

Srimad Ramayanam For children



Sri D.V. Nagaraja Sharma

VALMIKI RAMAYANAM

D.V.Nagaraja Sarma

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Profile

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Late Srimathi. Lakshmi Devi (Mother)

Late Srimathi. Subbamma(Step Mother)

Wife: Srimathi. Kanaka Durga (Retd., Teacher)

Children: Three (Son and two daughters)

Profession:

Worked as Head Master for 29 years at R.K.High school, Chakalakonda, SPSR Nellore Dt AP.

Achievements: Best HM District Award in 2003

Best HM State Award in 2008.

Other Contributions:

1. Grammar Practice activities (A text book in grammar for Bed students)
2. SUNDARAKANDA (in English poetry)
3. RAMAYANA (A true translation into English – Valmiki RAMAYANA)

Born on 27th August, 1950 at Nellore and educated at Kavali. I had the privilege of studying under distinguished teachers of English at Jawahar Bharathi, Kavali, SPSR Nellore Dt.

I developed early in life an avid taste for English literature and particularly love for Shakespeare's plays. This latest offering makes a distinct land mark in great voyage of writing books.

I tried in this book the recapture for the benefit of the younger generation our ancient heritage of spiritual inspiration and nourishment "Ramo Vighrahan Dhramaha".

Ramayana's heroic characters have helped to mould Hindu characters namely "Rama, Sita and Hanuman" to inspire millions of our people high or low in the social economic scale with the deepest tenderest and honest love, reverence and devotion.

Foreward

‘The Ramayana is the encyclopedia of the ancient Aryan life and wisdom, portraying an ideal civilization which humanity has yet it aspire after’

The Ramayana has been the perennial source of spiritual, cultural and artistic inspiration for these thousands of years, not only to the people of India but also to the people of Southeast Asian countries. It has enriched the national literatures of these countries and has also provided themes for envy four of their out-dance, drama, music, painting and sculpture. Its heroic characters have helped to mould the Hindu character and its great characters namely Rama, Sita and Hanuman have inspired millions of the people high or low in the socio economic scale with the deepest, tenderest and holiest love, reverence and devotion.

All Hindu spiritual teachers, ancient and modern have responded ecstasically to this great book and its heroes.

“Rama, the ancient idol of the heroic ages, the embodiment of truth, of morality, the ideal son, ideal husband, the ideal father and above all the ideal king, this Rama has been presented before us by the sage Valmiki. No Language can be purer, none, Chaster, none more beautiful and at the same time sampler, than the language in which great poet has depicted the life of Rama”.

Sita is unique. There may have been several Ramas perhaps, but never more than Sita. “Sita is the bery like of the true Indian woman, for all the India ideals if a perfected woman have grown out of that one life of Sita”.

My Special Thanks to Chi|| Bodapati Sreenivas for his personal contribution for printing this immortal book. When I informed him about this Book his pholonthropic outlook is highly laudable.

May Lord Sri Rama, Lakshmana, Sita and Hanuman shower their blessings on Sreenivas and his family.

D.V.Nagaraja Sarma

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VALMIKI RAMAYANAM

OM NAMO SRI MARUTHIM

PRAYER (LORD GANAPATHI)

SUKLAMBARADHARAM VISHNUM SASIVARNAM CHATHURBHUJAM
PRASANNA VADANAM DHYAYETH SARVAVIGHNOPA SANTHAYE

PRAYER TO LORD RAMA

Peaceful without any sins, one who gives liberation BRAHMA AND SAMBHU have served you always greatest of all Devathas, one who can be seen in human form by Maya.

Best among the Raghuvamsi and greatest of all kings,

Oh! Rama I salute you,

Give all your divine blessings so that I can fulfill this Herculean task of making a great work of translation into English your holy story and the greatest work of a greatest writer.

PRAYER TO LORD MARUTHI

Oh, Lord, God of great strength, your body is like iron, good qualities are present in you. Oh, king of monkeys, dearest devotee of Sri Rama I salute you, Oh son of Vayu, the wind god, make my venture a success.

PRAYER TO PARENTS

I pray the blessings of my mothers Lakshmi Devi and Venkata Subbamma and I also pray the blessings of my father Narayanaiah.

Who gave me this human form to serve my fellowmen

And lastly to make this great work of translating the greatest epic the RAMAYANA.

PRAYER TO GURU

Gurur Brahma, Gurur Vishnu: Gururdevo Maheswara
Guru Sakshath Parabrahma, Thasmi Sri Guravenamaha

My hearty pranamams to those who taught me English as well as other subjects and to all who provoked and inspired to attempt this stupendous task of this venture.

The epics and Puranas epitomize our culture. They are suffused with spiritual fervour. Their heroes and heroines are exemplars of nobility sublimity, valour, heroism, steadfastness and chivalry. And anybody by reading them find them himself a little better. They have moulded our outlook, our way of life from times immemorial.

Sita Rama guna grama punyaranya viharinau
Vande vishuddha, vijnanou kavishvara kapishvarau
'I salute the master of kavis, i.e., poets (Valmiki) and the master of

Kapis i.e., monkeys (Hanuman) who are endowed with pure reason and who move freely and joyously in the sacred grove of the myriad virtues and graces of Rama and Sita'.

Bala Kaanda



BALAKANDA

VALMIKI AND NARADA

Tamasa was the river on the banks of which was built the ashrama of Valmiki the great sage. He was famed the World over for his great Tapas, for his gurukula which had many disciples learning the sacred lore under him.

Once the sage was sunk in the reverie and to him came Narada, the Divine Rishi: Narada the son of Brahma, the creator of Universe. Watching Narada's fingers strumming the strings of the Veena, Valmiki sat without speaking a word. Narada asked him what his thoughts were and the rishi replied. "You are the son of Brahma and like the God of Vayu. You can enter anywhere, enter anywhere, even into the hearts of all men. You can know the thoughts of men. You must be knowing what has been teasing me my heart. I wonder if there is in this world of men, a single individual blessed with all the many best qualities with which one can think of.

"Tell me what these qualities are" said Narada, "and I will try and tell you if there is one endowed with all of them and thus satisfy your curiosity.

"Valmiki said "Integrity, bravery, righteousness, gratitude, truthfulness, dedication to one's principles, character without blemish, concern for all human beings, learning, skill, beauty, a pleasing appearance, courage radiance, ability to control anger, perfect control, a lack of jealousy at all times undaunted heroism which can frighten even the celestials".

Valmiki paused for a while after enumerating all these many qualities and then said with a smile: "I know I am expecting perfection in a human being. But I wonder if there is such a person! Is it possible for a single man to have all these qualities? Even Gods have not been able to possess them and how can a human being aspire to perfection? Yet this mind of mine has been aching to know of such a person: hoping that there is a perfect man".

Narada, a Trikalavedi (who knew the past, the present and the future) was very pleased with the speculation of Valmiki and he replied "Listen to me carefully. I happen to know of such a man". He looked thoughtful as though he were trying to collect his memories and said". As you rightly observed, it is very hard to find a single individual endowed with all these glorious qualities which you have enumerated. But I will tell you about one who can be said to have attained perfection in the world of men.

In the time of Ishwakus there is a king by name Rama. He is the man you are looking for. He is unruffled by the sway of emotions. He is powerful and has a attractive personality. He has charm, and at the same time, he is firm in his mind. He is highly intelligent and just. He has no foes since he has subdued all of them. As for his looks he is broad shouldered with long arms a wide chest, a large and beautiful forehead and a very attractive gait. He is neither too tall nor too short. He has large and liquid eyes. He is well versed in the Sastras and very jealous of his personal honour. He is a great archer and he is even pondering on the great. Truth beyond the comprehension of all human thought. He is dean to every one. All gentle people gravitate towards him like the rivers flow continuously towards the ocean.

Rama knows no partiality and he is ever gentle and pleasant in his speech. All the good and great qualities which you are taking for in a man are found in this king who is the son of Kausalya. In nobility he resembles the mighty ocean and he is firm in his convictions like the great Himavan. In prowess he is like Narayana and he is as pleasing to the sight as the Moon. If his anger is aroused he will be like the fire which burns up the universe at the end of Time. Patient like Mother Earth he is generous like Kubera. He is like Dharma the Lord of righteousness in truthfulness, and in short, he is a paragon of all the virtues which adorn the human being's.

Valmiki, who had been sitting quiet all the while, became greatly excited at the words of Narada and his eyes flashed with a great happiness. Loth to interrupt the flow of words from the lips of Narada, his eyes beseeched the Divine rishi to tell him more. Sensing his eagerness, Narada, with a smile lighting his young face, continued his talk "Dasaradha the father of Rama" said Narada was very eager to crown his eldest son Rama as the prince of the Kingdom: Rama who was noble and the home of all virtues, the great qualities, we spoke of just now. The king began to make all preparations for the coronation. His younger wife Kaikayi, however was against the coronation. With the help of two boons which she had been granted long ago, she made the king agree to her stipulations one of them was the crowning of her son Bharatha as the king and the other was the banishment of Rama to the dreaded Dandakaranya forest. The unfortunate king bound as he was by his promise, had to confirm to her wishes and he banished Rama to the forest. The noble Prince Rama agreed to go away to please his father and to fulfill the promise of the King. Rama's brother Lakshmana who was born of Sumithra was devoted to Rama and he decided to accompany Rama in exile.

"Rama had a wife by name site. She was dear to him as his very life. She was the daughter of Janaka. Born, as she was of a noble race this

jewel among women followed her Lord Rama even as the star Rohini does the Moon.

“On the banks of the river Ganga dwelt a hunter by name Guha. Rama spent the first night of his exile in Shringiberapura, the capital of the hunter king. After sending the charioteer, Sumanthra back to Ayodhya, the capital of Ishvaku kings, Rama Lakshmana and Sita crossed the river Ganges with help of Guha. They then arrived at the ashrama of Bharadwaja. The rishi advised them to go to the hill by name Chitrakuta and build a hermitage there. They crossed many coppices and fords and small rivers and finally arrived at the hill by name Chitrakuta. Lakshmana built a hermitage and the three of them were dwelling happily there in the midst of so much natural beauty.

“Even as Rama was approaching Chitrakuta Dasaradha his father, unable to bear the separation from his beloved son Rama, abandoned his mortal frame and was gathered to his forefathers. Bharatha had all the while been with his uncle Yudhajit, the brother of Kaikayi. Vasishtha the royal preceptor sent for him and when the funeral obsequies were completed, the wise man told Bharatha about the danger of a country which was without a ruler and asked Bharatha to take up the reigns of the Kingdom and rule it as his father had done”.

Bharatha refused to do so. Instead he made up his mind to go to the forest, meet Rama and bring him back to Ayodhya. He went to Chitrakuta accompanied by his subjects and the ministers and Vasistha. He met Rama and beseeched him to accept the kingdom. He said “My Lord, you are the king and you must come back and take up the responsibility of ruling the kingdom. But Rama who was ever famed for granting any one his wish was firm in this one instance and refused to grant Bharatha his wish. He would not accept the kingdom since that would falsify his father’s promise. Finally as a compromise, Bharatha asked for the sandals of Rama, as his representative. Rama agreed to it Bharatha took an oath that he would enter Ayodhya only with Rama. He therefore stayed in a small village by name Nandigram which was on the fringe of the city of Ayodhya. There he stayed dressed in tree bark and dark skin and with his hair matted even as Rama’s and Lakshmana’s were. He was governing the country waiting for the coming of Rama.

Rama in the meantime, felt that he would abandon Chitrakuta since the people of Ayodhya knew his whereabouts. Therefore he decided to penetrate into the Dandaka. The first event in the Dandaka was his slaying of the Rakshasa by name Virodha. He then proceeded to the Ashramas of Sara Bhangha, Sutheekshna, Agastya and the brother of Agastya. Agastya made a gift

of the great bow of Indra to Rama. He also gave him a beautiful sword and two quivers which were inexhaustible.

The rishis in the forest approached Rama with a request. They told him about their being harassed by the Rakshasas who were dwelling in their midst and asked Rama to protect them. Rama listened to them and told them that he would do so. He said that he would destroy all the rakshasas. It was a solemn promise made by Rama.

They went to a spot by name Panchavati. It was on the banks of the river Godavari and it was beautiful. There Lakshman built an ashrama and they spent a happy time there. By now, thirteen years had been spent in exile.

When they were in Panchavati, Surpanakha a rakshasi who was dwelling in the Janasthana came to Rama and expressed her love for him. Incensed at this Rama caused her to be disfigured Lakshmana took up his sword and cut off her nose and ears. She went to her brother Khara and complained to him about her insult to herself by two mere men. At her instigation Khara, Dhushana and Thrisiras with an army made up of fourteen thousand rakshasas accosted Rama. Rama killed all of them single handed and thus aid Janasthanas of all the rakshasas.

Khara and other two were conscious of Ravana, the Lord of Lanka. Hearing about the incidents in Janasthana, Ravana decided to avenge the deaths of his cousins and the destruction of the army and also the insult of Surpanakha. He went to Maricha, a rakshasa for assistance. Maricha tried in many ways to convince Ravana of the prowess of Rama and the dangers of arousing his anger. But Ravana paid no heed to his words prodded as he was, by fate, Ravana took Maricha with him and arrived in the neighbourhood of the ashrama of Rama with the help of his maya at which he was an adept, Maricha lured Rama and later Lakshmana away from the ashrama. And when wife was alone in the ashrama. Ravana carried her away. Jatayu, the king of eagles was a friend of Rama and tried in Vani to prevent Ravana from abducting Sita. He was fatally wounded and Ravana went away with the princess.

When they came back to the Ashrama, Rama and lakshmana found it empty. With site abducted and with seeing Jatayu who was dying, Rama was beside himself with grief and anguish. He heard about Ravana from the lips of dying Jatayu and when the eagle died, Rama performed the funeral rites for him as he would for his own father.

The brothers then went southwards in search of Sita. While they were proceeding this, they were caught in the arms of a gruesome looking

Rakshasa by name Kabandha. His arms were a yojana long each and his head was in his stomach. His mouth was wide open to swallow his victims Kabandha was in reality, the son of Kubera who had been cursed to assume this form. When he was killed by the brothers he regained his celestial form and returned to the heaven. Before leaving them Kabandha also said that on top of the Rishyamooka hill dwelt a vanara by name Sugriva who would help Rama to find Sita.

Rama went to the Ashrama of Shabari, was worshipped by her and he gave her leave to reach heavens which she had earned by her tapas.

Rama and Lakshmana proceeded on their journey and reached the lake known by name Pampa and after passing it they were wandering around at the foot of the hill Rishyamooka. They were accosted by Hanuman, the minister of Sugriva Hanuman took them to the presence of Sugriva. A great and lasting friendship was found between these two Rama and Sugriva and this was forged by the wise Hanuman. Rama recounted to Sugriva about himself and about the misfortune which had befallen him: the abduction of Sita by some rakshasa. Sugriva came out with his story and the unfortunate condition he was in, banished from his city by his brother Vali. Rama promised to kill Vali to please Sugriva. The vanara was dubious about the prowess of Rama and he recounted the many acts of valour performed by his brother. To assure him of his own superior strength Rama lifted the skeleton of one Dundhubhi with the tip of his toe and flung it to a distance of ten yojanas. And again with a single arrow he pierced this arrow of has pierced the seven sale trees, split the earth open and after entering the nether regions it has returned to your quiver. Never before have I seen such valour for give me for doubting you.

They went to Kishkindha, the capital city of Vali. Sugriva called out the great warrior Vali and challenged him to come out and fight with him. Rama killed Vali with a single arrow and established Sugriva on the throne of dead Vali

Sugriva then summoned his entire army and despatched his men to all the four quarters to search for Sita. Hanuman, accompanied by Angada, the son of Vali, went towards south. There dincted by Sampathi, the eagle king who was the brother of Jatayu, Hanuman crossed the sea which was a hundred yojanas wide. He reached the island by name Lanka. There in the King's pleasure garden by name Ashokavana, Hanuman found Sita who was kept there as a captive. Thinking of only Rama, the princess was a picture of woe. Hanuman announced himself to her, gave her the signet ring which Rama had sent and comforted her with words of encouragement. He gave her news about

Rama and Lakshmana and he told her that Rama assisted by Sugriva and his army, would soon arrive in Lanka and rescue her from Ravana.

Hanuman then destroyed Ashokavana. Ravana sent his army to capture him. But five of his commanders and seven of their sons, as also the son of Ravana were killed by Hanuman. Indrajit another son of Ravana came and despatched the Brahmastra at Hanuman. The Vanara did not want to insult the great Brahma and so he allowed himself to be bound by the astra. He was then taken to the court of Ravana. Thereafter he burnt the city of Lanka and returned to the presence of Rama. He carried with him the good tidings that Sita was alive and that she was a captive of Ravan.

Accompanied by Sugriva. Rama came to the shores of the sea. When the told of the sea would not make way for him and his army Rama was highly incensed and threatened to burn up the entire sea. The king of the waters appeared in front of Rama and asked him to build a bridge across the sea which would take them to Lanka.

Accordingly, Nala, the architect, built the bridge. Crossing the sea, Rama went to Lanka. Killed Ravana and rescued Sita. However he spoke harsh words to her unable to bear Sita entered the fire. Agni the God of fire brought her to Rama out of the flames and told Rama that he should accept her service he was without any taint.

The world above and the world of men praised the prowess of Rama. They celebrated the achievements of Rama, after crowning Vibhishana the brother of Ravana as he king of Lanka, Rama made up his mind to turn his step homewards with the blessings of the Devas and Vanaras who had died in the war came back to life and there was great rejoicing. In the celestial chariot by name Pushpaka, Rama along with his friends proceeded towards Ayodhya. He went to the ashrama of Bharadwaja first to pay his respects to him and from there he sent Hanuman to Bharatha to inform him of his return Rama then went to Nandigram with Sugriva. In Nandigram he was reunited with his brother Bharatha and Satrugnu. After getting rid of his matted locks Rama assumed the garments of a king and was crowned king of Kosala. The people were thrilled with the return of Rama and there was great rejoicing in the city of Ayodhya.

“Rama rules the Kingdom righteously and there is not a breath of Adharma in the rule of Rama.

After performing a hundred Ashvamedha, Rama will reach the heaven. He will establish dharma on the earth. He will rule for eleven thousand

years before he leaves the earth one who hears the tale of Rama will be assured of a plate in heaven”.

Having recounted the story of Rama to Valmiki, Narada took leave of him.

THE COMING OF BRAHMA

After the departure of Narada Valmiki was sitting quiet for a while thinking on the glorious personage Rama and his mind was dwelling on Rama. The rishi suddenly realized that it was time for him to perform his morning worship and so, accompanied by his disciple he went to the banks of the river Tamasa which was very near the more famous Ganga.

He saw a spot where the water was pellucid and he stopped in his tracks. He spoke to his disciple and said, “Son, the water here is clear and pure like the mind of a Good man. Look how beautiful it is! I have decided to perform my ablutions here in this spot. Place the water pot here in the ground and give me the tree bank.

The disciple did as he was bid with the water pot in his hand the rishi looked all around him his eyes pleased with the beauty of the surroundings. He took a few steps here and there and smiled to himself as he saw how lavish mother nature had been in her bounty in this particular place. Looking up at a tree the rishi saw a couple of Krouncha birds. They were singing happily in their sweet and melodious voices and they were very much in love with each other. They were making love and Valmiki’s eyes rested on them with tolerant amusement.

Even as he was looking, he saw the male Krouncha fall down hit by an arrow. Valmiki saw a hunter, sinful and cruel, who had just shot an arrow at the bird. The bird was lying dead on the ground drenched in blood and the female Krouncha was wailing piteously and her joyous song of a moment ago had turned into a mournful dirge. The small bird with its red head was full of sorrow. Valmiki saw the cruel act of the hunter and its sad consequence and his heart was filled with compassion.

He knew what an adharmi the hunter had been and he spoke in an impassioned voice. You have been merciless in your action. You killed one of these two birds when they were making love your act is unforgivable. You will therefore be denied the long span of life granted to man.

Valmiki then turned away from him and left the spot in a hurry. His heart was still full of sadness and he thought over the incident long after he had gone away from there. He kept remembering the words he had spoken to the hunter and he repeated them in his mind. He told his disciple : “I was very sad because of what had happened to the Krouncha birds. And I spoke some words. Born as they were out of my sorrow these words are so arranged that they follow a meter. They seem to follow a sloka which can even be sung to the accompaniment of the drone of the Veena. I am amazed at the sloka which I seem to have composed. The disciple learnt the sloka and when he repeated it there was wonder at the formation of it.

Valmiki thus entered the river and performed the ablutions the worship of sun and all the daily rituals. But his mind was dwelling on the sloka. They returned to the ashrama the rishi in the lead and the disciple carrying the water pot filled now with the pure water from the Tamasa. Valmiki entered the ashrama and with his other disciples pursued with them the study of the sacred lore.

While he was engaged thus, he found the hermitage found with heavenly glow. He looked up and saw Lord Brahma himself standing there. He got up with a feeling of awe and stood up with folding hands. He could not speak a word. So overcome was he with studded-ness of it all. He then worshipped the creator with proper manner, fell at his feet and offered Arghya and Padya and befitting seat.

Brahma honoured him by accepting his homage and the seat offered by him. After scattering himself at the command of Brahma Valmiki sat silent and his mind was pondering on the event of the river bank. He could not still grasp the cruelty of a hunter who could deliberately kill the happy bird without any cause whatever. Again the sloka came to his mind and he repeated it himself silently.

Brahma smiled at him and divorcing his thoughts said, “Do not wonder anymore about the words you spoke. It is a sloka and there is no doubt about it. I willed you to speak thus. I want you to compose a great poem in the same metre. Relate the story of Rama. Narada told you the story of Rama who is famed the world over for his righteousness for his nobility, his intelligence, his courage”. I will grant this boon to you; you will be able to know what passed in the minds of everyone of them. Rama, Lakshmana, Sita and the many participants in the strange tale. In short, there will be nothing which is a secret withheld from you. You will know everything which happened and every thought in the mind in each of them.

“In this Kavya which you are going to compose, there will not be a single word of untruth spoken. I command you to relate to the world of men the sacred story of Rama set in the same metre in which you composed the sloka you are thinking about the Anushtup metre. The world will be the richer for the composition of yours. So long as the story of Rama is remembered in the world, you will also be remembered. Your name will be immortal because of what you are going to do.” Brahma vanished from the presence of Valmiki after he had spoken these words. Valmiki was still in a doze and so were his disciples. They repeated the sloka again and again and with each repetition the wonderment grew.

VALMIKI COMPOSES THE GREAT POEM

Valmiki touched water to purify himself. He then spread darbha grass on the floor and sat on it facing the east. He closed his eyes and went into a deep trance. He thought of the task assigned to him and he told himself. As the Lord has commanded I will compose the poem in the metre which came to my mind and in the sloka form. It will be the story of Rama and his achievements and I will name it as RAMAYANA.

The more he thought about it the clearer became his vision and intellect and he could see with his mind’s eye all the many events which have taken place. He could visualize the old king Dasaradha with his wives around him, looking at his four sons with eyes filled with joy and pride. And he saw Rama and Lakshmana with Sita in Dandaka forest. It was as clear to him as the palm of his hand. The great related to the world the glorious story of Rama and the poem was full of noble thoughts and noble deeds like the ocean is full of rare and costly gems.

Valmiki remembered the manner in which Narada had spoken of Rama and in the same strain he composed the Kavya. It was made up of beautiful sounding words which were pleasing to the mind as well as to the ears words which were faultless in their formation and their meaning was as clean as the waters of a placid lake in the Himalayas. In a short while he was able to compose the poem. He had completed the epic Ramayana which spoke of the story of Rama, of the killing of Ravana. There were some twenty four thousand verses, slokas in the Kavya and the rishi was pleased with what he had done. He divided the Kavya into six sections. Five hundred chapters were needed to relate the story in its completeness.

After the completion of the Kavya Valmiki was about the proper person who would be able to recite the poem and thus propagate it. Even as he

was thinking on it, two youngsters, Kusa and Lava came to his presence. Prostrated before him and took the dust of his feet. The youngsters who were princess had been with the right to learn the sacred lore. They had very attractive voices and since they were twins, their voices blended together very well. To them Valmiki taught them the Kavya by name Ramayana. They learnt it and they sang it to the accompaniment of the Veena. They say like the Gandharwas.

