

Hanuman And I

Preparations had begun for our school annual day. Two plays were to be staged. The senior section was to enact 'Merchant of Venice' and the junior section, 'The Story of Rama'. I was hoping with all my heart that the drama teacher would include me in the cast. I had never acted in a play but was sure that once on stage I would give a brilliant performance.

Radhika, the prettiest girl in our class, would certainly get Sita's role. Since I was shorter than Radhika and had a shrill voice I could not hope to be Rama. But I wouldn't mind being Rama's brother Laxmana, I decided. I went around for a few days, imagining myself on stage with a bow and arrow slung on my shoulders, giving a brilliant performance as Laxmana. How surprised my parents would be! I could almost hear my father saying, "Imagine we had such a talented daughter and we didn't even realise it."

I was terribly disappointed when the drama teacher smiled and said, "I have a role for you. You'll be one of the monkeys in the *Vanar Sena*."

"Monkey brigade that helped Lord Rama."

"Can't I at least get the role of Hanuman," I asked timidly.

"No, your voice is too squeaky," was the teacher's reply.

Our rehearsals began the next day. All I had to do along with seven other girls was to jump up and down and shout, "*Jai Rama*", "*Jai Hanuman*" in a chorus.

Finally the great day arrived. We were all very excited. I had to wear a red shirt, red pants, red vest and a monkey mask.

We were dressing up when the *chaukidar*** handed a note to the teacher. She read it aloud. "Dear Madam, I am very sorry to inform you that Alka has contracted measles and has been running a high temperature since morning. Sorry, she will not be able to act in the play."

Alka was to play Hanuman. The teacher looked round in dismay and her eyes fell on me. "Look here," she said doubtfully, "You wanted to be Hanuman? You think you can manage?" My dream was suddenly coming true! I was quite overwhelmed. "Of course I can," I said confidently. "Even if I forget, I can always think up something else."

"Oh no," she said, "You shall certainly not do any such thing. I shall be prompting from the

"Victory to Lord Rama, Victory to Lord Hanuman.

"Watchman.

wings. All you have to do is repeat what I say and, for god's sake, don't mumble. Speak as loudly as you can."

As the curtains went up for the third scene I was pushed on stage to the accompaniment of drums. I almost fell on my face. For sometime I could not see a thing. The drums were echoing in my ears and my hands and feet were cold and numb. I opened my mouth to say my lines but my throat was dry and I couldn't remember them.

Thankfully I heard my teacher reading out my lines again and again. I began repeating whatever she said without realising what I was saying. I kneeled in front of Rama telling him with folded hands that I was his faithful servant. I would gladly die for him. "Oh, my Lord", I repeated loudly what my teacher was saying, "you have



forgotten to pin your tail." "Don't be silly," hissed Rama, "I am not supposed to have a tail. You've forgotten yours." I touched the spot where the tail should have been. "I am sorry, my Lord," I said trying to make up for my mistake. "I meant my tail, I have forgotten to pin on my tail."

The teacher now whispered, "Jump, jump," I shouted, "Jump."

"You jump," Rama shouted at me. Then realising my second mistake I began to jump like mad and the curtains came down to the sound of laughter.

There and then the teacher cut short my role as much as possible, but I had to be on stage in the last act.

I was feeling less nervous now and said my lines well. I showed Rama's ring to Sita to convince her that I was Rama's messenger. Sita said some beautiful lines about Rama's greatness and how much she missed him. She hid her face in her hands and began to weep. Suddenly I realised that the teacher was prompting while Sita kept sobbing. Since Sita was not saying anything I decided that it was my turn to speak.

"My beauty is my bane," I said grandly. "It is because of my beauty that the wicked Ravana wants to marry me."

"What?" said Sita looking startled.

"Not you, you idiot," I repeated what the tea-

cher said. Seeing the startled expression of the whole cast I bit my tongue, realising my mistake too late.

Just then everyone on stage began shouting, "*Maharaja** is coming, Ravana the Great is here!"

I was struck dumb by the huge figure in six-inch heels, which I didn't know about until that time, bearing down on me with a shining sword in hand. He said in a thunderous voice that made me tremble. "Who is this puny creature who dares to intrude into my kingdom?" I was supposed to answer in a proud voice that I was the son of Pawan-dev, the wind God, the worshipper of Rama, the immortal Hanuman. But Ravana was towering over me. He raised his sword and I screamed in terror, "Don't kill me, I am not Hanuman." I pulled off my mask as I spoke. By now the audience was rolling with laughter. The sound of laughter became louder when an infuriated teacher came on stage and unceremoniously dragged me away.

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