiki's hero has to kill the Vanara king, the epic requires it. But the slain warrior was a noble knight, worthy of the reader's admiration and tears.

Tara, with tears in her eyes, circumambulated him and praying for his success returned to her apartment full of grave apprehension. Leaving Tara and her companions behind, Vali issued from the fort hissing like an angry cobra and went to meet Sugriva.

As he saw him standing there, radiant and courageous, he girt his loins and sprang on him. And Sugriva too ran forward to meet Vali.

"If you love your life," warned Vali, "run away. Do not fall a victim to this fist of mine!"

Sugriva retorted angrily and the battle began. Fierce with remembered wrongs and keyed up above himself by the certainty of Rama's help, Sugriva maintained for long an equal combat. But presently Vali's greater might began to prevail and Sugriva was in such obvious distress that Rama who was watching with ready bow knew he could not hold out much longer.

It was now or never and placing a deadly arrow on the string and pulling it to his ear, Rama sped it at Vali's mighty chest. Pierced by that irresistible shaft Vali crashed down as falls a great forest tree cut asunder by the woodman's axe and lay stretched on the ground empurpled with blood as lies the festival flag-staff pulled down when the festival is ended.

Even so, he was radiantly handsome, his noble figure shining like a cloud lit up by the setting sun. The divine necklace given to him by Indra shone on his breast, which guarded his life and fortune. This jewel, Rama's dart, the bleeding wound, all added lustre to his mighty body.

Valmiki describes beautifully the majestic appearance of the fallen hero. A true warrior is never so beautiful as when he lies dying on the field of battle.

Astounded at being hit and laid low, when he least expected it from an unknown quarter, Vali looked round in perplexed surprise and saw Rama and Lakshmana approaching him bow in hand. With tears of indignant wrath, and in a voice faint with approaching dissolution, he accused them of ignoble perfidy in dealing causeless death to a person engaged in combat with another.

"Rama," he said, "you are the son of Emperor Dasaratha. Born of a noble race and famous by your own exploits, how did you bring yourself to do this deed? The world is full of praises for your valor and virtue. And yet, while I was absorbed in a battle with another, you came unseen, and from behind, shot a fatal arrow at me. How false and undeserved is your reputation for manly virtue, for truth and forbearance! What will the world think of you now? What harm have I ever done to you? Did I come out to fight with you? You have killed me like an assassin concealing yourself behind the trees. For a royal prince to kill an innocent person in this way is grievous sin. You are unworthy for kingship. The goddess Earth will never consent to take you for a bridegroom. My greatest sorrow is that I am killed by a base and sinful wretch. If it was battle with me you wanted, I would have given it to you, and slain by me in fair combat you might have been lying in the dust as I do now. Or if it was help to

recover your Sita I would have won her back for you in a day. I would have killed Ravana and dragged his body with a rope round the neck and placed it at your feet. No matter where he has hidden Sita, I would have discovered her and restored her to you."

Thus Vali, son of Indra, reproached Rama with his dying breath. And all this is fully set out by Valmiki, the divine poet, as well as by Kamban. Against this accusation what defence could Rama offer? Valmiki has it that Rama gave some explanation with which Vali was satisfied. But I am omitting all this as pointless and pray that the learned may forgive me.

What I think is that an avatar is an avatar and that among the sorrows that the Lord and His consort had to endure in their earthly incarnation, this liability to have their actions weighed on the earthly scales is a part. Vali bruised and bleeding from the many wounds of his fight with Sugriva, lay in the throes of death.

He lived just long enough to see his queen and his beloved son Angada. The poor bewildered lad who at his mother's bidding 'to fall at the feet of his father who was going on a long long journey' prostrated himself in silence, too stunned to realise the extent of his loss. This will be narrated later. Vali's words were addressed to Rama.

"All is over, I shall blame you no more. My dear, dear son Angada is orphaned. You and Sugriva should look after him. I entrust him to you. Look after him it is your duty to see that he does not pine away like a withering lotus-plant in a dried-up tank. Tell Sugriva that he should not imagine that it was Tara who set me up against him. Ask him to treat Angada as he should treat a prince, with honor and affection. Do this for me. I want no more. The warrior's Heaven is calling me!"

So ended Vali's life.

Owing to the protective virtue of Indra's necklace, Rama could not have met Vali face to face and vanquished him, just as Ravana could not be conquered by the gods. Rama could kill Vali only when himself unseen. And still the question stands, why should Vali have been killed at all?

Perhaps the answer is to be found in what Kabandha said to Rama in gratitude for being released from his curse. "Through Sugriva's friendship you will recover Sita," Sugriva's help not Vali's. And so Rama went in search of Sugriva, found him and pledged his friendship and consecrated it by fire. Sugriva had committed no unforgivable offence against Vali. Yet Vali, with his supernatural strength, persecuted his brother.

Hearing the latter's complaint, Rama had pledged his word to kill Vali and restore to Sugriva his wife and make him king as his part of the contract of alliance. Thereafter, Rama had no alternative. To kill Vali from cover became an inevitable necessity. Rama erred in running after the magic deer to please his wife.

Consequent on this, difficulties and sorrows and conflicts of duty pursued him. If we keep in mind that when God takes a lower and limited form by His own ordinance, limitations follow and we should not be confused thereby. This is my humble view as against other explanations propounded by the pious.

44. TARA'S GRIEF

THERE was panic in Kishkindha when the news came that Vali had been slain by an archer, and the Vanaras fled hither and thither in hopeless confusion. Tara, seeing this, laid aside her own grief and like a queen put courage in her husband's subjects saying: "Till this day you walked before the King to battle! Why, then do

you flee in fear now? There is no danger for you. Rama killed Vali only to make Sugriva king. Your lives are in no danger; you will only have a different ruler; that is all. You need not fly or fear."

When she tried to go to the spot where her husband lay dead, the Vanaras stopped her saying: "We shall crown Angada king and we shall make safe the fortress. We shall defend the town against Sugriva and his allies."

But she said: "Now my noble lord is dead, nothing matters." And boldly she went straight to where Rama and Lakshmana were standing.

When she saw her husband lying wounded to death she could not control her sorrow. She sobbed and cried.

"Ah my hero!" she wept embracing the wounded Vali. "How many heroes have you laid low and now you lie low yourself! And you have left me here!"

Soon Vali's son Angada reached the spot. And Sugriva, witnessing this scene, was filled with remorse at the thought that it was all for him that this calamity had happened. The remorse was no doubt genuine. For invariably revenge, especially revenge wreaked on those who have been friends in other day; brings nothing but bitterness and grief, and the momentary feeling of triumph is all ashes to the taste. How few of us realise this in the confusion created by desires and anger!

Tara rolled on the ground and lamented: "Leaving dear Angada an orphan and myself a helpless destitute you have gone on the journey from which there is no return. My Lord! My hero! "

Hanuman tried to console her: "The dead reach their places in heaven. Why lament for Vali? Angada will be crowned in due course and we shall then rejoice. It is our duty to look after Angada. Let us

now think of performing Vali's obsequies."

"I care for nothing," answered Tara. "It is for Sugriva to perform the obsequies and to look after Angada. What is there for me to do? Can a thousand Angadas equal in my eyes my husband? With him I shall enter the house of Yama. That alone will please me."

Vali, unconscious till now, opened his eyes for the last time and addressing Sugriva said: "Brother, we two could have been friends and reigned happily over the kingdom. But it was not given to us to be so wise and happy. I am more to blame than you, but why talk about that now? Hereafter you shall rule the kingdom. I have entrusted to you Angada, my son, dearer than life itself to Tara and me. He is a warrior equal to you in prowess. Be a father to him and look after him with kindness. This is my only request to you. And be kind to Tara who was not only a blameless and affectionate wife, but also a very wise and far-sighted counsellor. Whatever she foretells is bound to happen. Do not disregard her advice on any matter. Here, take the necklace that Indra gave me and take with it its secret power. My life is over and so is my resentment. May you be happy!" Thus the generous Vali blessed his brother Sugriva.

He gave good advice to Angada: "Sugriva is now your king. Be loyal to him and give him patient, affectionate service."

Like a flowering creeper embracing a forest tree felled down by an axe, Tara lay on the ground clinging to Vali.

Nila, as gently as he could, drew out the dart from Vali's chest.

Blood gushed out of the wound and spread into a pool. Vali's life left his body. Tara lamented loudly. "For the last time salute your father," she bade Angada in heart-broken accents. "O my husband!

Your dear son is bowing before you. Will you not say a word to him? Alas! I am a widow and he is an orphan."

The sight of all this struck Sugriva to the heart. He said to himself: "Moved by desire I closed the entrance of the cave and leaving Vali there, I seized and enjoyed his wealth. What a sinner have I been!"

It may be that in his penitent mood Sugriva accused himself wrongly, but it is also true that, without our knowledge, desire corrupts our mind and leads us to wrong actions and entangles us in sin. Sugriva felt that desire had unknowingly blinded and betrayed him.

Kama in Sanskrit stands for lust and greed and every kind of desire. Kama is man's internal foe which he has to vanquish. This is the lesson taught in the last seven slokas of the third chapter of the Gita. Sri Krishna concludes his exhortation with these words: "Jahi Satrum Kamaroopam Durasadam."

If desire corrupted Sugriva's mind, anger corrupted Vali's. When Vali saw that Sugriva had barred the entrance and left him shut up in the cave he felt convinced that Sugriva had accompanied him in his pursuit of the Rakshasa not as a brother but with a treacherous motive. He concluded that Sugriva had planned to sacrifice him to the Asura and usurp his place.

He became a prey to his own fury. He disgraced and drove out his blood brother and nursed his anger. Anger (krodha, as it is called in Sanskrit) betrayed Vali into sin.

Indeed kama and krodha are the ultimate causes of all sin. Unless we defend our heart against these foes and keep them out, we cannot escape sin.

Sugriva lamented: "Though my sin was great, he would not kill me. He drove me out and allowed me to escape with life.

That was all. But I conspired to slay him and succeeded. There is no sinner like me in the world and yet with his last breath he gave me the kingdom to rule and gave, too, the gift of Indra, the necklace of power. Indeed he was noble. Why should I still cling to this base life, I, who brought about the death of my heroic brother?"

At least once a year, men that follow ancient custom utter the prayer Kamokarsheet manyurakarsheet. That is: 'Desire lured me into sin, anger lured me into sin.' So saying many times with humble penitence, they seek to cleanse their hearts. This is a practice that all should follow, to repent and purify the heart and surrender it to the Lord, Kamokarsheet manyurakarsheet, Narayanaya namah.

With fear and hesitation, Rama gently approached the weeping Tara. But there was no sign of anger on her face. The words she addressed to the slayer of her husband were worthy of a hero's queen. "With the weapon with which, O Warrior, you killed my husband, kill me too and enable me to join him. Even in heaven, he will not be happy without me. Do not fear it would be a sin. It will be a meritorious act to unite husband and wife. This will cleanse your sin, your treacherous slaying of my husband."

Valmiki says at this stage that Tara knew the truth of Rama's incarnation and saw Vishnu in him. The traditional belief is that, like Sumitra, the mother of Lakshmana, Tara, the wife of Vali, was a jnani, a knower of Reality. Though at first she hated Rama for his treachery, yet when she saw him face to face she saw his divinity, so it is said.

Those who read the Ramayana as a mere tale would find all this pointless. But to the followers of bhakti marga, this will not sound improbable. Tulasidas sings at this point that Siva explains to Parvati:

"Look, Uma, how Rama, the Supreme Being, moves all creatures like puppets tied to strings!" Bhakti is needed to realise the full meaning of Hindu ancient mythology.

Even on a rational basis, Tara comes out as a diplomat, an expert in statesmanship. She had the intelligence to anticipate coming events. What had happened had happened. By his address and good fortune, Sugriva had secured the alliance of Rama. Vali was no more; Angada's welfare was all that she should care for hereafter.

Could Angada afford to antagonise Sugriva with Rama and Lakshmana ready to support him bow in hand? Peace, not war was indicated.

Hence, when she concealed her anger from Rama and put on an appearance of patient submission to events, she was really securing the best interests of Angada and winning for him the compassion and sympathy of all.

Vali's obsequies were performed with due form and ceremony. After the auspicious bath, Sugriva was crowned king and Angada was made Yuvaraja.

45. ANGER AND RECONCILIATION

THE rainy season began. Sugriva and his companions spent the time in Kishkindha in enjoyment but Rama and Lakshmana spent the weary days waiting in a cave nearby. The forest paths were flooded and became rushing torrents, impossible to traverse. The search for Sita, therefore, had to be suspended. Rama brooded over Sita's predicament and was plunged in sorrow. Lakshmana counselled him to bear with the delay till the rainy season ended. And Rama held his soul in patience.

The edge of the keenest sorrow wears with time and perhaps Heaven's kindest gifts to men are sleep for the fleeting cares

of the day and forgetfulness for the deep-seated injuries of the heart. Kishkindha mourned her Vali for a time, and then rejoiced in Sugriva and the survivors. Sugriva forgot the privations of his exile and the remorse for his brother's death. He enjoyed to the full his present prosperity and even Tara reconciled and adapted herself to altered circumstances in the interests of her son.

The royal palace of Kishkindha was full of joy and drinking, and the gloomy months of rain, which the Raghu brothers spent in leaden repining, sped with golden-winged enjoyment for Sugriva and his household. Only Hanuman felt anxious. He could not forget Rama's business. He was looking out for an opportunity to remind the king of his pledge to Rama.

At last, the rains ceased and the sky was cleared of cloud and lightning. The air was sweet with the perfumes of flowers and the songs of birds and joy came to life in the forest again. The intelligent and high virtuous Hanuman now approached his king. Sugriva had entrusted all official duties to the ministers and was absorbed in pleasure. Hanuman knew that the wisest and best of men neglect their promises in such circumstances and addressed the king with great politeness:

"You have regained the kingdom of your ancestors and are in secure possession and enjoyment of it. But something yet remains to be done. You must fulfil your promise to your allies and so increase your fame and strengthen your power. Even at the sacrifice of one's own interests and pleasure, one should carry out the business of one's friends according to one's promise. Only so can a king's authority and reputation grow. It will be best to fulfil one's promise before the due date. In any case delay should be avoided.

Fulfilment after the promised date is worse than useless. One should not wait to be reminded by one's friends of what had been promised to them. All this you know without my telling you. Remembering what Rama had done for us. We must take steps to fulfil our promise without waiting to be reminded by him. The rainy season is over. There is no ground for further delay. We can no longer postpone the task of searching for Sita. Rama may be very patient, but that does not justify any further delay on our part. Did not Rama kill your foe promptly, not minding the danger or the blame involved? We should fulfil our promise with equal promptness."

Thus politely did Maruti convey his advice to Sugriva. The latter accepted it and, thanking Hanuman, ordered Nila to mobilise the Vanara army. "All the world must be searched and Sita found," he said. "Order therefore the most powerful Vanaras to come and join up at once. Those who fail will be summarily punished." Having said this, Sugriva went back into private apartments.

Rama and Lakshmana spent the time in their cave waiting for the end of the rainy season and the fulfilment by Sugriva of his promise. But when the rains were over and the forest and its creatures shone with renewed beauty, Rama grieved intensely at the thought of Sita suffering at the hands of the Rakshasas.

"The world is full of life and joy," said Rama. "But Sita is in agony somewhere. And I sit still here, awaiting the favor of this ungrateful Vanara king. Alas, she walked cheerfully through the Dandaka forest, as if it were a palace-park. She did not mind the stony ground and the thorns in the path. What must be her suffering now? But this king, drowned in his cups and revelling in the company of his women, has forgotten his promise to me. Lakshmana! Go at once to Kishkindha

and tell this base king: 'Remember! Know that the path still yawns open whereby the slaughtered Vali went to his doom. Do not follow him, but fulfil your promise to me. Ruin awaits him who forgets kindness and, neglects friends. Beware of Rama's arrows. The four months of the rainy season are over. These four months were like four ages to Rama, but to you, steeped in pleasures, they have perhaps sped like minutes! By delay you incur Rama's wrath and seek your destruction.' Go, Lakshmana, and tell him this."

This was the angry and impatient message Rama wanted Lakshmana to take to Sugriva.

Carrying this weight of his brother's grief and anger, Lakshmana was about to leave. Then Rama thought again. He knew Lakshmana's nature and feared danger from his rashness. So he called him back and said to him: "In conveying my complaint to Sugriva, do not be harsh. Whatever his faults, he is our friend. Point out his faults to him, but say nothing harsh."

Lakshmana agreed, but he found it hard to control his own anger as he approached the gates of Kishkindha.

Noting the severe face of Lakshmana who was fully armed, the Vanara sentry became alert and made ready to guard the fortress. This enraged Lakshmana still further.

Some Vanaras ran to the inner apartments and reported to Sugriva: "Lakshmana, furious with anger, is coming here bow in hand. We could not stop him."

But the Vanara king was tipsy and surrounded by women and he took no notice. The king's servants ordered the sentry at the gates to stand firm and prevent the entry of any one. Lakshmana's anger became quite uncontrollable. Lakshmana forced his way in. There he

met young Angada, the thought of whose youth and misfortunes took away something of the edge of his wrath. "My child go and tell the Vanara king," he said, "that Lakshmana is waiting at the palace gate to have audience of him on behalf of his grief stricken brother."

Angada went accordingly to the king's apartment and informed him of Lakshmana's visit. But Sugriva was in no condition to understand. Angada saw this and took counsel with the ministers as to what should be done. Hanuman and some of the fellow ministers gently explained what was happening and Sugriva was at last roused from his tipsy condition.

Sugriva said: "I am not at fault, am I? Why should my friends Rama and Lakshmana be angry with me? Some enemy must have carried tales and set them up against me."

Hanuman answered: "It is my duty, O king, to say these things and I say them. Do not be angry with me. We have delayed in carrying out our promise to Rama. We have forgotten Rama's grief. It is late, but not too late. Hence let us do quickly what we should. Let us seek forgiveness from Lakshmana. Let us, without further delay, take steps to fulfil our promise to Rama."

Then Sugriva agreed to receive Lakshmana.

As Lakshmana went into the Vanara town, he marvelled at its beauty and the culture of Kishkindha. Passing through beautiful streets, he stood outside the king's palace. Hearing the sounds of revelry, of dance and song, proceeding from within, he saw that the Vanaras had forgotten their promise and were lost in enjoyment. He could hardly control his anger. Still he held back from entering the women's chamber and, standing in a corner, outside, he twanged his bowstring.

The sound filled all Kishkindha with fear and trembling. Sugriva, hearing it, realised that the prince was, indeed, angry. He saw the danger and asked Tara to go and pacify the prince. "A chivalrous man like Lakshmana will find his anger slip from him, when he speaks to a lady and it will be impossible for him to continue wrathful." said the king, shrewd even in his tipsy condition.

Tara advanced towards Lakshmana. In looks, in knowledge of the world and skill in speech, Tara was unrivalled. She said to Lakshmana: "After enduring for a long time poverty and persecution, Sugriva is enjoying the pleasures and the prosperity you have secured for him. This enjoyment has gone to his head and he has lost his senses. I know his fault, but you should forgive him. The high souled that knows the foibles and imperfections of our common nature should temper their censure with compassion. So be not too harsh in judging of King Sugriva's surrender to temptations of the flesh, especially after his long trials and privations. But I can assure you, he has never lost sight of his debt or his duty to you. He has already issued orders for mobilising the Vanara warriors from all quarters. Today or tomorrow they will all be here. Then the search for Sita and the war against Ravana will begin. Have no doubts. And now, pray come in and see the King."

Lakshmana, now no longer angry, entered the apartment. Sugriva, descending from his seat, welcomed Lakshmana.

"Forgive my faults," he said. "With Rama's friendship and help I am King today. How can I ever forget what I owe to the valorous and good Rama? He can destroy his foes without any help from me. I, with my armies, can only follow him. That is all. Surely Ravana will

perish. The search for Sita will soon begin. Do forgive the delay of which I am guilty."

Lakshmana was pleased. "Rama is your equal in honor and prowess, none else," he said. "Come with me to Rishyamuka and give him words of comfort in his grief."

Sugriva and Lakshmana went in a litter to Rama and, explaining the arrangements already made, satisfied him.

Rama was pleased. He said: "You indeed are a real friend. Like the clouds yielding rain, the sun destroying darkness and the moon pleasing human hearts, a good friend comes to one's help spontaneously. I am happy in your friendship. Now the end of Ravana and his race is certain."

Even as Rama was expressing his gratitude and joy, great multitudes of Vanaras under their respective leaders arrived and assembled. They came from distant forests, mountains and coasts. The dust they raised darkened the sky. Millions of monkeys and bears in a variety of shapes and colors were there.

Sugriva addressed this enormous army and showed them their appointed camping places. Later, he divided the host into eight divisions and sent each under its commander, thoroughly to search in the eight directions for Sita.

One point is worth noting here. The Tamil poet Kamban describes Tara as a chaste widow living a life of discipline and privations. It is different in Valmiki, who includes Tara and the other women as part of the inheritance Sugriva won from Vali, in fact, as an appendage of the throne. When Sugriva lost himself in bodily pleasures and forgot his duty to Rama, Tara shared his revels and is described as being flushed and unsteady with wine when she went out at her lord's

command to allay Lakshmana's resentment.

In ancient times, when an elder brother died leaving a wife, there was a custom in royal and other noble families for the younger brother to take the widow as wife and protect her. It is difficult for people of one age to judge the customs of another age. Imagination and great flexibility of mind are needed to assess the merits and defects of usage's with which we are not familiar.

46. THE SEARCH BEGINS

"LOOK, Rama, at this Vanara army," said Sugriva. "All these myriads, of wondrous strength, are yours to command. They are willing and able to do you all the service you demand. Consider this huge army as your own and bid them to do whatever you wish."

Rama, beside himself with joy; embraced Sugriva. He said: "First we should find out whether Sita is alive, and if so where she is. Next we should know Ravana's whereabouts. Then we shall do what needs to be done. But it is for you, not for me or Lakshmana, to command this army. You are their King. Besides, you know best what needs to be done and how to do it. Blessed am I to have a friend like you and a brother like Lakshmana!"

Then Sugriva issued stringent orders to his commanders at once to send divisions of the army to the four quarters of the earth to make a thorough search for Sita.

After sending away the other leaders, Sugriva took Hanuman aside and told him: "Son of Vayu, possessing the strength and splendor of your father, you alone can succeed in this task. You have strength, courage and intelligence and on you I rely to take up and discharge this responsibility of discovering Sita."

Rama too felt that Hanuman's efforts would be crowned with success. Whatever obstacles turned up, he felt that Hanuman

would find a way of overcoming them. He gave his signet ring to Hanuman and said: "Take this ring. I am full of hope that you will discover Sita. This ring will tell her that you are my messenger. Dear Hanuman, may you bring Sita and me together again!"

Readers should realise the solemnity and pathos of the scene. Rama full of abiding trust in the devoted loyalty and valor of Hanuman placed the ring as though it was his own hungry heart in his servant's hand. The ideal servant accepted the sacred trust with a deep reverence and an unshakable resolve never to fail his master.

Sugriva gave orders to his army. "Sita must anyhow be discovered. No matter where she is hidden, you can and must find her. Within a month you must return with news of her."

And the army swarmed out like ants from an anthill and spread in the four directions.

Satabali and his army proceeded northwards. Vinata went east, Sushena westwards, Hanuman, Angada and General Tara travelled southwards.

All were equally enthusiastic and equally eager to catch and kill Ravana and redeem Sita. Each group was anxious to be first to return with success. There was tumultuous rivalry.

Rama enquired of Sugriva: "You describe every quarter and region of the earth like one who has seen the whole world with his own eyes. How and when did you see it all?"

"You will remember, my Lord," said Sugriva, "how Vali pursued me in all directions. Wherever I went, he still pursued me. And so I had to wander over the face of the whole world. I thus had occasion to see every part of this planet. Later, I learnt about the spot where Rishi Matanga had built his ashrama. If Vali

entered that region, his head would go to pieces by the sage's curse. I knew that he would not come to that place and could not harm me even if he came. So there I lay protected."

The hordes that went north, east and west returned in a month and reported that Sita was not to be found anywhere. "Carefully we searched forests, mountains, rivers and cities, but nowhere could we find her. Hanuman, who had gone southwards, is the lucky one. Did not the Rakshasa carrying Sita also travel southwards? And Hanuman has not yet returned."

Rama, hearing this, was satisfied that the Vanaras had done their best.

Hanuman and Angada entered and searched the caves and forests of the Vindhya. Then they came upon a desert, where a rishi was performing tapas. By his curse it was devoid of trees and plants, of birds and beasts. Travelling further south, they saw a big Asura. The cruel one, regarding the Vanara crowd as a good meal sprang up to catch them. They thought at first that this was no other than Ravana.

Angada rushed towards him and gave him a mighty blow. Unable to stand it, the Asura spat blood and fell on the earth and lay dead like a great hill. Rejoicing in the thought that Ravana was dead, the Vanaras searched the forest for Sita. But, there was no sign of her. And so they carried the search elsewhere.

Often they would weary of their fruitless search and sit down in blank despair. At such times, Angada, Gandhamadana or some other leader would encourage them and make them resume the search. Many days were spent in this way. Yet Sita was not to be seen and they dreaded Sugriva's displeasure.

Very far they travelled southwards in their search.

Passing through a desert, fainting with hunger and thirst, they saw a cave from which issued a variety of birds full of the joy of life. The gentle breeze which came out of it covered them with the pollen of lotus flowers and filled them with fragrance. The Vanaras concluded: "undoubtedly there was water where the birds and perfume came from." And the Vanaras forming a chain with linked hands plunged cautiously into the dense darkness of the cave with hearts full of hope, though too parched with thirst even to shout.

At long last, all of a sudden, light appeared and they saw a lovely grove with streams of pellucid water and trees bowing under their wealth of fruit. Then they came to a city, with streets paved with jewels set in gold and great palaces beautiful as a dream. They went along and then they saw an aged tapasvini clad in the garments of a recluse and seated on a dark skin. The Vanaras trembled before the divine splendor of her face.

Hanuman took courage to approach her. Bowing low before her, he said: "Salutations to you, Mother. May we know who you are? Thirsty and tired, we entered the dark cave hoping for some water. And now that we see this unpeopled golden city with trees and tanks, we are afraid, lest this be a vain vision arising from the madness of too great sufferings. Explain all this to us and remove our fears."

She answered: "How did you find your way into this cave? You will have plenty of fruits and drink here. This palace was built by Maya, the architect of the Danavas. He learnt the art from Sukracharya. Long and happily did Maya live here, till he incurred the enmity of Indra, who slew him. Later Indra gave this golden palace to Hema, my friend. These buildings and parks are hers. At present

she has gone to the abode of the gods. But what is your purpose in coming here? Why did you weary yourselves wandering in the forests? First eat, drink and refresh yourselves and then tell me all about yourselves."

They ate and drank and refreshed themselves and were happy. Then Hanuman explained to the ascetic the purpose of their wandering.

"Rama, son of Emperor Dasaratha, for some reason, left his kingdom and lived in the forest with his brother and wife. Then a Rakshasa carried off Sita, the wife of Rama. The two went out searching for her. They made the acquaintance of Sugriva, the Vanara King, and became friends with him. He has sent us on this mission to search for Sita and find her for Rama. Our King fixed a time limit for us to return with a clue. We lost our way in the darkness of this cave and the period is now over. Now we do not know what to do. Sugriva is a strict master. For failure to do his bidding within the time set, he is sure to visit us with the penalty of death."

Swayamprabha, that was the name of the ascetic woman, said: "Alas! You cannot by yourselves go out of this cave. No stranger who enters it can go out of it with life. But yours is a great mission and I must, by my tapasya, transport you out. Now shut your eyes."

Accordingly they shut their eyes. All at once they found themselves on the seashore.

Reaching the seashore, they looked round and they were start led to discover that it was the beginning of spring. Angada lamented: "Alas! The time set has been transgressed. If we return to Kishkindha without any clue about Sita, the King will surely punish us with death. He hates me. It was under pressure from Rama that he agreed to make me Yuvaraja, not because of love for me.

Instead of going there and losing our lives, let us fast and seek death here and now." Many of his companions agreed with Angada.

The Vanara General Tara said: "I do not agree. Why should we end our lives? Let us return to the cave of the tapasvini Swamyamprabha and live there happily. There is everything in plenty there. Neither Sugriva nor anyone else can reach this spot. We shall spend the rest of our lives, free from care."

But Hanuman said: "What unworthy talk is this! What pleasure is there in eating, drinking and sleeping in the cave, leaving our families in faraway Kishkindha? Sugriva is a good king whom we need not fear. And if indeed Sugriva is angry with us and determined to punish us, how can this cave give us safety? Can it stand against Lakshmana's rage? Will he not smash it to pieces and kill us? I see no benefit in Tara's counsel. Let us return and tell Sugriva the whole truth and beg for his forgiveness. This is the only way to safety."

"I do not agree with Hanuman," said Angada. "Sugriva has no love or pity for me. He is sure to kill me. He is of a cruel nature. Remember how he killed my father. He does not want me to live. He will find some excuse or other for killing me. He regards me as an obstacle in his way and that of his progeny, who but for me would inherit Kishkindha. To break a promise is nothing to him. Did he not forget his solemn pledge to Rama that he would search for and recover Sita? Was it not only for fear of Lakshmana and his bow that he sent us on this search? My poor bereaved mother has succumbed to fear and accepted Sugriva's protection. She clings to life for my sake. Hearing that I am dead, she will end her life. Alas! I am miserable and know not what to do."

"My death is certain", he said again, "if I return to Kishkindha. It is far better to fast to death here."

He spread on the ground the kusa grass in the manner prescribed for the vow of death, bowed to the gods and the dead and sat facing east, determined to die.

When Angada the Yuvaraja took this vow and sat in the posture of a fast unto death, the other Vanaras cried in grief and, resolving also to fast with him and die, sat facing east.

From a neighboring hill, Sampati, the vulture King, saw this crowd of Vanaras, resigning themselves to fate. Having lost his wings and being unable to move, Sampati had been famishing for a long time. He now rejoiced, saying to himself: "So many monkeys are going to die here together. I shall have enough food for a long while without effort."

Meanwhile, the Vanaras, expecting death, were recalling the past and talking to one another and loudly lamenting over all that had happened. "Because of Kaikeyi, Dasaratha died," they said: "Because of Dasaratha, Rama had to dwell in the forest. Ravana carried off Sita. The heroic Jatayu lost his life in the attempt to save Sita. If the heroic bird had strength enough to continue the struggle a little longer, Rama and Lakshmana would have arrived on the spot and recovered Sita. By fate did all these things happen and the end of the tale is that we are dying here. In what curious ways does fate work!"

Listening to these lamentations, Sampati stared at the mention of Jatayu who was his brother. Hearing him spoken of as dead, he naturally wished to hear the whole story.