These two handsome. Sweet spoken boys with large eyes were the sons of Rama. After they had learnt the entire Kavya the youngsters began to travel from ashrama to ashrama singing all the while the story of Rama.

Once Rama was performing the great Yaga by name Aswamedha, the horse sacrifice. The young princes dressed in tree – bark and deer – svern went to the spot and there in the midst of many rishis assembled there, they sang the Ramayana. The rishis listened, with tears in their eyes to the glorious tale filled with all the nine emotions which a Kavya should have. And they praised the youngsters. The fame of these two young boys was the only topic of conversation among the rishis and the others who had heard them and the news reached the ears of Rama the king. He saw them too with their Veenas and he heard their voices from a distance. His curiosity was soon kindled and he sent for them. They came to his palace and he welcomed them. In the council hall was seated Rama surrounded by his ministers and his dear brothers. He had assumed the garb proper for one performing the yaga and he was charmed by the looks of the youngsters. He spoke to his brothers and said “They glow with a radiance which is unearthly” and their voice is heavenly too. Let us listen to them singing.,

The song which was accompanied by the hypnotic drone of the Veenas filled the hall. As the tale progressed Rama, who was seated on the throne descended unobtrusively from there step by step and sat on the floor with the others listening to the glorious Kavya. He sat spellbound and he listened as though it were the story of some one else and not himself. Tears were flowing from his eyes when he sat down to listen to the Ramayana.

“This story concerns the great line of kings whose founder was Manu and which has been immortalized by the Ikshvaku, the son of Manu and later by Sagara and others”. Thus began the Kavya and Rama sat and listening as though he were a figure carved out of a black marble.

DASARADHA AND HIS GRIEF

There was a country by Kosala and on the outskirts of the country, flowed the river Sarayu. The land belonged to the Ikshavakus, the descendents of Manu, one of the prajapathis. Kosala was beautiful and it was famed for its beauty. The richness of its soil its luscious greenery. The abundance of its crops, its wealth and its prosperity. The kings of solar race who had always ruled it were famed the world over for their valour and for their righteousness. The capital of the land of Kosala was Ayodhya. Tradition had it that Manu the great law given had created this city. It was a wondrous city with flowering trees and with wide beautiful roads where the king rode everyday. The royal pathway was ever beautiful with flowers and scented water sprinkled on it all the time. Ayodhya was like Amaravathi, the city of Indra.

Ayodhya was ruled by Dasaradha even as Amaravathi by Indra. Dasaradha had earned for himself the name Rajarshi since he had been a God fearing man. He was a wise king. He had charmed his subjects by his good nature. As befitted a scion of the race of Ikshvaku, he had earned the praise of all the many rishis and good people for his prowess coupled with gentleness. He had performed all the yagnas which a king had to perform and he was a king beloved by all. The people were happy and contented. None of them was jealous and one was avaricious. They were all rich and they spoke nothing but the truth. Everyone was wealthy and everything was beautiful. There was no meanness, no lust, and even ugliness was absent. The people were all well read and no one was an Atheist. There was no unhappiness in the mind of even one of them. Such a king was Dasaradha the descendent of Ikshvaku.

Dasaradha had eight ministers who were versed in the art of advising the king in matters of importance. They were highly intelligent, great diplomats, and they were all the time interested in the well being of their king and his subjects. The ministers were Dhriti, Jayantha, Vijaya, Siddhardha, Ardhasadaka, Ashoka, Mantrapala and Sumantha. The king also had great priest to advise him on matters pertaining to religion and religious rites and rituals. The chief of them were Vasishta and Vamadeva. They were great scholars and they were famed for their learning for their pride and self respect, for their self control, their penance. They were glorious men who had thoughts only for the good of others, the king and his subjects.

The king's ministers were so efficient and there was nothing which escaped their notice. They knew about the happenings in all the neighbouring countries. The treasury of the kings was ever full and so was the granary.

Such a great king who had every thing he could wish for was not perfectly happy. He had no son to make him happy. They line of Ikshavakus threatened to terminate with him since he had no one to succeed him King

Dasaradha was unhappy because of this and this sorrow ate into his vitals day and night. And as he grew older, his sorrow increased too.

One day while thinking on this, the king thought “Why should I not perform the yaga by name Aswamedha ? I have been told that it is a rewarding yaga. Perhaps my prayers may be answered if I perform the horse sacrifice”. He called for a meeting of his councilors. When they had all come the king asked them to be seated.

THE NEED FOR AN AVATHARA

Towards the end of Aswamedha Dasaradha fell at the feet of Rishyasruna and cried. “Rishi, make my yagna successful”.

Rishyasruna performed the intricate Putrakama ritual at the holy fire exactly as is prescribed in the secret passages of the Adharvana Veda. The Devas gathered above that fire for their share of the havis. These offerings are ambrosial to them like sipping the sweetest currents from human heart.

What the sacrificers of Kosala and the priest did not know was the Devas came from a transcendent mandala, where they had taken a petition to Brahma.

“Indra, the king of Devathas knelt before Brahma and cried”, O Lord, we cannot bear the tyranny of demon Ravana anymore. His evil pervades the earth and men’s heart are corrupted from afar. They deny their Gods and lie easily than speaking the truth. They are full of violence and seduce the their brothers wives Ravana’s devils swarm in the jungles of earth; they desecrate the rishis sacrifices and devour the holy ones.

“The sun and moon go in fear of Ravana. The planets spins into sinister orbits at his will and all the world has become a dangerous place.

The Yakshas and Gandharvas live in terror. No sage dares pronounce a curse on the Lord of Lanka, because he is such an awesome sourcerer himself. Vayu the wind blows softly, lest he ruffles Ravana’s hair. Surya, the sun doesn’t change his place over Lanka be it summer or winter lest he annoy Ravana and the demon pluck him from the sky and extinguish him. And now Ravana threatens to invade Amaravathi if I am not servile to him. I cannot stand it. Pitamaha! My throne on heaven is worthless, as long as Ravana lives. And because of your boon to him, none of us can kill the Rakshasa! Brahma said, “Ravana does not have a boon from me that no immortal can kill him. But in his arrogance, he did not ask for a bon to protect him against the

mortal race of men. He shall die by the hands of men. Be comforted. It is not long to the birth of that man into the World”.

As Brahma spoke, a blinding splendour shone on them from the sky. They saw Lord Mahavishnu, the savour mounted on a golden eagle. He wore robes tawny like the sun against his sea blue skin. He carried the Sudarshana Chakra, the Panchajaya and the Kaumodaki Brahma and the devas worshiped him with folded hands.

Across winds of light that Garuda’s wings stirred, Brahma cried to Vishnu, “Lord be born as a man to rid the earth of Ravana of Lanka or the Raksha will plunge the earth into a hell, long before the Kaliyuga begins. Only you can kill him; for evil though he is, he is greater than any creature in heaven or earth.”

Vishnu spoke to Brahma and the Dewas in his voice as deep as time, I will be born as Dasaradha of Ayodhya’s son and I will kill Ravana. I will rule the earth for eleven thousand years, before I return to Vaikunta.

He vanished from above them and how they yearned for him to appear again. But the Blue One was gone.

On earth, on the northern bank of Sarayu, Dasaradha’s Putrakama Yagna was also complete. Rishyastringa, chanted the final Mantras from the Atharva Veda. The fire leapt up, tall as trees, and the flames licked themselves up into a dark figure; a divine messenger his hair like a lion’s mane around his livid face. He wore burning ornaments studded with great jewels and a Chandrahara, a moon silver, on his chest.

He stepped out of fire, and flames were his body as he stood solemnly before Dasaradha and Rishyasringa. He carried a crystal chalice in his hands, with a silvery payasa brimming in it. He looked like Dhanvantari must have, when he emerged from the Ksheerasagara with the amrita.

Said that being, in an ancient tongue of fire and earth, “I came from Brahma, Grandstien of worlds. He sends this Payasa to your queens so they will bear you the sons you long for.”

He held the chalice out to Dasaradha. The king stepped forward and took it. At once the messenger vanished. Like a man with the greatest treasure he could even have, Dasaradha brought the choice to his queens.

He came to Kausalya, his first wife and said to her, “Look, the Gods have answered our prayers. You shall bear me a son to be my heir.

With his own hands, he made her drink half the Payasa. Then he went to his second wife Sumitra and fed her half of what was left. He went to his youngest wife Kaikeyi and gave her half of what remained. Finally he went back to Sumitra to give the rest. And they heard the people crying “Jai, Jai”.

Hope against Ravana of Lanka kindled in their hearts, the Devas came down from the sky to receive their share of Havis. Taking their burnt offerings in shining hands, they vanished back into their subtle realms. Dasaradha and his people returned to Ayodhya, with joy come among them like another God.

After being rewarded lavishly by the euphoric, King Rishyasringa and the other Brahmana’s went back to their homes.

KING DASARADHA’S SONS

Dasaradha was happy as a boy, as if only now the Gods had blessed him with manhood. He felt sorry as a Deva. The first few nights after the Aswamedha Yagna he went to his queens by turns; he made love as he had when he had just married them.

In some months, they announced in joy, Kausalya first, then Sumitha and Kaikeyi, that they were all pregnant. Celebrations broke out in Ayodhya. The Gods had not betrayed Dasaradha and his people. That year flew by for the king in cosseting in his wives. He fed them with delicacies that stroked their palates or their fancies. He clothed them in finery that not even queens like they had not worn before. Ayodhya had a festive look in breathless anticipation.

The ice in Himalayas began to melt as the sun drifted north again and spring returned to Bharatha Varsha. This was no common spring. But wore rainbow hued lotuses in its hair, flowers bloomed once in a thousand years. A hush of expectation lay over Kosala’s capital. The clear pools were covered with lilies. The flowering trees that lined the city of Ayodhya drooped to the ground. They were so heavy with new leaves in every shade of green and untimely, extravagant fantasies of flowers. A Malaya breeze blew across the kingdom carrying scents of spring through the city and up into the apartments of Dasaradha’s queens; most of all, into Kausalya’s.

All the earth seemed to strain, with senses of breeze and night moonbeam and sunray into the gracious Kausalya’s chambers. Vishnu was to be born from her bright womb as a man! Then it was the month of Chaitra.

Great rishis had arrived in Ayodhya and with occult sight, they saw devas in the sky above the city.

The moon was waxing. It was the ninth day after Amavasya. Rare and auspicious stellar aspects were strewn across the firmament. Five planets were in their signs of exaltation that night. The Nakshatra was Punarvasu and the moon rose in his own house. With lofty Jupiter in the Lagna Karkataka, cardinal sign of the crab. Kausalya was as radiant as Aditi had been in Devaloka when she bore Indra. That night Dasaradha's first queen to one greater than the king of Devas. She brought Vishnu into the world for its deliverance from Ravana of Lanka.

Kausalya felt no pair at all, just bliss as Rama was born from her. He was as serene as the Manasa lake upon the mountain. He did not cry at being born into this sad and fleeting world. He only smiled, his eyes wide open and so knowing on his dark face. A shower of barely tangible flowers fell out of the air around Kausalya's bed. Apsaras danced on the clouds when little Rama signed in his throat blue as the lotus that blooms on satin pools hidden in the hearts of jungles.

When in a day, the moon had moved into the Nakshatra Pushyami and Bharatha was born to Kaikeyi.

After another twenty hours, when the moon was in Aslesha, twins were boon to Sumithra who had drunk twice from the cup of Payasa. Lakshaman who would follow his brother Rama to the ends of the earth and Shatrugna, bane of his enemies.

Ayodhya was more festive than Devaloka on high. The Devas were jubilant at the thought that Ravana would die as soon as Dasaradha's eldest son was a man; in just some human years which for God's sake is a few days. But the people of Kosala celebrated because now they would have another great Kshatriya to rule them as wisely as Dasaradha had done.

In Ayodhya, the singing and dancing went on through the night. The streets were choked with thousands of revellers, at midday, and twilight, mid-night and dawn. The lines outside the palace gates were interminable, when the queens brought their sons out on to their terraces. The people stood patiently for hours to catch a glimpse of the infant's faces.

Dasaradha gave them gold by the sack and cows by the herd to the Brahmanas. If through day time there was ever a mortal king whose cup of joy

was full, he was Dasaradha of Ayodhya. The feasting continued for eleven days and Vasistha was called to name the four boys and perform their Jatakarma.

The next sixteen years were a waking dream for Dasaradha. He watched his sons grow around him and outstrip every hope he may have had for them. They studied the Vedas and the sacred lore with Vasistha and were quick to learn whatever he had to teach. No matter how profound or complex the subject how strange or new, they absorbed it at the first instruction.

Like the moon waxing day by day the four princes grew a young pride of lions. They learnt the arts of war, as all Kshatriyas must; and their skills were astonishing when they were barely ten. In their earliest teens, they rode elephant horse and chariot like masters, soon competing just with one another for there was no one else in the land, including their gurus, who could match them. Led by Rama, their archery was no less extraordinary. Their masters said that not the gods could equal the princes at the longbow, the mace or the double edged sword.

Now usually twins are exceptionally close. But in the palace of Ayodhya nature and subverted by a high order of achievement. From the beginning the fair, shy Lakshmana was like his dark brother's Rama's shadow and Shatrugna was as attached to Kaikeya's son Bharatha Rama and Lakshmana were inseparable. Since they were babies, Rama would not eat a morsel or sleep a wink unless Lakshmana was at his side, being fled from the same platter or lying in the same bed. Later Rama would not hunt Lakshmana without carrying his quiver or the older, the younger brother's. Dasaradha basked in the prodigious talents and love of his sons. Arrogance laid no hand upon them. They grew up as humble and respectful as they were gifted.

And what can be said about Rama his father's favorite ? Dasaradha lived Rama, he breathed Rama his every working movement was Rama his everything was Rama it one looked closely enough, his dreams than any man should. It was devotion, obsessive and a little dangerous.

Rama lived for his father's sake as well indulging his every wish, anticipating his least whim as if he read the old kings thoughts; at times even before they appeared in Dasaradha's mind! Those were perfect years and Dasaradha's pride in his sons grew apace. Then so quickly the princes were sixteen and of an age when they should take wives. Then father began to make delicate inquiries. But of course he was very particular about the girl his boy would marry.

VISWAMITRA COMES TO DASARADHA

The king Dasaradha was wondering as to who the bride of Rama should be. Since Rama was the favourite son the king could think only of Rama and his mind was ever thinking of the many ways of pleasing Rama. Rama on his part thought of nothing else but making his father happy in everyway. The Kinship between them was so great that everyone in the palace or even Ayodhya knew about it.

One day in the council hall, the king spoke to his ministers about the subject upper most in his mind; the marriage of Rama and his brothers. Even as he was thinking thus, there arrived at the doorsteps of the king the sage Viswamira. He accosted the door keepers and said, "Go and announce to the king about my arrival I am Kaushika, the son of Gadhi. People call me Viswamitra".

The name was so well known that ever the doorkeepers knew about him. They were greatly excited and with hurried steps, went to the presence of the king. Entering the council hall, they rushed to king and told him about the arrival of Viswamitra. The king was greatly pleased that such an illustrious rishi should have come to see him. He got up from the throne and accompanied by his preceptors, he went to receive the rishi.

Padya in his hand Dasaradha stood before the guest and washed his feet. He then offered Arghya and other prescribed object used for worshipping such guests. Accepting the welcome of the king with grace and with a smile, Viswamitra entered the palace of the king. He made the conventional enquires about the kingdom above the subjects, their welfare and in return. Dasaradha spoke about the Ashrama of the rishis tapas and the welfare about the inmates of the Ashrama when the formalities were over Viswamitra paid his respects to Vasistha and the others. He accepted the seat offered to him. The king then spoke to Viswamitra. He said : "Your coming is like godsend to me like the divine Nector to a human being, like rain water to one who is thirsty; like the birth of a son to a man and his good wife; like the finding of a treasure to one who has lost his entire wealth. I am indeed thrilled at the coming of a great personage like your gracious self. Can it be possible that I will be granted the privilege of doing something for you ? Something to please you ? That a Brahmarshi like you should have come to me on your own means some great good fortune to me. With the grace of the Lord above and with the blessings of men like you, I am in a position to offer the entire earth to you if you are so inclined please let me know if I can do something for you". The rishi was pleased with the devotion affection and humility of Dasaradha. He said "I am not surprised at your words. Born as you are in the line of the Ishvakus and having the great Vasistha as your Guru it is but natural for you to speak such

words. Only men like you will carry out what they have promised. I have indeed come to ask a favour of you. I will give you the background”.

I have taken the Diksha for a yaga. It has to be completed. But I am not able to do so. Two rakshasas who are able to assume what shape they will, are proving to be hindrance to my yaga. They are extremely skillful fighting the ‘Maya’ type of warfare, fighting without being seen. And they raw blood and flesh and such an unclean objects in the Yagnasala and on the platform itself where I perform the yaga. All the endeavors to perform the yaga have gone waste and I have come away from the spot without finishing the yaga. The yaga is itself is if such a nature that there is no place for anger in my mind during the performing it. I am not able to curse them and I have to hold back my anger. I have come to you for help so that I can complete the yaga.

“Tell me Lord”, said Dasaradha. He was greatly excited. He had fought on the side of Indra when there was war in the high heavens between Devas and the asuras and the king from the earth had been able to assist Indra during the war. That was when he was granted the boon that he would be able to drive his chariot in all the ten directions. The king was eager to hear more. “Tell me how I can help you” asked the king.

“I want you to give me Rama, your eldest son: Rama that charming youngster who is a great warrior”, said Viswamitra. Before the king could put in a word he said: “I will protect him, you need have a fear of that. This Youngman is sure to destroy those rakshasas. I am certain of that. Have no doubt that this will mean nothing but great good fortune for your son. He will be famed in the three worlds for this act of valour and I predict nothing but good for your son to follow in the wake of this act. The two rakshasas will not be able to withstand Rama’s powerful arrows. And Rama and only Rama is capable of destroying them. They have eaten up with pride and they have come to the end of their lives. Dasaradha do not let your father’s affection make you hesitate in granting me my boon. The yaga is for ten days and only ten days. The evil ones are destined to be killed by Rama and you can rest assured that they are dead already. I know Rama I know his true nature. I know him and his unswerving devotion to truth. These great rishis led by Vasistha also know the truth about him. If you desire fame in this world and a great future in the next you must give Rama to me for these ten days. If you do but look at your ministers that they are wanting you to grant me my wish.

Dasaradha thought of the youth of his beloved son Rama and to his mind. Came dreadful forms of the rakshasas who could assume what form they chose and who were Mayavis. He fell down senseless and for a while for the duration of a muhurta he was like that. He regained consciousness and then said,

“My Lord please be merciful. My Rama, my child with the eyes like the lotus is hardly sixteen years old. I am not able to imagine him fighting with rakshasas you speak of. I am an old veteran in the art of fighting. My entire army is at your service, my Lord. I accompany you and with my army to assist you I will fight with the rakshasas. I have fought before in the war with the Danavas when the Devas were harassed by them and I am sure. I can vanquish the two trouble makers. They are able to use astras and I will be able to give them god fought I will protect your yaga and help you to bring it to a successful conclusion. Please do not ask Rama to face the rakshasas. His education is hardy over and he is not strong enough to know how fierce the proposed fight will be. As for me, even if an hour passes without seeing my beloved child, my eyes become blurred with tears and I feel as though my life is ebbing away from me. Please do not ask me to send my Rama with you. If you insist on Rama coming with you then let me also come along with my army. Rama is my very life. After so many years of childlessness he has been granted to me and he is very dear to me as is well known the world over. Tell me about the rakshasas. Who are they? How did they acquire so much power. Who protect them? Where do they come from”?

Viswamitra said “In the time of the famed Pulastya is born a rakshasa by name Ravana. He is a powerful warrior and a brave fighter. He has pleased Brahma with his penance and has obtained boons from the creator. He is now bent on persecuting rishis and all good people. He had defeated Kubera, his half brother in the battle and has snatched from him the Pushpaka, a chariot which can fly in the air. Ravana is the son of Vishravasa and he is famed in all the three worlds. These two rakshasas Maricha and Subahu are his henchmen. They are bent on doing harm to people like me who are bent on tapas and actions which spell good for the world. Rama has to rid the world of them.

The king's expression was piteous when he heard about the rakshasas. He said, “unfortunate man that I am. I am in danger of losing my beloved son. My lord, how can I assume that this youngster will be able to stand in front of such powerful rakshasas and fight with them? I have been told that the Devas and the Gandharvas and all the denizens of the heavens are not able to stand up to Ravana. How can this child of mine, my Rama who is not yet sixteen, how can he fight with the henchmen of Ravana? I have heard it said that the valour of those who fight with him is absorbed into him and his opponents lose all their prowess. Rama is the scion of my race. I dare not give him to you. Subahu and Maricha are not the proper adversaries he should encounter in his first taste of fighting. I will fight my lord. But please do not ask me to give my child”.

Viswamitra's patience was at an end. Like a sacrificed for which burns brighter when ghee is poured into it, the words of the king made him more and more angry and finally his anger knew bounds . He looked at the king with his eyes glowing and said : "You made elaborate promises and now you are trying to go back on your word. This does not bring credit to the illustrations Raghuvamsa of which you are a descendant. If you think you are doing the right thing. I will go back to where I came from. Having broken your promise to your guest you can live happily with your kings-men surroundings you".

When he spoke thus the earth trembled in fear since his anger was known to all. Still the king sat silent. Buried as he was by his love for his son he did not realize what he was doing. Vasistha his mentor now spoke to him. He said, "Dasaradha, you are born on the lives of Ikshvakus you are expected to be a personification of Dharma himself. You are a righteous man and well versed in the rules of conduct. You should not behave thus and stay away you Dharma and you should not besmirch the name of your ancestors and yours too by this action of yours. Once you say that you will do a thing and hesitate to do so, it is an act unworthy of good men and it will rob you of all the punya you have accumulated so far. Send Rama with the rishi and save your name and that of your family. This illustrations son of Kushika will guard Rama like the wheel of fire does the pot fitted with Amrutha. No rakshasa this son of yours however mighty he may be. I am sure of that. Viswamitra is very image of Dharma and he is a great man. He is a man of great intellect and his tapas is his wealth. He is proficient in all the shastras and the sacred lore. No one in all the three worlds can gauge the greatness of Viswamitra. He knows the past, the present and the future. Please send your son without any qualms. Do you think it is hard for this great man to kill those too rakshasas who are wisps of straw in his presence ? He can do it. But he wants your son to achieve this greatness. Please realize the honour which has been granted to you and wakeup from this delusion called 'Putrasneha'.

When Vasistha spoke thus Dasaradha was convinced and woke up from his mental stupor. He fell at Viswamitra's feet and craved his pardon. He then said "In my blind love for my child I spoke hastily. Please forgive me and accept my son. Rama is never alone and Lakshmana will always be with him please take both of them.

The words of Vasistha had convince the king that the prince was taken by Viswamithra for the good of the youngster and his words of apology to the rishi were sincere. He sent for Rama and Lakshmana. Kausalya had heard

about the decision of the king to send the children with the rishi and even as the word reached her that the king wanted them she had prepared them for the journey. Taking leave of their mothers, the handsome young men came and stood before their father. They saluted all the rishis in the great hall and prostrated before their father. They were so handsome that Viswamitra could not take his eyes off their faces. Rama was dark like a blue lotus and Lakshmana was fair. Both had long liquid eyes and their smiles were bewitching. They stood with folded arms in front of their father.

Dasaradha said, “My dear Rama, Lakshmana the great sage Viswamitra has come to me with the sole purpose of taking you with him. Go with him and obey his commands in every way as you would mine”. The children spoke not a word but went and stood by the side of the rishi after saluting their father and the others in the hall.

The wind blew softly and gently and all the omens were good. When they left the place. All those in the hall went up to the doorway to bid Adieu to them and they were amazed to see the rain of flowers from the heavens and the distant music of heavenly music. Vasistha looked at the kings as if to say. “I told you that it is for the good of your sons that the great Viswamitra came to you asking you to lend them to him”.

VISWAMITHRA AND THE YOUNG PRINCES

Viswamitra walked in front and he was followed by Rama with a bow in his hand, with a sword at his waist and quivers fastened to his shoulders. Attired similarly Lakshmana walked just behind Rama and the citizens saw with their eyes wide with wonder at the beautiful spectacle. The rishi like a sacrificial fire and the two young men like smokeless flames leaping out of it. They looked like five headed serpents; accounted as they were for fighting. Several thought of the Ashvani twins following Brahma. When they saw the two princes walking behind the sage. Their fingers were protected by guards made of skins and their scabbards which had been set with precious stones gleamed in the sunlight.

Soon they reached the banks of the river Sarayu, the southern side of it. There is a very sweet voice Viswamitra called in a sweet voice “Rama”. There was a wealth of affection behind it. He said, “Child, fill your palms with water. I will teach you the Mantras, Bala and Atibala. Once you know them

neither hunger, nor fatigue nor thirst will trouble you while walking with me and there will be no trace or tiredness bothering you when you walk this long distance to the Ashrama. You will not be at a disadvantage if the rakshasas should accost you when you are tired.

“Rama, I know there is no one on the face of the earth to equal you in prowess in bravery, in all the many qualities that make up an ideal Kshatriya. Why, even in the three worlds I am yet to see the like of you. There is no one to equal you in handsomeness, in skill, in wisdom in the art of conversing with people. Fortunate indeed is Dasaradha to have you as his son and I am fortunate too that you will be with me constantly for a while.

“As for these mantras, Bala and Atibala they will make you respected by everyone in all the three worlds. They are the daughters of Brahma I know that you are worthy of learning them listen to me carefully and learn the Mantras.

Rama touched water and meditated on the Lord with great humility. He then learnt mantras from the rishi. Rama looked more powerful than ever after his initiation into the mantras. The young men then paid their respects to the great man as was the custom and they proceeded to make the preparations to spend the night on the banks of Sarayu. They spread dried grass and leaves on the ground and after seeing to the comforts of Viswamitra, the royal sons spent the night comfortably on the beds to which they were not accustomed.

When the night waned into daylight Viswamitra approached Rama who was still asleep and paused for a while to drink with his eyes the beauty of Rama. He then said “Rama Kausalya’s beloved child, the first Sandhya is approaching. Rouse thyself from sleep and perform the morning ablutions. The princes got up at once, bathed in the waters of the river and offered, Arghya to the sun standing in waters. They then approached the rishi and prostrated before him.

They began to walk again in pursuit of the journey. They reached the spot where the Sarayu joined the Divine Ganga. They looked at the glorious sight with wonderment in their eyes. They saw there several ashramas and the rishis were bent on tapas. The princes approached Viswamitra and asked him. Whose ashrama is the holy place ? Who dwells here ? Please tell us.

A gentle smile lit up the face of Viswamitra when he saw the eagerness of the young men. And he said, “I will tell you how this ashrama came into existence. Aeons of time have passed since then. But then, there was a time, when Kama, the God of love, had a form and features. Once Lord

Mahadeva was performing tapas here. He had lost his wife Sati and with his mind filled with anger and sorrow he came here all alone and was absorbed in meditation. Parvathi, the daughter of Himavan was serving him. The Devas were desirous that he should wed her since Parvathi was Sati born again as the daughter of Himavan. The Gods had been told that the son born of them would be the commander of the army of Devas.

Indra asked Kama to go to the neighbourhood of the spot where Mahadeva was and he was asked to aim at the arrows at the Lord. When Parvathi was standing before Mahadeva he had just opened his eyes and Kama thought it was an opportune moment to shoot his arrows made of flowers. The Lord was hit and he turned to see who had the audacity to do this and his eyes lighted on Kama. Mahadeva was furious and he opened his third eye, the eye of Agni and burnt Kama. Kama was from then without a form and now famed as Anaga the formless one. The spot where his ashes were wafted to, is known as the country Anga. As for this Ashrama you must have guessed that this is the spot where Kama was burnt to ashes and these rishis are all disciples of Mahadeva. It is rightly known as 'Kamashrama'. Let me take you to the rishis there. They will be pleased to see you both and they will bless you both and. In the place the holy rivers become one let us spend the night and we will cross the Ganges tomorrow. After purifying ourselves we will enter the Ashrama.

The rishis who knew all that had happened in the past and who could look into the future beyond the veil of time know who had come to their ashramas and were immensely pleased. They welcomed Viswamitra with great affection and they were thrilled to see the young men who were so humble and so gentle in their speech and their conduct.

The guests spent a happy time in the Kamashrama with the rishis and Viswamitra entertained them with stories about the many spots which they were to visit.

TATAKA VANA

Day dawning, the warriors led by Viswamitra reached the banks of the river Ganga. The rishis who were there secured for them a boat and told Viswamitra : "please use this boat to cross the river with the princes 'Do not tarry'. 'So be it" said Viswamitra and the three travelers sat in the boat and crossed the river Ganga which was flowing towards the sea.

When they were crossing in the midst of the river they heard a great noise. Rama and Lakshmana were impressed by the thunderous noise which was continuous and Rama said "Lord where is this roar from ? It is

wonderous and at the same time fearful”. “I will tell you” said the sage. Brahma once created out of his mind a lake which is rightly named Manasa Sarovara. This river Sarayu which flows all along the edge of your city Ayodhya was born out of this Saras. At this point actually, she is blending with the golden waters of the Ganges. Salute the rivers They did as they were bid and soon they reached the southern banks of the river. They resumed their walk.

After a while they reached a dark forest. It was dense and damp. No light from the sun could filter into the forest, so thickly were the trees branches intertwined. But what surprised Rama was the beauty of the forest and a strange lack of habitation there. This spot, which seemed ideally for any number of Ashramas was empty and there was eerie and frightening silence pervading the entire place. Only animals seemed to make their presence felt. Rama said, “My Lord, what strange noises! Beetles are making shrill music and the wild animals are roaring and making characteristic noises. Even the birds seem to cry harshly and there is no music emanating from their throats. The trees are all dense and they have darkened the place. I am not able to see anything. I cannot see the sun at all. Tell us what forest this is and why deserted by human beings.”

Viswamitra was pleased with the natural curiosity of the youngsters and he said, “I will tell you. This forest was not really a forest before. Two countries by name Malada and Karusha existing here. They were fertile and they were well populated. Indra, when he slew Vrita was guilty of Brahma Hatya. He was purified by the heavenly host of rishis with waters from all the sacred rivers and he was rid of the sin. This was the ground on which waters flowed from the body of Indra and the Lord of the heavens pleased with the earth for having received the polluted water said : I bless the ground. The countries will be called as Malada and Karusha and they will be extremely fertile. The fame of these two was a by word in the three worlds since they had been blessed by Indra.

Now, several years later a terrible rakshasi by name Tataka took possession of this place. She is ugly, horrible to look at cruel, by nature. She can assume any form she likes and she has a strength of a thousand elephants. She is the wife of good Yaksha by name Sunanda and her son is Maricha who will bring you fame in later years. This rakshasa has occupied the entrance to the two countries and no human being dares enter here since she is extremely fond of human flesh. A yojana and a half from where we are standing now, is her dwelling place. I am asking you to kill her. Kill this Tataka and make this land habitable once more. You and you will be the man who has courage enough to enter the land occupied by the dreadful woman and as for the human

beings she consumed there is no count. This Tatakavana does not boast of a single habitant. Still she will not abandon this place and go else where.”

Rama was listening to the words of Viswamitra very carefully. He then asked in a soft and gentle voice. “My Lord, you tell me that she is the wife of a Yaksha. I have been told that Yakshas are not so powerful as the other heavenly beings like the Devas for instance. How then can a mere woman be so strong ? You say that she has a strength of a thousand elephants how can that be possible ?”

It is a pertinent question said Viswamitra”. It is because of a boon which she was granted. Once there was a powerful Yaksha by name Suketu. He had no sons and so he performed a very intense Tapa. Pleased with him Brahma granted him a daughter by name Tataka. She was granted the strength of a thousand elephants. But the Yaksha did not get what he had prayed for a son. But it was the will of the gods and so satisfied with the gift which had been granted him, the yaksha brought up his daughter as he would a son. She grew up to be a beautiful maiden and when she was of marriageable age he gave her to Sunanda, the son of Jarjara. In course of time she gave birth to a son by name Maricha.

“Sunanda died and after his death Tataka’s nature underwent a change. She went with her son to the ashrama of Agastya and began to harass the great man with her advances. She desired him and with this desire evident by her progress Tataka went towards Agastya. Looking at her behaviour which was entirely against all modesty expected of a woman, Agastya who was radiant as Lord Agni himself, became very angry and he cursed her to become a rakshasi”. You will lose these attractive feminine looks and you will be ugly and formidable. You will eat human flesh and be despised by all” said the rishi.

Furious with Agastya for this curse Tataka has occupied this country and she has been killing anyone and everyone who has been foolish enough to enter this forest without knowing about her Rama, for the sake of protecting the human beings in the neighbourhood, the hermits, the cows and other gentle animals, you are to kill this rakshasi no one but you will be able to kill her I knew that you are very keen. You are not happy about it since she is a woman. But then the duty of a Khastriya as I know only too well is to protect the oppressed and the good. It has been the glory of the House in which you are born that no one has shirked in his duty, which is doing good to others. Several people have killed women for the common good. Why, Indra himself killed Mandara, the daughter of Virochana who had been wanting to destroy this entire world. Bhrgu’s wife the mother of Sukra, once desired that there should be no Indra and Lord Narayana himself killed her several other women who have been sinful have been killed in the past. Do not hesitate to kill Tataka.

The prince stood humbly in front of the rishi and said “My father, when he sent us with you said”, go with him and obey him in all things as you would my commands. He spoke to me in the presence of the elders of his count and I will never disobey my father. I will kill Tataka since you have asked me to. It is a command and it should be obeyed. For the sake of protecting hermits and the cows and for the good of the country. I am prepared to do your bidding.

THE KILLING OF TATAKA

Even as he was saying so, there arose the glorious noise of the bow string which he had been drawing. Rama had the bow in his left hand and his head was flung back. The entire forest reverberated with the sound. Hearing it Tataka was surprised. It was a long time since anyone had dared to enter her forest. She thought for a moment and incensed beyond measure, rushed in the direction from which the noise came. From atop the hillock there appeared the frightening female who was ugliness personified. Looking at her looming up like another hillock. Whose face was old and fearful to look at Rama turned to Lakshmana and said, “Lakshmana, look at this dreadful woman”. The very sight of her will make weak hearts stand still with bear. It will not be easy to subdue her. I am going to cut off her nose and ears at the tips and see the fun.

As he was talking to Lakshmana, Tataka rushed towards them with both her arms uplifted. Viswamitra made her halt in her tracks by scolding her and send. “May the two sons of the Raghurama succeed in their attempt”.

Tataka was spraying stones and mud on the young men and the sky was filled with the dust. It was dark for a longer hill and they could see nothing. She then sent a real rain of stones which made the gentle prince extremely angry with his arrows Rama destroyed the stones and cut off her arms. Lakshmana in the meantime, heard her roar with anger and pain and he cut off the tips of her nose and ears. Tataka suddenly vanished from their sight and from out of nowhere there rained on them a number of stones hurled by her. Both the brothers pulled the strings of their bows and the noise was so frightening that she forgot all her maya warfare and fell on the ground senseless. Viswamitra said “Rama there is no need for you to have any compunction about slaying this dreadful sinner. Evening is fast approaching and it is only too well known that the strength of Rakshasas increase with the setting of the sun.”

Rama felt that the time had come when he should kill her. Not heeding the stones which were being hurled at him Rama took an arrow pulled it as near as possible and released it. The arrow hit Tataka’s chest entered it and she fell dead on the hill.

The heavenly host rejoiced when Rama accomplished this task. Indra with his attendants came to Viswamitra and said, "All our gratitude for brings the son of the great Dasaradha to rid the world of this sinful woman. You know there are many such tasks which have to be accomplished by him. May your blessings he showered on him fully". The denizen's from heaven went back. Evening drew near and Viswamitra raised Rama who had prostrated before him and said, "Rama be in the last lap our journey." We will soon reach our Ashrama.

As soon as the rakshasi Tataka was killed, the forest changed its complexion completely. It was a startling sight when they woke up in the morning Viswamitra and the young princes saw the forest freed from the taint of Tataka. Flowers were blooming everywhere. Champaka, Punnaga and Mallika, Mango trees and Panasa trees and many palm trees could be seen bearing fruits. Ponds now could be seen everywhere with clear water and it seemed to be as beautiful as chaitra, the garden of Kubera. Viswamitra's eyes rested on him. They strayed away from there to the beautiful surroundings and came back to Rama. He said, "I am extremely pleased with you. May be you famed with world over for your prowess. Accept my blessings. I am so pleased with you that I am going to make a rare gift to you".

Rama and Lakshmana were intrigued by the words of Viswamitra. The said "you have blessed us and you have told" us that you are pleased with us, "Is there any other gift greater than this, my lord ?"

Viswamitra smiled and said, "you know about it or you may not. But I am telling you now that I am in possession of all the divine astras you can think of I will give them to you with the help of these astras you will be able to vanquish all the enemies you will come across later. I will now grant all of them to you learn the incantations carefully from me and you will be able to master them very soon.

Rama set facing the east after purifying himself and the rishi taught him the astras which he had obtained from Mahadeva after performing intense Tapas. Those were the days when he needed them. He had passed those days and he needed them no more. Smiling to himself at his earlier struggles, the sage Viswamitra taught them all to Rama one by one : the method by which he should invoice the astra, the manner in which it should be despatched and the manner of with drawing it. And all the presiding deities came and stood before Rama. Folding their palms they said "Noble Rama, we are now your slaves and will do your bidding". Rama told them : "Reside in my mind all the time and come to me when I want you".

Viswamitra asked Rama to teach the astras to Lakshmana now and he did so. The three of them hastened towards the ashrama of Viswamitra with a chastened look. The young men were still under the euphoria of the sight of presiding deities of the astras and the rishi realizing this gave them time to get used to the possession of the astras

SIDDHASHRAMA

As they were walking along Rama again asked Viswamitra “There is a beautiful mountain there and nestling at its foot is a grove which is pleasing to the eyes. Even at this distance I can see deer dark as rain clouds. Birds with sweet voices are singing in the grove. This green grove of trees captures my mind. Tell us what the place is we just came out of a forest which was fearful and uninhabitable and this is all the more exciting since it seems to be a happy place. How far away from here is the ashrama of your gracious self ? I have become very important since I am eager to see those sinners who are causing so much discomfort to you. When will I see those wicked rakshasas who kill hermits without compunction ? When will I be able to kill them?”. Viswamitra was only too eager to answer the questions of Rama. He said, “this grove has a long history behind it. I will relate it you”.

Ages back the great Lord Narayana the all pervading, who is the cause of the creation the preservations and the destruction of this entire universe performed Tapas here. And again this is the place where Vamana had his dwelling place and hence it is called the ‘Siddhashrama’.

Bali, the son of Virochana was the emperor. He had defeated all the rival Danavas as also the Maruts and Indra too. He was famed all the world over his prowess and for his generous nature. He once performed a yagna. The yagna was to confirm his position as the lord of three worlds. It was in this ashrama that the Devas led by Agni approached Narayana and said; “Lord, Bali, the son of Virochana is performing a yagna. You must some how stop it for the good of those who dwell in the celestial regions. Bali is well known for his generosity. He has never said no to anyone who has asked him for anything. You must use of this character in him and help us to regain the world which we have lost to him.

“In the meantime, Kashyapa, the great Prajapati who was like the God of fire, so radiant was he because his tapas, desired a son. His wife Adithi was like his other self in glory and this great man once performed Tapas with the image of Narayana deeply engraved in his mind. To him came the Lord in

poser and asked him what he desired. Kashyapa the son of Marichi said “please do not think it audacious in my part when I ask you to be born as my son. You must be born as the son of Aditi and you must wipe her tears which are flowing because of the unhappiness of her children, the Devas. Our purpose should thus be served and this ashrama where you will be born will be famed the world over as the Siddhashrama since we would have attained our desires.

“So be it” said Narayana with a smile. Aditi became the mother of the lord in human form. He was so small and so much like a miniature of a man that he was called ‘Vamana’ along with his other name ‘Upendra’. When the yagna of Bali was in progress Vamana went to the yagnasala.

“Bali stood up and greeted this young Brahmin who was like a heap of gold. He said, “what will you have my young Brahmin”. You look so beautiful and so radiant, I have a feeling you do not belong to the earth but to the heavens. No human being can look so glorious. Ask anything of me and I will give it to you I am eager to please you”.

Vamana was gratified by the generous nature of the king and said “O king! It is but proper for the son of Virochana to talk thus. The world talks of nothing but the great yagna you are performing and I came to you hoping that you will give me something. I want very little but I will ask only if you assure me that I will be granted my wish”.

The king smiled at the boy. For, so he thought was a child. “It is my great fortune that you have come to ask me for a gift. Who ever you are, I fell my life is complete only now that I have seen you. Ask me for anything. Be it my treasury or granary my army or my very kingdom. Just ask and it will be yours”.

The dazzling smile played in the Boy’s lips again. He said sweetly “I have no use for your treasury or granary your any or your kingdom for name is a life of Tapasya. My only need is for a price of earth to sit up in prayer. Give me the three strides of land Bali, that I can with these legs of mine Mahabali was amused. He said in a kingly patronage of course you shall have them now”. Bali reached for the sacred water that sanctifies the gift, the giver and the receiver out Sukracharya, his guru said, “Bali this is no child. He is the truth that not even Brahma the Devas or the yogis can fathom. This is Narayana who has come to you yagna. If you give him what he asks, you will die”.

But Bali would not listen, for Vamana had come to deliver him to far greater kingdom shone upon asura’s face also and he said to Sukra “If he is Narayana, my yagna will succeed beyond my dreams.

Bali's queen poured the water into his palms, and he solemnly gave away the three paces of land the away had asked for. But the instant the holy water touched Vaman's hands, the tiny Brahma began to grow. He grew into his Viswarupa his cosmic form with his first stride he crossed the earth. With his next he covered the heavens. Then he stood refulgent before Mahabali and said where shall I set my third stride Bali" ? My foot is raised. The asura was a great Bhaktha. Tears streaming down his face, Mahabali bent his head and cried to the god "set your third stride upon my head Lord".

The Vamana set his foot in Mahabali's head. With the ecstasy of redemption, he thrust the Asura who would have been experor of the worlds down to pathaladown to the eternal kingdom and please.

Viswamitra paused for a moment. They had drawn near the Ashrama. He pointed "In that Tapovana to your hearts thrill Vishnu set Mahabali free. And thus my Ashrama. It is the immortal place the rakshasas desecrate with their fifth."

With the princes at his side Viswamitra strode into the Ashrama of vibrant peace. They were like the moon blanked by the Punarvasu stars run into a clean night. The other rishis of the hermitage gathered around their master and the savions he had bought to deliver them from Maricha and Subhahu.

The princes of Ayodhya rested only briefly after their long journey. Then they came to Viswamitra and Rama said quietly. "Resume your yagna Muni; you will not be interrupted."

The same night Viswamitra took Disha again. Rama and Lakshamana slept peacefully through that first night. The next morning, they rose before the sun, as down clutched at the horizon for finger hold. They bathed and came before the Brahmarsi. He sat quietly on a seat of darbha grass, after he had worshiped Agni Deva, who conveys burnt offerings to all the other Gods.

THE YAGA OF VISWAMITRA

The young princes went to the presence of the rishi. Viswamitra had taken mauna a vow of silence for six days. Rama and Lakshmana stood watch over Siddhashrama. After their encounter with Tataka, they were eager for the rakshasas to appear. Day and night, they stood in vigil their bows in their hands grasping with arrows so that demons would not take them unawares. They guarded the ashrama as eye lids do the eyes.

Five days went by and Viswamitra's rishis said to the kshatriyas "Today they will come. It is the last day and these rakshasas know the yagna well".

The fire in the yagnasala burned high. As he sat before the flames. Viswamitra's chiselled face seemed to be made of stone. The other rishis sat around Viswamitra. The chanting of the Vedas rose like smoke from the fire. August and sonorous it spread through the world on subtle frequencies. Those timeless mantras were powerful healing upon the earth.

It was almost evening of the last day of the yagna. Suddenly a loud clap of sound shattered the sacred silence. A pungent darkness fell on the yagnasala an unclean night of the elements and the spirits. Chilling shrieks and wild laughter rent the air. The two rakshasas had arrived with their bizarre clan. Maricha and Subahu were used to meeting no opposition when they came to Siddhashrama and they had not bothered to make themselves invisible. They came as they were : devils of the forest ugly as the sin. They came in a Swatha of putrescence and a rain of excrement rotting meat and stinking blood. They came the flesh of some of them obscenely bared, to violate the sole of the sacrifice.

Rama and Lakshmana had waited five days. Rama invoked the Manavastra he had recently acquired and shot an arrow into Maricha's chest crying, "Let me never see you again or you die".

The weapon lifted the shocked rakshasa off his feet. It carried him through the air, aflame, screaming. It carried him past the wind for a hundred yojanas and doused him in the distant sea. But it did not kill him.

In the silence that followed you could hear again, the chanting of Veda Maricha's rakshasas and lean, then tall Subahu stood open mouthed, their long fangs plain. The heathen screams had died in their throats : their rain of filth had ceased around them. But the prince of Ayodhya, the guardian of Viswamitra yagna did not wait for the stunned demons to recover. Blue lightning, Rama invoked Agneyastra and in a wink made a heap of ashes of Lanky Subahu. Quicker than thinking, he undid the mortal elements of the rest of the horde with a Vayavyastra a vayu, the wind God. The weapon blew them apart as a gale would a dust heap in its path.

Shouldering his bow Rama said "Did you see Lakshmana, the first Astra was a compassionate one. The Manavastra did not kill Maricha. It only punished him with fire and water. It has purified him Lakshmana wondered that his brother saw to the very end. But just briefly but no miracle was beyond his

Rama. The sacrifice at Siddhashrama was completed. In joy Viswamitra called Rama.

Embracing him, the rishi cried, “Rama of Ayodhya, your name shall be immortal. Men remember you as the world exists from yuga to yuga your fame will be sung. The yagna you have helped me complete in the teeth of evil will bless the earth long ages after you and I am no more in it. Prince of light, today you have won a greater battle than you yourself yet know.

Viswamitra, saw into the past or the future as it they were plain before his eyes. The Brahmarshi thought, not Ravana of Lanka, who is evil incarnate shall prevail against you, Rama. But Rama your way is long and fraught with sorrow, before you rid the earth of that Rakshasa. Viswamitra said nothing of these thoughts to the happy prince. He only joined the other rishis in crying “Jaya Vijayi Bhava’ (may you always Victorians)

At the end of the day, Viswamitra said to Rama and Lakshmana. In the city of Mithila king Janaka is performing another kind of yagna. We are going to Janaka’s sacrifice and I want you to come with us. There is something there that should interest you and young warriors. The bow of Siva lies in Mithila, like an arc of the Sun. It lies in Janaka’s palace worshiped in flowers incense and prayers.

He paused, then mused, ‘you know, no Deva or Gandharva no asura or the mightiest Kshatriya could even lift Siva’s bow. Many tried, from heaven and earth none of them moved that weapon by a hair’s width. Rama, you must see Siva’s bow in Mithila it is a wonder upon the earth. We will set out tomorrow; Janaka’s yagna had already begun.

TO MITHILA

Viswamitra addressed the demigods who guarded the ashrama and the forest. “I have completed what I had undertaken. The Siddhashrama has retained her name. After visting Mithila, I will proceed towards Himavan the mountain where the sacred Ganga has her source. I wish you well and this place will always a blessed spot.

Accompanied by the rishis and by Rama and Lakshmana, the sage Viswamitra made a Pradikshana to the ashrama and began his journey towards the North. Several people followed them; even the den and the birds which were living in the ashrama with gentle and persuasive words, Viswamitra coaxed them back and proceeded with the journey. After considering distance

covered when the sun was sloping westwards, they reached the banks of the river Sona and remained there. They sat around Viswamitra when they found a charming plot to relax. Rama with his brother sat, very near the rishi. He asked Viswamitra “This country is very beautiful. I see nothing but green everywhere and evidently it is a very fertile and fruitful pride. Tell me whom does it belong to ?”