Sampati was very old. He and Jatayu were the children of Aruna, the god of Dawn and brother of Garuda, Hari's vehicle. Jatayu and Sampati in their youth competed with each other as to who could

fly higher and rose in the sky. As they approached the sun the heat became intolerable and Jatayu was about to be burnt up.

But Sampati spread his wings and protected his brother from the fury of the sun. Jatayu was saved, but Sampati's wings were burnt off. Unable to fly, he fell down on a hill. Since then he could not move but stayed in the same place ever hungry for meal and just alive.

"Who brings sad news of my dear brother Jatayu?" he cried in agony. "Oh, Vanaras, is beloved Jatayu dead indeed? Why did Rama son of King Dasaratha, go to the forest? Why did he lose his wife? Was Jatayu killed by Ravana? Tell me all."

The Vanaras had resolved to end their lives. The wingless, old vulture had desired to make an easy meal of them. But now things turned out otherwise. The Vanaras got up, went to Sampati and gently led him down from the hill. Then they talked and exchanged information. Sampati recounted his story. Angada related all that had happened in Kishkindha and asked old Sampati how Rama could be helped.

Sampati was old and weak, but his eyes had not lost their keenness. He could see things very far off. He could see Sita captive in Lanka and described in detail the wealth of Ravana's kingdom. He saw and described how Sita sat surrounded by Rakshasis in Lanka. The Vanaras were wild with joy. They jumped about saying, "Now we know all about Sita. There is no need for us to die, Rama's purpose will be achieved."

Sampati's troubles were also over. The boon he had received that when he helped Rama he would get back his wings came true and even as they were talking, young feathers began to spring and grow on his sides. Sampati now shone with fresh

beauty and he found satisfaction in performing the funeral obsequies of Jatayu.

47. SON OF VAYU

FROM Sampati the Vanaras learnt the place where Sita was kept a prisoner in the land of the Rakshasa, a hundred yojanas across the ocean. But of course it would not do to return to Sugriva at once with this second-hand information. They had outstayed the allotted time and only outstanding success could save them from punishment. They could not stop their search till they saw with their own eyes what Sampati had described only then could they fulfil Rama's purpose.

But then they had to cross the sea.

They went to the edge of the water and discussed matters. "How can we cross the sea, enter Lanka, see Sita and return?" Anxiety and fear overwhelmed them.

Angada said: "No matter how hard the task, one should never lose courage. Courage is the key to success. To lose heart is to lose everything."

Then he asked each one of his followers to state truly the maximum length that he could jump.

"Oh Vanara warriors!" he said, "much have I heard from Sugriva of your prowess. Your strength and your enterprise are beyond dispute. We should fulfil this task. We cannot return to Kishkindha without seeing Sita. That is certain. It is better for us to end our lives here than to be slain in disgrace by the king. Therefore, tell me, one by one, the longest jump you have the strength and courage to attempt."

Gaja said modestly: "I can jump ten yojanas." Gavaksha said: "I can do twenty." Another Vanara leader claimed he could do thirty.

And so each improved on the figure of the other. At last Jambavan, the oldest of the warriors, spoke:

"I am now old and infirm. Yet I would gladly spend myself to fulfil our king's command. But what will mere devotion avail if not seconded by strength? I think I can manage ninety yojanas, but this is not enough to cross the sea and reach Lanka. I can only regret my lost youth."

The Yuvaraja himself said: "I can do a hundred yojanas and reach Lanka, I have no doubt. But I wonder whether I shall have the strength for another jump of equal length for the return journey."

Jambavan answered, "O prince, you need not doubt your strength. Your prowess is as great as Vali's. Yet it is not proper for the crown prince to undertake this task while there are others to do it under his orders. It is neither statesmanlike nor safe for a king to act directly."

Then Jambavan cast an appraising and admiring look at Hanuman, who had sat apart, listening to the talk, but saying nothing.

"I feel that the son of Vayu, sitting there in silence is the one best fitted by strength and skill to do this deed," said the old Vanara and walked up to Hanuman and brought him to their midst.

Addressing Hanuman in the hearing of the myriad's of gloomy Vanaras, Jambavan said: "O warrior, learned in all branches of knowledge, why are you sitting silent and apart? You are the equal of King Sugriva, are you not? In strength and splendor do you not surpass all the rest of us? Why, are you not the equal of Rama and Lakshmana themselves? I have seen Garuda, the king of birds crossing the sea. The might of your shoulders is not less than that of Garuda's wings. You are not inferior to the son of Vinata in strength or speed, but you are not aware of your own prowess and intelligence. There is no equal to you in the whole world. Anjana, your mother, was a maiden

among the goddesses above. By the curse of a rishi she was born as a Vanari. One day, while she was wandering carefree on a mountain slope, Vayu saw her beauty and fell in love with her and embraced her. She was wroth. 'Who are you, O wicked one' she asked, 'who dares insult me? The Wind-God answered: 'Be not angry, your body is not tainted by my touch and loses not its virgin purity. Not in body but in my heart's desire did I embrace you and out of this ethereal embrace, a child will be born to you, equal to me in strength and vigor. He will be the mightiest and most intelligent amongst the Vanaras.' Thus did the Wind-God pacify Anjana. When you were a little child, O Hanuman, you imagined the rising sun to be a fruit and flew towards it in order to pluck it. Seeing your effortless and fearless flight Indra, king of the gods, became concerned for the sun's safety and hurled his thunderbolt at you. Struck down by it, you fell on a mountain and your right jaw was broken. Enraged by this, your father the Wind-God stopped his movements and stood still. All living creatures became breathless and felt strangled in the stillness. The gods begged Vayu to lay aside his anger and showered blessings on you. Brahma and Indra gave you boons. No weapon can slay you. Death can only come to you at your will and not other wise. You are immortal. Born of Anjana and begotten of the spirit of the Wind-God, you are equal to him in splendor, intelligence and power. But, for all your strength, you are virtuous and modest. You alone can help us to fulfil Rama's purpose. Crossing the sea is no hard task to you. This great army of Vanaras, struggling in a sea of distress, you should rescue. You, who can cross the sea, should not leave your power unused. Increase your stature. You are the equal of Garuda. Once I too was strong like you

and traversed the globe twenty-one times. At the churning of the ocean of milk, I fetched herbs from the four quarters at the bidding of the gods. But now I am old and weak. You are the sole hope of the Vanaras. O, son of Anjana, we beg you, noble one! With your heritage of divine strength, delay no further. Realise your true strength and spring forward. Like Trivikrama, you can cross the sea at a single jump. Do it and end our troubles."

The aged Jambavan thus praised Hanuman, reminded him of his strength and roused his dormant courage. At once Hanuman's form began to swell like the sea in high tide. Even as the Vanaras were watching him, the son of Vayu grew in size. The radiance of his body filled Angada and his companions with wonder and joy.

From now on, Hanuman is the hero of the Ramayana. The devotees of Vishnu lovingly call him the Junior Servant of Hari. The Senior Servant is Garuda who is always with Vishnu in personal attendance.

How the Junior Servant of Hari ended the grief of Sita, destroyed by fire the city of Ravana and returned to the Lord and told him: "I found have Sita," we shall now proceed to relate. Reminded of his might by Jambavan, Hanuman was now determined to fulfil Rama's purpose. And with fervor he uttered his faith:

"May your words come true. Flying through the sky and alighting in Lanka, I shall see Janaki. I have no doubt. I shall return and bring you good news. To take the jump I must press my foot hard against the earth. This hill may stand it," he said and climbed up the Mahendra hill.

There for a while he threw his whole strength into his foot and walked a few steps. The creatures in the hill could not endure it and came out.

Standing on the hill, Hanuman looked at the sea and directed his yoga-concentrated mind towards Lanka. He said to himself: "I shall search and find Sita. I shall fly in the sky and cross the sea."

With this resolve he offered worship and prayer to Surya, Indra, Vayu, Brahma, and all creation. Then facing east, he made obeisance to his father Vayu and, magnifying his frame still further, turned towards the south.

He pressed the hill with his feet and struck it with his hands. At this impact the flowers fell from the trees and covered the hill. Squeezed irresistibly by the pressure of his feet the hill threw out springs of water, like the rut flowing down the cheeks of the elephant. Many colored veins of ore burst out of the rock. From the caves the beasts emerged with panic-stricken outcries. Hooded serpents emitting venom bit the rock and sparks flew out.

The hair of Hanuman's body stood on end and he roared and lashed his tail on the ground. He contracted his hind parts, held his breath, pressed down his feet, folded his ears and stiffened his muscles. Then with a roar of triumph he rose into the sky and like Garuda flew with the speed of Rama's arrow. With the momentum of his speed, many trees were uprooted and followed in his wake. Like friends who speed a parting guest, they accompanied him a little way, showering down their flowers, and dropped.

One by one the trees that followed Hanuman fell into the sea like the mountains which of old were pursued by Indra and denuded of their wings. Covered with bright-colored flowers the sea shone like the sky with its stars. Hanuman's arms with their outspread hands as he flew through the sky appeared like two five headed cobras. He seemed to

swallow the sky as he flew forward. His eyes glistened like mountain forests on fire. His red nose shone like the evening sun.

His huge frame spanned the sky like an enormous comet. The air roared as he sped fast. Beneath him his shadow travelled like a ship on the sea. It looked as though a huge mountain with wings was flying in the sky. Hidden at times by clouds and again emerging from them, he shone like the moon sailing across the sky. The Gandharvas showered flowers. The Devarishis blessed him.

With courage equal to every occasion, with foresight, skill and resolution, Hanuman met and survived the trials on the way. Shooting up suddenly from the sea, a mighty mountain rose and stood, in his way. Hanuman struck it with his chest and the Mynaka Mountain yielded, like a cloud struck by the wind.

The mountain said: "My son, I am Mount Mynaka. My king Ocean bade me help Sri Rama, the descendant of the Sagara race. The Ocean is an old friend of that race. In honor of that ancient, association, stay here on me for a while. You will fulfil Rama's purpose all the better for this rest. When Indra struck with his thunder all the hills, I fled from his persecution and hid myself in the ocean and survived. The Ocean who gave me shelter now bids me help you. The sons of Sagara dug and deepened the ocean. Did not your father Vayu help me to escape from Indra's thunderbolt and find sanctuary in the sea? Both the Ocean and myself will be pleased if you will accept my hospitality and rest here for a while."

But Hanuman could not yield to Mynaka's importunity and said politely: "I cannot stop, my friend. I have no time to lose. My vow to fulfil Rama's purpose permits no delay. Your kind words are enough to please me."

He stroked the mountain affectionately with his hand and took its leave.

Later, a huge form stood in his way and said: "Enter my mouth. I have been without food for a long time and am eagerly waiting for you," and the monster opened its mouth wide like a cave.

Hanuman answered: "I am bent on doing Rama's purpose. Do not stop me."

"Impossible!" said the monster. "You must enter my mouth."

Hanuman thought quickly and decided what to do. Step by step he made his body grow bigger and bigger. The Rakshasa form (which had been assumed by Surasa, the Naga maiden) opened its mouth correspondingly wider and wider.

When the mouth was thus enormously wide, all of a sudden Hanuman contracted his body into a speck and, darting through the demon's mouth and body, came out again and resumed his former normal shape.

He then laughed and said: "You have had your wish, mother. I have entered your mouth. What more do you need?"

And the Naga goddess blessed him saying: "Your effort will be crowned with success. I did this at the bidding of the gods who wanted to test you. Rama's purpose, which you seek to serve, will assuredly triumph."

This was not the last of his trials. As he was flying in the sky, for no reason which he could discover, he found his speed obstructed and he suffered like a ship against a contrary wind. Some mighty force, he felt, was holding him and dragging him down.

He looked up and down and on all four sides. Then he discovered the cause. It was a huge she-demon in the sea holding him by his shadow below, arresting his speed, and dragging him down.

The demon, holding him by his shadow, said: "Come, come! Long have I

been waiting for you. No longer can I bear my hunger," and she opened her mouth like a cave.

At once Hanuman entered her mouth and ripped a way out through her entrails and emerged. The demon died and sank down in the water. Like the full moon emerging from an eclipse, Hanuman shone in the sky and resumed his journey.

Thus surviving many trials with the help of his subtle wit, courage and strength, he flew across the ocean and approached the coast of Lanka covered with plantain and coconut trees.

On the shore of the island he saw groves and mountains and forests and the mouths of rivers.

Hanuman saw the wealth of Ravana's kingdom and the beauty of the fortified city.

"I have reached the destination," said Hanuman to himself. "Now without letting the Rakshasas know who or what I am, I must search the place and find out where Sita is kept."

He reduced his huge form to the size of a normal monkey and alighted on a hilltop in Lanka.

48. THE SEARCH IN LANKA

FULL of hope, Hanuman alighted and set foot in Lanka. But soon the flush of triumph at the accomplishment of the journey gave place to sober thinking.

"True I have crossed the sea, but that is only the beginning of my mission. There, on mount Trikuta, stands Ravana's magnificent city, as if suspended in the sky. How beautiful, how wealthy, how well secured it is! The city and the fortress are not inferior to Amaravati or Bhagavati. The lovely groves, the elegant buildings, the engines of defence, deep moats, these fill me with much admiration but also with greater concern. Who can attack and vanquish this Ravana? How can an army cross the sea that I have just

crossed? Even if it crosses the sea and reaches this shore, how can it attack and bring down this fortress defended by bulwarks manned by well-armed warriors! Neither guile nor force can bring it down. But first I must find out whether Sita is alive or not. Other questions can wait. When and how can I best enter this well guarded city? I have to search it thoroughly, if I am to discover the place where Sita is kept. If thoughtlessly I do something wrong now, this error would be irretrievable and a great purpose would fail because of haste or negligence on my part. If I enter the city by day, it will be noticed by the Rakshasas. It is best I go in at night. But in what shape shall I go? To ward off suspicion, I must put on a trivial, inconspicuous shape."

Accordingly he shrank to the size of a little monkey, no bigger than a cat. To enter and search the palaces and parks of this vast city, this would be most convenient. His present form was as much smaller than his usual size as the latter was than the mighty proportions he had assumed as he crossed the sea.

By now the sun had set. The little Vanara walked towards the fortress gate. The moon shone brightly. Hanuman was glad and grateful for this help in his search.

Even on a distant view Hanuman wondered at the wealth and beauty displayed in Ravana's capital. The streets and mansions were bright with flags and festoons and glittered with gold and precious gems. The breeze blew gently from the sea. Like Indra's Amaravati and Kubera's Alakapuri, Ravana's capital had attained the peak of prosperity. The messenger of Rama was filled with wonder and anxiety how to overcome the master of such wealth and military power.

As he was walking along in amazement and anxiety, he was rudely accosted by

the terrible-looking Guardian Goddess of the city.

"Who are you, little monkey? How did you manage to come here and why are you here at all? Speak the truth."

"Yes, I am indeed a little monkey and I have come here to look at this beautiful city. I shall go back after I have gone round and seen everything and satisfied my curiosity."

The deity struck an angry blow at the monkey. Hanuman returned the blow carelessly with his left hand. It doubled her up with agony on the ground.

But soon she got up and remembered the prophecy that, when a monkey should strike and throw her down, the city she guarded would be destroyed.

She said to herself: "Ravana's sins are many and grievous. The end of Lanka is approaching. The word of the gods is about to be fulfilled." And she stood aside. The goddess of Lanka was not a servant of Ravana. She was the spirit of the city.

Hanuman climbed over the wall and jumped into the city. It was part of the ancient code of warfare that one should not enter the enemy's fortress through the regular gate, but should make his entry in an out-of-the-way manner.

Vowing that the Rakshasas should be destroyed he entered the fortress of Lanka with his left foot foremost, for that meant defeat for the enemy.

He went along the royal street that was strewn with beautiful flowers. Like lightning shining through the clouds the buildings shone against the sky. Clambering up the mansions and going along on their roofs, he admired the beauty of the city. The Rakshasa mansions and streets and their decorations shone with ineffable beauty. The sounds of cultivated and correct music were heard. Lovely women moved about to the accompaniment of tinkling anklets. The

city was filled with sounds indicating a full and joyous life.

In some houses mantras were being chanted. In some others Vedic chants were heard. In others songs celebrating the heroic exploits and glory of Ravana were being sung. Soldiers and scouts were everywhere. In the streets were people dedicated to particular religious practices and vows. There were others cruel in looks and ugly. The guards were armed with bows, swords, cudgels, slings, lances and other weapons. All the warriors were clad in armor.

Some were handsome, some ugly, complexions varied from fair through brown to black. Some figures were very tall, others very short. Thus Hanuman saw that the population had been drawn from a wide area with varying climates and that the army had been recruited from the pick of many nations.

He examined mansion after mansion. He saw women of exquisite beauty, some of them in the company of their husbands and others by themselves. He saw many young damsels, bright and beautiful like images of molten gold. Some were seated on the terraces, others were sleeping in their beds. Some were playing, others singing.

Innumerable beautiful women he saw, but not Sita pining for Rama. The sight of so much beauty only filled Hanuman's heart with disappointment and sadness.

He entered and examined the homes of many Rakshasas. There were war elephants, pure-bred horses, chariots and armories. Soldiers stood fully armed.

After passing through many mansions and gardens filled with merriment and music, he came to a great palace rising aloft in a nobility of splendor far transcending all the magnificent buildings around.

Looking at the elephants, horses and foot-soldiers in front, the high walls surrounding it and the beauty of its structure and the richness of its decorations, he concluded that this was Ravana's own palace, the central glory of splendid Lanka. He entered this palace. It was in every way a heaven on earth worthy of Ravana's peerless power and glory. The park, the birds sporting there, the shrines scattered here and there, filled Hanuman with wonder.

He said to himself: "What wealth, what beauty and what bliss!"

He was for a while lost in amazement. But soon he recollected that he had not yet found Sita. Admiration gave place to concern over the yet unfulfilled purpose for which he had come.

Passing through many mansions, he entered the innermost private apartment of Ravana and was almost overcome with the luxury and richness of its apartments which made it look a very abode of the gods. Everywhere was gold and silver, ivory and gems and pearls, and beautiful carpets and furniture and in their midst he saw the Pushpaka Vimana.

It was a magic vehicle obtained from Brahma by Kubera. Vanquishing Kubera, Ravana brought it to Lanka as his booty. As from Vasishtha's cow, in the Pushpaka car one could get anything one desired.

Ravana's chamber, which Hanuman now entered, was a very ocean of delight. Countless lovely women lay sleeping in the spacious chamber, some linked arm in arm and all in undress and the careless attitudes of sleep, making the place look like garden of bright, flower-laden creepers.

With his spirit controlled by dharma, Hanuman looked at all these sleeping women, each more beautiful than the other and all filled with joy and love, to see if any of them could be Sita. Ravana's

power to take what shape he would and to please all women was evident from the sight of these lovely women.

Hanuman pulled himself together reproachfully at his own folly in supposing for a moment that Sita could be in that sensual paradise of happy damsels. "It is certain that Sita is not in this crowd. What a fool am I to search for her in this company! This is no place for her."

Then he went elsewhere. In another chamber he saw many beds. He saw one more gorgeous than the rest, covered with gold and diamonds and Ravana stretched on it, like another Mount Meru. His form and majestic splendor made even Hanuman tremble for it moment.

He stood on one side and scanned the sleeping figure unable for a time to take his eyes off the majestic and virile beauty of that mighty form. The great muscles now in repose, the symmetrical grace of limbs which made the Rakshasa King at once beautiful and terrible.

Then Hanuman looked at the women in the beds around and on the carpets. Some, who had fallen asleep while singing, were still hugging their musical instruments.

His eyes finally fell on a figure lying on a divinely beautiful cot. The shapeliness of her limbs and the beauty of her features made Hanuman imagine it might be Sita. He leaped up with joy.

The next instant he cursed himself for his folly. "Fie, fie," he said to himself, "how foolish have I been! Could Sita sleep thus carelessly, covered with jewels, in a stranger's chamber? The very thought is a sin." And he was overwhelmed with shame and sorrow at his error.

Then he said to himself: "Because she would not yield to him, this Rakshasa must have killed her. What use is there in continuing the search?"

He had now searched the inner apartments of Ravana's palace. The

bedroom, the dining room, the hall of drink, the music room, all places had been searched and Sita was nowhere found. "I have entered every nook and corner. Against all the rules of propriety, I have even looked at every one in the women's chambers. But all in vain."

Saying this he left the hall of drink and went to the garden and looked into the little shrines and the arbours made of creepers. But all was in vain.

"I have seen all of Lanka," he thought with irrepressible grief. "I have seen every inch of Ravana's palace. What more could I do here? Am I to return without seeing Sita? No. I shall rather end my life here. Yes, that is the only thing for me to do."

But again he said to himself, "Fie, fie on me for yielding to such despondency unworthy and dishonorable."

He sprang up again and searched once again every inch of the places he had been through. He opened every door and window and looked in. There were ugly women, beautiful human and Naga maidens, all captured by the Rakshasa, but not Sita.

Once again his heart sank. He did not know what to do. He said to himself: "If I return to Kishkindha failing in my mission, with what face shall I meet my friends? If Rama loses all hopes of recovering Sita, what would happen to him? He would surely die. And after that, what would happen to others? Instead of going back to Sugriva and telling him that all my labors have been wasted, it would be far better to stay here and spend the rest of my days in the forest and seashore of Lanka. But why live on? Is it not best to end my life? But, then, was Sampati wrong in saying that Sita was in Lanka? Or has she been killed by the Rakshasa since Sampati sighted her in this island? She might well have been devoured by the

Rakshasis. Nothing is clear, everything is enveloped in doubt. What shall I do?"

Thus was Hanuman lost in anxiety and thought. Just then his eyes lighted on what he had so far left unexplored, a park attached to a shrine and surrounded by high walls. "Oh, here is a park, I have not seen or searched so far. Here surely I shall find Sita."

With these words as the son of Vayu meditated on Rama, hope sprang within his breast. The secluded park was well protected by high walls. "Yes, Sita must be here," he said to himself. Again he bowed to the gods. He jumped up and sat on the wall of the Asoka Vana and surveyed the beautiful park.

49. SITA IN THE ASOKA PARK

As HANUMAN stood on the high wall, he did not know why, a thrill of joy passed through his frame. It was the invisible atmosphere which envelopes an accomplished mission and influences subtly the devoted heart. As he had at last reached the spot where Sita was, his whole being throbbled with exulting expectation without any apparent reason.

It was an early spring night. Trees and plants were in flowers. Hanuman jumped to a place where there was a thick cluster of trees. This disturbed the birds that rested there and they flew out with sweet noises. Deer and other animals moved about. Flowers dropped from the branches and covered the body of Hanuman.

The creatures in the park, looking at the lovely figure of Hanuman covered all over with flowers, thought that the God of spring was visiting the grove in the early dawn.

The garden was entrancingly beautiful. Lovely tanks, terraces decorated with gold, silver, ivory, pearl and coral crystal steps, artificial hills and waterfalls, the sight filled Hanuman's heart with joy. Around some trees were platforms

overlaid with gold and silver. Little bells suspended from the trees made music in the breeze.

Hanuman climbed up and sat hidden among the leaves of a tall spreading tree with a golden platform around its stem. "If she be alive and in Lanka " said Hanuman to himself, "Sita would surely visit this garden. She would choose this place above all others for solitude and contemplation of Rama. They said, did they not, that she loved groves and trees? She would surely come here at dawn to offer worship to the Universal Mother."

He gazed all round, hiding himself among the leaves. He sat on a branch and looked below. He beheld a female figure seated on that platform, blindingly beautiful and divinely pure.

Thin and pale, she shone like the streak of the moon in the beginning of the bright half of the month. Her beauty glowed fitfully through deepest dejection like flame through enveloping smoke. Wrapped in a soiled upper garment she resembled a lovely lotus obscured by miry moss. Her face was bathed in tears, and she was wan and thin for want of food. She had no thoughts but of sorrow, no glimpse of friends or hope. There were only Rakshasis wherever she turned her eyes, and she felt like a doe which had lost its herd and found itself beset by a pack of wild dogs.

A single snake-like braid of hair wandered unregarded down to her hip. She seemed to Hanuman at once adorable and pitiful, like the holy word torn from its context by infidels, like prosperity sunk in unmerited ruin, like shattered hope and faith betrayed, like frustrated fulfilment, like intellect muddled by insanity, like blameless purity besmirched by foul slander.

Hanuman said to himself with conviction: "This image of beautiful

despair is surely Sita. For, behold, hanging unregarded on the branches of the tree are the jewels described by Rama as having been on her when she was carried away, all except those which she dropped during the flight and which were picked up by us on the hill. And see the scarf she wears, though soiled and crumpled, is the fellow to the one we found. Surely this sublimely beautiful lady, who seems like one steadfast in true love in a tempest-tossed sea of troubles, is Rama's beloved queen. It is for her that Rama is consumed by a three-fold agony, grief for her suffering, wrath for the insult to her and heart-broken pangs at separation from her. Surely he is ever in her heart and she in his, and in truth they are not parted or they could not live."

And as he continued to see her, his heart leapt back across the ocean and sought Rama's feet in adoration. And again he looked at Sita and said to himself: "It was for the sake of this divine lady that the mighty Vali, the peer of Ravana in prowess, was slain. For her that Kabandha and Viradha met their death, and fourteen thousand fierce Rakshasas with Khara, Dushana and Trisiras crimsoned with their gore the glades of Janasthana. It was for her that the splendid sovereignty of the Vanaras was wrested from the heroic Vali and given to Sugriva. It is to do her service that I crossed the sea, the lord of rivers, and am now here in Lanka. All this seems much, but verily, if for her sake Rama should transform or even destroy the universe, I would say from my soul it is well done! She is worth it all and more!"

And again Hanuman's heart crossed the sea back and dwelt on Rama far away.

Just then, as off the clear surface of a lake a swan might glide, so in the blue sky the moon swam into sight and shone

brightly as if on purpose to help the son of Vayu.

Peering between the leaves and not knowing what to do, Hanuman took another long look at the face of Sita, a face that disclosed a sea of care like a heavily-laden ship caught in a storm. The Rakshasis who guarded her were intolerably ugly. One had only one eye, another only one ear. Some were without ears and some without noses. Some had noses turned steeply upward. Some were bald, while some had done their hair in grotesque styles.

Some had pendant stomachs and some had camel's lips. Some were hunchbacks. Some were dwarfs and some tall like palmyrah trees. Swine-face, tiger-face, buffalo-face, goat-face, all were to be seen. These unsightly creatures were holding spears and other weapons in their hands.

And in their midst, the pale-faced princess sat trembling, befriended only by her virtue, like an unsupported beautiful creeper fallen on the ground.

It was still dark and not yet dawn. Ravana was roused from his slumber by the chanting of the Vedas and the morning songs of the court bards. The moment he awoke, he thought of Sita and started towards the park where she was kept.

With all his retinue, he entered the palace park, accompanied by scented torches and the royal umbrella, surrounded by maidens, covered all over with brilliant ornaments and clad in spotless white clothes. Ravana appeared charming like another Manmatha.

As the procession entered the gate, Hanuman could hear the noise of the crowd and the tinkling of women's anklets. Soon he saw the Rakshasa king approaching. At once Hanuman hid himself more effectively than before among thick leaves.

As Ravana came towards Sita, his strength and splendor were wonderful to behold. At this sight Sita's body shrank and trembled like a plantain tree in a storm.

As one reads or listens to this sacred story, one should form a mental image of Sita in her present state. One can imagine the agony of despair of any good woman who has by misfortune fallen into the power of a lustful man. What must be the state of Sita, daughter of Janaka and wife of Ramachandra, in such a predicament? To appreciate Valmiki's metaphors and similes in this context, one should purify one's heart and fire it with piety.

One feels unequal to rendering into another language the beautiful similes by which Valmiki illustrates her condition. Only a few are cited here to give some idea of them.

Ravana approached Sita still in the hope of obtaining her consent. Sita was covered with dust and had no jewels on her person but she shone as if wearing all the jewels that a princess must wear. She looked like a beautiful tree felled down and lying low.

Her face was covered by light and shadow, like a lotus flower stained by mire. She swayed like a cobra bound by charms. Her state was like one surrounded by raging fires on four sides, like an army which had lost its chief warriors, like a river which had run dry, like a vessel for sacrificial fire that suffered desecration, like a lovely lotus tank destroyed by elephants, like a flowering creeper uprooted and cast aside, like a cow elephant separated from the leader of the herd, captured and tied as a prisoner.

Sita sat trembling, overwhelmed with grief and fear. When she perceived Ravana's approach, that very instant her heart travelled to Rama like a chariot drawn by swift steeds. With faded face

and wasted form, she thought of her protectors far away. "When will they come? Will they ever come?" she asked herself and meditated on God.

Ravana approached and spoke to her. Hidden in the branches of the tree, Hanuman watched what went on below.

50. RAVANA'S SOLICITATION

TO SITA, plunged in a sea of sorrow and clinging to dharma and to the thought of her lord, Ravana spoke these words:

"O beautiful one! Why do you shrink from me? Do you not see how much I care for you? Though it is lawful for a Rakshasa to take another's wife and possess her by force, I am a beggar for your love. There is no need to fear me. I shall never touch you till your heart turns towards me. Do not be afraid. My one wish is that you should care for me as I do for you. You must accept me with affection. Why do you make your body a prey to unavailing sorrow? O beautiful one! There is none like you in loveliness, none in all the world. It is not right for you to reject beautiful jewels, and clothes, to sleep on the ground and leave your hair unkempt. O gem among women, do not thus waste your youth and beauty. Now you have come under my protection, you should lack nothing. All pleasures are suitors for your selection. I cannot take my eyes away from your face bright like the full moon. Wherever on your body I set my eyes, there they remain fixed and immovable. Why should one with so much beauty suffer so much sorrow? Accept me and enjoy all the pleasures of the world. I will conquer the world and give it to Janaka for your sake. What will I not do for you? You will be my sovereign consort. All the queens and women in the palace will be ruled by you. My wealth, my kingdom, all shall be yours to enjoy. Lanka and myself, why, the whole earth, shall belong to you. My

strength and courage are known to the Devas and Asuras. Vanquished by me, they stand with bowed heads. With jewels and garments fit for you my handmaidens will adorn you. I long to see you splendidly decked. And you will be free to give away generous gifts in charity. Your authority will extend over all mankind. My subjects and kinsfolk will deem it a joy to serve you. Why do you waste your thoughts on wretched Rama, wandering in the forest? How can you love, how can you trust one who has been deprived of his rights and driven out of his kingdom and is roaming about clad in bark garments? What can this helpless fellow do? The Goddess of Wealth, she that presides over power and she who rules over success have all abandoned him, and you know it. It is even doubtful whether he is alive today. Anyhow, you may take it, he will never set eyes on you again, much less come near you. Like Garuda seizing a serpent, you have captivated my heart. I am unable to escape. Even in your present state, devoid of jewels or good clothes, you have drawn me away from my other wives. What can I do now? In my apartments are innumerable lovely women. But after seeing you, I can bear the sight of none of them. You will be Queen over all of them and receive their humble service. In what sense can Rama equal me? Do you not see that in severe austerities gone through, in strength, wealth and glory, in every way I am superior to him? Shake off your fear. We shall wander over the whole world, happy in each other's company. With me you will enjoy limitless wealth and pleasure. Life will be one continuous joy. O beautiful one, have pity on me. Let us sport together in the parks and groves by the sea. Only say 'yes'."