Viswamitra was only to answer his question. He began “Lord Brahma had a son by name Kusa. He was a great tapasvi and he married the daughter of king Videha and four sons were born to him. Kushamba, Kushanabha, Adhurtharajah and vasu. All of them were valiant like their father and equally righteous. The king asked his sons to follow the dharma of the Kshatriyas and to rule the world. They founded four cities and each ruled one Kushambas city went by the name Kaushambi. Kushanabha’s city was Mohodaya. Adhurtharaja’s named his city Dharmaraya and Vasu was the ruler of the city by name Girivrga.

“This country which you admire so much is called Vasumathi and it belongs to Vasu. There are five mountains here and the river which has its source in the Magadha kingdom flows in between the mountains like a garland of flowers fling on the earth Kusanabha had a hundred daughters who were given to Brahmadata a noble rishi. The king was desirous of a son and he asked Brahmadata to perform a yaga for him. During the performance of a yaga, Kusa the father of Kusanabha said, “Do no worry. You will be the father of a son by name Gadhi. Because of him your name will be famed throughout born to Kushanabha Gadhi. Rama, Gadhi was my father”.

“My elder sister was Satyavathi and she was given in marriage to a saintly man by name Richaka. She was so pure and so good that she reached the heavens with the human body. She became a sacred river by name Kaushiki. This pure woman, my sister was born into this world only to do good to others. This is the reason why I spend all my time on the banks of Kaushiki in the Himavan mountains when I am there unbelievable peace enfolds me and I am extremely happy. Because I had a duty to perform, I left the banks of that pure river and came down south. I came to Siddhashrama and with your assistance, I was able to achieve what I had set out to do. Now you know whose country this is.

“Look! Half the night has passed by! I have been talking unaware of the passing of time. The trees have gone to sleep. Even a leaf does not move so still is the night. Animals and the birds have covered themselves with the dark night and have gone to sleep. The first half of the night gradually disappears and the sky, studded with the myriad stars, seems to have a thousand

eyes with which to look at us. The moon is just now brightening the east and his soft rays will soon embrace the world and banish the enveloping darkness. Only the night birds, the Pishachas, rakshasas and bhutas are making use of darkness you must sleep now children. We must continue the joining tomorrow. We will set about early in the morning.

GANGA

The music of the birds and the rustling of the waters of the river sona were waking them up and soon they were awake. Even before they could get up Viswamitra was by their side and he said, “Children, the dark night has passed and the dawn is fast approaching let us hurry and make preparation for the journey”.

Rama with his brother went to Viswamitra ready to leave with them. He asked Viswamitra, “My Lord, this river does not seem to be fed enough with water. I can see sandy islands here and there breaching the even flow of water. Where are we planning to cross the river ?

“We will follow the path of the rishis who have gone this way before”, said Viswamitra and the troupe walked fast towards the North. After a long trudge when the sun had reached the zenith, they saw in front of them, the broad expanse of the sacred river Ganga. They were thrilled at the sight of the river with swans and lotuses floating on its surface. They stood for a while looking at the beauty of the waters and they made up their minds to spend up some time in her banks.

As usual in the evening, they sat round Viswamitra. Rama asked the rishi, “I want to hear the story if the sacred river Ganga she is called Triptaga – the river with three paths. How did she purify the three worlds and finally reach the sea, the lord of all rivers ? I am very eager to listen to the thrilling story”.

“There is a mountain by name Himavan” began Viswamitra. “Himavan is the lord of all mountains and he had two daughters who were unrivalled in beauty. Their mother was Mena also known as Manorama. Ganga was the elder of the two daughters and the younger is known by the name Parvathi and also by name Uma. The devas wanted Ganga for themselves. They went to Himavan and asked him to make a gift of his daughter to them. Himavan agreed and Ganga who converted herself into a river flowed in the heaven and her waters purified whatever it touched. She was famed Mandakini in the heavens and is also known as Akash Ganga.

“The other daughter Uma performed severe tapas and her devotion was rewarded. Her father gave her to Lord Mahadeva. These two daughters of Himavan are worthy of the worship of the three worlds. Rama, one of your ancestors was a king by name Sagara. He was for a long time childless. He had two wives. One was Kesari the daughter of the king of Vidarbha. The second wife was Sumathi, the daughter of Kashyapa. She was famed for her beauty. With a desire for a child, the king went to the slopes of the Himavan with his wives. There he performed Tapas. After a hundred years had passed the rishi Bhrigu came to him and said “You will certainly become a father and because of them your name will be ever remembered by the world of men. One of your wives will be the mother of a son only one son, who will continue the time of Ishvakus. The other will be the mother of sixty thousand sons, all valiant, powerful and brave. The princesses were very happy and they stood before him humbly and said “Which of us will be the mother of sixty thousand sons ? and which of us will bear the son who will continue the line ? We are eager to know ?” Bhrigu said “the choice is yours. One of you will have to choose, the single progeny while the other will have to sixty thousand sons ? Kismi the elder queen chose to be the mother of the only son, while Sumathi the younger was happy in the anticipation of her many sons who were to be born to her. King Sagara took leave of the rishi and went back to his Kingdom.

In course of time, a son was born to dismay the king realized this son was wicked in the real sense of the world. He enjoyed doing evil acts. When he was a young boy he would catch hold of young children and throw them into the river Sarayu. He would stand watching them struggling in the water before they were drained. He would clap his hands in glee. Sagara thought that he would improve as he grew older. But now he became more and more unpopular. The townsfolk finally came to the king and told him about the atrocities performed by the prince. Righteous man that he was, Sagara did not hesitate even for a moment, he meted out punishment for such a miscreant, banishment from the kingdoms.

“The one consolation the king had was that Asamanyu’s son by name Aishwmin did not inherit his father’s nature but was a good, sweet, gentle child ever devoted to his grandfather”.

The other wife of the king, Sumathi became the mother of the sixty thousand sons as had been prophesied lusty, young men who were very powerful handsome and extremely arrogant. They were the pride of the mother.

Once Sagara wanted to perform the Aswamedha. The north is prove of the powerful Himavan and facing it in the middle of Bharathavarsha is

the mountain Vindhya which is a large range. These two mountains stand as though challenging each other in greatness. The land between these two was chosen as the site for Yagnasala.

The youngster Anshuman was asked to accompany the sacrificial horse in its triumphant march through all the kingdoms. Indra who is ever jealous of the king of the earth who performs the Aswamedha was very prompt in stealing the horse and he disappeared with it.

The pandits who were performing the yagna could not proceed with the rituals until the horse was found and they told the king about the urgency of the matter. They said, "Unless the horse is found and the yaga is completed grave disaster will follow". Sagara called his powerful sons and said, "you have heard the words of the rishis. Please make haste and go in search of the horse. This sacrifice can be performed without any fault by only very few people and once begun it has to be concluded. Please go at once and search in all the four quarters and in the other world also".

The lusty Kshatriya princes, the Sagara Putras were very happy to do as they were told. They set out in quest of the horse. With their powerful arms they dug up the earth. Each prince allotted to himself one yojana of ground and dug into it. The entire surface of the earth had been dug up and they could not find the horse. The earth groaned under the fierce onslaught of the princes. Serpents, animals and even the rakshasas suffered and the air was filled with their cries of pain which were piteous to hear.

When they did not find the horse in the surface of the earth, Sagara's sons entered the other regions. They saw the Diggajas, the elephants bearing the earth on their mighty heads. Virupaksha, Mahapadma, Saumantha and Bhadara. But they were not able to see the horse. Finally they went deep into the other lands and they came to the vicinity of a cave. When they were wondering as to who was inside they heard the neighing of a horse. The princes were surprised at this. Promptly they went inside the cave. It was an ashrama which was more like a cave than usual hermitage.

When they went inside, the valiant brothers saw Kapila Vasudeva, the great rishi who was lost in meditation. Beyond him, beyond where he was sitting they saw, a horse their father's sacrificial horse. They were happy that their search was at an end.

The sons of Sagara shouted. "This is the thief. He has stolen a horse and, having reached this underground retreat, he has assumed the garb of a sanyasi and pretends to be in deep meditation. Let's punish him". With their

minds completely bemused because of their anger against the rishi the sons of Sagara rushed at Kapil with their hands holding different weapons. They shouted at the greatman calling thief and Kapil opening his eyes because of the noise they made saw what was happening. He looked at them with angry eyes and that was enough to reduce them to ashes. The sixty thousand sons of Sagara were now just a happy ashes. The rishi went back into trance as though nothing has happened.

“Sagara, in the meantime waited in vain for the return of this sons with the horse. Finally he asked his grandson, Anshuman to go and find out what had happened. The young prince went along the path which his uncles had taken soon reached the cave where Kapila was Anshuman entered the cave and there has saw the horse. Anshuman stood humbly and wanted for the greatman to come out of his Samadhi. When Kapila opened his eyes he saw a young man standing before him with folded hands. Anshuman prostrated before the rishi and taking dust of his feet, he spoke to him about his errand. Kapila said “Here is your horse child, Indra as usual has stolen it and brought it here. As for your uncles, there they are, he said and pointed to the heap of ashes. They behaved in an unforgivable manner and with my looks, I burnt them to ashes.

Anshuman looked around for water so that he could offer the funeral oblations tarpana to his elders. But her could find no water there. But he found Garuda the brother of Sumathi coming towards him. And he said, child, do not be too unhappy. This is but the law of nature. Your uncles my nephews, were too arrogant to be popular. As for the Anjali, you want to offer them, ordinary water will not wipe out their sin. Ganga the elder daughter of Himavan is the only one who will be able to purify them. Ask her to came down to earth. The holy waters of Ganga must wet these ashes. Then, and then only then will they attain salvation.

“Anshuman was speechless with sorrow and with the stupendous task which he had been asked to undertake. Garuda then said, “That will be later. Now hurry with the horse to the presence of your grandfather and let him complete the Aswamedha”.

Anshuman returned to the kingdom with the horse and the sacrifice was concluded. But the king was greatly unhappy at the turn of events. He did not know to make the divine river Ganga flow on the earth. After sometime he left the kingdom in the hands of his grandson Anshuman and king Sagara accompanied by his wives went to the forest to perform Tapas and then reach to heavens.

Anshuman ruled the kingdom well and he had no time and try and woo Ganga to come down to earth. He had a son by name Dilipa. Anshuman left the kingdom in his hands and went to the slopes of the Himavan to perform penance in order to get Ganga. But it was in vain. He died without accomplishing his object Dilipa also suffered the same way. He could not during his reign, achieve the desire in the hearts of all of them, the coming of Ganga to the earth and the salvation of the sons of Sagara.

BHAGIRADHA'S PENANCE

Dilipa had a son by name Bhagiradha Dilipa ruled the kingdom until illness overtook him and crowning Bhagiradha as the king Dilipa died.

The one purpose in the life of Bhagiradha was to make his ancestors reach the heavens. He left the kingdom in the hands of efficient ministers and went to perform tapas. Brahma was pleased with the intense tapas which the king was bent on, and he appeared before Bhagiradha and said, "the Devas and I am pleased with your penance". Ask what is their will of me. I will certainly grant it.

Bhagiradha with his eyes filled with tears of gratefulness, spoke in a voice chilled with tears. "My lord, if you want to grant me a boon, grant me this : grant that my forefather reach the heavens. I have to perform the Nivapanjali for them with the waters of Ganga. And my lord, the line of Ishvakus should not terminate with me. These are the boons I ask of you" said Bhagiradha Brahma said, "Have no fear you line will not stop with you. You will be the father of a son. As for Ganga, she is the daughter of Himavan. When she descends from the heavens no one will be able to bear the force of her descent except Mahadeva. You must pray to him Bhagiradha now addressed himself to Mahadeva and spent a whole year fasting with just air for food. Mahadeva was pleased with the devotion of the king and appeared before him and said "My mind is pleased with you and your desire to win. Your forefather has a place in the heavens. I will take Ganga on my head and break the force of her descent".

Ganga, the daughter of Himavan had at the command of Brahma a greed to come down to the earth. According to the promise he had given Bhagiradha Lord Mahadeva stood on a raised plateau of the maintain by name Himavan. All the heavenly beings had assembled in the skies to see the glorious sight. Bhagiradha was standing with his eyes lifted to the skies from where Ganga was to descend.

They were waiting and suddenly they heard a mighty roar. Ganga was in the sky and an immense sheet of water began to rush towards earth. It seemed as though the sea had reached the heavens and was rushing back to the earth in a hurry. Ganga had become very proud of the fact that she was indispensable. She told herself “I will rush down with such fury that I will sweep Mahadeva into the Patala and the earth too”. Grasping her mind Mahadeva knew that her pride had to be humbled he stood with his trident held behind his back with both his hands with his head slightly raised and a beautiful smile shadowing his lips. So he stood when Ganga came to earth.

The sacred Ganga fell straight into the hollow head of Mahadeva. Every one was watching her descent. Then they saw a strange sight. Ganga's waters were coming down from the sky but when they reached the matted lock of my lord Mahadeva they absorbed by them. Ganga was lost there and no one could see her. Try as she might, she could find no way out of the tangled matts of the lord's locks.

“Bhagiradha was desperate and he praised the lord and prayed that he should have compassion on him. Mahadeva had felt that he had punished her enough and he allowed Ganga to emerge from his jata along simple strand of his hair. Drop by drop she came and a pool was formed called Bindusaras. Ganga was thus called Alakananda. Where the pool became a lake and when it was full the river flowed in seven streams. Three of these flowed eastwards and three towards west. The seventh followed Bhagiradha as his. Chariot rushed towards south where the Sagaraputras were.

The earth looked like sky with swans flying around. So white was the foam of the river as she followed the king's chariot. She was so willful. Here she would flow straight as an arrow and then she would fly like a serpent. She would rush fast at some spots and at others, she would wander like a woman walking in her pleasure garden. She would flow smoothly in the ground for a while and, suddenly she would timber like a child at play. So she went to purify the earth. She had washed the feet of Narayana and she had passed the region of the moon. She had been borne on the head of Mahadeva and this thrice purified. She had come down to the sinful earth to grant salvation for a fistful of ashes. Such was the greatness of the heavenly births.

Ganga reached Patala and finally Bhagiradha's dream came true. He saw the ashes of his ancestors drenched in the Divine Ganga.

Brahma came to Bhagiradha and said “child you have achieved something which was by no means easy so long as the waters remain in the ocean you forefathers who gave the ocean its name Sagara will remain the

heavens. Ganga will be your eldest daughter in the eyes of gods and she will be called Bhagiradhi”.

Viswamitra’s narration was complete and he said, Rama my child as usual. I have been talking for a long. I have told you the story of Ganga how she came down to the earth. Ganga who was TRIPATHAGA since she has been in heavens in the earth and in Patala too. Evening is fast approaches let us prepare to rest for the night.

TOWARDS GAUTAMA’S ASHRAMA

Early in the morning, the party of rishis headed by Viswamitra, who had princes by his side, went towards, Vishala, a beautiful city. They had crossed the Ganga with the help of a boat and had reached the other bank. Rama was still thinking of the glorious narration of the descent of Ganga. On the northern bank of Ganga they saw the city by name Vishala. As was natural to him Rama wanted to know whose city it was and who was ruling it now. Viswamitra said;

“The history of this city goes as far back in time as the churning of the ocean of milk when Amrutha was found. The Devas and the Asuras vied with each other to be the sole possessors of the bowl containing vector. Narayana, with his guile managed to let the Devas have it. There ensued a war and several of the famed asuras were killed in this war. And so Diti, the mother of Asuras was very unhappy she asked her husband to help her to be the mother of a son who would be able to kill Indra. Kashyapa taught her the incantations and there was one condition which she had to obey with great care she had to be very careful and clean and should never make a small mistake regarding this rule. A lapse would mean that his desire would not be granted Diti listened to it carefully.

She has observed all the rules well and Indra was by her side all the time. He was attending to her wants and by and large making himself useful to her. He was her sisters son, on that pretext he was with her. She was extremely careful. But one day she was careless and Indra who was waiting for this chance took advantage of it and managed to cut the child into pieces. Try as he might be he could not destroy the pieces and all seven were crying Diti was ashes and he did not want her to wake up and he told the crying children do not cry Maaruda. Meanwhile you wanted me to be destroyed and as a matter of self preservation, I had to resort to this. But your children are not dead. See I could not kill them. So powerful is the effect of yours. My Vajra was ineffective.

There are now seven children instead of one. Forgive me and take your son and I could not kill them.

“Diti know that they are not going to kill Indra since her Vrata had been tainted by her lapse. She said, “No one can conquer fate and it is destined that no evil should be fall you. Since you are responsible for these children, partly you can take them with you. Though born of me they will be your brothers. Since you went as saying Maa rude to them they will be famed as the seven Maruts and let them be the associates of vayu and be with him for ever. Rama said Viswamitra “This is the place when Diti performed her tapas this is where seven Maruts were born. Later a city Visala was built by Alambusa are of the sons of Ishvaku. His descendents ruled this country since then. At this present moment it is ruled by Sumathi.

We will spend this night here in this pleasant city and proceed to Mithila tomorrow.

Hearing the arrival of Viswamitra and his disciples, Sumathi, the kind came to where he was and paid respects to him. He looked at the young prices and asked Viswamitra who they were and how it was possible with these young men especially accompanying the rishis. Viswamitra told him about the yagh and how the young princes had protected by the rakshasas and how Rama killed the entire host. Sumathi was amazed at the thrilling narration and after talking to them for sometime went back to his palace. The rishis spent the night there and early in the morning they resumed their walk towards the city Mithila.

They reached the outstanding of Mithila and they felt that they were already in Mithila. It was a beautiful city and they all exclaimed. How beautiful ? What a lovely city! On the way Rama discerned a very pleasant looking ashram. It was isolated, situated in a garden which was touching the edge of the city. Rama looked with admitting eyes at the Ashram. He saw that there was no smoke plunning towards the sky and he realized that there was no one in the Ashram. This was very strange and with wondering eyes he turned to Viswamitra and asked him “Yonder there seems to be an ashrama”. I think it is very beautiful. But it seems to me as though it is empty. This beautiful ashram seems to be uninhabited. How is it possible my Lord ? Why is it there is no one in the Ashrama situated as it is in such sylvan surroundings ?

“It is empty because of a great man’s anger”, said Viswamitra. He continued “I will tell you how it came to pass.” This same spot was once like the very heaven itself. It was the ashrama of the great rishi Gautama. He performed tapas here for many years.

Brahma had created a beautiful woman and he called her Ahalya. To Gautama was this woman in marriage. And they live here for a long time.

Once Indra, who is famed for weakness for beautiful women came to the neighbourhood of this ashrama. After making sure that Gautama was away from the hermitage Indra assuming the guise of the rishi entered the apartment Ahalya was and said “You are a beautiful woman and my mind is lost to you. I desire you. Ahalya could see that it was not the rishi though the guise was there. She knew that it was Indra. She was flattered and pleased that the Lord of heavens desired her and she decided to confirm to his desire. She agreed to his love making.

When it was time for Gautama to return from the river, then Ahalya realized the extent of her sin and also the danger which beset her and Indra. She told him, “Go away from here as quickly as you can. I am afraid of the anger of my husband please protect yourself from his wrath. Indra laughed and said “Have no fear. I will take good care of myself and of you too”.

Indra hurried out of the ashrama bent as escaping the eyes of Gautama. He was just late. He saw the rishi entering the ashrama even as he was trying to depart. Gautama had just bathed in the river. He was wearing wet clothes and with his body covered with ashes he looked like Lord Mahadeva. Gautama was able to know the truth about everything which was happening around him and with Samidha and Darbha in his hands he stood still looking at the apparition before him, Indra assuming the garb of Gautama.

It did not take very long of Gautama to guess what had happened. He bent his angry eyes on Indra and said, “Your vanity about your being irresistible to women has made you commit this crime. I now curse you. You will lose your manhood.”

Gautama then entered the ashrama and looked at his wife who was shivering with terror. He said, “you will remain here, unseen by anyone and you will be in the ashes and the air will be your food. Years later when Rama, the powerful son of Dasaradha enters the ashrama, it will be sanctified and you will regain your form and you will also be cleansed of this sin which you have committed.”

“Gautama left the ashrama and went off to perform tapas while Ahalya is waiting for the touch of your blessed feet to purify her and to sanctify this ashrama. Come let us enter the hermitage and end the torture of this beautiful woman who is now penitent.

Rama, Lakshmana and Viswamitra entered the ashrama of Gautama and saw smooth beauty Ahalya. Rid as she was of her sin, Ahalya's radiated beauty and charm like the moon which has emerged from a screen of clouds. She looked like a sudden flame which leaped out of a cloud of smoke. She was like the sun reflected in a sheet of water.

Rama and Lakshmana saluted her and flowers rained from the heavens on them. Gautama came there and blessed the princes. The rishis spent some time together and then parted.

MITHILA

They walked northwards and soon reached the yagnasala of Janaka. Rama was staring with wondering eyes at the elaborate arrangements which had been mad for the yagna. He said "Look my lord : thousands of well read Brahmins have now assembled here and they are scholars in Vedas. The ashramas for the rishis have been constructed and they are so many in number. All the provisions and other materials for the yagna are there and they look like miniature hills. Tell me where are we supposed to stay ? I am so excited at the sight of all this ?

Viswamitra chose a spot which was near the water settling there. Janaka in the meantime heard about the sage Viswamitra and he was greatly excited. Accompanied by his preceptor Sadananda he walked fast to where the great man was. He received the sage with great humility. Viswamitra accepted his homage with graciousness and asked Janaka about the yagna he was performing. After the exchange of formalities they spent sometime together. Janaka was immensely pleased that his yagna was to be blessed by the presence of Viswamira. He stood humbly before the rishi and said "all the preparations are being made for the yagna. But before it is performed I feel that I have found the fruits of yagna since it is blessed by your gracious presence. I am greatly honoured. All my desires will be granted I know, since you have been pleased to come here in person to bless me. Pandits say that twelve days are left for the conclusion of the yagna. I am hopeful that you will be with us all the whole and be present when the Devas come to receive their shares of the Havis. "Janaka prostrated before the sage and accepted by the sage and accepted the seat indicated by him".

Janaka then said, "my curiosity its has been kindled by the sight of these two young men. They seem to be as valiant as the Gods. They work like elephants. Their gart is as noble as the gait of lions and as graceful as that of wild bulls. Their eyes, my lord are wide and beautiful like the petals of lotus.

They are carrying bows and arrows along with swords. They are like the Ashvini twins, glowing with a handsomeness which is not of this earth. It seems to me as though these two are some gods who have come to the earth by chance. What beautiful eyes! How long! How liquid. Their fingers are protected by made of leather and they look as though sons of Agni. They are young men who have entered manhood. Their beauty is such that even men wish they had been borne as women. Such is the charm of these too. It seems to me they have come here to make me happy and my family too. How is it these, who seem to be princes used to luxury. How is that they walked all this distances. Why have they undertaken this journey and who are these blessed youths ? Who is the fortunate king who has them far sons ? They are making this entire yagnasala beautiful with their handsomeness like the sun and moon beautily the sky. They seem to be Kshatriya and since they resemble each other so much they must be brothers. Tell me who they are ?

Viswamitra said : “They are the sons of Dasaradha the king of Kosala. He then recounted to the king about the yaga at Siddhastrama and the later journey to Mithila. He spoke about the visit to the ashrama of Gautama and he concluded. They heard me talk about the Siva Dhanush you have with you. I brought them with me so that they can feast their eyes on the great bow of Mahadeva which you have been worshipping for generations. They are archers as you can see and they are naturally eager to see this bow which is famed the world over”.