Thus Ravana uttered his impassioned appeal for love and pity. When Ravana

had finished speaking, Sita plucked a little blade of grass and, placing it between them, laughed in derision and gently spoke:

"Ravana, lay aside all such vain thoughts concerning me. It is altogether improper for you to desire me. Turn your heart to your wives. Never can I agree to what you say. Think of the family I was born in. Think of the family I was married into. How can you ever hope to persuade me? Do not give room for such foolish and impossible desires and make sorrow for yourself!"

Then she turned her face away and continued:

"How can I become your wife, when I am the wife of another? Do not violate dharma. Do not tread the path of sin. Listen to me. Think how carefully you watch over your wives to keep them safe from the touch of others. Would not other husbands do the same by their wives? Remember other men are like you. Do not cast your eyes on another's wife. To be happy with your own is the way of true happiness. But if you allow your mind to dwell on another's wife, sorrow and dishonor will be your portion. Is there none in the world to advise you aright? Why do you do evil and bring destruction on yourself and on your people? When a king loses self-control, his kingdom and wealth will all be destroyed. Be sure, this Lanka and its great wealth will be utterly destroyed if you persist in your sin and the foes whom you have conquered and humiliated will rejoice. I have no use for the wealth and the pleasures that you promise. They do not tempt me. I have married Rama and I cannot take my mind and heart away from him. I, who held his hand, can never touch another, never. I am his, the prince's, entirely and forever. I belong to him, as the Veda belongs to one who has reverently mastered it. It is not

right for anyone else to look on me with longing eyes. Listen to me who speaks for your good. Beg Rama humbly for forgiveness and escape from his anger. Do not go in search of your own ruin. Rama is generous and will surely forgive you if you seek his mercy. Seek forgiveness and safety. Do not seek death and destruction. There, I hear even now the twang of Rama's bow. You cannot escape. Yama stands very near, ready to carry you away. The arrows of Rama and Lakshmana will soon be here in Lanka and your city will be in flames. Did not Rama utterly destroy the Rakshasas at Janasthana? Did you not, knowing his strength, come like a thief to our hut, when Rama and Lakshmana were away, to steal me? Can you for a moment stand before them face to face? Can a dog approach a tiger? Will it not flee from the very scent? As the sun sucks up moisture from the wet earth, Rama and Lakshmana will drink your life. Will you run to hide yourself among the mountains? Will you try to escape under the sea? Even then, as at the appointed hour the tree is struck by lightning, so will you perish at their hands. You cannot escape."

Thus Sita ended with a stern warning. Ravana controlled his anger and spoke:

"O Sita, doting on this spurious ascetic Rama, you talk foolishly and repay my loving words with insult and contumely. Because of my love for you, I have refrained, else you would be dead by now. Of the time I had allowed you, two months more remain. Change your mind before they pass. Be my wife and come to my bed. If you refuse, you will be sent to my kitchen and cooked for my meal. Beware!"

It was well-known that the food of the Rakshasas included human flesh. Hence this threat of Ravana was no exaggeration, but conveyed a clear possibility. Yet Sita was unafraid, and answered:

"Alas! Alas! Is there none to give you good advice? Have you no friend to save you from this sin and put you on the path of virtue? You cannot escape Rama's punishment. Like a rabbit antagonising a wild elephant you have incurred the wrath of Rama. O wretch, who stole me in his absence, are you not ashamed? Your destruction is certain. Your evil fate has driven you to this act. And yet you are the brother of Kubera. You are famous as a warrior. You are the master of a complete four-limbed army. Why should you do this mean deed in this mean way?"

Ravana's eyes rolled in anger and he looked fiercely at Sita, hissing like a snake. Seeing his mounting anger, one of his young wives, Dhanyamali walked up to his side and, embracing him, said:

"King! Why do you vex yourself over this mean human creature who does not seem to care for you? She has not the good fortune to be your wife, that is all. And what is there so attractive about her? Why do you waste your thoughts on this puny creature? Come away. Let us enjoy ourselves."

She drew him away affectionately and the Rakshasa went with her, laughing.

Before he went, Ravana ordered the Rakshasis who guarded Sita to bring her round somehow, and with resounding steps left the Asoka park, followed by his retinue. As soon as he turned his back, the Rakshasis surrounded Sita.

The princess, who had been bold up till now, trembled when she looked at these ugly creatures that began speaking to her.

"When Ravana, scion of a noble family, a world-famous warrior, desires you," said one, "how can you refuse him, O foolish girl? Who do you think Ravana is? Know that he is a direct descendant of Brahma. He is the grandson of Pulastya Prajapati, son of Brahma, a hero who has

won many battles and vanquished many foes. How foolish to slight him!"

"Let not pride ruin you," said another. "Ravana is the son of rishi Visravas. Do not think he is a nobody. Accept him and be happy."

"The king of the Rakshasas, who defeated in battle and put to flight the gods of heaven, invites you to be his wife," said another. "You must yield, poor girl, or you must die."

"Slighting all his other wives," said another, "Ravana wants you and promises to make you chief among his queens. Forsaking all his noble wives, the King, bewitched by your beauty, begs for your love and offers to make you first among his consorts. Why are you foolishly obstinate?"

"None in all the world can equal Lord Ravana," said another. "Good fortune comes seeking you and you spurn it. How foolish!"

"The Sun and the Wind gods are afraid of the Rakshasa king. And he comes seeking you and wants to make you his favorite wife! Do not let your pride betray you. Do not reject the fortune that comes to you unsought."

And another concluded: "We have given you good advice. We have done our best and we leave the rest to you. If you reject his offer, you must surely die."

51. FIRST AMONG THE ASTUTE

THE boldest and most strong-minded woman may, if kept in captivity for a long period, lose heart and become depressed.

Sita hoped month after month that her lord would discover her whereabouts and come to her rescue. Sick with disappointed hope, alone in the midst of enemies, she clung to life only from an abiding faith in the love of Rama that made her feel that he would surely come.

The Rakshasis plied her with what from their point of view was well-meant

counsel. "Won't you listen to our advice? You are a human and so lack sense. You still hold on to this wretched man-husband of yours. Your proper place is our King's bedchamber. That is the place for every kind of pleasure. But spurning his offer, you are forever thinking of your worthless husband. Why are you still fond of this luckless wretch driven out of his kingdom? You will never see him again. Yield to Ravana and be happy."

Sita, hearing these words, could only shed tears.

"What sinful words you utter!" she said. "Never can I do what you say. You tell me that Rama is poor, wretched, and an exile from his home. All this I know. But among us of the race of men, no wife would think of giving up her husband on such grounds. It is wicked for the Rakshasa king to desire me for his wife. As the sun's brightness belongs inseparably to the sun so do I belong to Rama. As Sachi is faithful to Indra, or Arundhati to Vasishtha, so am I ever to Rama."

The Rakshasis gave up all hopes of persuading her and said to one another: "What can one do with a stubborn fool like this? It is best to eat her before she gets too thin with brooding!"

"I am in the family way," said one. "I have a great longing for human flesh. I shall tear her out and make a meal of her soft body. We shall strangle her and report to Ravana that she died of grief," said another. "The King is lost in unavailing grief because of this obstinate woman. Once he knows that she is dead, he will forget all about her and sleep soundly."

Another said: "I long to eat her liver. It must be very tasty."

Another added decisively: "Let us kill her and share her limbs. Fetch some sauce and strong liquor. Let us feast on her and

drink and dance in the temple of Nikumbhila."

Hearing these horrible words and seeing these terrible forms, Sita broke down and cried aloud. Her physical courage failed and nature had its way. She sobbed like a child. But even in her sobs her mind was clear and it was fixed on Rama.

"In Janasthana Rama destroyed thousands of Rakshasas. Why does not Rama come yet to redeem me? The warrior princes who killed Viradha in Dandaka, why are they still indifferent to my fate? It could only be that they do not yet know where I am! Jatayu, the vulture king, was slain by the Rakshasa. If he at least were alive, he would have told them the news that he saw the Rakshasa carrying me. But he gave up his life in trying to save me. But how long, will Rama remain ignorant of my being here? How long can Lanka and the Rakshasas survive? It is certain that, in every house in this city, Rakshasa widows will soon be lamenting loudly. It is certain that this city of Ravana and the whole Rakshasa race will perish."

Thus she thought within herself and slowly recovered courage. But soon again other thoughts came to her and filled her with gloom.

"Could it be that Rama gave up his life, unable to bear my loss? It might well be so. Otherwise, could he neglect me and leave me all alone these so many days? Indeed he is happy now and with the Gods. I must have been guilty of many sins to be thus left to suffer. My heart must be made of stone. How else can I suffer all this and yet survive? Yet something tells me that Rama is alive else I should be dead!"

Then again another thought occurred to her. "Perhaps he has resolved to spend his life in penance and has laid aside all

thought of me. No, no. How could a warrior forsake his duty and, leaving his wife in the hands of his foe, take up the life of sanyasa? How foolish of me even to think of this! The fact is that they do not know where I am. Could it be that Rama has lost his love for me? 'Out of sight, out of mind,' they say. Could it be that he has forgotten me? Fie, fie! What a sinful thought! How can my Rama forget me? He never can. And what wrong have I committed that he should cease to think of me? This cannot be the reason. Perhaps Ravana has played some trick and treacherously slain the prince."

Thus her mind wandered from one sad thought to another and sank ever deeper in the sea of sorrow. She decided that it was best by hanging herself. She could hang herself with her long braid of hair round her neck and jump down from a branch of the Simsupa tree.

Having failed in their attempt to persuade Sita, the Rakshasis did not know what to do next. Some went to inform Ravana of their failure. Some stayed behind to look after Sita.

Appearing among them Trijata, a Rakshasi, reprimanded them, saying: "O foolish ones, you are talking nonsense! Listen to me, I shall tell you of a dream that I dreamt. The time has come when Lanka shall be destroyed."

Then she proceeded to recount in detail the terrible dream that she had dreamt:

"I saw in my dream Rama, shining like a sun, come to Lanka to find Sita. I saw Ravana entering the abode of Yama. I saw Rama mounting Sita on his elephant and carrying her home. I saw Ravana and all the Rakshasas, clad in soiled garments and dragged away by Yama."

Relating this dream to the Rakshasis, Trijata warned them: "Don't persecute this saintly woman. Don't seek your own

destruction. Fall at her feet and beg for grace."

Even as Trijata was speaking to her companions, Sita, who resolved to slay herself, suddenly began to see many good omens.

Her left eyelids, hand, and foot throbbed auspiciously. A vague courage once again came into her heart. All ideas of self-destruction disappeared.

Hanuman, sitting hidden above and watching all that happened in the grove, wondered what he should do next.

One might imagine that, having reached Lanka and seen Sita, Hanuman had nothing more to do. But he was not so easily satisfied. He thought within himself.

"I have done something which no one else could do. I have crossed the sea and discovered Sita. I have seen the city of the Rakshasas and noted its defences. All that a spy can do without revealing himself to the foe, I have done. But the situation here is fraught with danger. If I go back now to report what I have seen to Rama and my king, who knows what meanwhile will happen here? Before Rama, Lakshmana and the Vanara host arrive here, Sita, unable to bear her suffering, might put an end to her life. All my labors would then be lost. It is not enough to have seen Sita. I must talk to her, give her news of Rama and put hope and courage into her heart, so that she may hold with life in spite of all. How would Rama receive me if I return without speaking to Sita? I must find some way of speaking to Sita."

In the rosary of Hanuman's name occurs the title, *Buddhimatam Varishtham*, 'First among the Astute.' It is a true description.

"In what form should I appear before Sita? In what language should I speak to her? If suddenly a monkey came and spoke to her in this Asoka grove, Sita

would surely suspect foul play and imagine that Ravana was playing some new trick on her. If I appeared suddenly before her, she might cry out in fear. In her present condition this is most likely to happen. The Rakshasis guarding her, who have now fallen asleep, will be startled awake and discover me. They would know that I have come from their enemy and in disguise, and they would bring the Rakshasas to attack me. A great battle would ensue. Of course I shall slay most of them. But the task of comforting Sita and bearing news of her to Rama would be jeopardised if I were to be captured and held a prisoner here. This would never do. Even if I escape being caught and come out successful in the struggle, I might be wounded and lose strength and be unable to cross the sea. What then would I have gained having seen Sita? One should never do things in a hurry. One should keep in mind one's main business. King Sugriva and Rama are confidently awaiting my return. Even a little fault on my part now may lead to great disaster. The first thing to do is to speak with Sita and put joy and hope in her heart. I must approach her in such a way that she can never for a moment entertain a doubt about my good faith. Well, I shall recite in a sweet low tone, and for her hearing only, the story and virtues of Rama. Her heart would then be filled with joy and trust, displacing suspicion. Only thus can I proceed."

So he thought and, still hidden by the branches of the tree, he began to utter in a low voice, the sweet words, "Rama," "Rama."

52. SITA COMFORTED

HIDDEN by the branches, Hanuman sang in a sweet and gentle voice the story of Rama so that it fell on Sita's ears:

"King Dasaratha ruled his kingdom well. His army was mighty and comprised

of chariots, elephants and horses. He was virtuous and a doer of great deeds. He kept his word and was foremost among the famous kings of the world. He was equal to the rishis in virtue and to Indra in statesmanship. He hated no one and harmed no one. All his endeavors were crowned with success. Therefore men called him Satya-parakrama, truly valiant. The richest of the Ikshavaku race, a king of kings, the ruler of the world, he enjoyed and communicated happiness. The eldest of his four sons was Ramachandra, whose face was like the full moon. Wise, virtuous and a master of the bow, Rama was beloved of all. And he was full of kindness for all the people in the kingdom, a warrior wedded to dharma. He was the heir to the throne. And yet, to preserve the honor of his father, he left the kingdom with his wife Sita and his brother Lakshmana and lived in the forest. There he vanquished the Rakshasas and protected the rishis. He destroyed Khara and Dushana and their mighty army. Coming to hear of this, Ravana, bent on revenge, induced a Rakshasa to assume the form of a deer and beguile the princes in pursuit and, in their absence, carried off Sita by force. Grief-struck Rama went in search of Sita. He met Sugriva, the Vanara, and made friends with him. Rama slew Vali, the Vanara king, and secured to his brother Sugriva the Vanara kingdom. And Sugriva sent his Vanara warriors to all the quarters of the globe to find out where Sita was. These Vanara warriors, who could assume what shape they would, searched the whole world for the missing Sita. Following a clue given by Sampati, I crossed the sea a hundred yojanas broad, and have come here. And now I see one whose form, complexion and qualities are those described to me by Rama as his royal spouse's."

Having said this, Hanuman paused.

These sweet words, uttered by some one from somewhere, filled Sita with wonder and delight. She looked around in all directions to discover who conveyed such sweet matter in so sweet a voice and in such exquisite language.

She looked round, and up and down but found no human form to match this perfect speech. She only saw a lovely little monkey seated on the branch above her. Sita saw the son of Vayu, the wise minister of the Vanara king, in the form of a little monkey, radiant like the rising sun.

The reader should imagine for himself the joy of Rama's messenger, as Sita's eyes fell on him. The reader who experiences this joy will find God in his heart. Narayana, who is waiting eagerly to enter and take possession of our hearts, would leave the great and boundless ocean of milk and come to dwell within us, when we cleanse ourselves of sinful thoughts.

Seeing Hanuman, Sita said to herself: "The words I heard the form I see, they cannot be real. I am only dreaming. One sees in one's dream what one is constantly brooding over. How often has my mind dwelt on the story of my Lord! Is it any wonder then that I seem to hear the tale as told by some one? It is not real. It is only a dream. They say that if one sees a monkey in a dream, it forebodes evil to one's kinsfolk. May God protect Rama from harm! May God keep all harm away from Lakshmana! May God bless all my kinsfolk in Mithila! No, no, this is no dream. My eyes are open and I see the same form still seated above me. There it is, clear and solid. No, this is no dream. And I am not asleep. How can one dream without sleeping? This is no dream. All this is real. Oh Gods! Could this indeed be a messenger from my dear Lord? Oh grant that it be so! Oh Vachaspati! Master of speech, I salute you. Oh Agni! I salute

you. Oh Swayambhu! I salute you. Oh Gods! Protect me. May this be Rama's messenger!"

Hanuman, radiant with the joy of seeing Sita, descended to the ground and stood before her, palms joined and head bent in salutation.

And he said in a deep soothing voice: "Mother, tears are falling from your eyes like drops from lotus petals. May I know who you are, who stands there, leaning on the tree trunk, face clouded with sorrow and eyes wet with tears? Are you a goddess or a Naga maiden? The radiance of your body makes me question whether you could be of merely terrestrial birth! Are you Rohini separated for a while from the Moon-god? Or are you Arundhati parted from sage Vasishtha? No, on closer observation, you seem to be a human woman, maybe a princess adorable in your distress. Please tell me who indeed you are. May God bless you! Are you the princess Sita carried off by Ravana from Janasthana? Is mine the bliss of seeing Sita, the beloved of Rama?"

Sita was beside herself with joy. "My child," she said, "indeed I am Sita, daughter of the king of Videha and Sri Ramachandra's spouse. For twelve years I enjoyed all happiness with him in Ayodhya. In the thirteenth year, King Dasaratha made preparations to crown my husband. Then Kaikeyi, his youngest wife, reminded him of boons he had granted long ago, and demanded that in redemption of his word he should crown her son Bharata king, and exile Rama to the forest. She threatened to kill herself if this was not done. Bound by promise the king had to yield to her insistence. At his bidding Rama relinquished the crown and betook himself to the forest not only without regret, but happy that it was given to him to enable his father to keep his plighted word. I refused to be left behind

and insisted on going with my lord into the forest. Even before me, Lakshmana had put on bark-garments, determined to accompany his brother to the forest and serve him. The three of us entered the forest and were living in Dandaka. One day the evil-hearted Ravana carried me off by force. And he has kept me a prisoner here in this Asoka garden. Of the time limit of twelve months he has set for me, only two more months remain. When they are over I shall end my life."

Thus spoke the helpless princess in her sorrow.

The speeches of Hanuman and of Janaki are sung by Valmiki in two brief chapters. As Hari appeared before the emperor Bali in the form of Vamana and measured the universe in two steps, so Valmiki has given the tale of Rama in a short recital by Hanuman and another by Sita. What greater joy can we have than reading Hanuman and Sita telling the divine story themselves? As Vamana got the better of Bali and saved him from his ahankara, may this tale of Rama as told by Hanuman and Sita rid us of the sense of 'I' and 'my'.

Sita concluded her story with the statement that two more months remained of the allotted twelve-month term and that her life would then end. To Sita overwhelmed by grief, Hanuman spoke words of comfort.

"O princess of Videha! Rama, the noblest of men and the mightiest of warriors has sent me to you with good news. His beloved brother Lakshmana, ever anxious for your welfare, sends through me his salutations to you."

"Ah! What happiness is mine!" she exclaimed. "I now see the truth of the common saying that so long as life lasts there is hope."

Thus between these two utter strangers a profound confidence and affection

sprang up like the sudden blossoming of the Parijata in Indra's garden. Yet when, in his joyful eagerness to console and encourage Sita, Hanuman took a nearer step towards her, Sita lost the confidence inspired by his words and again grew suspicious.

She shut her eyes and moved away further from the tree. Hanuman, noticing this, withdrew respectfully and stood with hands clasped in obeisance.

"I have been deceived," she cried. "You are no other than Ravana. Once you came disguised as an ascetic and imposed on me. Now you have come again in another disguise and speak sweet words. All this will bring you no good. Why do you torture me, O Ravana? I am weary and full of sorrow. You call yourself a warrior. Is it a warrior's part to persecute a helpless woman?"

Then she opened her eyes and thought again, "No, no. This cannot be Ravana. Trust and friendship spring in my heart at the sight of him. He can be no enemy of mine. It is wrong to suspect him."

She addressed him saying: "O Vanara! Are you indeed a messenger sent by Rama? May God bless you. Tell me more concerning Rama. Let my ears hear and my heart rejoice."

Then once again doubts assailed her. "Am I a victim of delusion, imagining good news? Is this a dream that mocks me with the illusion of joy to make my despair blacker when I am awake? Am I in my right senses? Of course, I am. My thoughts, my words are all normal. I am sane and sensible. But then he says that he crossed the sea a hundred yojannas broad. No, no. This cannot be true. He is Ravana and none else." So she concluded in her mind and without lifting her eyes to look at Hanuman sat apart in silence.

Hanuman understood her doubts and fears. They were natural in one who had

been deceived by the Rakshasa. He thought for a while and realised that the only approach to her confidence was to awaken hope and joy in her sorely tired heart by extolling Rama and harping on the certainty of her rescue and his victory.

And he began: "Rama has sent me. Rama is radiant like the Sun. Rama is pleasant to look at like the moon. Rama is praised by all the rulers of the earth. Rama is valiant like Vishnu. Rama is wise like Brihaspati. Rama is handsome like Manmatha the god of love. Rama's words are ever sweet and true. Rama's indignation is ever righteous and well directed. Rama is the peerless warrior. Rama has sent me. While a Rakshasa in the shape of a deer beguiled Rama and drew him away in the forest, you were left alone and Ravana carried you off by force. Soon he will pay dearly for this evil deed. You will see it with your own eyes. Soon the shafts of Rama and Lakshmana will strike Lanka and destroy it along with Ravana and all his race. At Rama's bidding have I come to you to learn about your safety which is his constant concern. On Lakshmana's behalf I place at your feet his respectful salutations. And so too homage from Sugriva, the Vanara king. Rama, Lakshmana and Sugriva are ever thinking of you. It is my good fortune to have seen you alive. Now there will be no more of loss of time. Soon Rama, Lakshmana and Sugriva, accompanied by the whole Vanara army, will descend on Lanka. I am Sugriva's minister. My name is Hanuman. I crossed the sea and reached Lanka. You may take it that my foot is already on the head of the evil-minded Ravana. By Rama's grace, even more than by my own prowess have I, his servant, crossed the sea to behold you. Do not suspect me. Have faith in my words, mother." So said Hanuman with tears in his eyes. These sweet words of Hanuman

acting on her great love for Rama and confidence in him, put an end to Sita's fears and gave her courage and faith.

"Forgive my suspicion, O Vanara friend," she said. "Deceived by the Rakshasa and surrounded by his artifices, I am prone to needless fear. O friend and messenger of Rama! How did you first meet Rama? How did the Prince make friends with the Vanaras? Tell me all".

To confirm her faith, Hanuman recounted once again the virtues and attractive qualities of Rama and Lakshmana. He said: "What wonder is there in Rama becoming friends with me and my king and the Vanaras when the whole world lives and finds bliss by his loving kindness?"

He proceeded to describe fully how the quarrel arose between Vali and Sugriva, how the latter first met Rama and Lakshmana, how they became friends, how Rama promised to slay Vali and secure the Vanara kingdom for Sugriva, how the Vanaras had picked up and preserved the jewels dropped by Sita, how with mounting sorrow Rama recognised them, how Vali was slain and Sugriva crowned, how after the rainy season was over the Vanara hosts searched the whole world for Sita, how the party led by Angada and proceeding south having failed to find her, decided to fast to death, how they met Sampati and received a clue from him, how he, Hanuman, crossed the sea and searched the inner apartments of Ravana, all this he recounted.

At the end of the narration he placed in her hand Rama's signet ring that he had brought. Sita received the ring and pressed it to her eyes with joy. Now all fear of Ravana's deceit and Rakshasa magic was over. She had complete faith in Hanuman and infinite affection for him.

"My child!" she said, "how foolish was my error! How could I suspect one like you?"

The son of Vayu explained to her who he was and who his father was and what his own might was.

"Though I, who enjoy the grace of my father Vayu, should not sing my own praises, I do so now to end your sorrow. Soon the Vanara warriors will be here to destroy the Rakshasas and their kingdom. I must first return and tell them where you are."

And then he described Rama's desolation in being parted from Sita, and the ascetic life he led, and Sita's heart melted in loving sorrow. Sita forgot her own suffering thinking of Rama's grief.

53. SITA AND HANUMAN

"DEAR, dear Vanara friend," said Sita, "I do not know whether to rejoice or grieve at the news you have brought. Your words are like nectar mixed with poison. My lord's love for me is sweetest nectar, and his grief over my plight is bitterest poison." Thus Sita spoke what she felt and found comfort in putting in words her love and her grief.

Pleasure and pain, happiness and misery alternately impel human beings. Sita was consoled but also pained by the thought that Rama had not forgotten her, but was thinking of her, grieving and searching for her.

"We are puppets manipulated by the twin strings of joy and sorrow", said Sita. "None of us can escape their pull. My lord and Lakshmana and myself are all subject to this law. You say my lord suffers like a sailing ship caught in a storm on the high seas. O! When will he come here? Dear Vanara friend, when will he destroy Lanka and Ravana and the other Rakshasas? All this must take place within the two months' time still left. Please explain this to my lord. Only two

months remain to me. Vibhishana, the younger brother of Ravana, tried his best to persuade the latter to change his ways. 'Return Sita,' he said to Ravana, 'and save Lanka and the Rakshasa race.' All his words have gone in vain. My heart is strong within me. I know Ravana is on the road to the abode of Yama. Soon my lord will vanquish his foes and redeem me. I have no doubt about this. My innocent heart tells me this and it cannot prove false."

Thus Sita went on speaking with tears in her eyes. Hanuman could not bear the sight of her suffering.

"Mother!" he exclaimed, "I shall go at once and bring back Rama. He will descend on Lanka with a mighty army. But why should you suffer any longer? If you are agreeable, sit on my back. I shall carry you across the ocean and restore you in a moment to Rama. Do not for a moment doubt my ability to do this. As Agni carries the sacred offerings to Indra, so shall I transport you to my Lord Rama. Permit me, O pure of heart, to do this service. I can not only carry you and restore you to Rama, but I have the power to wrench Lanka from its foundations and throw it and its ruler at Rama's feet! Sit on my back now and, like Rohini rejoining the Moon, you will rejoin Rama. As I sprang and came here, so shall I spring and reach the other shore with you."

Thus Hanuman went on speaking out of his affection and enthusiasm. And Sita wondered how the little monkey before her could hope to carry her across the ocean.

Hanuman saw her doubt and so, to demonstrate his powers, he jumped off from the platform and began to grow big in size. Sita was pleased.

But she said: "O Son of Vayu! I realise your strength and yet it is not right that you should carry me. On the way the

Rakshasas are sure to intercept and challenge you. They will hurl their weapons at you. Your care will be to guard me. You will not be able to fix all your mind on the battle and that may be a serious set-back to the strongest warrior. In a battle, one cannot be certain of victory and what would be my fate if you should fall? And besides, in the violent convulsions of a heady fight, how could I be sure of maintaining my position on your back? I may slip and fall into the sea. It is clear, therefore, that you should not try to cross the sea with me. Apart from that Hanuman, if you snatch me away stealthily from the Rakshasas it would be no credit to the valor of my lord. The honor of the Kshatriya race demands that he should come and fight and vanquish Ravana and redeem me as the prize of victory. Would Rama have me stolen back even as Ravana stole me from him? No, my son, return and quickly bring Rama here with Lakshmana and the Vanara army. Let my lord's arrows destroy Lanka and send Ravana to Yama's abode. His victory is certain. Like the fierce sun at the hour of doom, Rama's arrows will burn the Rakshasa people to ashes."

"You are right," said Hanuman, "I shall return alone. But what shall I tell Rama? What sign shall I carry of my having met you and talked with you?"

Hearing these words, all her happy life with Rama came like a flood to her memory and her eyes were filled with tears. If she told Hanuman and Hanuman told Rama some intimate happenings known only to herself and her lord, it would be proof of Hanuman having seen her and also make Rama see her present disconsolate state.

With flowing tears, she recounted incidents of their forest life.

"Once in Chitrakuta my lord and I wandered about in the grove beside the

river and became weary and rested on the ground. He laid his head upon my lap and fell asleep. While thus, a crow came down and hungrily pecked at my bosom, I drove it off, but again and again it returned and troubled me. I then flung a pebble at it. But even that had no effect. Rama was roused from slumber and saw me thus troubled and weeping in pain. At first when he saw what the matter was and found it was but a crow, he was inclined to laugh at my discomfiture. But he saw the bruise the crow had made and discovered that the bird was really an Asura. The bird flew for its life, but Rama sped a dart at it that pursued it wherever it went, till at last the crow-Asura sought Rama's feet for refuge and found pardon there. Tell him of this incident. O Hanuman, I cannot wait for many more days. Tell him to come quickly and save me."

Again she was in tears as she said: "On another occasion we were both wandering all alone in the forest. I was tired. Perspiration had washed off the tilaka on my forehead. My lord playfully plucked a pinch of red mineral from the rock and applied it between my brows with his own sweet hands. Ask him if he remembers this incident."

As she went on recalling happy memories of the past the weight of her present sorrow overwhelmed her and she wept and said:

"What should I tell Rama? What is there that he does not know? Does he need my words to rouse his indignation? Only tell my lord that I embrace his feet. That is enough. There is Lakshmana beside him, the brother born to serve him and of unrivalled skill in arms. Looking at his sweet face, my Lord even forgot his grief for the father's death. The pure-hearted hero, dear Lakshmana, parted from his own mother and came away with

us and regarded me as his mother. Tell him he should come and end my suffering."

As she thought of Lakshmana's heroism and devoted loyalty, Sita's eyes were filled with tears. When Rama had gone chasing the golden deer, did she not insult him and fling burning words at the selfless and devoted friend? The thought of this injustice filled her repentant heart with insufferable pain.

She was unwilling to part from Hanuman, who had come to her and consoled her just as she was about to put an end to her life. At the same time, she wanted him to return quickly to Rama and give him news concerning her.

At last she said: "My child, here is the jewel given by my mother at my wedding and fixed on my forehead by the late Emperor. Take it and give it to my husband as a sign from me."

So saying she untied a knot at the corner of her sari, took out the divine jewel and handed it to Hanuman who received it with humble reverence. When Hanuman had the jewel in his hand, pride and joy filled his mind.

His heart was far away with Rama. Mentally he had recalled Rama's presence and conveyed the glad message of his discovery. Only his body now stayed in Lanka.

"Dear friend," said Sita, "you must tell Rama all you have learnt here, and it will be your good fortune to help him to achieve victory."

As Hanuman was about to leave, Sita spoke again: "Dear Hanuman, convey my affection to the Prince and also to king Sugriva and the other Vanara leaders. Tell them from me that I implore them to give help to Rama to save me from this sea of sorrow. You, more than anyone else, I hope will encourage and show the way to the prince in all matters."

Hanuman answered: "Lay aside your sorrow, dear princess. Rama, Lakshmana and the Vanara army will descend on Lanka destroy the Rakshasas and redeem you. Have no doubt."

As he was about to go, Sita said again: "Should you not stay here somewhere, for a while, and rest? Should you return at once? Your visit has given me such great consolation and made me forget my grief for a while. When you leave, I shall sink again in my sea of sorrow. You came here crossing the great ocean. How will Rama and the big army cross it? Have you thought of that?" Doubts assailed her once again.

"Have no doubt, my queen!" said Hanuman. "Do you think I am the only Vanara that could cross the sea? There is not a Vanara but has more power and skill than I. Not only Sugriva, but many in his army can fly round the world. What is this narrow sea to them? There are thousands among us who can roam in the sky. Have no doubt whatever. Do you think they would send the best among them as a mere messenger? Dear lady, have done with sorrow, for you will soon see me with the two mighty princes on my back. They will lay waste this city with the arrows. They will destroy Ravana and all his race. You have as good as crossed the ocean of sorrow and reached the other shore. God bless you. In a few days you will see the two princes standing, bow in hand, at the gates of Lanka, destroying the Rakshasa host. You will see the Vanara army leaping with joy over the ruined city. Once they hear the news from me, they will not delay a moment. I have only to tell them and they will start at once. Do not lose heart." Saying this and bowing profoundly, Hanuman prepared to go.

"Tell Rama and Lakshmana that I am alive," cried Sita. "See that no time is lost. May God bless you."

And Hanuman left. Let us meditate with reverence on the heroic son of Anjana, the wise messenger who gave consolation to Sita and quenched her grief.

54. INVITING BATTLE

AFTER taking leave of Sita, Hanuman sat for a while on the top of the garden wall and began to think:

"What can I do to put courage into Sita and some fear into Ravana and his friends to shake their arrogant confidence? It would be good to leave them some souvenir of my visit, some indication of what the future has in store for them. It is clear I must instill some fear into Ravana to prevent him from troubling Sita in the meantime. Fear is the only argument they understand. Ravana has untold wealth and one cannot part his friends from him. Hence *sama* (conciliation), *dana* (buying over) and *bheda* (sowing discord) are useless in this case. I should therefore do something terrible to frighten them, and warn them, not to ill-treat Sita. Yes, I must do this before I go away."

At once he began to grow and assumed a huge form and began to lay waste the grove. Trees fell cracking to the ground, bowers collapsed, tanks and artificial hills were disfigured and destroyed. The beautiful Asoka Park soon became a mass of ruin from which the deer and the birds fled in fear. The slumbering Rakshasis woke up and were bewildered to see this unaccountable sight.

Hanuman sat on the top of the wall of the garden, a huge figure of wrathful menace, waiting for the answer to his challenge. The Rakshasis quaked with terror at the sight of this stranger and some ran to tell Ravana the news. Some approached Sita and asked: "How did this huge monkey come here? You should know who he is. Did he say anything to

you? Tell us the truth. Do not be afraid to speak out."

"How do I know what can happen in this charmed world of Rakshasas?" Sita answered, parrying, the question. "This monkey is probably one of the Rakshasas and you are likely to know more about him than I." The Rakshasis fled in fear from the park and reported to Ravana what had happened.

"O king! A huge monkey terrible to look at has laid waste the royal garden. It was in secret talk with Sita."

Of course they omitted to add that they had fallen asleep and given a chance for Sita to talk to the monkey.

"We tried our best to get some information from Sita," they added. "We asked her who he was, and how he came there, and what he told her. But she refuses to answer. You should seize and slay this creature. Do send a strong foe. The beautiful grove is completely devastated except for the Simsupa tree under which Sita is seated. Its spreading branches have suffered no damage. The monkey which laid waste the tanks and bowers has spared the habitation of Sita. There must be a reason for this. We suspect that this is not an ordinary wild animal. It must have been sent by some enemy of yours, either Indra or Kubera. Or could it have anything to do with Rama? How did this monkey dare to talk to Sita? He must be a messenger from Rama. Do send your warriors to capture this terrible beast."

Ravana was furious on hearing that his favorite park, set apart for his queens, had been destroyed. His eyes glowed like twin torches and hot tears rolled down from them like drops of burning oil.

He turned to the bodyguards standing beside him ever eager to do his bidding and ordered them at once to go and destroy the monster-monkey. A strong

force started to execute the king's commands, armed with maces and spears and other weapons.

55. THE TERRIBLE ENVOY

THE Rakshasa warriors saw with amazement a mighty Vanara seated on the garden gate, who at their approach grew to still bigger size and formidable menace.

"Oh! You have come, have you?" he said and, jumping down, brandished his tail, and striking the ground with it, roared till the four quarters shook. He snatched the huge iron bar from the gate and, armed with this weapon, began to attack them all.

He sprang and leaped in all directions and, whirling the iron rod, struck the Rakshasas down, one by one. After finishing them thus, he resumed his seat on the top of the pillared entrance, and roared once again.

"Long live Rama! Long live Lakshmana!" he loudly proclaimed. "Long live King Sugriva! Oh! Ye Rakshasas of Lanka, your doom are near. The great warriors Rama and Lakshmana and King Sugriva have sent me here to destroy you. Come on in your thousands. I stand here ready to hurl you to destruction. I have saluted Sita and received her blessings. And now I am going to destroy your city!"

All Lanka heard the thunder of his words and quaked in terror. When the news reached Ravana that the warriors sent against Hanuman were all slain, he opened wide his fierce eyes in amazement and wrath.

"What is it you say?" he yelled, and called Jambumali, the matchless warrior, son of Prahasta. And he said to him. "Go at once! Punish this monkey and report to me."

The Rakshasa Jambumali took some time to put on armor and to take up weapons and get ready to meet his foe.

Meanwhile, Hanuman was not sitting still. He climbed to the top of a temple in the park and stood there, shining against the horizon like a second sun suddenly risen in the sky. He magnified his body still further and looked like a golden mountain range up in the heavens.

His roar filled the city of Lanka and raised echoes from all the eight quarters. The hearts of the Rakshasas trembled in fear.

"Long live Rama! Long live Lakshmana! Long live King Sugriva! I have come as an envoy of the King of Kosala. I have come to destroy Lanka. I am Hanuman, son of Vayu, come here to utterly destroy the enemies of Rama. I have vowed before Sita and received her blessings. Know that I possess the strength to vanquish a thousand Ravana. Big boulders and uprooted trees I shall aim at the Rakshasas and destroy them. That is what I have come here for!"

The sentries in the temple took up various weapons and attacked him. Hanuman jumped down and plucked up a big pillar, supporting the temple, and stood there like the destroyer. Whirling his massive weapon easily as though it was a willow wand, Hanuman struck down and slew the sentries. The temple, from which the pillar had been removed, collapsed. As Hanuman struck the ground with the pillar, sparks of fire flew all around.

"In Sugriva's army there are monkeys much mightier than I and they will soon be here," he roared. "You and your king and your city will be destroyed by them, root and branch. Your king has incurred the enmity of the Lord of the Ikshvaku race, has he not? Lanka is nearing its end. Destruction awaits the Rakshasas. The God of Death is approaching Ravana."

Jambumali arrived at last. With wide, glaring eyes and ugly, irregular teeth

dressed in scarlet, with large golden rings in his ears, bow in hand, garland round his neck, sword at his hip, he came in a chariot rattling like thunder. Hanuman set eyes on the chariot dragged by enormous mules. And he got ready.

Seated in his chariot, Jambumali bent his bow and aimed a few arrows at Maruti who was seated on the wall. They wounded his face and drew blood, which added to the beauty of his face. It was as if a red lotus had suddenly blossomed in the heavens. The wounds enraged Hanuman, who picked up a big boulder and flung it at the chariot.

He uprooted a sal tree and, twirling it, flung it at Jambumali. Then he plucked out a huge iron rod from the temple and aimed it at the chariot and reduced it to splinters and crushed the huge body of Jambumali into a shapeless mass, in which neither head nor limbs could be distinguished.

The issue of this battle was duly reported to Ravana. He was struck with wonder. "This is indeed something strange," he said to himself. "This murderous brute is not an animal, certainly not a mere monkey. It is some new creature devised by my old enemies the gods to annoy me."

And he ordered mighty commanders to go with a great army to capture the creature and produce it before him.

The Rakshasa chiefs went forth in a great array of chariots. In full force they attacked Hanuman, who was as before stationed on top of the entrance and was laughing aloud in disdainful unconcern.

They showered missiles on him that mostly glanced harmlessly off his adamant frame. With each dart or arrow that struck him, he grew in stature and fierceness. And ranging all round with energy pelted them with rocks and huge tree boles, till all the leaders lay crushed

and slain, and the survivors fled in panic and despair.

Having killed or put to fight the entire contingent of Rakshasas, Hanuman roared in triumph and Lanka trembled at the roar. He resumed his seat on the stone-battlement on the top of the garden-gate. Hearing of the defeat of the force sent to capture Hanuman and the slaughter of five of his best commanders, fear for the first time entered Ravana's heart. "It is extraordinary that a solitary monkey should have this devastating valor and purposeful malevolence," Ravana thought with anxiety. "This is clearly a conspiracy of the gods."

But he kept his concern to himself and laughed derisively. He looked round at all the members of his great council. His son the heroic Aksha stood foremost, eager for battle, and the proud father bade him go forth to battle against the tremendous foe. Radiant with youth and health and glowing with high courage at this opportunity of distinguishing himself, Aksha went forth in a shining chariot, confident of victory.

56. HANUMAN BOUND

VALMIKI describes in beautiful verses how the youthful warrior Aksha, the equal of the gods, rode to battle in a chariot drawn by eight horses.

Who can put up in a different tongue Valmiki's poetry describing the beauty of forests and the terrible fury of encounters between warriors? The rhythm and grandeur of his words convey the terror and majesty of what he describes. This power is Valmiki's special gift. We can only summarise in pedestrian prose his glowing account, of the battle between Aksha, the beloved son of Ravana, and Hanuman.

In a golden chariot acquired through tapasya rode Ravana's young son. When he saw Hanuman, seated on the stone

battlement above the gateway, and noted approvingly the beautiful symmetry of his mighty limbs, and the majestic intrepidity of his look, Aksha felt that here was a foe worthy of his steel. He summoned all his strength and resolution to do him honor.

The young warrior aimed three sharp arrows at Hanuman. They struck his body and drew blood. But Maruti's strength increased and his face shone with new splendor. He too was pleased with the prowess of the youthful Rakshasa.

Fierce grew the battle between the two. Hundreds of arrows rose in clouds into the sky and hit Maruti. Like rain falling on a rock, they fell on Hanuman's body. Rising in the air Hanuman dodged about evading the arrows. Slipping as it were through the meshes of that deadly network of missiles and finding a favorable opening closed with Aksha.

Hanuman admired Aksha's youthful promise and heroism, and was sorry to have to slay him, but there was no help for it for the prince seemed to get more and more formidable as the fight went on. And it was unwise to take chances with him. At last Hanuman hardened his heart and decided to destroy the youth.

He rushed against Aksha's chariot and broke it to pieces. The horses fell dead. The Rakshasa prince stood on the ground chariotless. Nothing daunted, he rose in the air with bow and sword and attacked Hanuman. A great battle took place in the air. In the end Aksha's bones were crushed and splintered and he fell down dead.

Hearing that the prince had been killed by Hanuman, Ravana shook with rage, but controlling himself he called his son Indrajit, the conqueror of Indra.

"You have mastered all weapons," he said. "You have vanquished the Devas and Asuras in battle. You have by your austerities called Brahma down and secured from him the Brahmastra. There

is none in the world who can oppose you. Fatigue cannot approach you. Your knowledge of battle is unique. You have attained strength through tapasya. Nothing is impossible for you. None can equal you in foresight. The Kinneras I sent and Jambumali and the five generals of our army, and your dear brother Aksha have all been slain by a terrible foe who has raided us in the form of a monkey and it is yours now to avenge them. Do not underrate him. It seems he cannot be vanquished by weapons. He cannot be brought down in wrestling. Consider well therefore what needs to be done. Do it and return victorious. The astras you have secured through tapasya can serve you at this moment. Without allowing your mind to wander, fight with concentration and return triumphant."

Indrajit, bright like the gods, accepted his father's command with reverence and receiving his blessings went with courage and eagerness towards the Asoka Vana.

Standing in a chariot drawn by four fierce lions and twanging his bowstring, Indrajit proceeded towards Hanuman. His chariot sounded like the wind off the monsoon. His lotus-like eyes shone victory.

As Hanuman saw the chariot coming towards him, he was filled with joy. Indrajit too, skilful in battle, bent his bow and got his sharp arrows ready for Hanuman. Knowing that a great battle was at hand, the Nagas, Yakshas and Siddhas assembled in the sky to see.

At the sight of Indrajit Hanuman roared and increased his stature still further. Silently the Rakshasa warrior dispatched his darts. Showers of arrows began to descend as in the battle of the gods and their cousins, the Asuras. Hanuman rose in the sky and, moving with speed like lightning, struck down the sharp arrows. His roar made the quarters echo, drowning

the drumbeats and the bow-twangs of the Rakshasa.

The battle raged with increasing fury and filled all beholders with amazement. In skill and strength the two warriors were perfect equals. No matter how often he was wounded, Hanuman's strength showed no signs of lessening. Indrajit therefore resolved: "My arrows cannot vanquish this monkey. What my father said is true. He can be bound only by using the Brahmastra."

The Rakshasa Prince sent forth the Brahmastra. At its touch the Vanara warrior lay bound and helpless. Hanuman realised what had happened. He said to himself: "I have been bound by the Brahmastra." Hanuman too had secured a boon from Brahma, and this he now remembered.

"This will keep me bound for only one muhoorta (four fifths of an hour)," he said to himself. "I run no real risk. Let me see what the Rakshasas do to me while I lie bound and helpless. I might find here a further opportunity to function as a messenger."

As instructed by Brahma when he gave him the gift of immortality, he surrendered himself to the Brahmastra and lay down on the ground, inactive but in full possession of his faculties.

When they saw Hanuman thus lying helpless on the ground the Rakshasas who till then stood at a distance in fear, surrounded him and danced with joy and called him insulting names and praised their prince.

"We shall cut you to pieces!" they shouted. "Let us eat him up. We shall drag him to the throne of our Ravana." Thus and in many other ways they shouted.

A few among them feared and said: "This fellow is only pretending. He may get up suddenly and attack us." So they brought ropes of jute and coconut fiber

and bound him hard and shouted exultingly: "Now we have bound him, let us drag him to the Lord of the Rakshasas."

Indrajit, who discovered too late and could not prevent this foolish mistake of the Rakshasas, felt sad.

"Alas!" he thought with sorrow. "They have undone all my work. These fools do not know the secrets of supernatural weapons. When they have thus used ropes and jute for binding him, the astra withdraws its power. The bound of the mantra is undone when physical bonds are added. Hanuman is now held only by the ropes that he can burst asunder and the Brahmastra cannot be used a second time."

Hanuman too understood this, and knew he could spring up free if he liked. But he welcomed the opportunity to meet and talk to Ravana and allowed himself to be dragged to the king, patiently bearing all their insults and cruelties in seeming helplessness. They belabored and foully abused him, and dragged him through the streets and women and children came out to look at him and jeer.

57. LANKA IN FLAMES

His captors took him to the court of Ravana and placed him in front of the King. Forgetting the pain and insults he had borne, Hanuman gazed with wrathful curiosity at the giant monarch. As he gazed at him resplendent on his throne a sort of pitying admiration of the doomed Rakshasa entered his thoughts.

Clad in silk of golden hue, with the royal crown on his head, the jewels inlaid in it shining brilliantly, Ravana sat there, a figure of dazzling splendor. The whole court was brilliant with shining gold and gems, pearls and silk. His dark body, lit up by the marks of royalty, looked like a great radiant hill.

"Alas!" thought Hanuman full of anger, wonder and pity. "If only this great one

had not swerved from the path of dharma, not even Indra could equal him. What a form, what radiance, what strength! Trusting to the boon he had secured, he took to wicked ways and has lost his happiness and forfeited his greatness."

As Hanuman was lost in thought thus, Ravana addressed his ministers: "Find out from this wicked fellow who he is, where he has come from, who has sent him here and why he entered Lanka. Tell him to speak truthfully."

As ordered by the king, Prahasta questioned Hanuman. "Do not be afraid, monkey! If you speak the truth, you will escape punishment. Did Indra send you here? Or are you Kubera's servant? Whose orders are you carrying out? Speak the truth and save yourself. Why have you come here thus disguised? Take care you hide nothing!"

Hanuman, facing Ravana directly, said:

"Neither Indra, nor Kubera has sent me here. I am a Vanara. I came here to have a look at the Rakshasa king. That was why I laid waste the garden. Otherwise I could not get to the king's presence. And because they attacked me and tried to kill me, I killed them in self-defence. I have come here as the messenger of Sugriva, the Vanara king. O Rakshasa king my lord looks on you as a brother and sends you his greetings. Ramachandra, the famous son of king Dasaratha of Ayodhya, has become a friend of Sugriva and slaying Vali has made Sugriva king. When Ramachandra, heir to the throne of Ayodhya, was living in the Dandaka forest to fulfil his father's word, his consort who had been left alone for a while was lost and at the behest of Rama and Lakshmana, Sugriva has sent his servant to look for her throughout the world. I came to Lanka on this search and here I saw the good princess. O lord of the Rakshasas, I speak to you with the respect

due from the messenger of a brother king. I speak to you also as a devoted servant of the Prince of Ayodhya. You know well it was a cowardly act and totally contrary to dharma to carry off the princess Sita. This is sure to end in the destruction of your race if you persist in your wicked folly. Restore Sita to the prince and seek his forgiveness. Know that Death has come to you in the form of Sita. Do not mistake poison for food. It is not wisdom to oppose dharma and run into deadly danger. You know well enough that the sin of desiring another's wife will consume utterly the merit you have earned through tapas and destroy you inevitably. Your only recourse now is to seek refuge at Rama's feet. Do not make Rama your enemy and bring about your own destruction. The boons you have secured will avail you nothing against the Prince of the Raghu race. Consider well and realise the danger you are in. Pay heed to the words of this humble messenger of the Vanara king. Turn to the right path and find safety. These words from a brother king are true and meant for your welfare."

Hanuman uttered this bitter warning in a loud and clear voice. When the Rakshasa king heard it, his eyes grew red with anger, and he ordered that Hanuman should be killed forthwith. But Vibhishana pointed out that it would be improper to kill a king's envoy.

"According to the law of kings it is not permitted on any account to kill envoys and messengers. You can have him mutilated, whipped or branded, but not killed," so counselled Vibhishana.

"What is wrong," asked Ravana, "in killing one who has sinned so greatly?"

Answered Vibhishana with due politeness: "No matter how grievous his offence, it was done at the bidding of others. To leave his royal masters alone and to slay their instrument, a mere

messenger, what use or sense is there in it? Let us by all means seek ways of punishing those that sent him here. They must be brought here and given due punishment. If he is slain now, what chance is there of our real enemies being brought here? If, on the other hand, he is sent back alive to them, they will come here and attack us. Then they will receive proper punishment at your hands."

Ravana agreed. "Very well," he said, "a monkey's most cherished possession is his tail. Set fire to his tail, flog him soundly and turn him out."

At these words of the Rakshasa king, his servants took Hanuman out. They wrapped his tail in rags of all kinds. His tail grew in size and, as it grew, they brought more and more old rags and wrapped them round. They soaked the whole in oil and set it ablaze like a huge flaming torch.

Thus bound by ropes and with tail ablaze, Hanuman was taken through the streets of Lanka.

"Here goes the thief that entered our city!" cried the women and children. They jeered at him as he was taken round by the exulting Rakshasas to the accompaniment of pipes and drums through all the highways and byways of Lanka.

In the Asoka Vana the Rakshasis told Sita: "The monkey with whom you had secret talk, do you know what has happened to him? They have wrapped his tail in cloth soaked in oil and have set fire to it. His tail is ablaze. They are taking him in procession through the town."

They told Sita the tale and laughed in scorn. She kindled a fire and offered a prayer to the god of Fire: "O Agni! If there be any goodness in me, any purity, be cool to Hanuman; do not hurt him."

Hanuman endured the blows and the insults heaped upon him, and proceeded from street to street quietly observing

everything. The Rakshasas, to amuse their women and children took him through all the streets and bylanes of the city. And he noted in silence, for future, use all the secrets of that fortified city.

"But what is this miracle?" he thought. "The rags soaked in oil burn brightly but the fire does not hurt and is cool on my tail. The elements themselves seem kind to one engaged in Rama's purpose. Did not the mountain rise above the sea and offer me hospitality? Even so the god of Fire is gracious to me now and does not harm me. Or may be, Agni being a friend of my father Vayu, is gentle with me. Now, I think I should not let slip this opportunity which has come to me unsought to put the fear of God into these Rakshasas."

Suddenly he shrank in size and shook off the ropes that bound him and, resuming his huge shape, jumped with his blazing tail to the top of a tall building. He plucked a pillar there and whirled it round, striking terror in all beholders.

Then he jumped from mansion to mansion, setting fire to them. In a little while a strong breeze began to blow and the whole city was in flames. The Rakshasas and their women and children shouted in terror and ran hither and thither.

"This monkey is no other than Yama," said some. "No, he must be the god Agni," said others. And they all fled from their burning houses.

Recalling the insults he had suffered, Hanuman was pleased when he saw the flames rise. He sat on the summit of the Trikuta hill and contemplated with satisfaction the red glow of the burning city. Then he went to the sea and, plunging in, put out the fire in his tail and came ashore.

"Alas! Alas! What have I done?" he said with uncontrollable grief. "I have lost

my senses in my rage. What is the use of strength and skill and all other gifts if one cannot control one's anger? Sita too must have perished in this great conflagration I have raised. My angry deed has led to the utter ruin of my whole purpose. Alas, there is no fool, no sinner, like me on earth. My rage against the Rakshasas has ended in the death of Sita. Here and now I must put an end to my life and to my shame!"

Then he heard some voices in the sky. The Charanas and Yakshas were rejoicing and saying, "What a miracle! Glory be to Hanuman's prowess! Except the spot where Sita is, all Lanka is in flames!"

Hearing this ethereal conversation, Hanuman was relieved. "Sita has saved herself. She saved me, for it was her purity and power that kept the fire from harming me. How can fire help paying homage to the goddess of chastity? What can fire do to fire? This fire that I started could not go near Sita. And is not all this Rama's purpose? Did not the ocean king and Mynaka Mountain come to my help?"

Thinking thus, Hanuman went straight to the Asoka Park again. There, under the Simsupa tree, he saw Sita who was greatly relieved to see him alive and cheerful.

Rejoicing, he bowed before her and said, "Oh mother! I have seen you safe and sound. This is your power and my good fortune. Now give me leave to go."

And Sita said, "You are indeed a hero. For you there is nothing impossible. See that my lord comes here soon and lays low the Rakshasas and redeems me. I depend on you. You alone can achieve this."

"Be assured," said Hanuman. "Sugriva will soon be here with Rama and Lakshmana and the myriads of Vanaras. Ravana and his wicked hordes will perish. The happy prince will return with you to

Ayodhya. Grieve no more. God bless you."

Thus consoling her, Hanuman took leave of Sita. He went to the shore of the sea and, climbing up the beautiful hill called Arishta, rose into the sky.

On the way he saw Mynaka eagerly awaiting him. He affectionately stroked it with his hand, but did not stop. He flew straight like an arrow shot from a bow. At the sight of Mahendra hill he knew that he was near the other shore and he roared.

The Vanaras, meanwhile, who saw Hanuman flying towards them like a great eagle across the sky, shouted: "He is come. He is come!"

Till now their hearts had been full of care and their eyes wet. Now they jumped in their joy.

"It is certain he is returning in triumph," said Jambavan. "Else he would not roar in this manner."

They climbed up trees and hills and stood watching with joy the approach of Hanuman returning from Lanka.

And Hanuman rejoiced to see the mountains and trees all covered with his friends. Amid their glad uproar, he alighted on the Mahendra hill.

58. A CARNIVAL

BESIDE themselves with joy at the sight of Hanuman, the Vanaras assembled on the Mahendra peak. And the veteran Jambavan welcoming the son of Vayu with great affection, spoke on behalf of all.

"We are eager to hear a full account of your journey and its triumphant conclusion. More particularly, we are anxious to know how you discovered Sita. How is she now? What is the state of her mind and body? And dear son of Anjana, tell us about Ravana's state and behavior. After knowing everything we shall be in a position to consider and decide what needs to be done next. "

Hanuman tendered mental salutations to Sita and began his story.

"You know how I sprang into the sky from this peak. As I was flying over the sea, a golden mountain rose suddenly above the surface of the water. I thought it was something rising up to obstruct me and I gave it a flick with my tail. Meekly receiving the blow, the mountain said in a sweet voice: 'My son, I am no enemy. I was saved by your father from the dire wrath of Indra and am ever grateful to him. I now live in safety sheltered by the sea. In olden days, we mountains had wings and flew hither and thither in the sky and the world was in dread of us. Then Indra, to rid the world of this terror, relentlessly pursued us and cut off our wings. It was from this common fate that your father rescued me. You are engaged in the most fatiguing task of flying across the sea. I have come up here to offer you some rest. Stay here for a while and then fulfil Rama's purpose.' I declined the offer for lack of time and, taking leave of him, went on my way."

Thus, in proper sequence and without omission, Hanuman recounted all that happened during the passage and in the city of Lanka. He told them how he searched for Sita in vain in Ravana's palace, how he found her at last in the Asoka Vana, how Ravana sought and importuned her and was spurned by her. He narrated what dire threats Ravana held out, how the Rakshasis teased her and drove her to think of putting an end to her own life, and how it was at this juncture that he approached and gave her news of Rama and hope and interest in life.

With tears in his eyes he told them what a divinely precious soul Sita was and how nobly she had borne herself. Then he narrated how he destroyed the park and killed the Rakshasa warriors, how he was finally bound by Indrajit and produced

before Ravana. He described what took place at the interview, and how as a punishment for his boldness of speech they set fire to his tail, furnishing him thereby with a great torch with which he set their city ablaze.

On such occasions, when a character has to recapitulate past events, we can see Valmiki's skill in retelling the story in beautiful words. This is a source of special pleasure to those who read the Ramayana as a religious exercise. They do not dislike such repetitions. Indeed it is one of the special charms in a large epic. But I have abridged the recital to suit the general reader who has no time or taste for an oft-repeated tale however edifying. Those who wish to avert some calamity or desire success in some great undertaking usually make a Parayana (devotional reading exercise) of the whole of the Sundarakanda, the canto dealing with Hanuman's expedition to Lanka. It is believed that the same result can be obtained even by a Parayana of only this chapter where Hanuman relates to the Vanara warriors all that happened between his crossing and recrossing the sea.

After this full narration of the happenings, Hanuman proceeded: "Our efforts have been successful so far because of the power of chastity of Sita who is chastity incarnate. When I think of her I wonder how the Rakshasa could seize and carry her away and yet escape being burnt to ashes. But Ravana too had accumulated great power through his tapas. Even so, Sita could have reduced him to ashes if she had chosen, but she patiently endured all this, because she wanted the punishment to proceed from her lord. And now what is your advice? Shall we go straight to Lanka, destroy Ravana and the Rakshasa hordes, recover Sita and restore her to Rama? It is not as if

we have not the strength to do this. Single-handed I can destroy them and leave not a trace behind. And Jambavan too, all by himself, can utterly destroy the Rakshasas. And so can our Prince Angada; and so can Panasa or Nila; so can Mainda and Dwivida, the sons of Asvini. Yes, there are many among us who can slay Ravana and the Rakshasa hordes. Indeed I proclaimed aloud in Lanka: 'I, the messenger of Rama and the minister of Sugriva, am come to destroy you.' But while we are talking, Vaidehi, the Goddess of purity, is there under the Simsupa tree a closely guarded prisoner pining with aching heart for rescue. In her hour of despair, I showed myself to her, and comforted her with the assurance of her lord's speedy arrival. Consider well and decide what should now be done."

Angada, listening to all this, full of indignation jumped up, saying: "I can do it all alone. And there are so many of us here, eager warriors thirsting for battle. It would be improper, after all these days, to go to Rama empty-handed and without Sita. Let us go straight to Lanka, destroy Ravana and the Rakshasa army and return to Kishkindha with Sita in our midst."

Jambavan, old and wise, uttered a gentle protest. "No, it is not right, dear prince," he said. "We should report everything to Rama and Lakshmana and then do what they desire. Rama's purpose should be fulfilled in the manner that he desires. That alone is proper."

All the Vanaras, including Hanuman and Angada, agreed that this was the right thing to do. They then rose into the sky and flew towards Kishkindha.

They alighted near the protected park of the Vanara king. They made their way into it, drank honey and ate fruit, regardless of the warnings of the guards. They indulged in unrestrained revelry and ruined the beautiful park.

Unable to stand the riotous behavior of the mirth-makers, Dadhimukha, Sugriva's uncle and keeper of the royal park, hurried to the king and complained.

"Your protected park has been laid waste. The Vanaras that went south have returned and, alighting in the garden, are behaving outrageously. They pay no heed to my words. On the contrary, they assaulted and insulted me. They drank up and ruined all the honeycombs and plucked and ate fruit as they liked and are now lying senseless as a result of their revelry. The trees and plants are all in ruins. The king should forthwith inflict suitable punishment on these undisciplined Vanaras."

Sugriva understood the position at once. "Lakshmana, it is clear that Hanuman, Jambavan and Angada have succeeded in their search and are celebrating their triumph in this manner." Saying this he turned to Dadhimukha and said to him: "Send them all here at once."

Dadhimukha now understood the real state of affairs and, hastening to the Vanaras, conveyed to them the king's command.

59. THE TIDINGS CONVEYED

SUGRIVA'S conjecture was like nectar to Rama's ears. They eagerly awaited the arrival of the Vanaras. In a short while a great clamor was in the air and the Vanara hordes alighted with cries of triumph.

Hanuman and Angada leading, the Vanaras marched to the presence of their king who with Rama and Lakshmana was awaiting their coming.

Hanuman bowed and said: "Seen have I the Goddess of purity, your queen. She is safe and well in Lanka. I salute her from here across space." And he turned southwards and offered worshipful salutation.

Thus succinctly did Hanuman convey to the prince the glad news that Sita was

found and was well in body and mind. Sugriva and Lakshmana, beside themselves with joy, embraced Rama.

"Dear Vanara friends," exclaimed the Prince of Ayodhya, "tell me where exactly Sita is. How is she? How did you manage to see her? Tell me everything in detail." His eager inquiries came quick upon one another.

The other Vanaras turned to Hanuman who stood behind, and asked him to narrate all that he had seen and done. Hanuman began to tell the tale. With his unrivalled courage and strength and single-handed, he had performed a mighty task. Yet he did not push himself forward into the presence of Prince Rama or King Sugriva, but gave precedence to Angada and the aged Jambavan and the others, and was silent until they asked him to speak.