When he heard the words of Viwamitra, Sadananda, the preceptor of Janaka was greatly excited. He was a rishi rich in Tapas which he had performed and he was the son of Gautama. He could not take his eyes off Rama who had granted purity to his mother and he addressed Viswamitra “My friend, my mother who had been suffering for all these years has been seen by the princes. She has worshiped them and my noble father has come back to Ashrama. They had been reunited after a very longtime. Great is indeed is my happiness at the events which have taken place. He then turned to Rama and said “Welcome to you. You are the scion of Raghuvamsa and you have come here of accompanied by the renowned rishi Viswamitra. This man has achieved what cannot be imagined by ordinary mortals. By the power of his tapas he has become a Brahmarshi. This great man has assumed the role of guardian to you. You are extremely fortunate in your godfather. He will not talk of himself. So I will tell you about hiss magnificent efforts and his achievement.

VISWAMITRA

Pururavas, the ancestor of the Lunar race had six sons, the eldest of whom was Ayu. His descendants were Nahusha his son Yayathi and after Yayathi, Puru and the later kings who were more famed as Panavas.

Vijaya was the father of son by name Bheema. Bheemas son was Kamchana and his son was Jahnu who latter swallowed the river Ganga when she rushed in tumult following the king Bhagudha Jahnus son was Puru and his son was Balaaka. His son was Ajaka. Ajaka had a son by name Kusha who had four sons, the youngest of wom was Kushanabha. Gadhi was the son of Kushanabha. This Viswamitra is the son of Gadhi. He was known in those days as Kaushika and he was a famous king. He ruled his subjects well and he was reputed to be a very good king.

VASISTHA HOSTS THE KING

“Once the king had gone to the forest with a large army. He was visiting several places. He visited cities which were ruled by him and in course of his journey he saw may beautiful rivers, hills, and ashramas nestling at their sides. One such ashrama was that of Vasistha, the son of Brahma. From a distance Kaushika could see the orchards past the ashrama. Several deer and other tame animals could be seen and he was very surprised to see Siddhas and Charanas as well as Gandharvas and Kinnaras. The place was resounding with the music made by the birds which had nests on the trees and there was peace reigning in the Ashrama and in the forest which surrounded the Ashrama.

“On going nearer, the king saw several rishis performing tapas and there were may who were bent on meditation and who seemed to be lost to the world. It seemed to him that Brahmaloaka of which he had heard was not in the heavens, but here as the earth where Vasistha was”.

It is a rule among Kshatriyas that they should not pass the ashrama of a rishi without paying respect to him and in turn the rishi has to welcome him and honour him since a king is said to be Narayana himself Kaushika entered the ashrama of Vasistha and prostrated before the great man. The rishi was very pleased with him and welcomed him with great excitement. He sent for a seat noble enough to debit a king and he made the king sit in it. He offered fruits and water. Kaushika received all these with a humility becoming a great king and they spoke to each other about general things Vasistha asked the conventional questions which should be asked. He said, “I hope your subjects are happy under your rule which is sure to be righteous. I hope you servants are well behaved and obedient, all enemies are subdued. Is your army large and

powerful ? Is your treasury full. Are your children well and happy and obedient ?

“Kaushika was touched by the words of the rishi and spoke very humbly and said,” your words full of affection have done more than a feat could. You have already given us fruits and milk. The sight of you has made us pure for birth after birth. What need is there for a feast ? You are the person who should be honoured as a God and it is not right that you should say I deserve to be honoured. I will soon be taking leave of you to continue my journey.

Kaushika felt that it would only embarrass the rishi to feed so many of them and to save him this he used very tactfully as if to go. Vasistha would have none of it. Again and again he insisted that the king with his rishis should stay and accept his hospitality. Finally Kaushika had to accept to his request and said “So be it my lord you are so eager to play host to us and I have not a chance to escape from your goodness”, laughing together they walked out of the ashrama.

Vasistha called out “Surabhi child! Shabala come here. Kaushika was wondering whom he was calling and even as he was thinking about it a beautiful cow came and said.” You called me father “Kaushika saw that the cow was unbehavably beautiful. She was of a lovely shape and her hide was mottled black and white. Her eyes were soft and gentle and Vasistha said “Shabala, this is the king of the country by name Kaushika. He has come with his army. I wish to entertain him and his retinue. Prepare for them a feast with all the necessary. Let there be nothing wanting and I want them all to go back satisfied. Hurry and create everything.”

“Shabala was Kamadhenu, the divine cow which rose up out of the milk ocean when the Devas and Aswas churned it for Amrita she had been given to Vasistha”.

She created a feast for the royal guests and his attendants. There were all kinds of food and drinks of every type imaginable. The food was such that it suited every palate. There were heaps and heaps of all the edibles they could think of and the guests were served with affection so that every one had his fill of food and was satisfied. Kaushika was extremely happy and he saluted the rishi with his men.

He then said, “never in my life have I been so entertained and never have I tasted food like what I ate today. I want to ask a favour of you. I was greatly impressed by the power of Shabala. Your cow. A cow such as she should be in the possession of the king of the country. Bounty like her should

benefit everyone. Please give her to me and in turn, I will give you a hundred thousands cows. This cow is a jewel and any precious jewel rightfully belongs to the king. Please give her to me.”

Vasistha was taken aback at the words of Kaushika. But he controlled himself and softly and said “I hate to refuse anyone anything. But Shabala is some one different. Not even in exchange for a hundred thousand cows will off give my Surabhi. You may say that you will give me heaps and heaps and silver and gold. But it will of no use. I will not part with Shabala andthat is certain. Kaushika stood as though stunned. Vasistha’s eyes were now wet and he said” O King. Shabala is part of me and I cannot be separated from her. It is like trying to part fame from a man who is famous. All my religious rites are performed because of the gifts of Shabala. I cannot give her to you.

Kaushika did not give up. He said “I will give you a thousand elephants fully caparisoned in golds and silks. I will give you eight hundred horses and chariots. I will give your more if you so desired I will give you a crore of Kapila cows. Please give this Shabala to me. If you are so desirous I will give you gold and precious stones without number.”

Vasistha shook his head sadly finally said “No, she is my jewel and she is my wealth. She is my everything and she is my life. My tapas is all comprised in her. What is the use of dilating in the subjects. I will never part with her and it is futile on your part to offer me wealth. I have no use for any of the things you mention. I have Shabala and she will be with me forever”.

A FRUSTRATED KING

Kaushika was a Kshatriya and anger was second nature to him. He had never before been baulked in his desire and he had set his heart on this wonderful cow. He became very angry and he walked out of the ashrama. He commanded his servants to take the cow by force and they led her out of the shed. Where she was stationed. She thought to herself “why has the noble Vasistha abandoned me ? What I have I done that he should punish me thus ? The servants of the king are dragging me away from here and my father has not done anything about it! She was crying and her tears were falling fast. Her signs were audible and he told herself. “I will now go to heir and ask him why he has allowed this insult to me by the servants of the king?”

“She suddenly broke away from the hands of her captors and ran with the speed of wind and reached the presence of Vasistha she fell at his feet

and asked” why have you forsaken me father ? Even as you are looking on, these men are carrying me away. Why are you allowing this” ?

Vasistha said “you have not been in the wrong and I am not punishing you.” This king is powerful and he is dragging you away forcibly from my ashram. This army of his one of a snohini in number is his and he thinks he is, invincible and hence his action.”

Shabala said, “My Lord, what is the power of a mere king in the presence of a Brahmin ? Brahmabala is superior to that of a Kshatriya your greatness is unequalled in all the worlds. Kshatriya is powerful and no doubt a great Kshatriya. Give me permission father, to show him that a weakling like me, when blessed by you, can be more powerful than he is, I will punish his arrogance and humble his pride.

Vaistha looked at the cow whose breath is coming in gasps; so angry was she. Her eyes had become red and her tail has lifted in anger. The rishi smiled at her and said “Alright I grant you permission. Create in a moment an army which can tackle the King’s army.

Surabhi just shook her body once and there appeared a huge army. Hundreds of warriors went to fight with the army of Kaushika finding that his army was defeated by this army created by the cow, Kaushika with his eyes red with anger entered the fight and fought with the army of Surabhi. Seeing her army suffering at the hands of the king. Surabhi created more warriors to join the fight. Even as the army got thinned out, Surabhi kept on creating more and more. Kaushika was now joined by his sons and they attacked Vasistha himself. The rishi with a hunkara burnt all of them and only a heap of ashes was left of the sons of the king. Kaushika was heart broken. He was like the ocean without its power. Like a serpent with its frays pulsed out like a bird whose wings had been severed. His pride was humbled and his face was like the setting sun, all its fierceness was gone.

“Without a word, with his head hanging down with his eyes bent on the ground, Kaushika left the ashrama of Vasistha and went back to his kingdom”.

Kaushika’s anger was unappeased and his thoughts were always hovering around the humiliating defeat at the hands of the cow’s army in the ashrama of Vasistha. Kaushika was disgusted with everything and he made a son of his story and mind the kingdom. He then went into the forest. He went to the slopes of Himavan where the Khinnaras were he began to perform a great tapa with a desire to please Lord Mahadeva. After a time the Lord was

satisfied with his penance of Kaushika and he appeared before him and asked him, “Why are you performing this tapas ? What is it you desire I will grant you anything you ask for ?”

Kaushika prostrated before him and singing his praises, he said, “my Lord, if you are pleased with me, then grant me this boon. I should be proficient in archery. Grant me that I am master of all the Divine Astras. Please be gracious enough to accede to my request. Mahadeva said, “I have given them all to you”. Go in peace.

Kaushika went back to his kingdom. His self respect was restored and with it, his pride came back to him. It grew tenfold now. He told himself, Visistha the great rishi, is as good as dead. How can he withstand the astras which are presided over by the Gods ?

THE POWER OF BRAHMIN

Kaushika went to the ashrama of Vasistha and without any warning, he began to dispatch the astras one after another. The birds and animals which were in the ashrama rushed out in panic. The disciples who were living with the rishi were also startled by the sudden harassment and they fled from there in fear. The ashrama and surroundings were now as bare as soil which is salty and bit for nothing. There was silence reigning. Vasistha was extremely angry with the, cruelty on the part of Kaushika. He told himself for no reason at all, this king is bent on troubling me again and again. I will destroy him like the sun burns up snow.

“Vasistha came and stood before Kaushika and said”. This peaceful hermitage, the heaven of mental peace has been destroyed by you and I am angry with you. You do not know anything about proprietors and you are a fool. I am going to kill you.”

Vasistha lifted up his staff which began to glow like the staff of yama, the lord of death like the fire which burns with out smoke at the end of the yuga.

“Kaushika was not frightened by his words since he had the Divine Astras with him. He invoked the astra. Presided over by Agni, the Lord of fire. Vasistha hurled his dana at Kaushika and said,” so you have come to challenge me with your divine astras. Let me see your prowess. I am here standing before you and let me see what you can do. Show me let me see your Kshatriya bala is great if my Brahma bala. Fool, you are a disgrace to the Kshatriya claw

to which you belong. You will now see the superiority of the divine powers of a Brahmin.”

The astra sent by Kaushika was rushing towards Vasistha spilling fire in all directions. When it touched the Brahma Danda which Vasistha had planted in front of him, the fire was extinguished like when it is touched by water. Kaushika then sent out the astras Varuna, Roudra, Aindra, Pasyata, Aishika and his brows were knit with anger and frustration when he saw each one of them swallowed up by Brahma Danda. Manavasthra was sent in Vain and Gandhara the great Jrumbhana and Swaapana. Even Vajra presided over by Indra was futile Kausika sent paasas, Kaalapasa, Varun paasa and Brahma. The chakras followed and many sastras followed. None of them was capable of superceding the Brahma Danda of Vasistha.

By now the Devas had assembled in the sky's to witness the glorious scene where the power of Brahmin was proving itself to be greater than all the other powers in the three worlds. In despair, the king sent the great Brahmastra and everyone was watching its progress with bated breath. Even the Brahmastra was swallowed and followed the same path as others. Vasistha how glowing like the god of fire and every pore in his skin was spitting fire. The Brahma Danda was resplendent it was like a pillar of fire. The rishis from the skies and all over the heavens proclaimed “Vasistha, your power is the greatest power we have ever known you are capable of bearing anyone of these fires and making them pale into insignificance because of your glory. The good king Kaushika has been vanquished by you. Please abandon your wrath and let not the world suffer because of your anger.

Vasistha accordingly calmed himself and his Brahma Danda also. As per Kaushika, he threw down his bow and arrows and with a long sigh exclaimed. Fie on the bala of Kshatriya! The only Bala worthwhile is the bala of a Brahmin with his mere staff, this man is able to hold at bay all the astras which had been given to me by Mahadeva. I have decided to perform tapas so that I will become like him. I will be equal to him in bala and that will be Brahma bala and not Kshatriya bala. I will realize Brahmatva with my tapas.

“Kaushika's heart was full of diverse feelings. His heart was sore with the defeat he has met with at the hands of Vasistha. His sighs were like the hisses of a serpent which had been angered by the beatings of a stick. His hatred for the rishis was also immense.

With so many emotions raging in his heart Kaushika proceeded towards his soul and began to perform intense tapas with the desire to become a Brahmarsi. Years passed when a thousand years passed Brahma, the creator

came to him and said, your tapas have been so intense that the heavens are very pleased with your concentration. You have achieved what seemed to be impossible you will from now on be known as Raajarshi Kaushika. Having granted the boon, Brahma went back to Satyaloka. Kaushika however was not as pleased as he ought to have been. On the contrary he was very unhappy. His grief was intense and so was his frustration. He wanted the world and he was granted a handful of sand. He told himself “after all these years of tapas. I have been called as a Raajarshi. I feel that I have not done enough. I will try again”.

SIVA’S BOW

With the early sun Janaka came back to Viswamitra and his party. The king said “Through out the night, I thought about your presence in my city at the auspicious time. I feel more certain than ever that you have come with a blessing for me. Command me, my lord, how I may serve you?”

Viswamitra replied, “perhaps you are right Janaka and I have come to you with a blessing. But these princes of Ayodhya who are master archers have come to look at Siva’s bow let the ayudha be fetched out. It may be that your fortune is still bound to it”.

Janaka sat down with them. He said “Before we look at Siva’s bow, let me tell how I came to have it. My house is called Videha and Nimi was a great Khatriya in one time. After Nimi, the sixth king in olden times was Devaradha. It was to Devaradha that the bow was first given and he was told to keep it safely.”

It happened in these days when Siva’s father-in-law Daksha held his infamous yagna to which he did not invite either his daughter Sati or Siva. Sati went anyway. She did not want to be Daksha’s daughter anymore and raising the fire in her body. She made ashes of herself. The Devas watched in terror for in their vanity, they had all come to Daksha’s sacrifice.

Siva arrived at that yagna with his army of ganas. He came with his bow in his hand to kill Daksha and the Devas. He said, “Sati burnt herself while you watched. I will part your jeweled heads from your bodies”.

But they fell at his feet and Mahadeva is easily pacified for his heart is kind. He forgave Devas and gave Daksha a goat’s head in place of the one Virabhadra had hewn from his neck. It was at that time, as if he did not trust himself in his terrible grief, that Siva gave his bow for safekeeping to my

ancestor Devanadha. Ever since the bow has been with us and we have guarded it as our most precious treasure; the root of our fortune.

Now he glanced. The rishi, who knew the base part of the king's story was yet to be told, smiled to encourage him Janaka brightened as if a hope he held dear had been confirmed. He resumed slowly. He had arrived at the heart of his tale.

The king of Mithila said "Some year ago I was turning the earth for another yagna. Suddenly before my golden plough I saw a child lay on the ground like a piece of a moon. She lay smiling at me and my heart would not be still until I had brought her to my wife. We decided to raise her as our daughter."

Janaka's face lit up "we called her Sita, because we had found her in a furrow in the earth and we soon realized she was no ordinary child. Her devotion to her parents, her uncoming knowledge of people, her compassion, her gentleness and grace and matchless beauty are not merely of this mortal world.

He stopped again, and for an instant stared straight at Rama. That prince's heart was in strange fire that he had never known before in his young life. He looked away in mild confusion, while Viswamitra hid a smile. Now in the tare of a sharing a secret. Janaka said, "To tell you honestly, my friends in Mithila we think of Sita as an avatara of the Devi Lakshmi. Never before has this kingdom known such prosperity as we have since found her.

They saw his grow moist as he spoke of Sita. I decided she would marry a prince who was worthy of her. And we prayed that such a man might come for her someday. Meanwhile so many Kshatriyas came to Mithila wanting to marry Sita. But I refused them all. One angry king cried at me "To whom then Janaka will you give your daughter? Without thinking I replied "To the man who can lift Siva's bow and string it".

A hundred Kshatriyas come. But none of them could move the bow from where it lay let alone pick it up. Once an alliance of kings bought a great army and surrounded my city. How could I withstand such a force on my own? I prayed to the Devas and they sent a host from heaven because I was the guardian of Siva's bow. How swiftly the battle was concluded the Kshatriyas fled from the astras of God. 'Yes quite a tale hays by the bow of Siva.'

He rose and took Rama and Lakshmana by the hand. 'Come to my palace and I will have Siva's bow fetched for you to see'.

Just within the palace gates, the bow was displayed so that all those who passed could look at it. It was kept in an iron casket and worshipped with incense flowers and mantras during the three Sandhyas of the day.

Janaka led them to the palace arena, festive with flags, garlands and banners for the yagna. Already thousand of people had streamed into it from far the sacrifice. When his most recently arrived guests were seated with honour, Janaka clapped his hands to his guards to bring the bow.

In its great casket, Siva's bow was wheeled in. It lay on a low golden cent glimmering with jewels. A hundred strong men pulled in the massive ropes that dragged the cart of eight wheels. This was Siva's bow with which he had threatened the Devas. The crowd rose. A vast murmur of "Aum Nameh Sivaya" was heard like an ocean wave in that stadium.

Janaka came to Viswamitra and bowed to him, to show the rishi was the most revered person present. The king said aloud "Brahma risihi Viswamitra here has the bow of Mahadeva that has broken the pride of many a Kimpurusha, Kinnara, Asuras or great Naga has been able to lift this bow : not through all ages. Since Siva gave it to my ancestor.

The guards flung back the caskets cover. The jewels on that weapon shot livid shafts of colour through the day and the crowd gasped. Viswamitra turned to Rama at his side. The prince was as tense as a bow string himself. Softly the rishi said, "Rama, my child, go and look at Siva's bow".

A hush fell in the crowd when Rama rose. He was radiant. He was unworldly blue. He crossed gracefully to the casket for a moment he stood gazing at the bow. Then a smile lit his face. He said, "Muni, may I touch the bow". Janaka cried of course, "what else have you come for?"

Viswamitra nodded to Rama. The prince leaned forward and stroked the great weapon with his finger tips. Viswamitra whispered to Janaka 'Ask him if he can lift it'.

Janaka shot the rishi doubtful glance, he was afraid lest this prince could not lift Siva's bow. For suddenly, his heart was set in giving his princess Sita to Rama and no more else. But Viswamitra insisted, bristling his brows at the king.

Then Rama himself turned and said in a clean voice. "I think I can lift the bow and string it. May I try?"

A great intuition of destiny swept the people. The crowd was on its feet, ready for a miracle.

“You may cry the king and sage together. Effortlessly as if it was his own weapon that he carried at his back everyday Rama picked up Siva’s bow from its casket. The huge crowd signed. Calmly the prince bent the bow and stringed it. A thunder flash exploded in his hands. The earth shook and most of the people fell down stunned. Siva’s awesome bow had snapped in two.

Smiling Janaka embraced him again and again. Then he hugged Lakshmana and tears in his eyes, he bowed over and over to Viswamitra who had brought Rama to Mithila.

Janaka cried to the dazed crowd “The prince of Ayodhya had done what no other Kshatriya could”. I am delighted to give my daughter Sita to him. There is no warrior in heaven or earth like Rama.”

He turned to Viswamitra “My Lord, may I send messengers to Dasaradha ? To ask him to come to Mithila, so as Rama and Sita can be married as soon as possible.

Viswamitra glanced at Rama. He saw joy bringing on the prince’s face and he said “Do so Janaka. Let the news fly to Ayodhya within hours. The king’s messengers set out on the swiftest horses in Mithila’s royal stables.

From her room, high up in Janaka’s palace. Sita had seen Rama when he came and she had prayed he would string the bow. She had lost her heart the moment she set her eyes on him, it was this prince she had always dreamt of and waited for. She knew him from long ago from countless lives before. They had belonged together since the time began.

DASARADHA LEAVES FOR MITHILA

Three days and three nights had to pass before the messengers could reach Ayodhya. They reached the palace of king and told the doorkeepers. “We have come from Mithila and we have a message for the king. Please take us to his presence”. They went to the king and after saluting him in a manner befitting a monarch they spoke to him and said, “Great one, Janaka the king of Mithila sends his regards to your gracious self and wants to know if all is well with you and your kingdom. He asks again and again after your welfare and that of your subjects.

“He now wants you to listen to a request of his which has been approved and sanctioned by the great rishi Viswamitra. These are his words” : I have a daughter by name Sita. I had announced to the world that she is a Virasutha. None of the kings who came were able to satisfy the stipulations which I had laid down. That daughter of muni has been went now by your blessed son who was brought to me by Viswamitra. It is my good fortune that Rama, your eldest son, should be my son-in-law. In the presence of several rishis kings and citizens the great Divine Bow of Mahadeva was broken by your noble son. According to my promise, Sita my daughter, will be given to him as a prize for his prowess. Please accept my gift and honour me. Please come to Mithila as early as possible accompanied by your preceptors. Your sons are eager to be reunited with you. You must be gracious enough to let me keep my promise and let me give my child to your son. The messengers continued, “Advise by the sage Viswamitra and by his own Guru Sadananda, our king has asked us to convey to you this message. Please let us also add our entreaties and request you to come to our city. They waited eagerly for the kings reply.

Dasaradha happy beyond words, looked at Vasistha and Vamadeva and the ministers in the court and said, “So the children have give to Videha and Viswamitra. As you have all heard Rama’s prowess has won the admiration of everyone. Janaka is eager to perform the wedding as early as possible. If you are all agreeable to it we will, at once leave for Mithila. Let us not lose time.

There was nothing but happiness in the hearts of everyone in Ayodhya. It was decided to leave for Mithila early in the morning. The tried messengers from Mithila were duly honoured and they spent the night peacefully.

IN MITHILA

When the east was heralding the approach of dawn the royal entourage left for Mithila. The king had asked his treasurer to take as many jewels and gold with him as was necessary for the occasion. These were the gifts which a king naturally carried with him when he met other king. In this instance there was also the proposed marriage of his eldest son. Chariots and palanquin to carry the members of the royal family were ready. The many preceptors led by Vasistha were already on the way. The king ascended the chariot and the journey was on.

It took them four days to reach Mithila even as they were reaching the city, king Janaka hurried forward to greet the old and venerable king surrounded as he was by his Kinsmen and the rishis who were his preceptors.

He spoke to the king of Kosala and said, “It is gracious for your part to have acceded to my request and to have come to my city. You must honour me by accepting my hospitality. I have been honoured by the coming of Vasistha and he is accompanied by great rishis like Vamadeva and Markandeya”.

“Your son! O king has made my dream come true. He has saved me from breaking my oath about the proper man who should marry my child. The yagna is at an end. At the conclusion of the yagna you should permit that wedding of your son to take place with my daughter.”

Dasaradha with his face lit up with a smile of contentment said, “Receiving of a gift depends entirely on the given Janaka. There is no need for me to tell you when the marriage should take place. You and your preceptors will know”. Janaka led them to the palace set apart for them. The rishis all had assembled there for the sake of yagna and the great Vasistha with Vamadeva and the renowned Markandeya were honoured all by them.

Tender was the reunion of Rama and Lakshmana with their father. For the sake of propriety the king had refrained from rushing to Rama when he saw him. Now they were alone the king shed tears of joy and embraced them again and again. The night was spent happily with the princess recounting to their father about the many happenings during their stay with Viswamitra. Janaka, as was the custom spent the night in the yagnasala.

Early in the morning the king of Mithila became engrossed in the yagna which had almost had completion. The ritviks surrounded the vedika and the rites were performed without any disturbance or interruption or lapse to make its perfection.

Janaka then spoke to his own preceptor Sadananda the son of Gautama and said “As you know I have a brother by name Kausadvaja who is ruling over the city called Sankashya. The city has the sweet river Ishumathi flowing near her. I wish to send for him and let him share the joy of this happy occasion with me”. Sadananda at once sent messengers to bring Kushadhvaja to Mithila. Soon he came and when they had all assembled in the great hall. Janaka asked his Chief Minister Sudhama to go to the presence of king Dasaradha and bring him to the court along with his sons.

When the old king arrived there with Rama and Lakshmana, Janaka with his brother went towards them and with folded palms greeted them and led them to the jeweled seats set apart for them. Dasaradha then said “Janaka, my friend. Vasistha will perform everything in the proper manner. It

is the custom to related the ancestry of the young man who is to be married and now I request Guru Vasistha to do the needful.

Kulaguru Vasistha traced the line of Manu elaborating on the greatness of the kings like Ishavaku who was the first to rule in the city of Ayodhya. He then spoke of Trisanka, the famed Yuvanashwa, his son Mandhatha who was called the jewel of Kritha yuga, king sagara, Bhagiradha, Kakuthsa, Raghu and down of Aja whose son was the present king Dasaradha. He said “you have heard about the glorious story enough to give your daughter in marriage to Rama. The son of Dasaradha.

Janaka said, “I would also like to tell you something about the glorious men who were my ancestors, who have shed glory in our heritage. He first spoke of their first king Nimi and his son Mitha after whom the city was called Mithila. The recital went on king after king was mentioned cruel his glorium achievements. The recited went on king after achievement. The king Svarna Roma was the father of Janaka; “Who had three brother Janaka concluded”. I now as you to accept my daughter Sita as the bride of your eldest son Rama and my other child Urmila as the bride of Lakshmana. He added “Please make all the many preparations which are religious for these two young men and three days from today, when the star is in Uttara Phalguni. Let the marriages be performed.

Viswamitra spoke to Janaka and said “Janaka the alliances which you have proposed are indeed very good and we are all immensely pleased with it. I have a suggestion to make. I have been told that this brother of your Kushadwaja has two beautiful daughters. I ask you on behalf of the king of Ayodhya to give them in marriage to Bharatha and Satrughna, the other sons of the king. May the two houses be inextricably bound by these alliances.

The entire hall was filled with words of praise for the suggestion of Viswamitra and the old king Dasaradha returned to his palace with a glad heart.

SITA KALYANAM

On the morning of the day fixed for the wedding. Dasaradha surrounded by his entire hoss arrived in the hall which has been set apart for the wedding. The Princes stood with their father and Vasistha was the officiating priest. He smiled at Janaka and said, “King Dasaradha accompanied by his sons is here and they have been prepared for the solemn ceremony. They are wearing sacred Kankanas on their wrists and please hasten to perform the Kanyadana which is said to benefit the given and the one who receives.

Janaka with the rishis Viswamitra and Sadananda to guide him, purified and decorated the platform set for the marriage by offering flowers and incense and other symbols of prosperity. These were the rights prescribed in the Vedas. He then kindled the sacred fire with incantations.

Janaka brought Sita, words were inadequate to describe the beauty of Sita. She looked like the Goddess Lakshmi. Who had walked out of the lotus on which she resides, as though she had left the presence of Narayana and come down to the earth. She was as bright and beautiful as a flash of lightning. Large eyes like lotus petals were cast down and her hair which was long and dark was decked with flowers and garlands. She was wearing jewels and her dress was by the colour of gold which was woven as though swans were string together. She walked slowly with her father.

Janaka brought her to the presence of Rama and said, “This Sita my daughter, will be from now, yours. She will walk in the path of Dharma with you. Accept her. Take her hand in yours and may you both be blessed. She is a Pativrata a great personage and she will be like a shadow unto you.”

Janaka then poured water into the hands of Rama and thus made the gift complete. The gift of his beloved daughter to the greatest among men.

When the waters touched the hands of Rama divine music could be heard from the heavens and the Devas showered flowers on the newly weds.

Janaka then went to Lakshmana and gave his other daughter Urmila and said, “Lakshmana accept my daughter as your spouse. Take her hand in yours and make her yours. Bharatha and Satrugna also looked at the hands of the princes as Mandavi and Srutakirti and their brides making Pradakshina to the fire and taking the seven steps which is your essential rite. The excitement of the wedding was over in the morning Viswamitra went to the palace where the young princes were to take affectionate farewell of them and proceeded to the north to the Himavan and the banks of Kaushiki where he always stayed.

BHARGAVA

After Viswamitra had gone, Dasaradha came to the leave of Janaka. The two kings embraced and when time came to bid farewell to Sita, Janaka was overwhelmed. He clasped her to him and then turned away quickly he blessed Rama and his brothers, Urmila and his niece.

Janaka rode out of Mithila to the place where he had come to receive Dasaradha four momentous days ago. There he stood in his chariot, waving after the traveling until they stood on, waving after the travelling until they dwindled in a distance. And still that king stood on, waving to his daughter as she rode in Rama's chariot and once she had parted from her father, she did not turn back lands, when the riders in the van of the company saw a plume of darkness ahead. Curling into the clouds. Birds cried in alarm and wheeled panic stricken. Beasts of the wild dashed across their path, terrified deer herds, elephants and even a tiger. The darkness whirled towards them, swallowing the sun and quickly all the sky, until were plunged in an unnatural light. Their horses reared in fright, whinnying may unseated their riders. A pall of dust blew at them so they could hardly breath.

The black wind whistled shrilly. Dasaradha creid "I see evil omens all around. What dreadful spirit is upon us ?"

Vasistha strained his eyes against the spinning darkness. Above the scream of wind which flew their armour off the soldiers backs, he shouted "Something terrible approaches. But the blast of the earth run round us in Pradakshina whatever it is will pass."

But dread quipped the party from Ayodhya. The storm raged fiercer as the eye of it drew near. Women swooned and strongmen too. Soldiers were seized by fear and fell from their houses in the dizzy night. Soon few of the company were still conscious. Only Rama and his brothers, Dasaradha, Vasistha and some of the other rishis striding at them out of the freaakish storm, they saw a tremendous figure, illumining the darkness around him.

He wore the bare garb of a hermit. His unkept jata half of it piled high in his great head also hurry to his shoulders in thick locks. He lit the night he brought with the fine that consumes the planets when time ends. Those who had not fainted stood dazzled by him shading their eyes. The blade of the battle axe he carried in his shoulder glinted at them. In his other hand he carried a bow a weapon as old and mighty as the one Rama has strung in Mithila. His eyes burnt like molten drops of the sun. Like Mahadeva came to consume the Tripuras Parasurama Bhargava, Vishnu's avatara, Brahman warrior, Bane of the Kshatriyas stood glowering at them. Vasistha and the other rishis folded their hands to Bhargava. But inwards they trembled that the Kshatriya slaughterer was among the princes of Ayodhya. They had heard Parasurama had kept the oath he swore in his dead father's name : he had offered Jamadagni tarpana in blood. They had heard he was satisfied with the river of royal blood he had let

flow in revenge and to quell the habits of the king's of earth. Yet it seemed wrath sat on his brow like thunder today and he came swirled about in a furious night.

They offered Parasurama Arghya and he took it from them. But all the while he shook with some powerful emotion.

Then he had done with nicety. He seized the bridle of Rama's horse and cried in a voice full of sneering challenge. I have heard of your archery, princeling the people of the earth speak of nothing else. I have heard you broke of Siva's bow and I have brought another bow to test your with. For I don't believe what I heard and he stood glaring at Rama, locked with him eye to eye. But now Rama shone in that gloom as bright as Parasurama himself. A faint smile played on the Prince's lips, though he said nothing yet, only held the Bhargava's gaze easily. While the other framed at him, and growled at him trying to shake his composure and make him look away. Abruptly Parasurama thrust ant the magnificent bow he had with him. This belonged to my father Jamadagni. If you are who they say by let me see your string this boon and shoot an arrow from it. If you can, I will consider you a worthy adversary and we shall fight a duel.

“But if you are afraid only admit it. Accept that I am your master and I will leave you in peace.”

Dasaradha gave a moan. His face was white with folded hands he cried to Parasurama “I heard you had put out the fire of your anger with the blood of a thousand kings.”

Fear gripped his very soul. But of love for Rama he confronted the Bhargava. Kneeling he petitioned the apparition of wrath. ‘You swore to Indra you would lay down your weapons. You went to mount Mahendra to sit in Tapasya. Then why are you here now to challenge my child ? If you kill my son, it will be the end of me and my House’.

But Parasurama's glare did not move from where it was fixed an Rama's face. He ignored the king as if he was not there. He said just to Rama “Viswakarma made two bows in the eldest days. They are the ancestors of all weapons and a legend across in three worlds. They are infused with the power of the first days of creation and no more mortal can beat them.

Viswakarma gave one bow to Siva and the other to Vishnu I am told you broke Sankara's bow and I do not believe what I hear, because I know these weapons. If you did break a bow it must have been another. But here in

my hand is no replica, preinceling. This is the bow of the Blue God who lies upon Ananthasesha. This is Vishnu's bow with which he broke a silver from Siva's weapon. So the three eyes one was shaken. Then they fought again and the Devas have to stop them test the stars were put out and the darkness of the void consumed yes, this is that bow.

“Siva gave his bow to Janaka's ancestors and Vishnu gave it Maharshi Richaka. And Richaka gave it to his son Jamadagni, my father. In his vanity, Karthavirajuna killed Jamadagni. And with this bow, Rama of Ayodhya, I split the blood of a generation of arrogant Kshatriyas. And I, Parasurama ruled the world for an age. When I had offered tarpana in blood to my father. I sat in penance to expiate my sin of killing a host of anointed kings the earth I left to kashyapa.

He paused and his eyes of full of savage memories. His gaze was still fused with Rama's neither wavered. The Bhargava said in his voice deep with a thousand slayings ‘I have heard not only men but Devas extol you praising. If you are truly who they say you are, string this bow and I will concede that we may fight.

Bhargava thrust the bow forward again. Calmly Rama climbed down from his chariot. He raised his father up from the ground. Then he went up to Parasurama.

“You need not repeat yourself Bhargava I hear you clearly said Rama quietly. ‘I am ready to accept you challenge, because you insult me by thinking I am afraid of you’. Quicker than the eye sees, Rama took Vishnu's bow from Parasurama. One moment, the Bhargava stood thrusting the great weapon at the prince. Rama had taken the bow from him, stung it with an arrow like a streak of lighting, drawn the bow string to his ear and aimed the shaft at the astounded Parasurama's heart. ‘Bhargava said Rama softly.’ Viswamitra is my guru and I honour him like my father. The Brahmarshi was devoted to his sister Satyavathi and she was Jamadagni's mother, you are Viswamitra's kinsman and you are a Brahmana. Otherwise, this arrow would have already cloven your heart. Now tell me Bhargava, what do you offer my arrow in place of your life”?

In a moment, the power of an age ebbed. Out of Parasurama's body. His hands shook. His spirit quailed for the first time in his life. Knew that the Kshatriya who stood before him was greater than himself Brahma and the Devas had gathered in the sky, invisibly to watch this encounter. They smiled when they saw Parasurama falter before Rama.

The fire was gone from the axe bearer weakly he said “you are my master, Rama of Ayodhya. I will turn back to Mahendra and never come down again, because I know that he who has come in my place is here. I know who you are, and it does not wound my pride to accept defeat from you Rama. All my tapasya is yours.

Rama turned his bow to the sky and shot the arrow of Vishnu flaming into the darkness with which Parasurama had enveloped them. That shaft of infinite trajectory still flies through the deepest galaxies. Some say the earth will end on the day Rama’s arrow returns. The darkness vanished like the soul from a body at death and the sun shone on them again. Parasurama made a Pradakshina around Rama, then walked away towards the mountain of his penance never to return to the word of men. An ancient mantle, which the Bhargava had worn for an age. Passed on to the one who came after him.

Now Varuna, Lord of the ocean appeared there in light. Rama gave Vishnu’s bow to him, for the power of that weapon belonged to another time, another incarnation. If he kept it he would forsake his destiny as a mortal man.

In place of the cosmic Ayudha, Varuna gave Rama and Lakshmana each a bow. And these were great weapons as well if not as awesome as Siva’s or Vishnu’s. The Deva of the ocean also gave them each a magic, inexhaustible quiver, two swords in jeweled sheaths, and sets of armour, light as wishes impenetrable. Then the god of ocean vanished.

Once the bow of Narayana was gone, his vertiginous anger seemed to leave Rama. No more did he burn like the fire that consumes the stars, when time ends. He was the prince of Ayodhya again and the son of Dasaradha. Rama said to his father gently “come father let us go home now”!

Dasarada embraced his son. But for the first time he saw who Rama really was and he felt almost ashamed that he had ever presumed the prince belonged to him at all.

Such a welcome awaited them at Ayodhya for a month there was music and dancing in the streets. And the people swore their Rama who the

rishis said was Vishnu incarnate had surely find his Lakshmi she was as gentle and humble he was and they truly were the perfect couple. The light of their love shone through Ayodhya and the people were full of joy.

But fate had other designs on the lives of the young couple lost in each other's tender love. Time had a sinister way to lead them down. Far away on a jade island a monster lived, whose path was to cross theirs in evil.

Ayodhya Kanda



AYODHYA KANDA

Kaikeyi was the younger queen of Dasaradha and the mother of Bharatha. Her father Aswapathi was old and Dasaradha thought that it would please him if her sent his son Bharatha to Kekaya. He called Bharatha and told him that he should go and spent sometime in Kekaya with his grandfather and his uncle Yudhajith. When Bharatha left for Kekaya with him went his brother Satrugna who was so fond of him that he would never be separated from him. Satrugna was a noble prince who was able to keep the six enemies at bay, the enemies by name Kama, Krodha, Mada, Matsarya. He was indeed Satrugna as his name implied and he was Bharatha's after ego as Lakshmana was Rama's.

Ashvapathi, the old king was very happy that the young men had come to him to spend sometime with him. Though they were treated well entertained very well by their uncle and grandfather Bharatha and Satrugna thought of their old father very often. The king also remembered them.

All his sons were dear to the old Dasaradha. To him they were like his four arms to him and he was happy, since they were born to him when he was no longer young. Still, though he was fond of all of them. Rama was dearer to his father than all of them. It was perhaps his beauty and charm or perhaps many good qualities, noble qualities in him which made the king to love. Only the Devas knew that Rama was Lord Narayana himself who had deigned to be born on the earth for the sole purpose of destroying Ravana. Kausalya was contented and proud of Rama and he looked like Aditi, the mother of Indra.

As for Rama, he was unparalleled in his qualities which make a man great. He was handsome very pleasing and charming to look at. He was a very brave Youngman and yet his bravery was combined with mercy. He was ever tranquil, unruffled by the sway of emotions. He would be friendly with everyone. He would talk first and talk softly. With affection, even if by chance, someone spoke harshly to him, he would never reply in the same tone. If anyone did him any favour, even if it were a small task, he would always remember it with gratitude, while his own good acts would be forgotten by him even if they were hundreds in numbers.

Engaged in the Ayudhasala, practicing his archery and other arts, befitting a Khatriya, Rama would still find time with elders. Those who were elder to him because of age, because of the greater wisdom, because they were old enough to teach him the ways of the world. He was highly intelligent and he had learnt the art of conversing with people. His voice was pleasing to hear

and though he was a warrior, he never once prided himself on his prowess. Rama would never tell a lie. It was with him a religious compulsion that he should not utter untruth even in the most trying situation. He was ever bent on honouring scholars and elder. He could spend a lay time with them humbly learning all that they had to teach. Rama was greatly attached to his father's subjects and the people of Ayodhya loved him. Each man loved him as his own son so dear was the prince to everyone. Rama was compassionate and he would sympathize with any one who was in trouble. He was the first to shed tears if anyone was in pain or suffering.

He was ever righteous and he had conquered the greatest of enemies anger. He would never wittily hurt anyone with words. He knew how to listen patiently to others and to make the proper reply when questioned. In this art he was like heavenly preceptor Bruhaspathi himself. He was loved by everyone this young son of the king words could not describe the wealth of goodness that was Rama. He was the very life of men in Ayodhya. He was also in the arts which a Kshatriya had to master and he was also very proficient in the knowledge of Vedas are all its angas. He was greater than even his father in the art of Warfare.

Born of a line of kings all of whom were paragons of virtue, Rama was the jewel of them. Righteous and ever truthful, he was firm in his convictions. He was trained by great teachers and he would never forget what he had been taught. He would always think of new ways of doing things and his name was used as an example for everything. For every good quality that should adorn every human being.

Rama firmly believed that the path of Dharma was the only pathway to be humble. Rama knew how to keep his thoughts to himself and until it was completed he would not talk about any task which he had undertaken. He was a sincere friend and he was wise as to the proper use of wealth. When it should be acquired and when it should be spent.

We well read as he was in the sacred lore Rama was equally proficient in the fine arts. He could play on the Veena and the flute and he was an expert in judging the merits of sculptures and other form of arts. He could control horses and elephants just as well as he could his own feelings. A great warrior, he knew all the many methods of arranging the Vhuhas, riding the chariots, fighting from a horse back or on foot. He was greater than all the Devas and Asuras in the intricacies of warfare.

He was never jealous and anger had no place in his heart. He and never once insulted his dependants. He knew when to angry and with whom.

Never selfish Rama knew how to act according to the situation in which he formed himself. In short Rama was the home of all the many qualities that can be enumerated and he was the beloved prince of the citizens of Ayodhya. He was ever dear to his father and to the people of the country. The earth herself was so much enamoured of him that she desired to be ruled by him.

A YUVARAJA FOR AYODHYA

As he grew older, Dasaradha's world was fuller than ever of his eldest son. The father saw the greatness of the young man with his three mothers between whom he made no difference with his wife and his brothers with the risihis and ministers in the palace and outside to palace, with the people of Ayodhya. And the aging king wanted to crown Rama Yuvaraja the heir apparent. He longed to see his son stand before him in the royal Sabha, dropping with the waters of Abhisheka.

'My Rama will be a greater king than I ever was' he knew. He is as strong as Indra and as wise as Bruhaspathi once I made him Yuvaraja, I can leave this world in peace. But then he began to see evil omens in the air and in the land and the water that flowed ran queerly. The king thought that these were signs of his end. He called his ministers and told them he wanted to crown Rama Yuvaraja Dasaradha asked for the rural people of Kosala and the neighbouring King's and chieftains to be called immediately to Ayodhya for the ceremony. He was in a hurry, the omens disturbed him.

It would take too long for him to invite Janaka, that king would rejoice, whenever he heard the news. The guests began to arrive. Dasaradha welcomed them according to their status and his own. There was a regal congregation in the king's sabha and the common people thronged the palace yard and the street outside. Like the sea when the tide is in the crowd surged.

Dasaradha entered flanked by his gurus. He climbed up to his throne, the king who was a father to him people. When the cheering died down and he had their silence. His great voice resounded like a blessing among them.

"You all know that since the golden krita yuga the kings of my line have ruled your ancestors, since the days of Ishvaku himself. I too have ruled to the best of my abilities. I have never strayed knowingly from Dharma I have love you like my children."

But now this body a mini is old and it cannot bear the burden of kingship for much longer. The weakness of age is advanced in me. It is time

before I err as your king that I give the reigns of power into younger hands. I seek the consent of the wise, who have guided me through the years; I seek all your blessings. I want to crown my son Rama Yuvaraja and be at ease in my last years.

There was a swelling murmur of approval from the crowd. Dasaradha indicated his hands to indicate he had not furnished.

“You all know that Rama has every royal quality and in each one in more abundance than I ever did. No man was ever more suited than my son to be a king.”

There was a roar of assent from the crowd. Again Dasaradha raised his hand for them to be quite.

“But I would only make Rama the Yuvaraja yet, until he grows used to the burden he must shoulder. If you do not approve of my choice you must tell me and also whom you would rather have as your king than Rama.

But now there was no controlling them. They began to shout for Rama until Ayodhya reverberated with the syllables of his name.

“We will see Rama soaked with the waters of the abhisheka and his head under the white parasol!” Cried some one and the crowd roared Rama to be king.

Dasaradha held up his hand again. Though his heart was with full of joy he said ‘I thought you were happy with my reign. Why this unseemly delight at the thought of Rama being crowned’ ?

But there was a twinkle in his eye. His people shouted their replies. ‘Because he is Rama’, said some one simply ‘We love him’, cried another. He has more truth in him than the Devas said a woman.

‘He is the greatest of the Ishvakus’.

‘He is brilliant’.

‘The strongest Kshatriya of all’

‘Wise beyond his years’

‘He is one of us’.

‘he cries when we do’

‘Even the earth wants Rama for her king

She told me in a dream’

‘He is as blue as a night lotus’

‘He is Vishnu’s avatara’

‘He is beautiful in his body and in his soul’
‘His face wreathed in a smile. “Dasaradha
Cried to Vasistha above din. My Lord let us
Prepare to crown Rama Yuvaraja”
Vasistha ordered the city of Ayodhya to be
Got ready for the coronation.

‘Let there be flowers everywhere, from the palace arches to the streets, as though they sprouted for joy at this news. Let the royal road along which Rama rides his elephant be perfumed like the gardens of Amaravathi. Let there be music and dance. I Vasistha say to you that Gandharvas well sing in the sky when Rama is crowned and Apsarasas will dance on clouds.

Dasaradha called Sumanthra and said “Bring my son to me”.

Today, Rama had gone out from the city, he should not be present when the king told the people he meant to make him yuvaraja. Sumantra went like the very yearning in the old king’s heart and Dasaradha climbed the marble stairs to the terrace of his palace to watch his son ride home. He stood there his eyes searching the horizon, until a small cloud of dust appeared on it. He saw Rama’s chariot with the Kovidara banner, as he flew have at his father’s summons.

With fond eyes, the king watched his prince ride up the highway into Ayodhya. His lank hair flew behind him. His horses were in thrall at the one who drove them. Again Dasaradha remarked how long his son’s arms were. They were at his side hung down to his knee. A thought of the eternal one who lies on primal waters dreaming the universe fitted into King’s mind. But he did not care to think who else his son was apart from just his precious Rama. Just Rama was enough and more for him.

He watched his son climb down from the chariot at the palace door. He watched him wade through the crowd that reached out to touch him. He saw him take the steps, two at a time, hurrying to his father whom he loved like his life. Then Rama was with him on the commanding terrace. Dasaradha clasped his son in his arms and made him sit next to him on a golden chair.

His eyes mellow with the light of age, Dasaradha said solemnly so the crowd below heard him ‘Rama, you are my eldest son and deen to me as my life. These good people want me to make you their Yuvaraja. And I mean to crown you when the moon is full in the Pushyami Nakshatra.

The people roared their approval again like the very ocean shouting. Rama's have and Jaya! But Rama said nothing only gazed for a moment into his father's face, then he prostrated at Dasaradhas feet for his blessing.

His servants came running to kausalya with the news and she gave them silks and ornaments. Slowly the crowd began to thin as the people drifted home. But Ayodhya was alive with the announcement, and soon singing and dancing broke out on the streets.

But Rama distanced himself from the celebrations. He sat alone in his own palace lost in thought. He knew he should feel much happier than he did. But then he was a wise prince and realized that kingship was always more burden than a privilege. But he had been raised to be a king since he was born and it was not only this thought that now worried him. Another, deeper anxiety stirred in his heart for no reason he could name.

Something malignant seemed to mock him from far away, but quite clearly.

TOMORROW – said the King

When the crowd had all dispersed and when he was alone in his chambers the king thought to himself and said "Tomorrow happens to be Pushya and why should I not arrange the coronation to take place tomorrow. Dasaradha entered his palace and went to his inner most apartments. He summoned Sumanthra and aske him to bring Rama once again to him. Sumanthra went to the palace of Rama and he asked the doorkeeper to announce his arrival to Rama. The prince puzzled when he heard about the desire of the king to see him once again. He took Sumanthra inside the palace and asked him "you seem to be in a hurry. I have just returned from the presence of the king and you say that he wants me there again. Can you tell me why"?