Indeed, generally, great men who dare and do mighty deeds are disinclined to speak about their exploits. In painting this scene the poet brings out this law of natural conduct. Another thing to note here is Hanuman's reverence for Sita. From the time he first saw her, his reverence for Sita appeared to surpass even his devotion to Rama, if the two could be distinguished. This is the case with all pious devotees who regard and worship the Supreme as Mother. When that aspect of the All immanent Power is before true devotees, their reverence becomes ecstatic like the child's joy in the mother's lap.

"Crossing the hundred yojanas of water, I reached the city of the wicked Ravana on the southern shore. There, in a park attached to the palace, I saw Sita held prisoner and closely guarded. It was wonderful to see her emaciated form. She maintained life only in the thought of her lord and repetition of his name. Cruel and ugly Rakshasis surrounded her. I saw her

lying on the ground, her hair unkempt and her face clouded by sorrow and care. When I reached there, she had resolved to put an end to her life to escape from the Rakshasa king's importunities and threats. I began uttering praises of your glory in a low voice. Unknown to her, and a mere monkey, I had to secure her confidence first. Then I spoke to her. I told her of the alliance between King Sugriva and yourself. I told her of your great grief and unchanging love. This filled her with sweet sorrow and awakened hope in her and the desire to live. Asked for a token which I might convey to you, the angel of purity gave me this jewel to be given to you. She also told me how once a crow had troubled her while you were asleep and how you were grieved about it, she asked me to remind you of the incident. She wanted me to remind you of another occasion when, roaming among the hills, perspiration had made the tilak trickle down her forehead and you replaced it with red ochre rubbed out of a rock. She bade me tell you that she would struggle and keep alive for a month, but then she would perish at the hands of Ravana, or she would seek her own release of death. She bade me convey her respects to the Vanara King. Now let us think and make preparations at once for proceeding to Lanka to redeem the princess."

Saying this, he handed the sikhamani, crest-jewel, of Sita to the prince.

Rama took the jewel from Hanuman's hand and at the sight of it fainted, racked beyond bearing between extremes of joy and grief.

He pressed the jewel to his bosom and cried: "O Lakshmana!" Again he embraced Hanuman and said: "Heroic son of Vayu, blessed are you who have seen Sita. I too see her now before me. You have, indeed, brought her to me."

"Dear hero, my heart's friend!" he cried "tell me everything again in full. Tell me once again what Sita said. Let me hear her words which are sweet like water to parched lips."

Hanuman narrated the whole story to the eager listeners and Rama wept when Hanuman repeated these words of Sita:

"Many Rakshasas has my Rama slain, but why has he not come here yet to slay Ravana and save me from my sufferings? Why has he not sent brave Lakshmana to slay the wretch? It cannot be that my lord has grown indifferent towards me! For I know of no wrong I have ever committed in thought or word or deed to lose his love."

Hanuman said: "I tried to console her saying: 'Rama is ever thinking of you and grieving for you. He knows no rest. Do not imagine that Rama and Lakshmana have forgotten you. No words of mine could describe their grief. Now that I am going to tell them you are here, it will not be long before they come and destroy Ravana and return with you in triumph to Ayodhya.' It was then she untied the jewel from a knot in a corner of her sari and gave it to me. I placed it on my head in reverence and, securing it, started to return. She stopped me and uttered a benediction again and said: 'Friend Hanuman convey the news of my welfare to the lions, my lord and his brother, to king Sugriva and his ministers. Devise your plans and help him to come here and redeem me. I trust in you, Hanuman, absolutely. May God bless you.'"

"Lay aside your grief, my Lord," continued Hanuman, "and think out now what has to be done. Sita doubted how you and the Vanara army could cross the sea. I assured her that she need have no fear or doubt on that score, since, by no means the strongest among the Vanaras, I myself had crossed it as she could see. I

said to her that I myself could carry Rama and Lakshmana on my shoulders and cross the sea and bring them there."

60. THE ARMY MOVES

FORWARD

RAMA heard Hanuman with heart and eyes overflowing and, when he had come to the end of his narrative, said:

"The deed done by Hanuman none else in the world could even conceive of attempting, crossing the sea, entering Lanka protected by Ravana and his formidable hosts and accomplishing the task set him by his king not only fully but beyond the fondest hopes of all."

And it saddened him to think that it was not in his power to reward Hanuman at all adequately for the supreme joy he had brought. "O Hanuman, let this embrace of mine stand as an acknowledgment of all that my heart feels of gratitude for your great service to me."

So saying while his whole being thrilled with grateful love, he took Hanuman into his arms and clasped him to his breast.

"Sugriva," he said, "Hanuman has indeed wrought a wonder. He entered Lanka so strongly guarded by the Rakshasas. He has discovered Sita and, by consoling her, preserved her life. Bringing back good news of her, he has saved my life also. But how are we now going to cross the sea? How can our huge army reach the other shore? Before we can attack Ravana's city and the Rakshasa's army, we have first to cross the sea. I see no way of doing it. Our joy in Hanuman's achievement and the good news he has brought is overlaid by anxiety about our future course."

But the Vanara king said: "What is this, my Lord Rama? What need is there for dejection? Here are my warriors, ready to lay down their lives for you and let it be our joy to transport you and Lakshmana to

Lanka. Have no doubt that we can do it. The moment Hanuman saw Lanka, you may take it the fortress has fallen. Doubt only makes the warrior weak and afraid and should be cast aside. Our victory is certain. The feeling of confidence in my heart at this moment is a good enough omen for me."

Thus Sugriva reassured Rama, and inspired him to action. Then Rama and Hanuman discussed matters about Lanka, the town, the fort, the moat and other defences. Understanding this, Hanuman described the wealth of Lanka, the happy lives of the Rakshasas, their confidence in Ravana and their affection for him.

He told Rama of the might and size of Ravana's army; the strength and structure of the fortress; the alertness of the sentry; the moats, walls and gates, catapults and drawbridges, the care and thoroughness of all the arrangements for defence. He also explained how the coast too was carefully guarded so that no enemy ship could approach it.

"And yet you may be certain," he said, "our Vanara army is fully equal to the conquest of Lanka. We have with us peerless warriors like Angada, Dwivida, Mainda, Jambavan, Panasa, Nala and Nila. We have an enormous army. We shall fly in the sky and without touching the ground destroy Lanka. Its mountains and forest defences are nothing to us. We shall raze the city to the ground. Fix the auspicious time and give us the order to start."

Under the star of triumph, Uttara Phalguni, at high noon, the army set forward towards the southern sea. Good omens greeted them.

As they marched, Rama, Sugriva and Lakshmana went conversing with one another. "If only Sita could know that we have set out," said Rama, "it would encourage her to keep life going."

Scouts who knew the way went ahead, looking out for enemies lying in ambush. They led the army through regions that could provide food and drink for the huge army. With speed the army crossed mountains and forests.

The Vanaras sometimes carried Rama and Lakshmana on their shoulders so that the march might be speedy. Every moment the enthusiasm of the Vanaras increased. They jumped and roared and sported. Rama could hear them saying to one another: "I shall kill Ravana! I shall meet and kill Ravana!"

Nila and Kumuda went ahead reconnoitering in front of the army. Strong warriors were kept in the rear, guarding it from behind. King Sugriva, Rama and Lakshmana were in the middle. Rama gave strict orders that the army should inflict no harm or hardship on the towns and villages on the way. The noise of the marching army was like the roar of the sea and filled the eight quarters. The dust they raised covered the sky.

When they came to the Mahendra Mountain, Rama climbed the peak and surveyed the sea.

"We should now think and decide," he said, "how the army can cross the sea. Till then let it camp and rest in the forest." And Sugriva passed the order to the commanders. The Vanaras camped in the forest by the seashore.

When Sugriva, Rama and Lakshmana had satisfied themselves that the whole army had settled in comfort, the two brothers retired apart.

Rama said: "If a person loses a dear thing, people say that time will enable him to forget about it and he will cease to grieve. But Lakshmana, this is not what I find."

Dejection again seized Rama for the thought of Sita and her condition preyed on his mind now more than ever before.

"When Ravana seized Sita and carried her off," Rama said, breaking down with fresh grief, "she must have cried aloud 'Ha my Lord! Ha Rama! Ha Lakshmana!' But she saw no one coming. We failed to go to her help. Every time I think of the suffering she then must have gone through, my grief swells up afresh. What am I to do? Like the limbs of one who has drunk poison, my whole body burns with pain. She is held in the grip of the cruel Rakshasis and she is in great anguish. Janaka's daughter, the bride who entered the home of great Dasaratha, she lies on the bare ground, a prisoner surrounded by Rakshasis!"

"Rama!" said Lakshmana, "cease from sorrow. Soon we shall destroy Ravana and rescue Sita and take her home to Ayodhya. She will enter the city like the goddess of chastity. Give up your grief. Arm yourself with courage."

61. ANXIETY IN LANKA

Now let us leave Rama and his host here and go back to Ravana. Great poets in all languages delineate with sympathy even their bad characters allowing gleams of goodness to shine through occasionally, for nature has not made anybody wholly and unredeemably evil.

The poet's aim is to direct the reader's mind into the path of good, the satvik way. For this purpose they use all their skill and power in developing even their rajasik and tamasik characters.

The reader who is held by rajasik and tamasik qualities, naturally tends to sympathise with such characters; much more so readers below the average who are untouched by the satvik element.

They would regard the deeds of the hero and other satvik characters as mere fiction invented for blind worship, and identify themselves with the rajasik and tamasik characters and even claim these as their own kith and kin. They would find

themselves attracted by such characters and follow their doings with considerable interest.

Paradise Lost, the English epic on a Biblical theme, is famous throughout the world. In this poem Milton delineates the Almighty and Jesus, His spiritual son and human incarnation, as well as several orders of angels. But the most impressive character in the great epic is Satan who rebelled against God and brought sin and death into this world.

Critics of English poetry admire Milton's wonderful success in the characterisation of Satan. Similarly, the great dramatic poet Shakespeare has created a wonderful character in Shylock, the usurer and miser. Even such embodiments of despicable qualities are presented by the poets as possessing courage, determination, energy and other good qualities that attract us and serve as a bright background to their blackness.

In Valmiki's portraits of Ravana and Kumbhakarna too, we notice the same artistic skill. The cook who meets all tastes shows his skill in making out of bitter vegetables an attractive dish. So does the poet show his skill in portraying evil.

The Rakshasa king was somewhat ashamed and afraid at the thought of what Hanuman had achieved in Lanka. He summoned his ministers and took counsel with them.

He began in an apologetic tone. "What has happened is something strange and unexpected. No one has till now been known to enter our city, but this envoy of Rama has not only entered Lanka, he has met and talked with the imprisoned Sita. He has destroyed temples and palaces. He has slain some of our best warriors. He has filled our people with fear. And this thing is not likely to stop here. Hence we have to consider what should be done.

You know that the king should decide his course of action only after consulting his loyal ministers of clear vision and well-versed in statecraft. And so I have summoned this Council. Rama has become an inveterate enemy. Let us consider what we should do about it. The king has no use for ministers who are not straight forward or who not knowing their own minds wobble in their advice. The matter before us is most important. Rama is strong, and so is his army. It is certain that they will contrive some how to cross the sea. It would be unwise to trust to that single defence. Consider well and tell me how we can strengthen and secure our city and army and what steps we should take to defend ourselves."

After listening to the king, the members of the Assembly spoke with one voice.

"Great king! Knowing well that our army and our weapons are the strongest in the world, why need you be anxious? Where is the enemy who dares to attack your fortress and who can oppose your army with any hope of success? The world knows your might. Did you not invade the city of Bhogavati and defeat the Naga king? Did you not attack powerful Kubera and defeat him and his Yakshas and capture his Pushpaka Vimana as well as this island of Lanka? Did not Maya in fear of you sue for your favor and friendship and give you his daughter in marriage? How many cities in the nether region have you not attacked and taken? You fought and defeated the Kalakeyas. The sons of Varuna, yea, and Yama himself have been suppliants for your mercy. And who is this Rama? Your son Indrajit by himself can destroy Rama and his Vanara army. Did he not seize and imprison Indra himself and afterwards let him go? How can Rama and his Vanaras stand against such a warrior? You have

only to bid Indrajit destroy this Vanara crowd and all will be over. Why should you, great king, be anxious?"

Thus they spoke in praise of their king.

The Commander-in-chief Prahasta rose like a great black cloud. "You, who subdued in battle the Devas, Danavas and Gandharvas, why should you, oh King of kings, feel anxious because of these little creatures? It is true that the monkey came here and caught us napping and did some mischief. But this sort of thing will never happen again. If he comes again, I know how to manage him. I alone can destroy the whole Vanara race, if only you will order it. You need not fear any danger from this small indiscretion of yours, the abduction of Sita."

Next Durmukha rose and roared: "We shall not let this monkey's bravado and undeserved good luck go unavenged. I shall go this very instant and destroy the Vanara army, root and branch, and return."

Vajradamshttra stood with a terrible iron club in his hand and cried: "Here is my weapon unwashed and still covered with the blood and flesh of my foes. Why waste your time talking about this monkey? Are not Rama and Lakshmana our enemies? I shall slay them first and then destroy the Vanara army and return immediately. Only let me go. I have a piece of advice to give you, King, if you would listen. Let us order some Rakshasa warriors to put on human form and approach Rama, telling him, 'Bharata has sent us in advance. A great army is coming behind to help you.' While Rama is thus fooled into negligence, our Rakshasa army can travel through the sky and destroy him and his followers on the other shore. This is my advice."

Nikumbha, son of Kumbhakarna, rose and said: "All of you may stay here with the King. I shall go alone and meet and

destroy the enemy and bring you the news."

Another Rakshasa, licking his lips, said with gusto: "I shall go alone and kill and feast on the flesh of these two men, Rama and Lakshmana. Please let me go."

Thus one after another they got up and spoke brave words to please Ravana and then all of them stood up together and, raising their weapons, roared aloud.

At that Vibhishana, the younger brother of Ravana, made them all sit down, and said to the king with folded hands:

"Brother, what these people say is sweet to hear but not true or good to act upon. Anything done in violation of Niti shastra (the Science of Politics) can only lead to grief and ruin. It is only after trying sama (conciliation), dana (buying off the enemy) and bheda (sowing discord) that one should think of using danda (force of arms.) against a foe. If you take the advice of these people and start a war now, it would mean the destruction of Lanka and all of us. We should also consider the demands of dharma. It was not right, it was indeed a great sin for you, to have seized and brought Rama's wife here. We should first cleanse ourselves of this sin. What harm did Rama do to us? What Rama did in the Dandaka forest was in pure self-defence and the defence of those that looked to him for protection. He fought with and slew only those that went out to slay him. His actions surely do not justify your carrying away his wife. And even if we had any just complaint against him, we should have met in battle. Instead of that, to contrive his absence and seize his wife was very wrong and sinful. When the fault is on your side, it is morally not right that we should think of battle. Further, warfare requires that before fighting we should take some measure of Rama's

strength and that of his army. We have had some taste of Hanuman's strength and skill. It is pointless to talk lightly of him. Did he not do remarkable things? Though our own strength may be great, we should weigh it against the enemy's strength and then decide whether we should seek war or avoid it. But first it is essential that we should restore Sita. My advice is this, before Rama and the Vanaras attack Lanka, let us restore Sita. Dear brother, I am saying all this for your good. Pray, do not be angry with me. We should first set right our own fault and then think of other things."

Thus with folded hands Vibhishana besought Ravana.

Though Ravana was pleased with the vainglorious words of his ministers and generals, there was doubt lurking in his mind. Hence, after listening to Vibhishana, he said: "Let us meet again tomorrow and consider this matter."

He adjourned the Council, and retired.

62. RAVANA CALLS A COUNCIL AGAIN

AS soon as the day dawned, Vibhishana went to the king. He had thought deeply over the matter and had come to a decision. His brother's welfare demanded that he should seek somehow to convert and save him.

Vibhishana entered the royal palace and stood with folded hands before the king. Ravana sent away all but the principal Ministers and asked his brother to speak.

"My brother and my lord," began Vibhishana, "forgive me if what I say is not pleasing to your ears. My desire is not to flatter but to save you from a great danger while there is yet time. I beg of you to listen to me, consider well what I say and then decide on your course of action.

"Ever since you brought Sita to Lanka we see only evil omens. Even when the libation is poured with the correct mantra, the flame does not spring to receive it. One finds snakes in places of worship. Ants infest food offerings. The udders of cows are dry and yield no milk. Elephants, horses, camels and monkeys fall sick, reject food and behave strangely. Medicines have lost their efficacy. Crows perch in numbers on the housetops making hideous noises. Vultures circling overhead fill the augurs with anxiety. Foxes boldly enter the city and howl at unusual hours. Wild beasts haunt the streets. These portents should not be disregarded. I beg of you, restore Sita to her husband. It is only since her coming here that these omens are noticed as you can verify by asking others. Why should we, who have so much to lose, needlessly incur any one's enmity? Let us restore Sita to her people and live happily." Thus did Vibhishana plead earnestly with his brother.

"Never, never!" exclaimed Ravana. "Let there be no talk here of Sita being returned to her people. I do not think much of this enemy. I see nothing to be afraid of. Now, you may go."

Though he spoke thus and was obstinate, Ravana had no peace of mind. Sita had not yielded to him and his own near kinsmen disapproved of his conduct. He was agitated, but putting on an air of confidence and unconcern he summoned the Council again. Lust and injured vanity kept him from the straight path, but he found some consolation in taking counsel from others.

From the palace to the Hall of Council he drove through the street in a golden chariot drawn by noble steeds. Warriors, holding swords and shields and wearing brilliant uniforms, marched in front, behind and on the sides. Others mounted

on elephants and horses and armed with axes, spears and other terrible weapons, followed the chariot. Trumpets were blown and drums beaten.

As the Lord of Lanka, accompanied by his retinue, passed majestically through the royal street, his people bent low their heads and folded their hands and invoked victory for him. As he entered the hall, drums and trumpets sounded loudly and filled the eight quarters.

Ravana took his seat on an agate throne in the great hall constructed by Maya which shone in all the splendor of gold and silver and precious carpets.

Hundreds of demons stood sentry without. Obedient to the call of the King, thousands of Rakshasa warriors had assembled in the chamber. Long rows of vehicles stood in the streets. Within the chamber each was assigned a seat appropriate to his rank.

Priests and chanters of the Vedas came in hundreds and after receiving tokens of respect from the king were seated in the hall.

Vibhishana, Suka, Prahasta and others bowed before the king and sat in their respective places. Devoted officers thronged the hall, all brave and efficient and waiting to fulfil the commands of their king.

The air was heavy with rich perfume. The assembly equalled Indra's in splendor and everyone felt that momentous decisions were to be taken. Ravana broke the hushed expectant silence of the great assembly in a voice deep and resonant as thunder.

He said: "You are strong, brave and skilled in the arts of peace and war. You can find a way out of every difficulty. Never so far has your advice miscarried. And so, once again, I seek your counsel. You know well what I have done. I have brought here Sita who was living in the

Dandaka forest. My desire for her so entirely possesses me that sending her back is to me unthinkable. She has not so far submitted to my wishes and entertains a foolish hope that Rama will come here and redeem her. I have told her that it is an impossible wish and a vain hope. Finally, she asked for a year's time and I gave it to her. I now seek your counsel. My desire is unfulfilled. I can never agree to sending Sita back and begging forgiveness from Rama. Till now neither you, my great warriors, nor I have known defeat in battle. True, a big monkey somehow contrived to cross the sea and wrought some mischief here. But hard indeed will it be for Rama and the Vanara army to cross the sea and come here. And even if they did come, what need we fear? What chance have they against us? On the other side of the sea, Rama, Lakshmana, Sugriva and the Vanaras are encamped. Think how we can slay Rama and Lakshmana. I should have summoned the Council earlier. But Kumbhakarna was in his period of sleep and I waited till he woke up."

Thus spoke Ravana, blinded by lust, hiding his real anxiety and mixing a little falsehood with truth. For Sita had not asked for a year's time. She had absolutely rejected his advances, but he asked her to reconsider and gave her a year's time.

63. VIBHISHANA

KUMBHAKARNA, the younger brother of Ravana, spoke in the assembly:

"Great King! Ignoring the principles of statecraft, you have run into a great danger. If you had any grievance against Rama and Lakshmana, you should have met them face to face and defeated and slain them before carrying off Sita. If you had acted thus, even Sita would have admired you and there would then have been a possibility of her accepting you. As waters flow down a mountain, she would

have followed a victorious warrior. You did not consult us before committing the offence and incurred the enmity of Rama, but now, when it is too late, you seek our counsel. This is not the right way of doing things that a king should follow."

Having spoken thus harshly, Kumbhakarna looked at the king and saw he was pained. Affectionate as he was brave, he could not endure the sadness in his brother's face.

"Let by-gones be by-gones," he thought, "one cannot forsake one's honor."

Kumbhakarna was under no delusion as to the consequences, but his generous spirit accepted them for the sake of the brother he idolised. He knew that Rama was a peerless warrior.

He knew the power of his bow and also the limitations of the boons that Ravana had received from the gods. But it was no good taking the heart out of others in the face of unavoidable peril and so he also began to speak vaunting words like the rest:

"What You did may be wrong, and so too the way you chose to do it. You have done first what you should have done last. And yet, it does not matter. I shall slay Rama. Do not be afraid. One or two of his arrows may touch me. In spite of it, I shall kill him and drink his blood and victory will be yours. My brother, lay aside your care, and think of other things."

Some people suggest that Kumbhakarna was dull and so he thus contradicted himself. But it was not stupidity, it was due to generous affection that he accepted the inevitable fearlessly. He was a proud warrior who loved his brother and his people and he decided on honorable death with them.

Prahasta was Ravana's chief counsellor. He spoke of the King's invincible strength and cheered him up.

Ravana now grew enthusiastic and said: "Didn't I vanquish Kubera? Didn't I drive him out and make Lanka my own? Who dare come here and oppose me? Let us see!"

The assembly applauded these words.

Vibhishana alone did not join in the applause. He did not mind the wrath of his royal brother. He felt it was his duty to warn him of the danger and the error of his ways.

He felt bound to make his utmost effort to save him and the Rakshasa race from doom. He stood up and spoke:

"You have brought Sita and with her, death for yourself and your race. Your first duty to yourself and your people is to restore her to Rama. If you fail in this, we shall all assuredly perish. This is certain."

He went on describing Rama's strength and skill and his mastery of weapons. He spoke frankly and without fear.

"If we oppose Rama," he said, "defeat is inevitable. Our fortune is sinking. Let us restore Sita, seek Rama's pardon and thus save our kingdom, our lives and possessions and honor."

At this importunity of Vibhishana, Indrajit, Ravana's son, lost patience and burst out:

"My uncle's words fill me with shame. What race are we? What is our strength? I marvel that a descendant of Pulastya should talk in this strain and that the assembly should meekly sit and listen. My uncle has only betrayed his evil intentions. We can never agree to his proposal. Are we to be afraid of two petty humans? Did I not beat Indra down in battle and his hordes of gods? Does not the whole world tremble even now in terror before us? Vibhishana's counsel is an insult to our race!"

Vibhishana answered gently: "Boy, you lack experience. That is why you talk thus. You are the king's son and should be

his best friend. But I am afraid you are proving yourself his worst enemy. And you, ministers who ought to give good advice, you are leading the king to ruin. My Lord of Lanka! Do not reject what I say. Return Sita honorably to Rama and seek his forgiveness. This is the only way. There is no other. Failing to pursue the only available course, we shall all perish."

Ravana's rage was now uncontrollable. "I put up with your talk thus far," he shouted in anger, "because you are my brother. Else you would by now be dead. A brother, I see, is one's worst enemy. All the world knows that the envy of brothers brings dishonor and discomfiture to the brave. They hide their real desire and wait for their time and, when it comes, do not hesitate to practise their treachery. How true is the complaint of the wild elephants in the story! We are not afraid of the burning fire. We do not mind the hunters and their long spears. The noosed ropes and the chains can do little harm to us. But the elephants which join the hunters and give us trouble, these brothers and cousins who turn against us, they are our terror!" Yes. So long as one is safe and prosperous, the brother smiles and talks pleasantly. But when danger comes, he is ready to leave. The bee does not stay with the flower after the honey has been sucked. It goes in search of another flower. Brothers and cousins are no better than these bees. One cannot trust them in adversity. If any one else should have spoken as you have done, Vibhishana, I would have slain him here and now. Base fellow! You are a disgrace to our race!"

Unable to bear the insult, Vibhishana rose and said: "My brother, you may speak as you please. Though you have wandered from the way of dharma, you are still my brother and I warn you that, drawn by the noose of Yama, you are going along the path of destruction. My

advice, salutary but unpleasant, you reject. It is easy to speak sweet words. Your ministers are doing it. I spoke for your good. But truth is bitter and you hate it. The terrible vision of Rama's darts destroying you is before my mind's eye and makes me speak as I do. You call me your enemy. Defend your city and your life as well as you can. God bless you! I am going. May you be happy! I thought I could serve you in your need, but you will not let me. You imagine that I envy you and your possessions. Good counsel is rejected by one whose end is near."

Having spoken thus, and realising that there was no place for him in Lanka thereafter, Vibhishana renounced all his possessions and, rising into the sky, proceeded straight to the spot where Rama and Lakshmana were encamped. Four good Rakshasa friends went along with him.

64. THE VANARA'S DOUBT

HAVING committed a sin and run into danger, Ravana did not see how to extricate himself. Like other kings in a quandary, he called a council for consultation. Many spoke flattering words. Only two spoke harshly.

One said: "You have committed a fault. But I will give up my life for you." This was Kumbhakarna.

The other, Vibhishana, said: "You have committed a sin, but there is still time for repentance and escape from consequences. If you take this right and wise course, we shall all escape destruction and live happily. Restore Sita and seek pardon of Rama."

"Never," said Ravana.

"Then our ways part and I leave you," said Vibhishana.

In a conflict of duties, each one follows his own nature. All cannot follow one and the same path.

Ravana's self-indulgent vanity would not let him admit his error or retrace his steps. Very rarely does one who has committed a sin confess defeat. It requires some courage of a bad sort to commit a sin. But it requires much greater courage of a noble kind to confess it.

It was this noble courage that Ravana lacked. When an evil is being perpetrated, the friends of the evil-doer face a difficult problem. Some are constrained against their better judgment to espouse the wrong cause through gratitude for past kindness, a sense of loyalty, or affinities of blood.

Others think it their duty to try and reform the sinner, regardless of his anger and hatred and consequent danger to themselves and if their efforts fail they part company from the sinner, rather than abandon dharma and give their support to the sinner who persists in crime. They hold that it can never be one's duty to support or cooperate with adharma.

It would indeed be adharma to refrain from doing one's best to reform the sinner or to cooperate in his sin. In the Ramayana, Kumbhakarna and Vibhishana represent these two different types. If Ravana had told Vibhishana: "Come, let us go to the Dandaka forest and carry off Sita," it is inconceivable that Vibhishana could have complied. That is why we respect Vibhishana.

"At least now restore Sita and be happy," Vibhishana said and tried to persuade Ravana. "Rama will surely forgive you. Take the way of dharma." But Ravana would not listen, and Vibhishana, as an enemy of sin, had no alternative but to part company from the perverse wickedness of Ravana. Hence it would be wrong to find fault with Vibhishana. And if we find fault with him, it is because our concern for dharma is weak.

But can we find fault with Kumbhakarna? We cannot do this either. He is one of those noble soldiers of lost causes whose faults we forgive for their selfless loyalty and sublime acceptance of death.

But, because we cannot condemn Kumbhakarna, it does not follow that we must condemn Vibhishana. There are some people today who rejoice in arguing against dharma and against Vibhishana; hence this elaboration of a simple point.

Men are restrained from evil by the wholesome fear that if they commit sin they would forfeit the affection and goodwill of their friends and kinsmen. This fear is a strong incentive to good behavior and its removal would be a serious loss in society.

All this is forgotten by those who argue that Vibhishana was a traitor. Ravana was the first, unfortunately by no means the last, to dub him by that name. Those who are anxious to retain the support of kinsfolk while pursuing evil ways disapprove of Vibhishana's conduct. But Vibhishana was not afraid of being a traitor. He would have nothing to do with adharma. His course was, however, not easy as we shall see.

The Vanara chieftains standing on the northern seashore saw all of a sudden the sky lit up with a golden glow like the summit of Mount Meru. It was too steady to be a flash of lightning.

In the brightness could be distinguished the forms of five big Rakshasas. Sugriva, the king and commander of the Vanaras, looking at them said: "There is no doubt these are Rakshasas come from Lanka with hostile designs."

On hearing this, the Vanara warriors armed themselves with trees and boulders and said: "Let us go. We shall intercept

and slay them and bring them down to earth."

Vibhishana, hearing these words of the Vanaras, showed no signs of fear but from above with calm courage spoke out in a clear voice:

"Vibhishana stands here before you, the brother of Ravana, the wicked king of the Rakshasas. I am here before you, none other than brother to Ravana, who killed Jatayu and carried off Sita by force and is now keeping her a prisoner in Lanka. In vain I strove to turn him from his wicked designs and counselled him to restore Sita and seek Rama's forgiveness. All the response I got was disdain and public insult. Hence I am standing here before you. Renouncing kingdom, wife and children, I seek service and sanctuary at Rama's feet. I pray you, convey this information to Rama."

Sugriva mistrusted the good faith of the Rakshasa king's brother and reported thus to Rama: "Vibhishana, the brother of Ravana, has come here with four Rakshasa friends seeking sanctuary at your feet. They are standing there in the sky. Consider well, you who are skilled in affairs, what should be done now. These Rakshasas are adepts in duplicity. They can make themselves invisible and do many other tricks. They have all the skill and courage of the wicked. One cannot trust them. I believe that these Rakshasas have been sent by Ravana himself. They have come here to mix with us for subversive purposes. Or else they intend seeking an opportunity to assassinate the leaders in our camp. Whatever Vibhishana may say, we cannot forget that he is the brother of our foe. By birth he belongs to the wicked Rakshasa race. How can we trust him? This is some trick of Ravana, I have no doubt. It is best to kill Vibhishana and his companions right now. If we admit him into our camp, he will betray us

at the first opportunity and return to his own people. Permit us, therefore, to destroy forthwith Ravana's brother and his followers."

Having thus frankly expressed his feelings at the sight of the Rakshasa, Sugriva stood in silence, awaiting Rama's reply. Rama listened and turned to Hanuman and other leaders and said:

"You have heard the words of the King who is well-versed in policy. Ravana's brother has come and waits there for our pleasure. I wish to know your opinion on this matter. In times of crisis, one should ask for the advice of friends. Tell me without reservation what you feel in your hearts."