Sumanthra said, "I do not know. The king went to his inner chambers, summoned me and asked me to bring you to him immediately. That is all I know. He did not tell me why. Rama hurried into the chariot and went to the presence of the king and stood as before waiting for him to speak. Holding him close to his chest. The king embraced Rama again and again. He said, "Rama, I wanted to talk to you for a while. Child, I am getting old. I have tasted all the joys which life has to offer. I have performed yagas and I have been a good king. Because of my good fortune and as a reward of my good actions you have been born as my eldest son. I have done my duties well and your coronation is the only task which I have not attended to yet. I want to do it

as early as possible. I have been having bad dreams, my child and they have began to worry me. I dreamed that a big burning torch fell on the ground with a noise like a thunder clap. This means that a calamity is in store for me. And again the astrologers who have studied my horoscope tell me that my star is now being attacked by planets Surya, Angaraka and Rahu. These evil omens spell either the death of the king or some other misfortune to the king. He may even lose the power of same thinking. I would like to take up the reigns of the realm before life leaves the frail old body of mine.

Man's mind is full of uncertainties. Today the moon is in conjunction with Punavrasu and tomorrow he will be with Pushya. My mind can think of nothing else unless and until you are crowned. You must be crowned on the day when Pushya is with the moon and that is tomorrow from today you must observe all the necessary rituals guided by Vasistha. You must fast to night with your wife and sleep in the floor where darbha grass has been spread. Great events like this are apt to be beset with hindrances. I therefore ask you to surround yourself with well wishers.

“Bharatha has been sent away from here and I am of opinion that this is the proper time for your coronation. I know Bharatha and his nature. I know that he is devoted to you his eldest brother. He is righteous and he is a compassionate man, one who can enter into the hearts of others. But then having lived in this world for years, I have come to know of one truth. Even the minds of those who follow no other path but of dharma who have been taught all the rules of conduct. Even they, I say are very rarely happy at the sight of the good fortune which has befallen to others. The mind of man is very unsteady and so I have decided to hold the coronation tomorrow. Still Rama spoke not a word, but went back after taking the dust of the feet of his father.

After leaving the apartments of his father, Rama went to his mother Kausalya. He found her in the place sit apart for the worship of household Gods. She was dressed in pure white still and she was reciting slokas in praise of Lakshmi the spouse of Narayana. Her eyes were closed and he stood by waiting, Sumitra and Lakshmana too having heard the news, had come there to be with the queen and they were also standing by, waiting for her to conclude her prayers. Sita had come there long ago.

When she opened her eyes, Kausalya saw them all standing by her. Rama approached her and he prostrated before her. He then said, “Mother, father has commanded me to be the ruler of his subjects. He now told me that I am to be crowned tomorrow. He asked me to fast to night along with Sita. I have come to you to ask you to bless me and Sita. Kausalya whose heart had been waiting for this moment for the past so many years spoke to Rama in a soft

voice.” Rama, my child may you live long. May your enemies perish. May you please me and Sumitra. You were born under an auspicious star and your father is pleased with you and your excellent qualities. I am indeed very fortunate. My prayers to Narayana have not been in vain.

Rama smiled gently at the words of his mother and then he looked at Lakshmana and said, “Lakshmana, this kingdom, this honour bestowed on me by my father is only for you; since you are my very life to me. Rule this world along with me. I am happy to be the king for your sake. I want you to enjoy the pleasure of kingship”. He then prostrated before his mother and went back to his palace accompanied by Sita.

PREPARATIONS FOR A CROWNING

When Rama had left his presence Dasaradha called his guru Vasistha and said “You must see that Rama and Sita take diksha to night and keep a fast. So my son will have wealth, fame and prosperity.

Vasistha was a trikalagnani. He saw into the dim future and the deep past. But now he said nothing of what he saw. He went out and climbed into the chariot that waited to take him to Rama’s palace.

Rama received his Kulaguru, and they sat in an airy countryyard on silk covered chairs. Vasistha called Sita and initiated the young couple into the fast for the next days coronation. He sat with them a while then went back. The people milled outside to see Rama and the prince’s friends and many others of importance in Ayodhya waited for him.

Vasistha moved through the festive crowds in the streets. The city was in flower with blooms of every colour. The main roads, the streets and alleys, the arches, erected hastily and festooned, the houses the towers and the ramparts, the terraces and great pillars had all turned into a heady spring of garlands. Joy, that Rama would be Yuvaraja burned through Ayodhya like soft fire.

Rama came briefly in to his terrace. He waved to the people and they sang out his name and Sita in a million voices. It was dusk now and the sky grew dark as the sun sank in the west. It was time he went in and performed Narayana Puja.

Later Rama and Sita lay side by side on an acetic bed of darbhas. Until they fell asleep, they gazed into each others eyes by the moon light flowing through the window. They were not allowed even touch to night and they did not break that vow. Outside festivities continued throughout the night.

Well before dawn, Rama and Sita were roused by the Sutas chanting the Vandhi Magadha. Rama rosed and bathed facing east, he recited the Gayathri Mantra. He put in white silks and worshipped his Gurus. Outside when the first rays of the sun sprang above the horizon, the songs took up again. But in Dasaradha's palace not all was well.

MANDHARA

On the day the king announced his intention to crown Rama, the city began to den the garb of gaiety and happiness. That evening a servant maid of Kaikeyi, Mandhara by name, happened to go up to the terrace of the palace. It was sheer chance which prompted this woman to do so since usually she was not in the habit of doing so, deformed as she was, because of a hunch in her back. The terrace which was as white and beautiful as a stream of moonlight attracted her, perhaps, or perhaps it was fate which made her ascend the steps of the terrace of the queen's palace.

She stood near the parapet of the terrace and looked down at the city of Ayodhya. Something out of the way struck her. The streets were covered with flowers and the scent of the water which had been sprinkled on them reached her. There were banners fluttering everywhere. The people were all looking greatly excited and there seemed to be excessive joy writ on their face. She could hear music and she was intrigued as to what the great event was which the people seemed to be celebrating.

Even as she was wondering, she saw a maid passing by. This maid was wearing white silk garments and her eyes were dancing with joy. Mandhara accosted her and asked her "Tell me what is all this excitement about ? What is to happen ? Rama's mother seems to be giving away gifts to everyone around. I have never seen it happen before. The citizens seem to be very happy too. What is the provocation ?"

The maid who was standing by, smiled happily and said, "How is it you do not know about it ? Tomorrow early in the morning, the emperor is desirous of crown ling noble minded Rama as the Yuvaraja. There is nothing but joy in the heart of everyone and that is why the city is looking so happy".

Mandhara could hardly stand there listening to her words. Uncontrolled answer filled her hearts and with the maid watching her with wondering eyes, she hobbled down the steps of the terrace without speaking even a word in reply.

Mandhara went straight as an arrow into the chambers of Kaikeyi, the young queen. She was the beautiful mother of Bharatha lying down in a conch half asleep Mandhara rushed up to her and said “Get by you stupid woman. This is not the time to lie down. Great danger is approaching to you. You will soon be drowned in a sea of sorrow and without being aware of it you recline on the conch as though nothing has happened. You are blinded by the assurance that the king is lost in you, that he loves you more than he loves anyone else. Can you not see that the love of king is like a summer stream short lived ?”

Kaikeyi paid no attention to the words of Mandhara. Evidently she knows the old woman who had come to Ayodhya with her when she was married. She had been with her ever since she was a child and she was granted certain privileges because she had brought up Kaikeyi. After a while the queen looked at her and said, “Mandhara, I hope you are well. Your face looks as though you are sick. You seem to be unhappy about something. What is bothering you ?”

Mandhara stood fuming with anger. After a while, composing herself she said ‘Madam the king is contemplating your destruction even at this very moment. He is planning to crown Rama as Yuvaraja tomorrow. As for me concerned as I am about you and your welfare. I feel I am burnt up by grief and anger. You will be destroyed my queen and I have come to find you a way to save you. Kaikeyi, you know how much I love you. Your happiness is my happiness and when. threatens you, it threatens me too. You were born as the daughter of a king and you have been the dear queen of an emperor. How is it then you do not know about the intrigues in the royal court ? Your Lord, the king, talks glibly about Dharma but he is deceiving you. He speaks words steeped in honey but he is very cruel. You are very simple trusting and very innocent. You are not able to perceive the truth about the nature of the king. All these years, he has been talking to you words of such sweetness that you have not been able to see through his deception. Look he is now granting all good fortune to Kausalya and not to you.

“With evil designs forming in his mind, he has sent away your son to the kingdom of Kakaya and when there is no obstruction in his path he is going to establish Rama on the throne. You do not know about it, but the king is really your enemy. He is like a serpent. Since he is your husband, you have never questioned his actions and like a mother does her child. You have taken

this serpent in your hands and placed it on your lap. And an enemy of a serpent when unnoticed, is sure to hurt and that is what the king is doing now. You are a mother and your motherhood is being ignored. It is time for you to wake up from this dream of security. Seek the good of your son and thus save yourself from calamity and me too, along with you”.

Kaikeyi had not even bothered to get up from her couch. The words of Mandhara “The king is crowning Rama as the yuvaraja tomorrow” were all she heard. She would not listen to anything else. She was full of happiness and her face became as charming as the moon during the season by name Sarath. Pleasure and surprise were writ on her face.

Impulsively she removed a costly necklace from her neck and gave it to Mandhara saying “O Mandhara, what a glorious thing to happen, and you have bought me the good news. Take this as my gift for making me so happy. If you want anything more, ask of me. I am so happy, my Rama is to be the Yuvaraja tomorrow”. She paused for a moment and continued. “I am very pleased by the decision of the king. I have never made a difference between Rama and Bharatha as far as my love is concerned. They are both my son. I am well pleased with this event. You could not have given me any news more welcome as this.

Mandhara, filled as she was with hatred anger and grief flung the jewel on the floor. Kaikeyi could not understand why she is behaving like this. She stared with her eyes open in wonderment. Mandhara said “How careless about yourself and your future can you be that you can rejoice at this! You still do not seem to realize that it means nothing but sorrow for you are indeed very childish. Only a woman like you will rejoice at the good fortune that has befallen another queen of the king. Tomorrow during the time when the star Pushya is in the ascent. The wise men of the court will perform the abhisheka of Kausalya’s son. Is it not evident that the king really favours Kausalya and not you ? With the obstacle in her path wiped away. Kausalya will be the favourite of all. Everyone will attend on her here afterwards since she will be the queen mother and as for you, you will also stand by as one of her handmaidens your son Bharatha will have to be a serf to Rama.

Mandhara paused for breath. She was still fuming with rage and frustration since Kaikeyi would not listen to her. The queen intervened and said “Mandhara, Rama is righteous and he has been trained in the path of Dharma by the best of men. He is a noble and gentle sould. He is no enamoured of wealth or kingdom. He is the eldest son of the king and it is but right that he should be crowned as the Yuvaraja. Throughout his lifetime he will protect his brothers and all his king folk like a father will his children. Why do your feel so strongly

about this ? After a hundred years of Rama's rule Bharatha will become the king. The present event Rama's coronation, is welcomed by all as a happy event. Why should you and only you be unhappy. Bharatha is no doubt dear to me. But Rama is even better than Bharatha. He loves more more than does his mother Kausalya. He loves his brother so much then it is immaterial whether Rama is the king or Bharatha. The kingdom will belong to both of them and to their brothers too.

Mandhara sighed as though her heart had already been broken and with her voice choked with tears she said "What I am to do with you and your foolishness ? You are surrounded on all sides by the terrible dangers which will lead you to eternal sorrow. This sea is threatening to engulf you and your refuse to realize. Listen to me Kaikeyi Rama will become the monarch. It will be his son who will rule after him and not your sun. Bharatha will be just an object of ridicule.

Remember, all the son of the king are not entitled to be the heirs. If it were so, there will be many difficulties which have to be faced and that is why the rule has to be laid down that the king should be allowed to use his discretion to choose one of his son as his successor. Your son is destined to be ignored by all and be treated as an underling. I came to you because I wish you well and you do not seem to understand me.

"Your rival Kausalya seems to be have come into her own and you rejoice so much over it that you reward me with a jewel for bringing you the dire news. I assure you of are fact, once his family is established on the throne, Rama will either banish Bharatha from the country or even seem his dath. Bharatha is a pure minded youngster, and he is away in his uncle's house at Kekaya. Do you not know the simple truth that love thrives only when the persons are with you all while ? Shatrugna has gone with Bharatha. The world knows well the affection which exists between Rama and Lakshmana. Rama will never injure Lakshmana but the same cannot be said about his treatment of Bharatha.

I assume your, Rama will try to harm Bharatha. I suggest that you send word to your son to go away to the forest from the palace of the Kekaya king. However if it is possible for Bharatha to be made the heir to this ancient kingdom of Kosala, then it will be a matter of pride to you and those who are devoted to you.

"It stands to reason that Rama will not treat your son as a brother since Bharatha will be a rival to him. Accustomed as he is the luxury and comforts, how can Bharatha expect the same life after the coronation of Rama ?

He will be like an elephant in the forest oppressed by a lion. You are the only one capable of saving him.

“Again, think of yourself what have you been doing all these years ? The king has chosen you as his favoured queen and pride had give to your head so much that you have constantly insulted Kausalya. Now that she has a chance to retaliate, do you think the queen mother as she soon will be, will hesitate to assert herself and punish you for your arrogance ? The moment Rama is crowned, all your privileges as the dear queen of Dasaradha will be at an end and your son. Bharatha will be destroyed. I hope you have realized the truth of my words at least now. Make haste and think of a method by which Bharatha will be crowned and Rama banished from Kosala.”

KAIKEYI'S DECISION

The poison began to work. Mandhara's words had the desired effect and Kaikeyi who was all for Rama changed suddenly. Her face was now flushed with anger and signs escaped her. She said, “you are right Mandhara, you are right. Rama has to be banished. I will today, at this very moment send Rama away to the forest. I will summon Bharatha from Kekaya and crown him as the Yuvaraja, Mandhara tell me how I am to accomplish Yuvararaja as to how I am to accomplish this ? Rama should go and Bharatha should be the king. How I am going to do it ? Think deeply and advise me as to how I can do it “?”

The sinful hunchback spoke slowly and deliberately, “May the gods be praised that you have come to your senses finally. I will tell you how to achieve the crowning and the exile of Rama”.

“Kaikeyi, have you forgotten something which happened long ago ? You confided it to me then and evidently you have forgotten it or perhaps you do not remember anything which I told you. If you wish that I should repeat what you once told me I shall do so to please you”.

Kaikeyi rose up a little from the conch where she was leaning and said “I am not playing a game with you have do I remember anything which I told you”. I am impatient. Tell me how I can make Bharatha king instead of Rama, Mandhara spoke with a wicked smile lighting her ugly face. I want you to go back several years. Do you remember the war in the high heavens when the Devas fought with the asuras ? King Dasaradha has been asked by Indra to help and he went and with him you. Sambara was the asura who was the chief enemy of Indra. During the night the asuras entered the encampment and they began to kill the men there. Your husband fought with all of them and finally

he fell down senseless. Dasaradha was hurt. You carried him away from the site of danger. Dasaradha was nursed by you and his life was saved by you.

Pleased with you and your devotion he granted you two boons then. You said “I do not need them. If at any time I need them very badly. I will ask you for them. ‘so be it’ said the king and then the matter ended. You once told me about this and I have not forgotten it.

“Kaikeyi, the time has come when you must ask the king to grant you these two boons. One of the two boons is the crowning of Bharatha as the Yuvaraja and with the other you can have Rama banished to the Dandaka forest for a duration of fourteen years. This is the way to force the hand of the king and assure yourself that Bharatha will be the king.”

Kaikeya was listening to the words of Mandhara. The wicked woman continued : Kaikeyi, you must enter the gruna called Krodhagriha – the chamber you stay when you are angry about anything remove the beautiful silks you are wearing and dress yourself in soiled clothes. Lie on the bare ground as though you have been weeping for a long time and that you are unhappy.

The king will surely come to see you at night. Behave as though you are angry. Do not receive him when he comes to you nor should you reply when he talks to you. You are very dear to the king and he will even fall into the blazing fire if you so desire. I have no doubt about his love for you. He cannot bear to see you angry or unhappy. He will try to pacify you in every way. He will say that he will even give up his life even if it will please you. Remember that the king loves you to distraction. He cannot refuse you anything.

“When he sees you on the ground he will try to placate you with gifts of gems and pearls and lovely ornaments. Be very careful and do not be distracted by these”.

Remind him of the boons we granted in the days of yore and make him promise you that he will grant you anything these boons. Everything depends on you and your firmness. He must promise to give you anything you ask for and on your firmness. He must promise to give you anything you like and then only you should mention the boons and ask for them. When the boons are granted you should tell him what you they are you should say “send Rama to the forest for the duration of fourteen years and make Bharatha as the Yuvaraja”.

“It Rama is away in the forest for a long time. Your son will be able to establish himself firmly on the throne and they can dislodge him. Remember you must take care that Rama is banished. That is the only one way to make your son’s future secure. Rama, who will be away from the kingdom for fourteen years. Will soon be forgotten by people and that boon should be granted by the king at any cost, you must make sure of that. Do not let your mind weaken when the king appeals to you to change your mind”.

Kaikeyi listened to the words of Mandhara carefully and she decided to do as she was told. Alas, the princes had, till then been famed for her sweet nature. The entire city of Ayodhya knew about the affection she had for Rama and about the respect with which Rama treated her. He spent more time with her than with Kausalya and Kaikeyi was pleased with it. Even Bharatha did not enjoy the privileges which Rama did in the hands of Kaikeyi. But because of the evil genius in the shape of sinful Mandhara she agreed to do something which she would never have done on her own. Evil was so disguised that it appeared to be good and Mandhara who was clever enough to know the workings of the mind of Kaikeyi took advantage of her weakness and killed the goodness in her. With a glad heart, Kaikeyi spoke to her. “You are my well-wisher and no one has thought of my future as you have. You are a wise woman and I did not know it till now. But for you, I would never have known the real nature of the king. Mandhara, my beautiful Mandhara, when my Bharatha becomes king I will decorate this hump of yours with golden ornaments. I am very grateful to you.

With a smile Mandhara brushed aside and said, “Kaikeyi that is all in the distant future. At the moment you should hurry and set about the task ahead of you. Evening is fast approaching and this is time when the king comes to you. Prepare yourself before he arrives”.

Kaikeyi the proud and beautiful queen of Dasaradha went to the sulking room and Mandhara went with her. She took off her precious jewels, necklaces of pearls, golden bracelets, earrings and all the many auspicious jewels which a woman wears. She removed her costly silks too and dressed herself in an old soiled silk.

She then spoke to Mandhara and said ‘Mandhara – my mind is made up when Rama goes to the forest, Bharatha will rule the kingdom’. If I am not able to achieve this, consider me to be dead you can be assured that the king will not be able to change my mind with offerings of gold and jewels. Until Rama leaves for the forest, I will not wear flowers. I will not use perfumes and I will not darken my eyes with collyrium. I promise you, I will not succeed in my attempt.

Kaikeyi removed all the auspicious jewels and with flowers and gems and jewels lying about her, the beautiful queen of Dasaratha lay on the ground and looked like a Kinnara woman who had lost all her plume and had been flung down to earth.

THE LONG NIGHT

Dasaradha came to Kaikeyi's apartment it was with her that he most of his nights. To night he came with news that he was sure would fill her with joy, because Dasaradha knew how much Kaikeyi loved Rama.

Usually she would be waiting for her. But to night the guard said, 'the queen is in the Krodhagriha'.

It was the first time Kaikeyi had ever entered the chamber of anger. Dasaradha rushed to her. He threw open the door. The darkened room was lit by two oil lamps. He saw his lovely queen on the floor. She wore a gown made of coarse cloth. Her long hair was loose and disheveled. Her ornaments and flowers lay where they had been flung, glimmering in the lamplight. And she lay with her face in a pool of tears her kohl smeared across her cheeks. She moaned to herself, tracing patterns in her tears with a finger like a mad woman.

Dasaradha took her hand 'Kaikeyi'

What happened ? Are you ill ?

She pulled her hand away and quashed her teeth. She did not speak.

"Who has hurt you my love ? I'll have his head, I cannot bear to see you like this. My life is made of your smiles and you know it Kaikeyi. Please talk to me who hurt you ? Do not weep. These tears do not become you. Do you desire to send to his death anyone who is innocent ? Or do you want me to lean unpunished are to be punished. If you want me to live please make haste and let me what you desire. I cannot live without you and your smiles. You know the wrath of love I have for you. I swear by all the punya I have accumulated to do as you please. Evidently you want something and you feel shy to ask me. Do not hesitate. First get me up from this floor and tell me what is worrying you".

Reassured that the king would get what she desired Kaikeyi began to talk "I am not unwell" nor I have been insulted by anyone. I am eager to get

something done and only you will be able to satisfy my wishes. You told me just now that you would do so. If you swear that you will do what I ask you to do, then and then only I will tell you what I want”.

The poor king, smitten with love for this beautiful woman smiled a little at her elaborate preface and caressing her head with his hands, he said, “Kaikeyi, you know how much I love you, you mean everything to me. It at all there is anyone dearer to me than you, it is Rama my child I swore in the name of Rama that I will give you anything you ask for”. Rama is very life to me and I repeat I do swear by him that you can ask what you want and get it from me. Ask and put an end to my suffering. “He paused for a moment and said,” Kaikeyi. If I do not see him for more than a few moments, my life threatens to leave my body, so dear Rama to me. Can you still doubt my words when I have sworn by him that I will grant you your wish ? Do not have any doubts about my words. It is a solemn practice.

Like a king cobra uncoiling herself, Kaikeyi raised herself from the floor and looked at the king. There was triumph in her glowing eyes since she knew that her desire would be fulfilled. The king sworn in the name of Rama. She said “you have promised to grant my wish. Let Indra and Devas bear witness to your words. Let the Sun, Moon, the Sky and the Planets be my witnesses. Let the heaven and the earth listen to me. This great king who has never once swerved from the path of Dharma, who has never spoken an untruth has agreed to give me what I desire”.

Dasaradha was listening to her with a smile on his lips and wonderment because of the words she was using to make sure of his promise. Kaikeyi said “Listen my lord, If you take your mind back several years, you will remember the won between the Devas and Asuras when you were asked to fight with Sambara. During that war there was a time that I saved your life and in appreciation you granted me two boons. I had told you that I would ask for them when I needed something bady. The time has come when I want them. Please good enough to give me those two boons. I had told you that I would ask you for them. If you refuse to grant them after promising to, I will give up my life. I will now tell you what I desire. Please listen to me carefully”.

You have made all preparations for Rama to be crowned as Yuvaraja let the preparations remain as they are only I want Bharatha to be crowned as Rama. As for the other boon, wearing deer skin and tree bark, Rama should spend fourteen years in the Dandaka forest. I want my son Bharatha to be crowned and it is up to you to keep your word and do the needful. I want Rama to be banished at this moment.

“You have been famed the word over for your truthfulness and for your walking in the path of Dharma always you belong to a line of kings and stood for they righteousness. Do not disgrace the Rama of your house and by refusing to grant me my boons after promising to give me anything I ask for.

Dasaradha was too surprised by her words to react at once. Suddenly he realized what she had said and he fell down in a faint.

He recovered after a while and said, “Am I dreaming ? Is this a nightmare ? or am I loosing my reason ? Is this incident which happened in my previous birth which I am remembering now ? As I sick and is this a distortion of mind which makes me think I heard these words from Kaikeyi “?”

He looked at Kaikeyi and she stood silent as though expecting an answer from him. He trembled like a deer. Which is threatened by a tigress. He realized that it was not a nightmare but realize which faced him. He was sorely distressed and he could not speak a word. He was like a serpent which had been bound by the chanting of speaks and had been rendered immobile. He signed as though his very life were ebbing away from him and then sat on the ground. He tried to talk but fainted again unable to bear the sorrow which had visited him so he lay for a long time, and came to his senses again.

Anger now took the place of sorrow and spoke to Kaikeyi. “What a cruel woman you are! I had not realized what a cruel woman you are until now. You seem to be set on the destruction of my entire house. What have I done that you would punish me like this ? What have you against Rama that you wish him to be banished ? He did you no wrong. He is ever devoted to you and he considers you to be as dear to him as Kausalya. How then can think ill of him. I brought you to my home as a bride and made you my favourite queen. I did not realize that I brought a poisonous serpent and foolishly clasped it to my bosom. The entire world is all the praise for Rama. What fault have you found in him that you should hate him so ? How will I justify my act when I am questioned about Rama’s exile. I can live without Kausalya or Sumithra. I am prepared to leave even my kingdom.