Angada, the Vanara prince said: "He has come from our enemy's camp. We do not know whether he has come of his own accord or was sent by our foe. While perhaps it would not be right to reject him out of hand, it would be dangerous to accept him without testing him. Let us at least watch his behavior carefully without giving him any opening for mischief. If his movements are suspicious, we can throw him out. If they are friendly and show good faith, we shall accept him." Thus spoke the son of Vali.

Sarabha said: "I do not think it safe to admit him now or to decide later what to do with him. Even now, let us test him through skilful questioners and decide once and for all what to do with him."

Jambavan said: "Nothing can be discovered by testing such persons. If he has come here hiding treacherous intentions, no test can discover the truth. Ravana is our inveterate foe. His brother says that he has all of a sudden broken with him and come over to us. This sudden rupture with a brother is hard to believe. We have not yet crossed the sea. What is his motive in seeking safety with us while we are on this hither shore? All

this is very suspicious. They are a deceitful race. I think we should not admit him."

Mainda said: "How can we reject a man on mere suspicion? Only after careful examination can we decide how to deal with him. He says that he has forsaken Ravana and come over to us. We can find out the truth of this statement. Some of us should talk to him and then decide. Surely we have enough ability to do this."

Then Rama turned to Hanuman the wise.

65. THE DOCTRINE OF SURRENDER AND GRACE

IN response to Rama's invitation, Hanuman expressed his opinion in clear, sweet and pregnant words:

"Why should you ask for our advice? Not even Brihaspati has anything to tell you that you do not already know. If it is dangerous to admit Vibhishana, how is the danger met by delay and trial? Where is the time or opportunity for a test? More over, Vibhishana has not approached us stealthily. He has come to us with frank openness and a clear object. What is there for scouts to discover about him? It has been said by some that his sudden advent is suspicious. But why? What wonder is there if Vibhishana became disgusted with Ravana and foresaw his certain disgrace and a defeat? What wonder is there if he recognised your heroic virtues and nobility and the certainty of your victory? To me the time and manner of his coming give no room for suspicion. It has been suggested that before admitting him our leaders should put him questions and examine his answers. But one who knows that he is suspected would cease to speak or behave naturally. He would be afraid that we are out to find only faults in him. And thus his real nature will not be revealed. I see no cause for suspicion in the face or speech of this Rakshasa

suppliant. His carefree looks disclose a guiltless heart. The wise say that the face is a perfect mirror of the heart. I think that Vibhishana has come here honestly to seek sanctuary at your feet. And there is nothing strange in his action. He knows Ravana's real weakness. He knows that the lord of Lanka is fated to fall. He knows too that you have slain Vali and given his kingdom to Sugriva. Granting that his real motive is to secure for himself the sovereignty of Lanka, there is nothing wrong in it and certainly it is a guarantee that he will be loyal to us. Hence I feel that we should admit him."

The Vanara chiefs thus differed in their views. Kumbhakarna acted according to ordinary morality. This was a simple thing that everybody could understand. But Vibhishana followed a higher morality. The path he chose was more difficult and likely to be blamed.

He knew (how could anyone else know?) his inward suffering at the thought of Ravana's evil doings. Ordinary people could not sympathise with his situation. Hence the Vanaras failed to understand the conflict in his mind. Even today people find it hard, without elaborate explanation, to appreciate Vibhishana aright.

Patiently, Rama listened to the various views of the Vanara chiefs. When at last he heard Hanuman's words he was filled with joy.

Rama, steadfast in his own dharma, found satisfaction in Hanuman's utterance. A good man is glad when a friend's opinion supports his decision on a question of duty.

"If a man comes as a friend," said Rama, "how can I reject him? It is against the law of my life. All of you, my friends and helpers, should know this. Once a man surrenders himself, one should overlook all his faults."

But Sugriva was not satisfied. He said:

"This Rakshasa has on his own showing deserted his brother whose cause he considers lost. How can one put faith in a person who forsakes his own brother in his need?"

Valmiki records that on bearing these words of Sugriva, Rama turned to Lakshmana with a smile. Probably the smile was provoked by Sugriva's forgetfulness of his own fraternal conduct in his indignant condemnation of Vibhishana!

Rama said to Sugriva: "I see what you mean. But listen. It is natural for kings to suspect brothers and neighbor kings. Good kings who entertain no such suspicion are exceptions. Most kings imagine that brothers envy them. What wonder then if Ravana suspected and insulted Vibhishana? It follows that Vibhishana feared danger to himself if he stayed on in Lanka. I conclude therefore that he has no sinister motive against us in coming here for refuge. Let us go further and grant that he has eyes on the kingdom, expecting Ravana's defeat at our hands. Even in this ambition there is nothing wrong. Well, Lakshmana, can we expect all people to be like our Bharata?"

Having said this, Rama was silent for a moment, lost in remembrance of Bharata's selfless love. Then he spoke: "Who in the world is as lucky as I am? Who has a brother like Bharata? And what a father I had! His love for me was so great that his life fled when I came away to the forest. And my friends, who else is blessed like me with friends such as you?"

Having spoken thus he wiped the tears in his eyes, and went back to the subject on hand.

"I see no point in the argument that Vibhishana will forsake us, as he has forsaken his brother. He had cause for forsaking his brother, and can have none

for leaving us. We do not want Lanka, and if, as is natural, he wants it, he can get it only through our victory. From the point of view of policy, it would be a mistake to reject Vibhishana.

"But there is a stronger reason. When one comes to me for refuge, I cannot reject him. This is my dharma. It does not matter if as a result of this I suffer. Even at the cost of life I must do this duty of mine. Never can I deviate from it. Verily, I tell you, even if Ravana himself came to me for sanctuary, I would accept him without hesitation. How then can I reject his brother who has done me no wrong? Go and fetch Vibhishana."

"My Lord Rama! It is wonderful how clearly the right stands out demonstrated when you speak!" said Sugriva. "I see things clearly now. I shall go and bring Vibhishana. May he too become a loving friend of yours, even like us!" And Sugriva went to fetch Vibhishana.

In the Vaishnava tradition, this, episode, in which Vibhishana is taken by the prince into his camp and innermost council, is held to be as important as the Bhagavad Gita episode in the Mahabharata.

It illustrates the doctrine that the Lord accepts all who in absolute surrender seek shelter at his feet, regardless of their merits or defects. Their sins are burnt out by the mere act of surrender. This is a message of hope to erring humanity. It is the heart of the Vaishnava faith that there is hope for the worst of us if only we surrender ourselves to the Lord.

But why should I restrict this doctrine to the Vaishnava tradition? Is not this the heart of all the religious traditions in our land, yes, and of all the religions in the world? Every world teacher stresses this certainty of relief and redemption. It is not to Arjuna only that Krishna said: "Have no fear, cast off all doubt, I shall destroy

all your sins." Wherever in the world God has spoken to mankind in a human voice, He has given this assurance.

There are two ways in which we can regard Valmiki's account of Rama's acceptance of Ravana's brother. The poet describes the rules of policy, the matters to be examined before one can accept a visitor from the enemy's camp.

This is shown in the speeches of the Vanara king, the cultured and accomplished Hanuman, and Rama, the firm upholder of dharma. But in addition to right policy, we see here Rama's character and personality due to nature and nurture.

He said: "I cannot reject anyone who comes to me for protection. This is my dharma. If Ravana himself came to me, I would not reject him."

Those who look on Rama as an avatar of God find in this utterance the essence of scripture. The solemn assurance which Krishna gives to Arjuna later in the Gita, that assurance the Prince of Ayodhya declares in the presence of Sugriva and others in this Vibhishana episode of the Ramayana.

This divine assurance is the life and light that a world filled with sin and darkness, needs.

66. THE GREAT CAUSEWAY

MEANWHILE Ravana did something foolish. He sent a scout to seduce Sugriva from his loyalty to Rama. This Rakshasa, Suka by name, flew across and in disguise met Sugriva in secret and with every appearance of benevolent solicitude spoke to him thus:

"Ravana, the king of Lanka, has sent me because of his affection and regard for you. He sends you his fraternal greetings. You are a king and he is another and there is no sense in your staking your high heritage and making common cause with a disinherited prince against an all-

powerful king. If Ravana desired Rama's wife and carried her off, how does it concern you? What do you lose by it? Consider well and choose your course with description. It is most expedient that you and your army should return forthwith to Kishkindha."

But Sugriva's response was scornful and definite:

"Base fellow! Go and tell your king that he is no brother of mine. He is wicked and, being an enemy of my friend Rama, he is my enemy too and we are out to rid the world of him and his wicked gang. He is a fool to imagine that he can offend Rama and still survive. Tell him that there is no escape for him, tell him all this as from me."

When Sugriva delivered this message to the Rakshasa spy the Vanaras caught hold of him and began to handle him roughly but Rama sternly forbade it and set him free to go the way he came. The spy rushed back to Lanka and conveyed the result of his adventure to Ravana.

As soon as Vibhishana's adherence was accepted by Rama, Lakshmana and Sugriva crowned Vibhishana king of Lanka and performed the abhisheka with seawater. Vibhishana pledged unchanging friendship to Rama and Rama in turn gave his word that he would not return to Ayodhya without slaying Ravana.

Then Sugriva, Vibhishana and Lakshmana deliberated on how to cross the sea. They thought it best to begin with a prayer to the ocean-god and submitted their opinion to Rama.

Rama accepted their counsel and, spreading darbha grass on the seashore and laying himself on it, began a fast, addressing his request for a passage across, to the king of the sea.

For three days he prayed to the god of the sea but received no response. Then Rama, his eyes glowing with anger at the

sea-god's arrogance, turned to Lakshmana and said:

"The low-minded mistake courtesy and gentleness for want of strength. Mildness is simply wasted on them. See now how I shall bring this misproviding sea to its senses with my arrows which shall not only choke it with the carcasses of mighty fish but even dry it up with their fierce odour. Bring me my bow and quiver, O Soumitra!"

Then bow in hand and blazing with wrath like the destroying fire at the end of the world he shot arrows irresistible as thunderbolts into the bosom of the sea. These missiles of power disturbed the sea to its depths carrying death and dismay to all it contained and presently the tortured waters began to exhale steam in their agony.

It looked as though Rama in his wrath would convert the sea with its infinitude of waters into a desert of blazing dust bereft of all life. The sea-god could stand it no longer. Shining like the rising sun behind Mount Meru, he appeared and stood before Rama.

With folded hands he said:

"My Lord Ramachandra! I am subject to the laws of nature like the earth, the air, space, light, and all constituents of the universe. How can I depart from my nature, which is to be vast, deep, wave-filled, and impassable? But this I can do. Ask the Vanaras to bring boulders and trees to build a causeway. I shall permit it. I shall help you by receiving and keeping in place the rocks and trees. This is all that I can do and I shall also show the most favorable place for this causeway. There is Nala, son of Viswakarma, with you, who has the ability to build this path. May victory be yours."

Rama, true to his nature, graciously accepted the sea god's apology and offer of help. And then, ordered by Rama, they

all began to work. Thousands of Vanaras went at it with enthusiasm and soon finished building the causeway.

Valmiki describes the work at length. He sings with gusto of the noise and confusion of the gigantic project. The Vanaras went to the mountains and forests and, plucking rocks and trees, dragged them to the shore. The bigger Vanaras brought big boulders and threw them into the sea. As they fell down, the water splashed up sky-high.

Nala stood and supervised their labors. The leaders in charge of companies kept them active. On top of the rocks and trees, when the base was firm, a dressing of grass and little pieces of wood was given to produce a level surface. The noise raised by the dam-builders drowned the roar of the ocean.

The construction was complete. The new path shone across the sea like the milky way in the sky. Hosts of gods above rejoiced, as hosts of Vanaras shouted below in exultation. The gods and the rishis uttered benedictions.

Then they went on the causeway. Hanuman carried Rama on his shoulders and Angada carried Lakshmana on his. The Vanara army crossed the sea. There is a principle expounded here. As Rama stood bow in hand, the ocean-god bowed before him with clasped hands and said:

"Dear Ramachandra! Earth, air, ether, water, fire, these five elements must follow the eternal laws of their nature. Tempted by pleasure or reward or frightened of punishment, can I ever swerve from my nature? Can water harden and become stone? Or can I reduce my depths into a shallow pond for your easy crossing?"

Thus the ocean king protested with all politeness to Sri Rama. Valmiki puts into the mouth of the ocean king a fundamental of our religious philosophy.

He explains the primordial relationship between God and Nature.

God's law operates in and through Nature. The laws of nature were created so that the universe may proceed by itself. So too the law of Karma. The five elements, all objects without life as well as all living creatures, must follow their own permanent laws.

According to the Hindu Shastras, Nature itself, the sequence and chain of cause and effect, the properties of matter, and the law of Karma, all are ordained permanently by God.

Nature itself is a witness to God. He is not proved by a suspension of the laws of nature. This is expounded clearly in the ninth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita:

"Under my supervision Nature gives rise to all that exists movable and immovable, and the universe, evolves from this cause."

This is put briefly by Valmiki in the speech of the ocean king. Malyavan, the aged Rakshasa, tried his best to impress on Ravana the error of his ways. He said:

"Your time of good fortune is over. Your sins have begun to bear their fruit and to dim your radiance. You can trust no longer the boons you have obtained from the gods. Make peace with your enemies. Look at the army that has arrived, the terrible host of Vanaras and bears. Look at this wonderful causeway so quickly built. It seems to me, this Rama is Vishnu himself come in human form."

Ravana had no patience with such talk. "Your words are wormwood in my ear," he cried. "It looks as though you too have joined my enemies. Are not human beings well known to be weaklings? Why are you afraid of this wretched man driven into the forest by his father? And he relies on the support of monkeys and bears! Of such a man you are afraid."

Really I am ashamed of you. Or could it be that you cannot bear to see me happy? Why do you talk like this to me? I cannot bend before Rama. If it is wrong policy or wrong ethics, I cannot help it. You may take it that it is part of my nature and I cannot change it. I would far rather die fighting than sue before Rama for peace!"

Malyavan replied: "Consider well and do what you think best." And he returned home, uttering the usual benedictory words: "Victory to the King! Victory to Ravana!"

The old man was Ravana's grandfather.

Ravana carefully stationed his warriors. He posted Prahasta at the eastern entrance, Mahaparsva and Mahodara at the southern entrance and Indrajit, his illustrious son, accomplished in the arts of secret magic, at the western entrance, while he decided himself to guard the northern entrance. Virupaksha, the mighty, was appointed commander of the army within the city.

Having ordered the disposition of his forces and chief warriors, he felt he had ensured victory. As his end was approaching, he listened to no one and foolishly believed himself unconquerable. The ministers raised shouts of victory to please the King and then dispersed.

Rama, Sugriva, Vibhishana and others held a council of war. Vibhishana duly laid before the council the information gathered by scouts who had gone out and watched Ravana's arrangements.

"In numbers, strength and courage," Vibhishana said, "the army now mobilised by Ravana surpasses that with which he opposed Kubera. Still I have no doubt of Rama's victory."

Rama distributed his forces to meet Ravana's disposition and assigned to each commander the task he was to perform. He ordered Nila to meet Prahasta at the

eastern gate. Angada was to meet Mahaparsva and Mahodara at the southern entrance. At the western entrance Hanuman was to encounter Indrajit, the master of black magic.

"Lakshmana and I shall meet Ravana, the terror of the world, and we shall direct the assault on Lanka. Sugriva, Jambavan and Vibhishana shall stay behind with our main army." The army rested for the night on Mount Suvela. The following morning, standing on the mountaintop, they took a good look at Lanka.

The beautiful city on the summit of Trikuta seemed as if suspended from the sky. Behind the thick fortress wall the Rakshasa army stood sentry, looking like another massive wall. Observing the great and beautiful buildings in Lanka, Rama was moved to pity. And he said:

"Alas! Because one person, drawn by the noose of time, has committed a sin, all this wealth and the whole Rakshasa race must now be destroyed. Alas that this scion of a noble race should forget his real greatness and pull death and destruction on himself and his people!"

Rama continued: "However, we should now bend all our thoughts to the task before us to win this battle and destroy Ravana. There will be much confusion in the course of the battle. The Rakshasas will try to deceive us with many disguises. Let the Vanaras and bears retain their own shape while fighting. Vibhishana and his friends alone need assume human forms, like Lakshmana and myself. The Rakshasas, our enemies, will never take the form of man or monkey. They would think it beneath their dignity to do so. If we stand together maintaining due order we can know who is who, slay our enemies and help our friends."

67. THE BATTLE BEGINS

THE Vanara army descended from Mount Suvela and entered the forest

adjoining the city of Lanka. As the army burst in like a flood the frightened beasts and birds in the forest fled in all directions.

Valmiki describes the scene and the event in his characteristic style. Gazing now from below at the mountain fortress and the divinely beautiful city constructed by Viswakarma, Rama was again filled with wonder and exclaimed:

"Oh what beauty! What wealth."

The Vanaras, for their part, noted the Rakshasa warriors' strength and readiness for battle, the thick walls and mighty engines of defence.

From Lanka, all ready for war, the sounds of drums and trumpets issuing from the city increased the eagerness of the Vanaras for battle. The army stood in ordered divisions as instructed by Rama.

Looking at Lanka he said: "Lakshmana! Look at the beauty of the city."

His mind turned to Sita. She would have known by now, he thought, of his arrival with the army and her depressed heart must have revived. But he spoke nothing of this and engaged himself in the arrangements for the army.

Suddenly, and without any noise or warning to any one, Sugriva sprang up into the sky and alighted on the terrace on top of tower in Lanka, where he saw Ravana seated clad in red royal robes like a thick black cloud seen in the red evening sky. The scar caused by the tusk of Indra's elephant, shone like a crescent moon on his chest.

"Ravana! You are caught!" cried Sugriva. "I am a friend and servant of Rama. This is your last day!"

And he sprang on him, knocked off his crown and gave him a mighty blow. The two wrestled together for a long time. Both were experts in wrestling. All the tricks of that science were tried by each.

Ravana was at the end of his resources and so he discarded wrestling and took to magic and Sugriva seeing this disentangled himself and sprang back to where Rama was.

The Vanara leaders, who saw the son of Surya return, shouted praises and made a great noise of congratulations at this daring-do, rash and reckless no doubt, but such as would give the Rakshasas some idea of the mettle of the foes they were up against.

Rama too was glad to see that Sugriva had returned safe. Observing bleeding wounds on his body, he said:

"Sugriva! I am filled with wonder and joy at this, your valorous exploit. But what you did was not right. It is not for a king to rush into risks. How could you suddenly and without consulting anyone take such a dangerous course?"

Sugriva confessed his fault.

"True, it was improper to rush into battle without consulting you. But when I saw the villain who had insulted Sita I was overwhelmed by anger and forgot my duty."

The Vanara army surrounded Lanka on all sides in the manner laid down by Rama.

Rama sent for Angada and said to him:

"Prince! Take this message from me to Ravana. Tell him: 'Great sinner, your end is approaching. Rama waits at your fortress gate, ready for battle. Trusting to the boons of the gods, you have become proud and wicked. You have troubled the world too long and committed too many heinous sins. The time has now come for the world to be cleansed of you. If you come out into the open and fight and die in battle, your sins will be washed away and you will gain a place in the world above as a hero. But if you love your life, humbly restore Sita to her lord and beg for forgiveness. Then you can escape with

life. Whatever happens, you are fit to be king no longer. The kingdom of Lanka now belongs to Vibhishana. He is worthy to rule and protect his people. If you are not willing to surrender and seek safety, then have your obsequies performed in advance. Bid final farewell to all your dear possessions in Lanka. Prepare for death. Come out and meet Rama in battle.' Go, Angada, deliver this message to Ravana."

As instructed by Rama, bold Angada delivered his message: "Listen, Ravana. I am the son of Vali whom you no doubt remember. I have come as Rama's messenger. The time for your liberation from sin has come. You may, if you choose, die in battle and attain the swarga of brave men, cleansed of your foul sins. But if life is dear to you, you may beg it of Rama after humble surrender, and he never refuses mercy to a suppliant. If what I have heard about you is true, you will elect to fight, which means you choose to die. I would advise you to take last leave of your kinsfolk and complete your obsequies yourself, for none of your race will be left to perform them. Look your last on lovely Lanka!"

Ravana's rage flared up like a flame. "Seize him, kill him, the villain!" he shouted.

At once, two Rakshasas caught hold of Angada. He rose in the sky carrying these two Rakshasas on either side of him and then flung them down.

He rose higher up and, coming down kicked and broke off the tower of the king's palace. Then with a single leap he returned to where Rama was.

Dazed by Angada's exploit, the Rakshasas were filled with fear, but they did not disclose it. Ravana, too, heaved a heavy sigh at the sight of the broken turret. He looked on it as a bad omen.

As soon as Angada returned, Rama issued orders to the army to begin the assault on Lanka.

68. SITA'S JOY

SUKA, the Rakshasa scout, went and reported to Ravana: "I did my job according to your instructions. But my efforts were fruitless. They were rough with me and made me feel thankful to be allowed to come back. Rama, to whom it was sport to slay Viradha, Kabandha, Khara and others, has arrived with the army of Sugriva. They have somehow come to know of the place where Sita is held captive. The bears and monkeys have crossed the sea and are standing ready for battle before Lanka. The visible earth is covered with this army. There is nothing to be gained by discussions and debates. Their strife can only be quenched with our blood, Oh King! Consider well what needs to be done, and do it."

And then he added with fear, in a suppressed voice: "We may yet escape if Sita is restored."

Ravana was enraged. "What did you say?" he cried. "Let no one talk to me of Sita being restored. They do not know my strength who talk like this. I can slay the gods, the Vanaras, the Gandharvas and the Yakshas. My darts can burn up Indra himself and Yama too. Wait and see how this wretched fellow Rama and his army will be destroyed."

Ravana believed what he said. He had dwelt long on his previous achievements and, filled with pride, had become foolishly obstinate.

Then he sent for two of his ministers and told them: "Scouts have come and reported that a large army has built a causeway to Lanka and has come over here. This is indeed strange news, but as yet nothing serious has happened. Go and observe the enemy and bring me a full and detailed report of their strength."

Accordingly, the spies assumed the shape of Vanaras and coming to Rama's camp and mixing with the other Vanaras looked all around. But Vibhishana, discovering their disguise, caught hold of them and produced them before Rama. They pleaded that they were mere messengers sent by their king and prayed for release.

Rama said: "Show them our army. Let them have a good look around before they return. Give them free and full opportunity to see our strength. And, Oh you Rakshasa messengers! When you go back to Ravana, tell him, 'The strength on which you relied when you carried Sita away is to be put now to the test. Your fortress, your city and your army will be destroyed, Rama's darts will pierce your body.' Yes, convey this message to your king."

The spies heard Rama's words and agreed to convey them to their master. Then, impelled perhaps by force of habit, they said: "Victory to thee!" The Vanara army took this to be a fine omen.

The spies went back to Ravana and said: "O King! We were discovered by Vibhishana and were in fear of death but Rama would not let them kill us and he ordered our release. King! Our enemies are determined. Rama and Lakshmana, Sugriva the Vanara king and Vibhishana, they are all of one mind. It is difficult for us to prevail against an army led by such warriors. We have seen Rama, son of Dasaratha. He impressed us as being by himself strong enough to destroy our city and army. We have seen the courage of the Vanaras and their eagerness for battle. It is not expedient to try the fortune of war with them. It seems best to restore Sita to Rama. Do consider what should be done."

Of course the advice was sincere and well meant, but Ravana could not control his fury. He said: "Even if the whole

world turns against me, I shall not yield to fear. Even if all the Devas, Gandharvas and Vanaras join together to oppose me, I shall not return Sita. Because you were thrashed by the enemy, you give me this cowardly advice. Faint hearts! Where is the foe who can vanquish me?"

Having said this, he went to his high tower and himself surveyed the enemy's strength. His ministers and officers were with him.

Those who had gone out to reconnoitre described at length the Vanara chiefs and the army behind them. They recounted the strength of that huge army of bears and monkeys gathered together from the far-flung forests, mountains and river-valleys of the world.

They spoke of their physical strength and courage, their firm devotion to Rama, their unity and eagerness to slay the Rakshasas. All those that had gone confirmed this. "Look!" one of them said. "That majestic and graceful youth with matted locks and bow in hand is Rama. See how he looks round him with eyes of love and command and how his glances seem to brighten the quarters and to fill all with devotion and confidence. The mighty armed warrior near him is his brother Lakshmana, a peerless bowman and Rama's second soul. And look! Next to him is Sugriva, wearing Vali's garland. He is the equal of Vali himself. There, next to him you see Vibhishana, your brother. It is not easy to vanquish such warriors. Consider well and take all steps necessary for victory in such a situation."

As the ministers extolled the strength of the enemy, Ravana's rage grew more and more furious. This is the way of a tyrant. The wise king is never angry with those who bring him true information or with ministers who give him good advice for his welfare. But now Ravana's mind

was confused. He had no use for true facts or good advice.

His thought followed a strange line. He judged Rama by his own character. He thought that, if Sita could be made somehow to yield to him, Rama would return home disgraced and broken hearted. Hence he resolved to make one last attempt with a different technique.

He sought the help of a Rakshasa sorcerer. "Oh, Lightning-Tongue!" he said (that was his name), "prepare a head which looks so exactly like Rama's that it will deceive Rama's nearest and dearest into believing it is his. When I send for you, come to the park where Sita is incarcerated and place it before her."

The sorcerer agreed to do as he was bidden.

Then Ravana went once again to the Asoka Park and tried to beguile Sita. "Your husband and his army have been destroyed," he said. "My warriors crossed the sea and attacking Rama and his monkeys, when they were tired and asleep, killed them all. A warrior has brought the head of your husband for me to see. Why do you still persist in your obstinacy? Join my wives now and reign as their chief. Take my advice and become the queen of Lanka."

Then he ordered a Rakshasa to fetch Vidyut-Jihva, the sorcerer. The conjurer came and placed before Sita a head that looked exactly like Rama's.

Startled by the sight, Sita cried, "So then, is this my fate?" and broke into hopeless lamentation.

Meanwhile, Rama's army had come close to Lanka and the ministers and generals sent word to Ravana desiring an immediate interview. Ravana, therefore, had to leave Sita at once and go to the Assembly Hall.

Ravana's presence was necessary to keep up the sorcerer's illusion. So, when

he left the place, the apparition of Rama's head vanished like smoke. Sarama, who was a lady of the royal household posted as a companion of Sita, consoled her explaining the illusion. She said: "No one has killed Rama. He has reached Lanka at the head of a great army. They have built a wonderful causeway across the sea and are all over Lanka like a submerging sea. The Rakshasas are panic-stricken. Ravana is only trying to deceive you through sorcery."

Sarama went on to inform Sita: "Several ministers advised Ravana to restore you and save himself by unconditional submission. But he would not listen to them. 'I may perish in battle,' he said, 'but I will not bow, a suppliant before Rama. I shall never return Sita and sue for peace.' Holy lady! No harm can come to you, Rama will surely triumph and this wicked one will perish."

Even as Sarama was speaking, the noise of the drums and trumpets sounded by the Vanara army reached Sita's ears and filled her with joy. She knew that Ravana's end was near. The Rakshasas in Lanka heard the same noise and trembled in fear.

69. SERPENT DARTS

RAVANA as duly informed that Rama's Vanara host surrounded Lanka like a tumultuous sea. In an angry mood he went up the tower of his mansion and surveyed the scene. On every side he saw Vanara warriors who had armed themselves with trees and boulders. He wondered how he could destroy this vast invading force.

At the same time, Rama saw the City of Lanka guarded by the Rakshasas. He could see with his mind's eye the sad figure of Sita held captive within those walls. He ordered an immediate assault.

Shouting: "Victory to the Vanara king! Victory to Rama and Lakshmana! Polish

off the Rakshasas," the Vanara army rushed on the doomed city. Some hurled big boulders against the fortress wall and on the city gates. Others armed with huge trees torn up by the roots rushed on the Rakshasas.

Then Ravana sent forth a big army. He commanded it to go out and slay at once all the Vanaras. They beat their drums and blew their trumpets till the sky resounded. They fell upon the Vanaras. The Vanaras used boulders and trees and their own nails and fists to oppose the Rakshasas. Thousands fell dead on either side. The field was covered with blood and mangled bodies.

Besides this gruesome engagement, there were many duels between individual warriors. Angada encountered Indrajit like Rudra against Yama. There was a duel between the Rakshasa Prajangha and Sampati, one of the companions of Vibhishana. Hanuman fought a duel with Jambumali, Nila with Nikumbha, Lakshmana with Viroopaksha, and so on.

The chariot and horses of Indrajit were destroyed and Angada received a blow from the mace of Indrajit. Jambumali hit Hanuman with his weapon and Hanuman smashed his chariot to pieces. The Rakshasas concentrated their attack on Rama, and fell in thousands under his arrows.

Vidyunmali aimed his darts at Sushena. The latter smashed with a rock the chariot of the Rakshasa. Vidyunmali jumped out with his mace and attacked Sushena who crushed him to death with a rock. In this way many warriors fought and many died.

The battle raged throughout the day. And at night the Rakshasas would not stop fighting. The battle became fierce. Blood flowed in streams. There was terrible slaughter on both sides. Angada attacked Indrajit, slew his horses and charioteer and smashed the chariot. The Vanaras

admired the skill and strength of their prince and raised shouts of joy.

All the warriors in the army praised the Vanara prince's prowess. Indrajit lost his temper along with his chariot and resorted to sorcery. Making himself invisible he aimed many darts at Rama and Lakshmana who were greatly harassed at this attack from a foe whose whereabouts no one could discover and who seemed to shower deadly missiles from all sides.

Then Indrajit shot serpent darts at Rama and Lakshmana. Bound by them, they could not move and lay helpless on the battlefield. They looked at one another, wondering what to do. Lakshmana's grief at Rama's plight was great. As for the Vanaras they stood round in mournful bewilderment.

Indrajit congratulated the Rakshasa army and returned to the city. Exulting in his victory, he went to his father and announced that the story of Rama and Lakshmana was over. Ravana was beside himself with joy. He embraced his son and praised his prowess.

The Vanara warriors wounded and downcast, seeing Rama and Lakshmana laid low, concluded that all was over. Vibhishana, who saw Sugriva standing helpless and forlorn, put courage in the Vanara king. "It is foolish to lose hope," he said. "Look at Rama and Lakshmana. Their faces are still bright. They are not dead. Be not afraid. Soon they will recover from this swoon and resume fighting."

The chief took heart and did everything to save the army from panic. The ranks were reformed with their respective chiefs. Meanwhile Ravana had it proclaimed in Lanka that Rama and Lakshmana had been slain by Indrajit. He sent for his women and said to them: "Go at once and inform Sita that Rama is no more; that the two princes lie dead on the

battlefield and the Vanara army is destroyed. Also, to convince her finally, take her in the Pushpaka Vimana and show her the battlefield from above. Let the obstinate one see for herself what has happened. Seeing that she has now no one to look to besides myself, she will turn to me."

The Rakshasis did as they were told. From the Vimana Sita saw the field of battle. She saw Rama and Lakshmana lying motionless on the ground with their weapons scattered by their side. She was filled with grief. She thought that it was now all over and cried: "To this end has fate brought me, giving the lie to the predictions of saints and astrologers that I would live as a happy wife and mother and a glorious queen. Poor Kausalya! Who shall console you now. Like one who, having, crossed the ocean, gets drowned in a little pond, these warriors, who had done so much, lie dead now. Oh princes! How did your divine weapons fail you. Alas, all-powerful is destiny!"

When Sita was thus in the desperation of utter sorrow, Trijata, her Rakshasi companion, who was looking closely at the motionless figures of the princes, suddenly burst out: "Dear Sita, there is no cause for grief. Neither your husband nor Lakshmana is dead. Look at their faces. Is this how the dead look? They are bound by a charmed weapon and are unconscious for a while. Look at the orderly array of the army. Have courage. Be not frightened." Her words fell like nectar in Sita's ears. The Vimana returned to Lanka and Sita was taken back to the Asoka Vana.

In time the force of the arrows charged with sorcery weakened. Rama opened his eyes and sat up. Though sorely wounded, he recovered his strength by an exercise of will power and sat up. He looked at his brother lying on the ground and cried out:

"Alas! What is the use of victory now for me? Why did I bring you, dear brother, with me to the forest and get you killed like this? How can I return without you to Ayodhya? You used ever to console me in my sorrow. You are silent now when I face the greatest sorrow. How can I survive you? Where in the world is a warrior like you? One can replace anything lost, but where can I find anyone to fill your place? Like Kartaviryarjuna with his thousand hands, you with your two hands discharged showers of arrows and slew the Rakshasas. How could death come to you? You came with me into the forest, and now I shall repay my debt to you by joining with you to the abode of Yama. I confess defeat. The word I gave to Vibhishana cannot be fulfilled. Oh Vanara king! Return to Kishkindha with all your warriors. You have worked hard for me. You have fulfilled all the duties of friendship. You have my gratitude. But there is no use in more of you dying. Go back to your city. Let me perish here." Thus did Rama lament in helpless grief.

Then Vibhishana arrived there, mace in hand. Seeing his huge dark form, the Vanaras imagined it was Indrajit again and started to fly.

In another part of the battlefield Sugriva and Angada were discussing. "Why are the Vanaras thus beginning to scatter in fear? What has happened?" asked Sugriva.

Angada answered, "Do you not know that Rama and Lakshmana are lying wounded?"

Sugriva said: "It is not that. Look at the way they are running helter-skelter. There must be some other reason for it."

Then he learnt that the Vanaras, who had suffered at the hands of Indrajit, mistook Vibhishana for him and were frightened. He sent Jambavan to rally the troops by disabusing them of this fear.

Vibhishana looked at Rama and Lakshmana. When he saw them wounded, covered with arrows all over, and unable to fight, he broke down crying: "It is all over. What more is there to do?"

Sugriva turned to Sushena, his uncle, and said: "Take Rama and Lakshmana to Kishkindha. I shall kill Ravana, redeem Sita, and bring her there."

Sushena answered: "There are herbs which can heal the wounds of the princes and restore them to health. Some of us know where these herbs are to be found. Here is Hanuman. If you send him, he will fetch the herbs."

As they were speaking, the sea and air were churned up by a mighty wind and the great bird Garuda burst into view. When Garuda arrived, the serpent darts that covered Rama and Lakshmana disappeared instantaneously. They were all venomous serpents which had become arrows through the magic of Indrajit and had bound the princes' bodies.

When their inveterate and dreaded enemy Garuda appeared, they took flight. Then Garuda gently stroked the bodies of Rama and Lakshmana and restored to them their full strength. The wounds were all healed and they rose up, stronger and more radiant than before.

And Rama asked: "Who are you, my benefactor?" He did not know that he was Vishnu and Garuda was his own bird on which he always rode.

Garuda answered, "I am your good friend, and old companion. Glory is yours! Let me go now. When the battle is ended, we shall know each other better." Saying thus Garuda bird flew away.

Seeing Rama and Lakshmana fully recovered and ready for battle, the Vanaras were enthusiastic once again and resumed attacking Ravana's fortress.

70. RAVANA'S DEFEAT

RAVANA from within his palace was surprised to hear, borne on the wind, the jubilant acclamations of the Vanaras, who he thought must then be mourning their vanquished leaders and slaughtered comrades. He turned to the Rakshasas standing beside him and asked: "What has happened to make the Vanaras so happy? Something strange must have occurred. Go and find out what it is."

Some Rakshasas climbed up and looked over the wall. Returning, they said to Ravana with fear and trembling: "King! The Vanara army, led by Sugriva, is attacking the fortress with spirit. Rama and Lakshmana are both alive. Like elephants that have broken their bonds, Rama and Lakshmana have shaken off the naga darts with which Indrajit bound them and have rejoined the army and are raging about the field like hungry lions. The darts of Indrajit have proved futile."

Ravana's face fell. He was filled with anxiety and said: "I marvel at what you say. No one till now has escaped these darts. If those weapons were powerless against these men, we are in deed in danger."

Then with an access of anger, he shouted: "Listen, Dhumraksha! Why should I worry when you are here? Get together all the men you want. Go at once and destroy these two little men and return quickly."

Dhumraksha was indeed happy and proud to be thus singled out by the king. He took a party of warriors and, issuing out of the fort, came into contact with the group who, under Hanuman, were attempting to enter the western gate. In the battle that ensued there was great slaughter on both sides. In the end Dhumraksha was slain by Hanuman. A few Rakshasas escaped into the fortress, but most of them lay dead without.

News of this discomfiture filled Ravana with uncontrollable fury. He hastily summoned Vajradamshttra and said: "Oh bravest of warriors, go without delay and destroy these wicked fellows."

Vajradamshttra bowed low before the king and followed by a mighty army sallied out of the southern gate and encountered Angada.

The Rakshasas under the leadership of Vajradamshttra waged grim battle and slew countless Vanaras. And yet the Vanara army stood firm and would not withdraw. Armed with boulders and trees, they killed innumerable Rakshasas. On both sides the fighting was intense. In the end, Angada and the Rakshasa chief fought hand to hand for a long while. Vajradamshttra was slain, gallantly fighting to the last, and the Rakshasas fled in confusion. The Vanaras surrounded Angada and shouted in exultation.

Then Ravana ordered Prahasta: "Send Akampana and let him have the most terrible Rakshasas to accompany him. Let them go and slay Rama, Sugriva and the Vanara army. None can resist Akampana's might and skill."

Accordingly, Prahasta sent an army of Rakshasas under the leadership of Akampana. True to his name, Akampana was firm and immovable in battle. He had chosen his weapons and his warriors carefully. As he advanced, bad omens met him. But neither he nor his followers regarded them. The noise of their challenge rose above that of the ocean.

A great battle ensued. Blood flowed in streams. Dust rose and cut off the sun plunging the earth in portentous gloom. The slaughter on both sides was enormous. Kumuda, Nala, Mainda and Dwivida attacked Akampana who defended himself with courage.

The battle went against the Vanara warriors and they were about to take flight

when Hanuman arrived bringing courage and hope. Akampana sent forth a shower of arrows at him but Hanuman took no notice and lifting a huge boulder and swinging it above his head hurled it at Akampana. The Rakshasa's darts intercepted the stone and reduced it to powder.

Then Hanuman grew in size and shone with blinding brightness like the sun and uprooting a big tree attacked the Rakshasa with it and slew him. The Rakshasa army was smashed like a forest in an earthquake and the survivors fled in panic from the fatal field that was strewn thick with the dead, and spread the dismal news in Lanka. The Vanaras surrounded Hanuman and uproariously expressed their admiration.

Ravana's spirits fell when he received the news of Akampana's death but he found strength in anger and desperation and began hinking of new plans. He went round the defences of the city again and took counsel with Prahasta, the commander-in chief.

"We must break this Vanara siege. We should issue at the head of the whole army and slay the Vanara chiefs. Myself, Kumbhakarna, yourself, Indrajit or Nikumbha, one of us five should take up the responsibility of leading the army out of the fortress. Are we to be afraid of monkeys? Why! They used to flee in terror on merely hearing the roar of a Rakshasa. They do not know the science of war. They are unskilled brutes. How have they managed to stand all our attacks?"

Prahasta answered humbly: "Things have happened as we foresaw. We respectfully submitted long ago that it would be best to restore Sita and make peace. But I am bound to obey you. I am prepared to sacrifice my life, my family,

my all for your sake. I shall lead this sortie, if such is your pleasure."

A huge army was collected and everything was got ready for a supreme endeavor, including the solemnisation of special rites and sacrifices.

Then Prahasta marched out to the beating of drums. Evil omens presented themselves. But he disregarded them.

Seeing the great army led by Prahasta issuing out of the eastern gate of the fortress, the Vanaras roared with joy and prepared for battle.

Like moths rushing at a flame, the Rakshasas fell on the Vanara army.

"Look," said Rama, "there comes out a Rakshasa at the head of an enormous army. Who is he?"

Vibhishana replied: "It is Prahasta, the commander-in-chief of Ravana. A third of the imperial army is his to command."

Then ensued a grim battle between the Vanaras armed with boulders and trees and the Rakshasa equipped with swords, spears, bows and axes. Exchanging showers of stones for arrows and grappling in death grips at close quarters, both sides fought fiercely, deluging the field with blood.

Prahasta's followers, Narantaka, Mahanada, Kumbhahanu and others were opposed by Dwivida, Durmukha and Jambavan and stain. There was a prolonged battle between Prahasta and Nila. At last Prahasta, armed with a massive mace of iron rushed towards Nila. Nila, for his part, uprooted a big boulder and with it smashed Prahasta's head killing him on the spot.

The Rakshasa warriors fled in all directions. After this great victory, Nila went to Rama, and Lakshmana and, bowing low, told them what happened. Rama and Lakshmana praised his prowess and congratulated him.

Some of those who fled from the battle carried to the Rakshasa King the news that Nila, son of Agni, had slain Prahasta. Ravana was beside himself with rage and grief. "My warrior chief," he said, "who could vanquish Indra and his host of gods, has been killed by these Vanaras. We cannot treat this lightly. We must destroy Rama and the monkey host." So saying, Ravana got into his chariot and went forward like Rudra, the destroyer. Seated in his radiant chariot and issuing from the city, Ravana beheld the Vanara army and heard their uproar which resounded like the ocean.

Seeing a new Rakshasa army issuing out, the Vanaras stood ready to receive them with stones and trees in hand. Vibhishana pointed out the Rakshasa warriors one by one to Rama. "There seated in the chariot and shining like the rising sun, is Indrajit." And so he went on from one renowned warrior to another till he came to Ravana. "There, in the big chariot, radiant like the sun, sits the ten-headed Ravana."

Rama beheld the majestic and glowing form with interest and pity. "A great warrior no doubt," he said, "but he is so wicked that he has to be slain."

Ravana attacked innumerable Vanaras and laid them low. Nila opposed Ravana gallantly but was felled by a fire-dart. Hanuman attacked Ravana with violence and the two fought an equal battle for a while but Ravana could not be subdued and wrought great havoc in the Vanara host.

There was a fight between Lakshmana and Ravana. Lakshmana fell down unconscious but Hanuman intervened and carried Lakshmana away to Rama.

Then Rama, riding on Hanuman's shoulders, gave battle to Ravana. The Rakshasa king was sorely wounded. His olden crown was broken. So was his

chariot. Deprived of every weapon, he stood before Rama.

"You may go now," said Rama. "You have fought well today. Go away and rest and come back tomorrow, refreshed and with weapons." And Ravana retreated shamefacedly to the city.

71. THE GIANT IS ROUSED

WHEN Ravana returned humbled and dejected, the gods rejoiced foreseeing the speedy end of their troubles. Ravana entered the fortress, ashamed and anxious. After deliberating a while, he recovered his courage and ordered his sleeping brother Kumbhakarna to be roused.

As the result of a curse, Kumbhakarna used to sleep for months together and he had gone to sleep just a few days before the events last narrated. Ravana asked his ministers to spare no efforts to rouse Kumbhakarna at once and get him ready for battle.

"All my penances have proved futile. It looks as though the prophecy of the rishis will be fulfilled," thus said Ravana to himself, but rooted in his determination to fight to the last he issued orders as if he were certain of ultimate success: "Let the warriors guard the fortress on all sides. My brother is sound asleep. He sleeps blissfully, unaware of my anxiety. He will not wake up for months together if left alone. It is only nine days since he started sleeping. Rouse him at once. If he wakes up and goes to the battle, the enemy will be surely scattered. Who can stand before my Kumbhakarna? If he wakes up and opposes my enemies in battle, I need have no fear."

Ravana's officers and their servants accordingly went to Kumbhakarna's palace. They knew that as soon as he opened his eyes, he would be rapaciously hungry. So they first prepared and piled up mountains of food for him. Then they

made a great din beating drums and blowing conches.

Many Rakshasas exhausted themselves pushing and shaking the huge body of the Rakshasa. The noise that they made with their shouts and drums and trumpets filled the sky and frightened all the birds and beasts of Lanka, but Kumbhakarna in his sleep heard nothing. The Rakshasas worked hard at rousing him. They made elephants walk on his body. They took cudgels and belabored him.

At last his eyelids opened slightly and as one might brush away a mosquito while still asleep he pushed them all aside and yawned. Kumbhakarna was thus disturbed in his sleep which otherwise would have been months long.

But before he could find out the cause for this, he began to eat and drink. The heaps of meat and the pots of blood and wine kept ready for him were finished. When his hunger was somewhat mitigated the Rakshasas approached him to acquaint him with the situation.

Ravana's minister Yupaksha said: "My Lord, we have been defeated in battle and stand in grave danger. You will remember the quarrel about Sita. The Vanaras with Rama and Lakshmana have arrived and are breaking through the fort. They have slaughtered and defeated our army which never knew defeat before. Lanka is surrounded by the Vanara host as by an ocean. Ravana himself went to battle but he retired from the field having had the worst of it. It was our good luck that he escaped with life."

Hearing this, Kumbhakarna was beside himself with rage. "This very instant I shall go and destroy this enemy. I shall kill the Vanaras and drink the blood of Rama and Lakshmana. After finishing this first, I shall go and wait on the king."

The ministers were delighted to hear this furious speech but pleaded with

Kumbhakarna that he should first see the King and take counsel with him as to what should be done.

Kumbhakarna agreed, washed his face and then strode in sombre majesty to the hall of the king of Lanka.

The Rakshasas standing on the royal highway felt new courage and joy as they saw him pass and bowed low before him and showered flowers on him. He entered the palace and stood in the presence of Ravana. Rejoicing at the arrival of his peerless brother, Ravana stepped down from his throne and embraced him.

"What can I do for you, brother?" asked Kumbhakarna. "Why did you get my sleep broken? What makes you afraid? Tell me who is tired of life and wants to be turned into a corpse!"

"Brother! You do not know what has happened," said Ravana. "You were lost in sleep. The man Rama has become a real menace to me. He has built a dam across the sea we considered inviolate and now the Vanara army surrounds Lanka like another sea. Our warriors who sortied out and met them have been defeated and almost annihilated. It is for you now to save us from destruction and I know you can do it. You have put the gods to rout. I know your love for me. I know your keenness and your courage in battle. Go at once and annihilate these enemies and help us in our need and save Lanka."

Kumbhakarna, when he heard Ravana's words of anxiety, was moved at first to fury against the enemy but soon he remembered the whole story and Ravana's vainglorious confidence in his invincibility and that made him smile a little bitterly.

He said: "Excuse me, my brother. The warning we gave you when you consulted us went unheeded. Our fears have come true. You rejected the good advice we gave you. Now, you suffer the

consequences of your error and your sin. You brought away Sita. What else can happen when, driven by lust, one acts without thinking. If you so desired, and you had the confidence and strength, it would have been wise first to have slain Rama and Lakshmana and then seized her. You have done things without due thought and in the wrong order. When one acts without seeking or regarding the advice of wise and faithful friends and kinsmen, it is no wonder if he runs into danger and ruin. Did you not know that these things must follow? Should not a king understand who gives him good advice and who bad?"

Ravana did not like all this lecturing. He had no use now for lessons in ethics or politics. His face flushed with anger but he controlled himself and said: "Brother! The time is now past for such talk. What I need now is not your criticism but your prowess. What is done has been done and it is useless discussing whether it was just or unjust, wise or unwise. The question now is what we should do in our present predicament. It is your duty now to use your strength and skill and ward off the present disasters resulting from past errors. He is a true friend and a true kinsman who helps one out of the trouble that has been brought on oneself, maybe because of folly. If indeed you care for me, the time is now to show it by helping me instead of commenting on my conduct. I depend on your strength and prowess. Out of your infinite courage, give me comfort."

Kumbhakarna was moved by this appeal. "Have no more care," he said. "I am your brother and can never forsake you. Rest assured that Rama and Lakshmana are dead. I shall scatter and slay their monkey army. I shall fling at your feet the head of Rama and you shall see the Vanara King's blood flowing on the battlefield. Rama can only approach

you, if he does, over my dead body and that is not possible, for no one can vanquish or slay me."

Kumbhakarna's pride swelled. "No matter who the enemy is," he cried, "I shall destroy him. Be he Yama or Surya or Agni, I shall eat them all up." In this mood he rushed out to the field of battle.

The sudden waking from deep slumber had completely upset his temper, but when his consuming hunger and thirst had been appeased, he had recovered his balance and spoke wisdom to Ravana. Again seeing Ravana's plight, fraternal affection and pity made him forget everything else.

Ravana was pleased. "O my true warrior! O my brother! What a friend in need I have in Kumbhakarna!" he exclaimed, confident that Kumbhakarna would return triumphant and he now felt like one recovering from a mortal sickness.

Kumbhakarna armed with his great spear was about to go to battle alone, but Ravana stopped him and sent an army to aid him. He covered his brother's big body with jewels and garments and blessed him saying: "Go, my hero! Destroy the enemies and return victorious."

Tall and mighty-limbed Kumbhakarna, covered with shining jewels, was radiant like Trivikrama himself. He circumambulated his brother, bowed and marched out spear in hand at the head of a great army, amidst the plaudits of the Rakshasas, and under a shower of flowers and good wishes.

As the huge form of Kumbhakarna, a giant even among the Rakshasas, was seen stepping across the fortress-wall like Yama at the end of Time or some great natural cataclysm, the Vanaras were frightened and started fleeing in all directions. With great difficulty their

chiefs rallied them and put them in battle formation.

72. IS THIS NARAYANA HIMSELF?

RALLIED by Angada, the Vanaras recovered courage, reformed in battle order and prepared to receive Kumbhakarna. They hurled rocks at him and dealt heavy blows with trees plucked by the roots. But he disregarded them all and with a smile on his face went on dispatching the Vanaras with a methodic cruelty that was most terrifying. Some of them retreated to the newly built dam, while others tried to save themselves by concealing on the shore of the sea and the forests.

Once again Angada had to encourage the Vanara chiefs and warriors and get them to reform and attack Kumbhakarna.

Dwivida, Hanuman, Nila, Vrishabha, Sarabha and other chiefs attacked Kumbhakarna fiercely. But he disregarded them all and continued his ruthless slaughter of the Vanaras. Angada himself received a blow, as a result of which he fainted and fell on the earth. Sugriva was struck down. Picking up the unconscious Vanara King, Kumbhakarna carried him with joy towards Lanka. The Rakshasa army rejoiced greatly and raised a triumphant uproar. Kumbhakarna wished to make a present of the captive Vanara King to his brother Ravana.

As Kumbhakarna went through the royal highway carrying in triumph the unconscious Vanara king, the Rakshasas and their women-folk, standing on the terraces, showered flowers and poured sandal paste. This incidentally revived Sugriva. He opened his eyes and wondered where he was and what had happened. He soon understood everything.

He then began to bite with his teeth and tear with his nails the ears and nose of the

Rakshasa who was carrying him. Worried thus Kumbhakarna threw him down intending to crush him with his feet. But when he was once on the ground, Sugriva jumped and flew off across the sky and arrived at the place where Rama was.

Hanuman was sure that Sugriva would somehow come back. Foreseeing this escape of Sugriva, Hanuman had rallied the Vanara ranks and prepared them again for battle.

Grim and gruesome with torn nose and ears, Kumbhakarna, like a great blood-red evening cloud, and raging like Death at the end of Time, returned to the battlefield with a huge iron mace in his hand.

None could now stop Kumbhakarna. He began to kill and devour the Vanaras. The whole army began to disappear in this way. They tried to deter him by climbing on his mountain-like body and tearing at it with nails and teeth but without effect for he shook them off as if they were flies. None of the Vanara chiefs could hold him.

Lakshmana tried with his arrows to obstruct his progress but the Rakshasa passed him by and rushed forward to face Rama himself.

For a long time Rama kept aiming powerful darts at the Rakshasa. The arrow that pierced the seven sal trees and the adamant body of Vali was powerless against Kumbhakarna.

Sending sharper and stronger arrows, Rama wounded the arms and the feet of the Rakshasa, but nothing short of death would stop him. His legs were cut off, but legless he moved about on his stumps and went on with demoniac ferocity, fighting his brother's battle.

At last, Rama cut off his head with an arrow.

The severed head, carried by the force of Rama's arrow, rose into the sky and red with blood fell in Lanka like a hill with its

forests aflame. The news was carried to Ravana.

"Your brother Kumbhakarna, terrible like all-destroying Death at the end of Time, has entered the heaven of slaughtered heroes! He killed thousands of Vanaras and for a long time kept the army of Rama and Lakshmana in fear of destruction. But at last he was, slain by Rama himself, and deprived of arms and legs his mutilated body lies like a mighty tree disfigured by a forest fire. A part has fallen into the sea. Another big part blocks the entrance to the fortress. The severed head, flying across the sky, has dropped in the city and is lying there. Your beloved brother is gone to Heaven!"

When the Rakshasas told this tale, Ravana felt that his own life had left him. He swooned. After recovering consciousness, he cried in grief and anger: "Ah mighty warrior! How could you go to Yama's world leaving me behind? My right hand is cut off! How did Rama kill you, you whom in the whole world no enemy dared approach? I see the gods rejoicing in their heavens at your fall. The Vanara are dancing with delight. Of what use is this kingdom to me? Why should I cling to life when my dear brother has left me? Yes, I have to torture and slay the man who killed this dear brother of mine!"

Then with sudden and futile remorse he wailed: "Alas! Why did I refuse to listen to Vibhishana?"

Trisiras and his other sons tried to console Ravana.

"What is the use of lamentation" they argued. "You who have secured from Brahma strength and armor, why should you fear or lose yourself in grief?" And Trisiras himself set out for the battlefield. Many others eagerly followed him, riding on elephants and chariots.

A great battle ensued. Narantaka, riding on horseback spear in hand,

wrought havoc among the Vanaras and was proceeding towards Sugriva. Angada opposed him and killed him and his horse.

Likewise, Devantaka and Trisiras were slain by Hanuman, and Mahodara by Nila. Atikaya fell a prey to Lakshmana's arrows. But before they died, these four had fought like four Yamas and caused enormous loss to the Vanara forces.

When Ravana heard that Atikaya was dead, he was bewildered.

"This is incredible! These my warriors, firm and mighty like mountains and irresistible like the ocean, have been slain one by one by these enemies. Those, who till now have never known defeat, have been defeated and lie dead in the battlefield. There stand my foes who have broken out of the serpent entanglements with which my peerless son Indrajit had bound them. I cannot explain the marvel of this man Rama's strength. May it be that he is Narayana himself?"

Thus bewildered, Ravana lost heart. He wanted that the enemy forces should not enter the fortress and in particular should not enter the Asoka Vana. He supervised the defences again and returned to the palace, downcast and forlorn.

73. THE DEATH OF INDRAJIT

INDRAJIT comforted his father. "Why should you worry when I am here alive?" he said and gathered an army, and with it made another sortie.

He swooped down on the Vanara forces and killed and wounded thousands of them. They were helpless against his fury. The Brahmastra of Indrajit was effective against even Rama and Lakshmana who were tied up by it. They lay unconscious on the ground and the Rakshasa prince went straight to his anxious father with the glad news of this achievement.

Vibhishana rallied the Vanara leaders who had scattered in all directions and put hope and courage into them.

Jambavan, who was more dead than alive, moved slowly among the Vanaras, inquiring: "Is Hanuman alive?"

"Yes, I am here," said Hanuman, and bowed low before Jambavan.

"My son," said the old Vanara, "proceed northwards at once across the sea to the Himalaya range. Between the Rishabha and Kailasa peaks, there is the Hill of Herbs. In that hilltop are four medicinal plants. If you bring them here quickly, Rama and Lakshmana and the Vanara army will recover consciousness. Their wounds will be healed and they will fight again. Do this without loss of time. Only you can do this."

Accordingly, Hanuman sprang up into the air and moved fast. He reached the hill described by the venerable Jambavan and as he could not identify the plants, he carried the whole hill and returned with it to Lanka.

Even with the approach of the Sanjivi hill, Rama and Lakshmana and the Vanaras felt the darts slip off their bodies. Their wounds healed and they became strong and stood up.

The battle was resumed. Taking counsel with Rama, Sugriva now chose a few Vanaras and ordered them to enter Lanka and set fire to the city.

Towards midnight they entered the city with torches. They attacked and overpowered the sentry and set fire to the palaces and turrets of Lanka. Houses in their thousands were reduced to ashes. The proud city was reduced to a mass of ruin.

Valmiki describes this incident in detail. It reads very much like the destruction of cities in modern battles with which we are now familiar.

Seeing Lanka being burnt down by the Vanaras, Ravana was furious and sent to the battlefield Kumbha and Nikumbha, the sons of Kumbhakarna, together with Yupaksha and other Rakshasa warriors.

After another terrible battle, Kumbha was slain by Sugriva and Nikumbha by Hanuman. Makaraksha, son of Khara, who opposed Rama, fell to his fiery arrows. Many more mighty Rakshasas perished. Then, at the bidding of Ravana, Indrajit went once again to the battle.

He rose into the sky and became invisible. Thus he fought again unseen by the Vanaras. Indrajit, by his necromancy, created a maya-Sita and, putting her in a chariot, took her before the Vanara army and seemingly killed her in their presence.

Deceived and horrified by this, the Vanaras asked themselves: "What good is it now to continue this war?" They left the field and went to Rama with the heart-rending news.

As a result of this trick, Indrajit gained time to perform an asuric sacrifice. Rama and Lakshmana, like the Vanara warriors, believed that Sita was dead and were lost in grief. They were completely bewildered and helpless when Vibhishana came and inquired what had happened.

He listened to their story. Then he said:

"You have been deceived. Never would Ravana allow Sita to be killed. This is only a trick of sorcery. Indrajit tries to defeat you through magic. Having given up all hope of achieving success by normal means, he has gone to perform an asuric sacrifice of great power. If he completes it, we cannot vanquish him. We should therefore go and obstruct the sacrifice. Let Lakshmana go at once and mar Indrajit's purpose."

Accepting this advice, Rama sent Lakshmana who was accompanied by Hanuman and other Vanaras, besides Vibhishana. They went to the spot where

Indrajit was about to offer oblations to evil spirits. The sacrifice was interrupted and a long and fierce battle ensued. Ascending his chariot, the son of Ravana sent forth his arrows.

Standing on Hanuman, Lakshmana did the same. As they were well matched in strength and skill, the battle lasted long. The chariot of Indrajit was destroyed in the course of the combat and both the heroes stood on the ground and continued the battle.

At last, Lakshmana used the Indra-astra spell and uttering the name of Rama discharged the fatal arrow. The head of Indrajit was severed and fell to the ground and as it fell, it shone like fire. The Devas and Gandharvas showered flowers from the heavens.

Lakshmana then went to Rama. He was wounded all over and bleeding. He walked slowly, supported by Jambavan and Hanuman. Rama had already heard the news of the death of Indrajit.

"Lakshmana!" he cried, "this is the end of the Rakshasa race. You have achieved it."

Lakshmana modestly stood back but Rama seated him on his lap, kissed his head and gave vent to his joy.

"You have performed a mighty deed, impossible for anyone else. You have deprived Ravana of his right hand. Who in the world can equal you or Vibhishana or Hanuman? I have no more care. You have vanquished the conqueror of Indra. I feel I have already recovered Sita."

The news reached Ravana that Indrajit had been slain by Lakshmana. When he heard that Vibhishana helped Lakshmana in slaying Indrajit, his grief and anger swelled and the tears he shed burnt where they fell. And from his mouth issued fire.

"Alas, my son! O peerless warrior! O hero! Vanquisher of the great Indra! Has Death won after all? Have you entered the

heaven of heroes? But I should not grieve," he said.

But the father's heart would not thus be denied, and again he cried: "What! Is Indrajit gone? The world is now empty for me. Oh son, you have left your mother Mandodari and your dear wife and myself heart-broken and disconsolate. Nothing remains to us now but revenge and despair. It is best to kill Sita, the cause of all this tragedy. My son killed the maya-Sita. Now I shall kill the real Sita herself." So saying he rushed out, sword in hand, intending to do it. Some fierce Rakshasas, seeing Ravana issuing out in anger, applauded him with joy; but the minister Suparsva was horrified and appealed to Ravana's better sense and what was due to himself as a man and a king.

"King!" he cried, "how dare you think such a thought? How can you do it? Oh, Lord of ten heads! Brother of Kubera! Are you thinking to kill a woman? Are you going to incur this shame and sin? Can you thus be tempted by anger? You have mastered the Vedas and all the sciences. You have performed many penances. How can you end up with such a thing as this? Who is equal to you? Let us direct our anger against Rama. It will be new moon tomorrow. Gather all your armies, issue out of Lanka, slay Rama and Lakshmana and achieve victory. Then take Sita. Put on the armor you have secured from Brahma. Ascend your chariot and go to battle."

Ravana felt that Suparsva was right and his words were good. Seated on his throne, he was silent for a while, lost in profound meditation. Then he addressed the commanders with folded hands, saying:

"Go now with all your strength and slay Rama. If even you fail, I shall go myself and destroy him."

Never before had he been so courteous and humble when dealing with his officers. Adversity had taught him this lesson. Mounted on chariots that shone like the hills on the evening horizon and on the back of great elephants and beautiful horses, Ravana's army went in full force for the great battle.

The Vanaras tore up rocks and trees and attacked the Rakshasas fiercely. The Rakshasas returned the attack with equally grim ferocity.

The Vanaras jumped about everywhere and worked havoc among the Rakshasas, their chariots and animals. Each of the Rakshasas was surrounded by many Vanaras and slain.

The Rakshasas too did not spare the Vanaras whom they killed in tens of thousands.

Rama bent his bow and sent showers of arrows against the Rakshasas who destroyed their army like a raging fire. Warriors only saw their companions fall. They could not see Rama because of the shower of arrows. Their fear conjured up a multitude of Ramas, who dealt death in all directions.

Countless elephants and horses perished. Thousands of chariots were broken. The Rakshasa army was destroyed, all but a handful who fled into Lanka.

The Devas, Gandharvas and Siddhas sang the praise of Rama from above. In Lanka, the Rakshasa women clung to each other and lamented loudly that Ravana's folly should have brought this great calamity on them.

74. END OF RAVANA

THERE was wailing in every house in Lanka. In Ravana's breast grief, shame and anger seethed like a raging sea. He had so far sent his commanders and men in detachments, and, brave as they were, they had been destroyed in detail. This

had been the result of overweening confidence in his invincibility and contempt for the enemy, most of whom fought with no better weapons than sticks and stones. But repeated reverses had brought him no wisdom.

He had not even disputed the passage of the sea but allowed the enemy a lodgment in his island. But negligent and reckless as a general, he was brave and finally resolving to fight himself and with his sole strength to destroy the foe, he set out. He had full faith in his prowess and in the efficacy of the boons he had secured and he went forth with confidence mounted on his divine chariot that was drawn by eight horses and filled with all manner of weapons accompanied by a division of Rakshasa chariot-warriors.

As Ravana issued out of Lanka, the sun seemed obscured by an unpredicted eclipse, and foul birds and beasts of the night roared at large with weird ill-omened cries; but disregarding it all, Ravana drove out to battle accompanied by Virupaksha, Mahodara and Mahaparsva.

The mighty Rakshasa warriors who followed Ravana were mowed down by a deadly flight of arrows and chunks of rocks and presently Ravana found himself facing Lakshmana, who tried to oppose his further progress. Forcing his way past Lakshmana, Ravana precipitated himself against Rama with all the pent-up fury of hatred and revenge and strove to overwhelm him with a spate of arrows.

Rama easily baffled these arrows with his own and struck Ravana repeatedly, without however being able to penetrate his armor. Thus they fought, these supreme bowmen, each bent on slaying the other and using increasingly potent missiles of secret power, while the gods in heaven looked on with marvel and admiration. Neither hero had met such an

opponent before and on both sides admiration was mingled with wrath.

Rama pierced with his darts every limb of Ravana. And yet he did not fall.

Then Lakshmana and Vibhishana together attacked Ravana. Furious with his brother and determined to kill him, Ravana flung at him a powerful weapon. But intercepted by a dart of Lakshmana it broke into two and fell on the ground like a burning brand. Once again, Ravana aimed another mighty sakti against Vibhishana. This too Lakshmana intercepted. Then Ravana hurled a sakti at Lakshmana crying: "Now you are dead!"

Under its impact Lakshmana fell down unconscious on the ground.

Not observing this, Rama went on keeping up his pressure against Ravana. While the battle raged between the two, the Vanara leaders took counsel and sent Hanuman once again to the Hill of Herbs to save the life of Lakshmana.

For the second time, Hanuman flew northwards and, not wasting time searching for the plants, returned with the whole mountain. Lakshmana got well again and resumed his part in the battle.

Meanwhile, Matali brought his master Indra's chariot to the battlefield for the use of Rama.

"Indra, king of gods, has sent this for your use," said Matali. "Be pleased to ascend this chariot and destroy Ravana, the enemy of the gods!"

Rama bowed to the gods, circumambulated the divine chariot and ascended it. Then followed a wonderful battle.

Sorely wounded, Ravana fell unconscious and, noting this, his charioteer quietly took him out of the battlefield.

When, a little later, Ravana recovered consciousness, he was highly wroth, with his charioteer for taking him out of the

battlefield and insisted on being taken back to face Rama. The grim battle began again. Every astra was met by another. In new and wonderful ways, the two chariots moved and the two warriors fought for a long time, while both armies watched the spectacle with breathless admiration and anxiety.

Matali, the charioteer, whispered into Rama's ear: "The Rakshasa's end is approaching. Delay no further. May I remind you of Brahma-astra?"

Rama uttered the spell and sent the Brahma-astra. Though the Rakshasa's ten heads had often been cut off before, they had grown again and baffled Rama. The Brahma-astra, emitting flames, went towards Ravana and pierced his chest, where was enshrined the secret of his invincibility, and shattered it.

Then the bow slipped from the Rakshasa's hand and he fell down from the chariot and lay stretched on the battlefield.

The gods blew their trumpets. Rama and his chariot were covered by a heap of flowers showered from the heavens. Lakshmana, Vibhishana, Jambavan and other warriors surrounded Rama, lost in joy and adoration.

When the first flush of triumph was over and Vibhishana looked at his brother's body, the natural call of blood and memories of boyhood days when Ravana and he had loved and played quite overwhelmed him and he burst into lamentations over his lost brother.

"O warrior!" he cried. "O brother of heroic deeds! O scholar learned in all Shastras! O valiant and famous King of kings! Your great arms are, now sprawling helpless on the ground! Self-willed and self-deceived, surrounded by bad advisers, you would not heed my warning! The worst I feared has happened now! You reaped what you sowed and

you lie on the bare ground, O once mighty ruler of the Rakshasas!"

To Vibhishana thus lamenting, Rama spoke:

"Ravana fought like a true warrior and fell fighting like a hero! Death has washed his sins. It calls for no mourning. Ravana has entered Heaven."

Rama cleared all confusion from Vibhishana's mind and bade him do the funeral rites for his departed brother.

Said Rama: "It is for you now, his brother, to do the rites. Death ends all enmity. I, his former foe, even I can rightly perform his obsequies. Your brother is my brother too, is he not?"

The women of Ravana's palace came to the field to mourn. They led the Queen Mandodari, who looked like the goddess of grief incarnate. The crowned queen and beloved wife of Ravana was in utter desolation.

"Indra, King of gods, dared not face your anger," she cried. "The Rishis and the Gandharvas at the very sight of you fled in fear in all directions. And now a mere man, a wanderer in the forest, has brought you down! I do not understand how this could have happened. Truly, Fate is all-powerful! But lord, my lord, I warned you long ago. Did I not tell you that this Rama is no mere human being, but someone greater than Indra or Agni or Yama, whom you could not vanquish? This Rama is no other than Vishnu Himself in human form, God without beginning, middle or end. Even when we heard that he stood on the ground riding no car and slew your brother Khara in Janasthana, did I not say this? When Hanuman penetrated Lanka the impenetrable fortress, and laid it waste, I knew the truth. I begged you not to incur their enmity but you would not listen. Why did you cast lustful eyes on chaste Sita? This was the madness that drove you

to your death! Was it not a heinous sin to carry her off when she was alone? Death in the form of Sita drew you to your end! Sita and Rama are now reunited and happy after their brief separation. But me and all our race you have thrust for very into the depths of sorrow. Alas, my husband, my lover. You lie dead. Yet how beautiful you look with your body pierced by Rama's darts, covered with blood and dust of battle! What should I do now? I had a lord who was the Lord of Lanka! I had a son who had vanquished Indra. They have left me and I am a mere helpless widow without friends or home!"

Lamenting thus, Mandodari fell on Ravana's body and lay unconscious.

75. THE END

VIBHISHANA was crowned King of Lanka in a magnificent ceremony. The new Lord of Lanka came out to the Vanara camp and bowed low before Rama.

Then Rama said to Hanuman: "With the King's permission, enter Lanka and tell Sita what has happened." Hanuman accordingly took permission from Vibhishana and went to Asoka Vana to convey the news to Sita.

Sita's joy was beyond words. She was silent.

"Why, mother," asked Hanuman, "why do you not speak?"

"What is there to say, my son?" she answered. "How can I repay my debt to you? Your wisdom, your valor, your prowess, your patience, your humility are all your own. None in the world can equal you." As she said this, her eyes filled with tears of gratitude and affection.

Hanuman looked at the Rakshasi women who had guarded Sita and turning to Sita said: "I wish to slay these cruel women who troubled you. Do give me leave!"

"No, my son," she answered. "Who in the world is blameless? It is the part of noble souls to be compassionate towards all sinners as well as good people."

These words of Sita are treasured like nectar by generations of pious men. The worst of sinners, clinging to the golden feet of the Mother, can gain forgiveness.

"These Rakshasis," she continued "but carried out their master's orders. How are they to blame? Their king is dead and has paid for his crime. It is unjust to punish these Rakshasis now."

All that Hanuman could find to say in reverent admiration was that what she said was only what was worthy of Rama's wife.

"What message am I to carry to Rama?" he asked.

"I am eager to be in his presence," she answered. "That is all."

Hanuman returned to Rama and gave an account of his visit. For some reason Rama's face now darkened and with lacklustre eyes he fell into a frown study. A little later he turned to Vibhishana and said:

"Ask Sita to bathe and bedeck herself and bring her here."

When the message reached Sita in the Asoka Vana, she said: "I would rather go as I am."

"Not so, my lady," said Vibhishana, "the prince's orders should be obeyed."

So, after a bath and bedecked with jewels and seated in a palanquin, Sita went to the camp.

When he heard that Sita was coming, Rama woke up from his meditation. Events of the past rose like waves and battering against his mind threw it into a wild commotion of shame, grief and joy.

As Sita's palanquin was taken through the great concourse of Vanaras, they thronged round the princess and caused confusion. It was made worse by the

Vanara leaders trying to push them aside and make way for the palanquin.

"Let no one be kept away," said Rama. "These dear Vanaras have stood and suffered for me. Sita will be pleased to see me surrounded by such friends. Let no one be pushed away."

Rama's face showed a strange transformation of mind. None of those around him, not even Lakshmana could understand.

Alighting from the palanquin, Sita, with downcast eyes, proceeded towards Rama. "Aryaputra," she said and sobbed, unable to speak more.

Aryaputra in Sanskrit means beloved and noble one and is an intimate form of address of wife to husband.

"I have slain the enemy," said Rama. I have recovered you. I have done my duty as a Kshatriya. My vow is now fulfilled."

Incomprehensible and wholly unexpected were these words that he uttered. His face darkened for some reason. Then he spoke even harsher words.

"It was not for mere attachment to you that I waged this grim battle but in the discharge of duty as a Kshatriya. It gives me no joy now to get you back, for doubtfulness envelopes you like a dark cloud of smoke."

"What do you wish to do now?" he continued. "You must live alone, for we cannot live together. You can stay under the protection of any of our kinsmen or friends. How can a Kshatriya take back a wife who has lived so long in a stranger's house?"

Sita looked at Rama. Her eyes flashed fire.

"Unworthy words have you spoken!" she said. "My ears have heard them and my heart is broken. The uncultured may speak such words but not one nobly born and brought up like you. Your anger, it

seems, has destroyed your understanding. My lord does not remember the family from which I come. Janaka, the great seer, was my father and he brought me up. Is it my fault that the wicked Rakshasa seized me by force and imprisoned me? But since this is how you look at it, there is but one course open to me."

Then turning to Lakshmana, "Fetch the faggots, Lakshmana, and kindle a fire," she said.

Lakshmana, who had been watching Rama's behavior in dismay and indignation turned to look at Rama's face seeking his orders, but Rama did not say 'No' to Sita's request nor show any sign of softening. Obeying Sita, Lakshmana kindled a big fire and the princess, with eyes fixed on the ground, circumambulated her lord and exclaimed:

"Ye Gods, I bow before you. Oh rishis, I bow to you. Oh Agni, you at least know my purity and will take me as your own!"

With these words she jumped into the flames. And wonder of wonders! The lambent flames were crowded with celestial figures, for all the gods came and assembled there. Brahma spoke: "Narayana! Mighty God that took human form to slay Ravana! Is not this your own Lakshmi?"

Agni, God of fire, rose in his own body out of the flames and lifting Sita in his arms with all her clothes and jewels untouched and intact, presented her to Rama.

Rama said to Brahma: "Who am I? All that I know and can tell is that I am Rama, son of Dasaratha. You know who I am and whence I came and more. It is you who must inform me." Saying this to Brahma, Rama accepted Sita fire-proved.

"Think you that I did not know your irreproachable purity? This ordeal was to satisfy the people. Without it, they would say that Rama, blinded by love, behaved

with a strange weakness and broke the rule of well-brought-up men." So saying he drew her to his side.

Then Dasaratha descended from above and, placing the prince on his lap blessed him.

"My child!" he said to Sita. "Forgive my son. Forgive him for the wrong he did you to preserve the dharma of the world. God bless you!"

Indra gave his boon, and the Vanaras who died in battle for Rama regained their lives.

Rama and Sita, now reunited, ascended the Pushpaka which carried them swiftly in the air with their friends, the Vanara warriors and Vibhishana, to Ayodhya.

As they travelled in the sky, he said: "Look there! That is the causeway built by Nala." Again, "Look there, that is Kishkindha," he said, "where I met and made friends with Hanuman and Sugriva." And Rama pointed out to Sita the spots where he and Lakshmana had wandered disconsolate and related to her all his unforgettable experiences.

Alighting at Bharadwaja's ashrama, they sent word in advance to Guha and Bharata.

The city of Ayodhya swam in a sea of joy. Rama and Bharata met. Planning for Bharata's sake, ambitious Kaikeyi and her hunchback maid had contrived and concocted plots. But now, as Bharata bowed at the feet of Rama, a joy deeper than what they had planned for him was his. What kingly crown could equal the joy one found at Rama's feet? What sovereignty could bring one the glory that was now Bharata's forever?

The Vaishnava hymns exalt Bharata even above Rama for a spotless mind and unblemished unselfishness. For fourteen years till the return of Rama, Bharata installed Rama's padukas and administered the kingdom as a devotional

exercise in the service of his brother. Now that Rama was crowned King as his father had wished, Bharata's penance was at an end and his heart was filled with joy.

The smile of divine grace brightened Sita's face as she cast her merciful glance on Hanuman. What more could Hanuman desire?

I have retold in brief compass the story of the Prince of Ayodhya as sung by Valmiki. Those who read or listen to the tale, it is said, will be saved from sin and sorrow. Sri Sankara, the master of wisdom, has said that, if one keeps in one's heart the son of Dasaratha and meditates on him with reverence, one's sins will all be burnt up as chaff in a fire.

After the avatar of Rama, the lord appeared again among men with greater soulabhya (easy accessibility) as Govinda. He lived among cowherders as one of them and served Arjuna as a chariot driver. At the end of the Gita, the Lord says to Arjuna:

"Believe in me as the sole refuge, cast aside all doubt and come unto me. I shall save you from all sins. This is truth, friend. Cast off your fear."

This promise of Sri Krishna is addressed to all of us. We, like Arjuna, have our doubts and fears in the Kurukshetra of life and this assurance of grace is for all of us, for we are all dear to Him.

76. EPILOGUE

On one occasion Gandhiji and I were talking about a girl very dear to both of us. I said: "How did she get all these ideas and phrases of love without having read any of present-day love stories?"

Gandhiji said in answer: "But has she not read the Ramayana? Is the Ramayana not a love story too?" This struck me as profound. Then we turned to other matters.

Dasaratha's troubles began with love. Then the love of Rama and Sita is the theme and substance of Ayodhya Kanda.

In love that is not opposed to dharma, we find a manifestation of God. So was it affirmed by Sri Krishna when he explained his manifold being to Arjuna. The Ramayana has, for its twin theme, love that is opposed to dharma also. The Ramayana is undoubtedly a great love story.

Those who regard the Ramayana as an allegory interpret Sita as the individual soul and Rama as the Supreme Being. God seeks and pursues the human soul till He secures it. He is eager to save us. It is enough if we just do not obstruct or resist.

There are also other interpretations and applications of the Ramayana. Sita, the female counterpart of the Supreme Being, is the embodiment of compassion and grace. Compassion is the Supreme Mother and she is enthroned in the heart of the Lord. When she casts her merciful glance on us, we reach the feet of God.

Parvati's function in relation to Siva and Lakshmi's in relation to Hari are both identical, and are just variations of the same creed of dependence on God's grace. God as Father and God as Mother are not distinct. If the Lord were to be parted from compassion, our plight would be just that of Ravana who separated Sita from Rama. The quality of the Lord's compassion can be understood from the experience of true human love.

Many meanings can be read in the Ramayana and its beauty appreciated in many ways as from a real diamond many glorious colors emanate. Seventeen months ago I began writing these weekly chapters not without fear and trembling. This week I close it full of thankfulness for the health of body and peace of mind that enabled me to complete this humble service. Learned men will no doubt find

many faults in what I have written. But they must be glad also that it has done some good.

A word to the children who read these chapters. I have told the story of the Prince of Ayodhya mainly for your sake. Grown up people may read Valmiki and Kamban. Those who know how to sing can render with joy the sweet songs on Rama given to us by Tyagaraja. But this story that I have told can be read direct by you, children, without anyone's help.

You should look upon Rama, Lakshmana and Hanuman like your own fathers and elder brothers who are by your side ever eager to help you. Grow to be like Bharata, Lakshmana and Hanuman, good and brave souls, full of love and strength.

Mothers too, I know, have been reading this story with joy. This has been a great encouragement to me. They can understand why I have told the story in simple words and short sentences for the sake of our children. Everything we do, we do for the sake of our children, do we not? Only women can realise and relive the experiences and feelings of Sita.

The story of Sita as told by Valmiki and Kamban can be fully appreciated only by women. Only they can fully appreciate the courage of Jatayu and the prowess of Hanuman. Sita's sorrows have not ended with the Ramayana. They go on, still, in the lives of our women.

In the Rama avatar, Rama did not know that he was God incarnate. Krishna knew that he was an avatar and acted accordingly. We should read the two stories with this difference in mind. The despair and grief that the man Rama experienced, Krishna never knew. When he sucked at the demon-woman's breast or was bound with a rope and thrashed for mischief, he cared not nor grieved. Standing weaponless in the battlefield, he

led the warrior to destroy the wicked. In every episode of Krishna we see the difference between the two avatars.

I have followed the story of the Prince of Ayodhya as told by Valmiki. There was a legend current among people, I think even before Valmiki's time, that after recovering Sita, for fear of scandal, Rama sent her away to live in the forest.

This pathetic episode must have sprung from the sorrow-laden imagination of our women. It has taken shape as the Uttara Kanda of Ramayana. Although there is beauty in the Uttara Kanda, I must say my heart rebels against it. Valmiki had disposed of this old legend through the fire ordeal in the battlefield. Even that ordeal does not seem to me as consistent with Rama's character. It is painful to read it.

As the prince returned from Mithila he met Parasurama. I have heard it said that with that meeting Parasurama's avatar came to an end. Likewise, it should be held, I think, that Rama's avatar came to an end with the slaying of Ravana. After that battle, Rama remained only as a King of the Ikshvaku race.

On this theory, Rama's treatment of Sita after the battle and in the Uttara Kanda can be explained simply as the behavior of a king in accordance with the customs of the times.

But, how can we comment on a work composed thousands of years ago and coming down to us in palm-leaf manuscripts subject to corruption? If, even after the fire-ordeal in the Yuddha Kanda, it is said in the Uttara Kanda that Sita was sent to the forest, we may take it that it mirrors the voiceless and endless suffering of our women folk.

Sorrow and joy are both alike the play of God. God himself took with him his divine spouse, the embodiment of his own supreme compassion, into the world of

men and women, and enacted with her a great drama of joy and sorrow in the Ramayana.

Rain falling from the heaven flows into the rivers and flows down to join the sea. Again from the sea the water is sucked up by the sun and rises to the sky, whence it descends again as rain and flows down as rivers. Even so, feelings and values rise from the people and, touching the poet's heart, are transformed into a poem which, in turn, enlightens and inspires the people.

Thus in every land the poets and their people continuously reinforce each other. The tenderness and purity and the untold sufferings of women took shape as the Uttara Ramayana. Like an unflickering lamp, it throws light on the quality of their hearts. Whether the epics and songs of a nation spring from the faith and ideas of the common folk, or whether a nation's faith and ideas are produced by its literature is a question which one is free to answer as one likes.

Does a plant spring from the seed or does seed issue from the plant? Was the bird or the egg the first cause? Did clouds rise from the sea or was the sea filled by the waters from the sky? All such inquiries take us to the feet of God transcending speech and thought.

One other point, in describing how Ravana carried off Sita, Kamban differs from Valmiki. In Kamban's Ramayana, Ravana does not seize and carry Sita as Valmiki describes; without touching her he lifts her with the earth on which she stands. Kamban's version is followed by most popular expositors because this version is less painful to our feelings.

It is no sin or shame to an innocent woman if a villain behaves like a brute. Yet, mistakenly, we in this country look on the violence of a brute as causing a blemish to the woman's purity. It is in

deference to this wrong feeling that Kamban departed from Valmiki here.

For the same reason, Tulasidas relates that the Sita seized and carried off by Ravana was not the real Sita at all but a palpable image of hers left behind by the real Sita. Thus the story is told in all North India. During the fire ordeal, it is the maya-Sita that disappears and the real Sita springs again and returns from the flames.

It was perhaps presumptuous on my part to have begun the task, but it was a joy to retell the Ramayana. Now, when it is over, I feel like one awaking from a dream of joy. When the prince left the city, he felt no sorrow. It was only when he lost Sita that he knew grief. So with me too.

When I had to step down from high office and heavy responsibility, I did not feel at a loss or wonder what to do next. But now, when I have come to the end of the tale of the Prince of Ayodhya, the void is like that of a shrine without a God. Let no one look upon work as a burden. Good work is the secret that keeps life going. While one should not hanker after results, life without work would be unendurable.

Glossary

Adishesha : The primordial Serpent which is Lord Vishnu's bed.

Agneyastra : A missile charged with an invocation to the God Agni (Fire).

Aryaputra : Noble prince; classical form of address by wife to husband, betokening love and respect combined.

Ashrama : Hermitage.

Asuric Yajna : Sacrifice pertaining to Asuras. Demoniactal sacrifice and necromancy for gaining power.

Abhisheka : Religious rite of pouring or sprinkling sacred waters on the head of one who is installed as King or First Prince.

Adharma : Sin, unrighteous action, opposite of dharma.

Agni : The God of Fire.

Alakapuri : The capital of Kubera, the God of Wealth.

Amaravati : The city in heaven where Indra has his abode.

Aruna : The God of Dawn, first son of Kasyapa Prajapati and Vinata. He was born lame.

Aruna was the elder brother of Garuda. Aruna is the charioteer of the Sun God

Arundhati : Wife of Sage Vasishtha, a pattern of chastity.

Astras : Miraculous weapons whose power lay in the invocations they were charged with.

Asuras : Enemies of the Gods.

Aswapati : King of Kekaya, father of Kaikeyi and grandfather of Bharata.

Aswini Devatas : Celestial beings, twin sons of Surya.

Avatar : Incarnation.

Bala, Ati Bala: Two invocations to obviate hunger, thirst and sleep.

Bhagirathi : Another name of Ganga.

Bhagyam : Fortune, prosperity.

Bhakta : Devotee.

Bhakti : Devotion to God, loyalty, faith.

Bheda : Diplomacy of playing one against another in the enemy camp.

Bhogavati : The capital of the Serpent King in the nether world.

Brahmana : The first of the four castes devoting their lives to study and teaching and the

performance of religious ceremonies.

Brahma : The Creator, one of the Trinity

Brahmastra : The most powerful among Astras (mantra invoked weapons).

Brahmachari : One who is in the first of the four stages in a Brahmin's life, the stage of study and practice of a disciplined life.

Brahmadanda : Holy staff of an austere Brahmin.

Brahmajnana : The realisation of the Supreme Being, higher wisdom.

Brahmarishi : The highest type of sages.

Brihaspati : The preceptor of the Devas, the planet Jupiter.

Chaitra : The month falling in the second half of April and the first half of May.

Chandala : Outcaste, untouchable.

Dana : Gift, bribing of the enemy,

Danavas : Sons of Danu and Kasyapa Prajapati, enemies of Devas.

Daityas : Sons of Diti and Kasyapa Prajapati, enemies of Devas.

Daivam : Divine, celestial, fate.

Danda : Physical punishment, force used in meeting the enemy's tactics.

Darbha : A species of sacred grass used for religious rites.

Deva-Loka : The celestial regions.

Devarishis : Sages of Heaven.

Devas : Celestial beings, sons of Aditi and Kasyapa.

Dharma : Duty as laid down by religion or custom

Dishtam : Indicated.

Gandharvas : A Class Of semi-divine beings. Celestial musicians.

Garuda : The bird king who is Vishnu's vehicle.

Govinda : One of the names of Krishna.

Guru : Acharya, preceptor.

Hari : One of the names of Vishnu. The second of the Hindu Trinity. Other names are Krishna, Mukunda, Madhava, Kesava, Narayana.

Himavan : The presiding deity of the Himalaya range.

Ikshvaku : King of the Solar race from whom the name came for the race of Solar kings.

Indra : The chief and the king of the Gods.

Indra-Astra : Missile charged with an invocation to Indra.

Jambavan : Leader of bears in the army of Sugriva.

Jamadagni : A great sage, father of Parasurama.

Jnana : Spiritual knowledge, realisation.

Jnani : A knower of Reality.

Kama : Desire, usually referred to in relation to sex.

Kamadhenu : The Divine cow of Heaven. It was born of the Ocean when the Devas and Asuras churned it for Nectar.

Kamavalli : A name which Surpanakha gave to herself.

Kartaviryaarjuna : Son of King Kritavirya. He had a thousand hands and his golden chariot could go wherever he wished. He was a contemporary of Ravana and had him imprisoned in his city. Parasurama killed him for carrying away Kamadhenu and killing Jamadagni.

Kailasa : The abode of Siva.

Kalpaka : A Tree which issued out of the Ocean when it was churned by Devas

and Asuras. A celestial tree which grants any wish to people who are under it.

Karma : Action, the law that governs all action and its inevitable consequences on the doer.

Karma Yogin : One who practises the way of action for salvation.

Kasyapa : A celebrated sage, son of Brahma. He had many wives through whom were born the various forms of life on earth.

Kekaya : A country north-west of Kosala, the place where Bharata's maternal grand father ruled. West of modern Punjab.

Kinkaras : Soldiers, personal attendants.

Kinnaras : Celestial beings like the Gandharvas, who played on musical instruments. Kodanda : Rama's bow.

Kokila : The cuckoo.

Krodha : Anger.

Krouncha : A bird.

Kshatriya : The second of the four castes.

Kubera : God of Wealth.

Kurukshetra : The battlefield where the Pandavas and Kauravas fought.

Kusa : A kind of grass used in religious ceremonies.

Lakshmi : The Goddess of well-being, wife of Vishnu.

Leela : Play, the unexplainable ways of Providence.

Malyavan : The aged Rakshasa grandfather of Ravana.

Malyavati : A stream flowing by the foot of the Chitrakuta Hill.

Maruti : Name of Hanuman being son of Marut, the Wind-god.

Mahabali : An Asura who became a powerful ruler and a rival to the gods. He was the son of Virochana and grandson of Prahlada.

Mahadeva : One of the names of Siva.

Maharshi : A great Sage.

Manmatha : The God of Love.
Mantras : Scriptural verses, incantations.
Maya : The architect of Asuras.
Meru : A fabulous mountain around which the Sun is supposed to revolve.
Naga : Semi-divine serpents.
Narayana : Vishnu.
Narada : The celestial rishi with the lute.
Namah : Bow, salutation.
Nandigrama : A village near Ayodhya where Bharata lived and ruled Ayodhya as a deputy of Rama.
Nikumbhila : A cave and grove in Lanka where oblations were offered to Kali.
Niti Sastra : Science of government and diplomacy.
Niyati : Law.
Paduka : Footwear.
Parayana : Reading a Purana or Epic as a daily devotional exercise.
Parijata : A celestial flowering tree.
Parvati : Uma, wife of Siva.
Patala : The nether regions.
Payasam : A sweet preparation of milk and rice.
Parasurama : The sixth incarnation of Vishnu who curbed the growing arrogance of the Kshatriyas.
Pinaka : Bow of Siva.
Puja : Worship.
Prajapati : The Creator.
Puranas : Sacred legends.
Pushpaka Vimana : Aerial chariot of Ravana which originally belonged to Kubera. Sitting in this chariot, one could obtain anything he or she desired.
Rajagriha : The capital of the Kekaya country.
Rajasabha : Council of State.
Rajasik : Appertaining to the principle of activity egoism, arrogance.
Rakshasas : Evil-minded strong beings similar to Asuras.

Rakshasi : Feminine of Rakshasa.
Raghu : An ancestor of Rama. He was a king of the Solar race.
Raja Rishi : An eminent sage, a philosopher-king.
Rishabha : A peak in the Himalayas.
Rishi : A sage who has undergone severe austerities.
Rudra : Siva.
Sama : Peaceful approach to the enemy, negotiation.
Sastras : Sacred lore.
Satvik : Appertaining to the element of equanimity as distinguished from the principles of activity and inertia.
Sanyasini : A female recluse, feminine of Sanyasi.
Sarama : Wife of Vibhishana. She and Trijata were the friends among the Rakshasis that Sita had during her incarceration in the Asoka Vana.
Sarayu : A tributary of the river Ganges on the North bank.
Satyaparakrama : Righteous and strong. Strong in righteousness.
Siddha : One who attained special powers through penance. A class of heavenly beings.
Siva : One of the Hindu Trinity.
Sloka : Couplet or Quatrain in Sanskrit.
Surya : The Sun God.
Soulabhya : Ease of access.
Sri Krishna : The eighth incarnation of Vishnu, who gave the Bhagavad Gita.
Sruti : Veda, Revelation.
Sukra : The Guru or acharya of the Asuras, the planet Venus.
Swarga : Heaven, where the blessed are received after death.
Tamasik : Pertaining to the element of inertia.
Tamasa : A river flowing into Ganga.
Tapas : Austerities and penances.
Tapasvi : One who does Tapas or penance.
Tapasvini : Feminine of Tapasvi.

Tapasya : Power obtained through Tapas or penance.

Tilaka : A mark put on the forehead of women.

Trivikrama : See Vamana.

Vamana : The fifth incarnation of Vishnu to curb the power of Mahabali. Vamana became Trivikrama of huge stature who measured Earth and Heaven in two steps

Vanaprastha : The third stage of a Brahmin's life retiring with his wife as a preparation for sanyasa.

Vayu : The Wind God who was father of Hanuman.

Vaidehi : Another name of Sita.

Vaishnava : Appertaining to Vishnu or worship of Vishnu.

Vaitarani : A terrible river in Hell.

Varuna : The Lord of the Ocean.

Veda : Scripture. Four books: Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, and Atharvana Veda.

Vidhi : Law, decree of fate, that which is ordained.

Vidyut-Jihva : Lightning Tongued, a Rakshasa sorcerer.

Vinata : Mother of Garuda.

Vishnu : See Narayana.

Visravas : A rishi who was father of Ravana.

Viswakarma : The celestial architect.

Vritra : An Asura killed by Indra.

Yaga : Sacrifice, a religious ceremony accompanied by oblations.

Yajamana : He who performs a sacrifice, Master of Ceremonies.

Yakshas : A class of celestial beings.

Yama : God of Death.

Yojana : A measure of distance equal probably to nine miles.

Yudhajit : Son of the King of Kekaya. Brother of Kaikeyi.

Yuvaraja : Prince-Regent.