AT THE PALACE

At crack of dawn, the sutas began to sing outside the door to wake the king. But the sky was overcast and the people of Ayodhya wondered that the morning Rama was to be crowned should be so forbidding. It seemed an evil omen on this auspicious day. Soon a grey drizzle began.

Kaikeyi prodded the king awake that morning of fate. He hoped to wake from his nightmare to find that was all it had been and last night a dream. But ugly quered in her eye, his queen said to him ‘Don’t bring shame in yourself Dasaradha by breaking your sacred word’.

He groaned. He awoke trembling. His eyes darted around the room now filling with wall light. Dasaradha whispered ‘let Rama be prepared to perform tarpana for me with the water for the Abhisheka’.

He looked imploringly at Kaikeyi. She wore friney once more. Ornaments glittered and cried. “Enough, day has dawned. Send for Bharatha and have him crowned. Let Rama leave for the forest”.

Meanwhile, Vasistha and his sishyas arrived in for the coronation. Despite the drizzle the streets of Ayodhya were filled to bursting. The people chanted Rama’s name. Vasistha said to Sumantra to go and tell Dasaradha the fire is kindled and the Muhurtham is here. But, I can never give up Rama. When my eyes light on Rama’s face, my heart becomes full of joy and when he is not with me. I am the most unhappy of all beings. The world may live without the sun. Plants may be able to live without water, but I will not live without water. Abandon this sinful thought from your mind. If you so desire I will fall at your feet and ask you to have pity on Rama.

“Kaikeyi, tell me how this sinful thought came to you mind ? All your testing the extent of my love for Bharatha by asking me to grant this love of boon to you ? You love Rama as much as I do! Often you have told me : Rama your eldest son is dear to me and he is my eldest son too. He is righteous, truthful and very dear to me”. You have ever been pleased with Rama some one has been poisoning your mind against him and you have been led by astray by others. That is why you are torturing me like this. A great blot will taint the name of the Ishvakus if. I agree to your wish I still cannot believe hat you can speak such harsh words you have ever been so thoughtful about my happiness and this is unlike you. You do not realize the extent of your foolishness in behaving thus. Bharatha and Rama are both dear to you. How then can you think of Rama spending fourteen years in this forest.

“There are so may women in my harem and among all the inmates of this palace not one has found fault with Rama about anything. He is loved by everyone. He is devoted to truth and that is why he is dear to the elders. He is a great warrior and the enemies are afraid of him because of that. He has conquered the minds of the people by his affection and by is generosity.

“Kaikeyi think for a moment of Rama and his noble traits selflessness, ability to control his senses at all times, humility, intelligence as well as wisdom and above all. Pleasing everyone by his behaviour. You have known all these and often have you spoken about them. How then can you find fault with him suddenly and find him to be such a sinner as to deserve exile from the country ? I have never once spoken harshly to my Rama now to make you happy, you want me to do him this injustice. How is it possible what is left for me in this world if Rama goes away from me ? Kaikeyi, I have reached the end of my life in the earth. I am old and my mind is sorely distressed by your words. Please have pity on me and change your mind. I will give you everything I can lay hands on. But grant me this Rama shared never leave me and go away.

The king was drowning in the sea of sorrow and his appeal was piteous. Again and again he appealed to her beseeched her, but it was of no avail. She stood firm and he heard her harsh words. “You gave me two boons and now you are full of regret for having done so. How can you consider yourself righteous ? When good people hear about this what will they say ? You will have to tell them. This Kaikeyi once saved my life and pleased with her devotion, I granted her two boons. But I refuse to keep my word because it does not please me to do so”, you are an untruthful man. You are born in a time of King’s famed for their truthfulness. The great Sibi and the incident of hawk and the dove are too well known to me to talk about them. Alara, to keep his word, gave away both his eyes to a Brahmin since he had promised me to do so. I have been told that the ocean does not break its boundary because of the dharma of the kings who ruled before you. Born in an illustrious time of kings, you wish to transgress dharma. You wish to abandon truth and righteousness and after crowning Rama as the Yuvaraja you wish happy with Kausalya. You are a wicked minded king and your mind follows only the lath of Adharma. I am not concerned about your opinion of me. You may consider my request to be unjust. But the fact remains that you should keep your word and give me what you promised. I however in spite of all this. You decide to crown Rama I will myself by drinking poison. I prefer death to the indignity of seeing another woman becoming the queen mother. I swear to you in the name of Bharatha. I will be satisfied by one gift, the exile of Rama nothing short of it will please me.”

Kaikeyi paid no heed to the King who was crying piteously. He lost consciousness for a long time and she was quite concerned. When he woke up he set her eyes in her but he spoke nothing. He had been bound by his oath and he could not find anyway of extricating himself from it. He was mumbling to himself as though he were demented and again and again he spoke Rama’s name.

Once again he spoke to her and send Kaikeyi same he has been trying to influence you and some one has made you to behave like this. By nature you have never been cruel. Some demons seems to have entered your mind and you seem to be under its way. All these years you have been like an innocent child and this is uncalled for in you. Why this sudden decision to see Bharatha as king and to see name banished from my presence. If your want to save the life of your husband and the citizens of Ayodhya. Please thrill again and withdraw your request. Save me my queen.

He realized that she would not relent. His sorrow turned to anger and he said “You are a cruel woman and your mind thinks up only sinful thoughts. You have been born only for the purpose of destruction. You have been nursing this hatred towards Rama and me since ever so long and I did not know about it. You are only dreaming about the crowning of your son Bharatha. He is righteous and he will never accept the kingdom when Rama had been banished. I know him, but you did not as for Rama. I know how much he loves me. When I tell him, “Rama, go to the forest” he will not speak a word in protest. How can I fear to see his face after I tell him this ? Today I called him to my presence and in the midst of everyone I told him that he should be Yuvaraja and you ask me to speak these harsh words to him taking back what I had promised to give him what will the many kings of world say when they come to know of these ? They will take disparagingly of me. If they question me the reason for the banishment of Rama, what shall I tell them ? If I say that I have done so since my wife Kaikeyi wished it. I will then be breaking my promise to the people of the city. How will I pacify Kausalya, Rama’s mother ? because of my love for you I have been neglecting her for the last so many years. She has been a perfect wife in spite of my indifference to her. Now when I make her lose her son she will not be able to bear it. Sumitra will not respect me anymore. As for Sita, the young wife of Rama, how will she react to my act ? You will see the death of us. You can be same that the moment I receive. I will die the moment Rama goes away, you can rule the kingdom along with your son. Kosala will be ruled by a widow.

I might have sinned in my previous birth and that is the reason why I have to listen to you and your sinful wishes. I know what the world will think of me. This king for his infatuation form a woman lost all count of Dharma and banished his son to a forest for no fault of his what a foolish man.

I wish Rama has not been such a good son. If only he would refuse to obey me, it will be a great source of great happiness for me. But Rama is noble. The moment he hears my words he will say”. It is my duty to obey you in all things. I will do your bidding immediately I am dreading the future of my

country I will be gone and Rama also will be sent away. What you are planning to do with the subjects of the land make me feel for them. I wish to stress one wish of mine. If after my death and the exile of Rama your son Bharatha accept the throne, he should not perform my obsequies since I will disown him my Rama who has never once walked in the streets of the city will now walk in the dreadful forests I have never seen him without his golden bracelets and earrings and wear the bark and deer skin. He has to live on the fruits and roots gathered by his own dear hands in the forest. My mind rests on the plight of my child. It seems to me that women as a whole are wicked. Ungrateful, selfish, bent over on achieving their objections and unconcerned about the feelings of others.

But I am wrong. All women should not be condemned thus. I can say only about Bharatha's mother. Can you not realise that I cannot love without Rama ? The sun may cease to shine and Indra may forget to moisten the earth with rain and the world may still go on. But I cannot exist even for a moment without Rama. It is true of the people of Ayodhya also. No one can bear the thought of exile of Rama. Once again Kaikeyi, I fall at your feet. Kaikeyi will you not relent ? Dasaradha held out his hands to her and walked towards her. Without touching her feet the king fell down senseless on the ground.

Kaikeyi was adamant and realizing that it was so, Dasaradha lamented his fate. He spoke the beauty of Rama and his many qualities and he shuddered to think of the morning when he would have to face separation from him. The sun had set long ago and the night had advanced. To the king the night seemed interminably long and he watched the sky and began to talk disjointedly. May this star studded night never get brightened by the red light of dawn. I do not want the night to come to an end. Once the sun rises my son leave me or else, let the night pass soon. I am not able to bear the clasp of this sinful woman let me go away here as early as possible.

He tried again and again to talk her out of the promise and he could not finally with a sheer pain and hopelessness the king lay down senseless. So passed the terrible night. Humming under his breath Suman arrived in Kaikeyi's chambers. He said to Dasaradha "my lord everything is ready for Rama's investiture and the people await you."

Dasaradha turned to face his Sarathy Sumanthra was startled to see Dasaradha's face was red and swollen. In a voice that had aged years in a night, the king said 'you make my tears flow, Sumanthra'.

Kaikeyi turned imperiously to the charioteer 'The king wishes to speak privately before the coronation to Rama. There is nothing to worry about. Just that my husband spent a sleepless night. Go and fetch Rama here.

Pleased to believe her rather than what his eyes saw on his masters face. Sunmathra went to bring Rama. Karkataka, the great grab could soon rise on the horizon. The moon was already in Pushyami and Sumantra hurried on his way people in the streets, the crowd that eddied arrowed the palace like a muted sea, cried to him.

‘Where is the king, why hasn’t he yet came out. It is almost turne for the coronation’. ‘Is he asleep on this great day?’

As they pasted tide with his chariot, Sumantra cried back to them Dasaradha wants to see Rama alone before the crowning. But I will tell him of your impatience. He was a popular figure and waving to them, he came to Ramas palace. The tusker Shatrinjaya, beautifully caparisoned, raised his trunk to greet Sumantra within the flower decked gates Sumantra smiled to himself at the thought of Rama on the elephants’ back ambling through the ecstatic crowd to be couned.

Sumantra was shown into Rama’s presence the prince sat in a finely carved chair wearing white silk. Enchanting Sita sat beside him with a Chamara whisk in her hand. Sumantra bowed deeply and said, ‘Rama the king summons you to the Queen Kaikeyi chambers. Rama said to “Sita, mother Kaikeyi wants to bless me. You wait Sita. I will return shortly”’.

She said nothing, but went with him to the road and watched him leave. Her lip moving soundlessly, she prayed ‘Indra, Yama, Varma, Kubha, O lokpalas watch over my husband on this day of his fortune.

How the crowd roared his name when Rama come out of the hence for the first time, the sun broke through from behind the clouds in broad golden shafts. The people allowed the chariots to pass but slowly. They all waned to see their prince clearly and those and could reach out to touch him. The women of Ayodhya, wearing their best clothes and jewelling sang out his name from terraces. They threw armful of flowers down on the chariot as it made its ways to the Dasaradha’s palace.

At last Sumantra cried to the people. ‘Time is short. We will miss the Muhurtham if you don’t let us through’.

They parted like an ocean at a prophet’s command. The chariot passed through them and came to the king’s palace.

KAIKEYI TALKS TO RAMA

Rama went fast towards the apartment of Kaikeyi. He was eager to see his father. Lakshmana stood near the doorway and Rama entered the chambers. Rama looked at his father. Dasaradha was seated on jeweled conch and Bharatha's mother was standing at a little distance from him. An unnatural silence pervaded the place. Rama was puzzled and he looked again at his father. The king's face was that of a rishi who had uttered untruth. Rama could perceive that the king was suffering from great mental torture. His face had no evidence of happiness on it as it would always have when Rama came to his presence. The king's eyes were closed and he was looking as though sorrow had taken shape and become a human being such a picture of woe was the king.

Rama went to the presence of the king announced himself and falling at his feet clasped his feet in his blessed hands. He prostrated before Kaikeyi and did the same. The king could not open his eyes. Tears flowed from them and he said Rama. He could proceed no further. His eyes remained closed and words would not leave his lips Rama was taken aback at this strange sight. It was frightening and Rama was like one who had stepped unwillingly on a snake. The king was sighing, like one in great pain. His senses did not seem to be functioning at all. He looked like Rahu eclipsed by him. Rama could not guess the reason for the king's unhappiness as he stood in his mind in a great turmoil. He thought to himself. This is the first time that such a thing had happened. My father has a thing had happened. My father has never once failed to greet me with a smile an embrace and a loving word. I have ever tried to obey him in all things. Why does he not look at me ? Why does he refuse to talk with me ? Have I offended him in any way ? Even if he is angry with some one he would smile when I went to him 'but today he is different'.

Rama stood for a long moment looking at his father. He went near Kaikeyi and said "Mother father seems to be angry with me". As he said it Rama's voice was full of sadness and his pain could be seen on his face. He was sorely grieved to see his father thus. He asked her "Tell me how I have offended my father, the king". I have never once done anything to displease him. Please if I have unwillingly done so, please on my behalf plead with the king and pacify him. He has ever been sweet to me and today he seems to be unhappy, displeased and unwillingly to speak to me. I am not able to bear it. Is he unwell ? or is he mentally upset ? He is not like ordinary human beings to be affected by the usual sorrows which bother others. He is far all above that. I am abroad mother I hope no bad news reached you from Kaikeya about my beloved brother Bharatha or Sharugna unless and until I do what my father wants me to do, I cannot rest in peace. I am unable to live with this fear in my mind. That I have displaced my father. A father is divinity incarnate to a man and my father is the God whom I worship daily. How can I fear him to see him

unhappy ? I know I should not ask this of you, but have you, by any chance hurt him with harsh words spoken thoughtlessly ? Mother please tell me what makes him look the moon under eclipse.

When she heard Rama, Kaikeyi spoke words which were harsh and heartless. She had no hesitation to speak the words which were like a thunder clap when they were first heard by the king. She said “Rama, the king is not anything with you nor he is unwell. Bharatha and Shatrugna are also well too. A matter of great importance of great moment is now lodged in his mind. He is not able to talk to you since you may not be pleased with his words. He is extremely fond of you Rama and these words refuse to leave his lips. Kaikeyi paused for a while. Her face was calm and unruffled. She had no thought of the censure of the world which would condemn her for ever nor did she feel that she was doing something unforgivable an act which was unparalleled in the history of Raghuvamsa. She continued “What has been promised by him should be fulfilled by you”.

Kaikeyi looked at Rama and his beautiful face which was full of concern for his father and impatience to know what she was trying to say. He listened with eager eyes. Kaikeyi said once the king had granted me two boons and that was when he was extremely pleased with me. Now he is asked to live up to it, he is repenting his gift like an ordinary illiterate man. After committing himself he is trying to go back on his word like a foolish man who is trying to build a bridge after the bloods have damaged everything. His love for you is making him untrue. Rama, I do not have to tell you that the true sign of good men is to walk in the path of dharma to speak the truth, never to swerve from it. This, I am told is the only pathway to heaven since that is so, the king should not transgress the rules of Dharma even for the sake of love he has for his love he has for his sin. If you agree for the fulfillment of my conditions of my boons, whether they are pleasing to you or displeasing. I will tell you all about it. I will relate to you the desire in the heart of the king and it is up to you to save the honour of your father. He will never speak to you about it. But knowing you as I do, I have no doubt that you will do what is desirable and I will talk to you. Rama was listening. He was as still as in an image carved out of stone. He saw his father suffering and he was himself quite upset by the words of Kaikeyi. He had never heard this harsh hard time before in her voice. Her face had lost the charm and softness which he was wont to see always “Mother said Rama “Mother you should not say this to me. You should not say. If you will do it”. You know my devotion to my father. If the king wishes me to do something, nothing will stop me obeying him I will fall into the blazing fire, drink poison without hesitation or drown myself in the sea, if my father so wishes. I am hurt that you should have doubted it even for a moment. It is my misfortune that you should have thought so. I am but the slave of my father

who is my elder, who is my guru, who is everything good and great to me. Tell me mother, tell me what the king desires me to do. I promise to do so immediately and you know Rama speaks but once and no one need ask him to repeat what he said, for assurance. Please tell me about my father's commands.

Kaikeyi spoke to the great prince who was devoted to one thing and only one thing and that was the path of Dharma. Whose religion was truth. Kaikeyi who had now passed beyond caring for the opinion of the world spoke in a calm and emotion less voice. Long ago, Rama, there was war in the heaven between the Devas and Asuras. Your father had gone to help Indra and I had gone with him. I happened to serve the life of the king and he, pleased to save the life of the king and he, pleased with me granted me two boons. I had told him that I would ask them when I needed them. I asked him now, for the two boons. It is not as though he cannot grant them.

“All that I wanted was that Bharatha instead of you should be crowned as Yuvaraja and that you should spend nine years and five more in the Dandaka forest. Rama, if the king should prove truthful, it is up to you to help him to do so. If you accept these conditions and fulfill his promise to me he will be saved from being called an Adharmi you must go away to the first and spend these years away from Ayodhya. Bharatha must be crowned wearing deerskin and tree bark. You must spend seven years and mother seven more in the Dandaka forest Bharatha will rule the land of the Ishvakus. Love for you is blinding this king and he is in danger of following the path of Adharma by breaking his promise. He is not able to look you in the face since he is bound by his word. You should do what I have told you just now. You are a jewel among the sons of this house and you must undertake the task of saving your father's name”.

Unperturbed as he always was by pleasure or by pain, happiness or sorrow by the sway of the opposites, Rama stood calm. There was not even a trace of disappointment or anger in his face. Her harsh words had no disturbing effect on the face of the great prince Rama. It was the king who looked more unhappy than before and he was moaning in pain.

Rama looked at Kaikeyi and said but certainly my mother. I will go at once to the forest dressed, as you say, in tree bark and dark skin. I will not let my father break his word. I am unhappy only about one fact. Why does the king refuse to look at me with love as he always does ? Mother, please have no doubt about me. I swear to you that I will definitely do what you have asked me to do. I will go away from here, to the forest. Your wishes are granted by me on behalf of my father. This my guru has stipulated that I should go and do you think. I will dream of disobeying this god among men ? What hurts me most is

this; Why could the king not tell me the good news himself that Bharatha, my beloved brother Bharatha is to be crowned ? As for my love for Bharatha. I am prepared to give up my kingdom, my kinsmen, Sita and even my very life without being asked to do so. I will gladly do so, when such is the case did you think that I would hesitate when the king himself desires to do so. Let the king look happy at least from now. Why does he bend his eyes on the ground and shed tears ? Why ? mother ? Please dispatch messengers to Kekaya immediately and ask them fetch Bharatha as early as possible. As for me. I will leave at once to the forest as for my father's commands.

Rama stood with folded palms and Kaikeyi with a triumphant toss of her head looked at the king and then at Rama. "Rama" she said "I will arrange about fetching Bharatha from Kekaya. Messengers will certainly be sent soon. I do not see any need for you to tarry till the arrival of Bharatha. It is imperative that you leave at once for Dandaka. The king does not speak to you because of his love for you which is making him feel slightly shame faced. That is the only reason why he is not talking to you. Unless and until you leave this city. Your father, the king will neither bathe nor eat".

Rama closed his ears with his hands and said, "Shantham, Papam" to himself and the king spoke in a feeble voice "What a shameful thing this is. I am helpless and I am not able to take to my child". With a sigh which seemed to shatter his entire frame, the king fell back on his conch in a faint. Rama hurried to his side and raised him up with great concern.

Like a high born horse wincing under the stroke of a whip. Rama spurred by Kaikeyi, spoke to her with a smile and sadness in his voice. "Mother, still you have not understood me I have never been fond of riches, nor do I want to live in luxury like ordinary men. I wish you to know that I am like the rishis, bent on following the path of Dharma and nothing else is desirable to me. It is humanly possible to please this godly man who is my father, I will do so. I will give up my very life and save my father's name from ignoring. As I see it, the utmost Dharma of a man is to serve his father and to worship him as his god and to obey him in everything. Though I have not been spoken to try the king directly, I have been commanded by you to spend the next fourteen years in the fearful forest by name Dandaka. I will certainly do so. I have no fear.

"Mother, you did not credit me with one thing I would have obeyed you if you had asked me to do this. Because of your lack of faith in me and in my love for you. You have approached the king. I am only sorry you have underrated me. Are you not as dear to me as my father I would have obeyed you implicitly. But is no matter.

“I will at once go to my mother and take her blessing. I will have to comfort her and convince her that this is not a calamity which has befallen me I will then speak to Sita about this. After that I will have nothing left but to leave for Dandaka, situated between the rivers Narmada and Godavari. After all, the forest once belonged to Dandaka, the son of Ishvaku. Bharatha can take over the service which is due to my father. Service to one’s parents is the first and in fact the only path which leads to the other purushardhas. Mother you should take good care of my father and make certain that Bharatha does not fail in his duties as a son and as a ruler.

The king was now sobbing loudly and his grief was uncontrollable. Rama had to steel his heart against staying there and comforting his father. Without a word he fell at his father’s feet clasped them in his hands and placing them in his head, he stood up. He went to Kaikeyi and taking the dust of her feet, walked out of the chamber without another word. He could hear his father’s sighs and his lamentations but he walked away with firm steps.

Lakshmana had been standing near the doorway and he had heard everything. Rama looked at the angry face of his brother. Lakshmana’s lips were throbbing with anger and his eyes were filled with tears. Rama walked fast towards the Anthahpura of his mother Kausalya controlling the unhappiness in his own heart and his senses too and Lakshmana followed him silently. They had to pass the great hall where preparations were made for the coronation. Rama went round the vessels full of the waters from the many sacred rivers of Bharatha vamsha. Waters which had been gathered in a hurry for the coronation.

There was not even a shadow of disappointment on the face of Rama as he did this. His face was like the full moon, charming and pleasing. The loss of kingdom and the banishment which was imminent had no effect on this great soul, who was the beloved of everyone and his face was just as it was the previous day when the king had summoned him to his predecease Rama looked like a great sanyasi who had renounced the world. He had made up his mind to abandon willingly all the gras which should have been his, and he had decided to proceed to the forest.

Rama did not even look at the white umbrella, the chamaras, nor the chariot which stood at the doorway of the palace. Rama managed to avoid the people and friends. Who were awaiting him but walked towards his mother’s chamber. His mind is engaged only in one thought, now to break the news to his dear mother whose grief would be unbearable. His face did not reveal any of the feelings inside his mind. He walked with the same fine step

which was usual with him and his face was looking as though nothing untoward had happened.

Some people spoke to him on the way and Rama spoke sweetly and calmly with them and went towards Kausalya's chambers. Lakshmana whom Rama would call "my life which has taken a form and is with me always" walked with him. He managed to keep under control the great sorrow and the greater anger which were seething inside his heart and walked with Rama. Ever since he was born, Lakshmana had shared everything with Rama and the two brothers walked towards Kausalya's chambers, each busy with his own thoughts.

News was already spreading about the impending disaster. Cries of dismay and distress could be heard vaguely from inside the apartments of several of the women in the palace. "Rama, the prince who is dear to us who has been a savior to all of us, who has treated us with the same love and respect he has for Kausalya Devi, Rama who is the refuge of all those who are in trouble, Rama our child is today leaving us and will depart for the forest. He has never angered any of us with his words or acts and even those who were angry would be pacified by him. The king has taken leave of his senses or else how can he contemplate such an act? How will he leave Rama after he is gone? These and similar words were filtering through the walls of many chambers. Some were sobbing, some were wailing and some were talking angrily about the injustice of the king. Rama paid no heed to all these disturbances. Like an Aswatha tree which stands firm and unconcerned about the twittering of the birds seated on its branches, he reached the palace of his mother followed by Lakshmana.

The old doorkeeper was squatting at the doorway and some others were standing by seeing Rama they rushed towards him with excitement and said, "Jaya Vijayee Bhava" Rama accepted their greeting with his beautiful smiles and walked on. The women in the inner chambers went towards, where Kausalya was, to announce the arrival of Rama.

The queen mother Kausalya had spent the entire night praying Lord Narayana. Her thought was the welfare of Rama. Early in the morning she sat before the image of the Lord and was even then performing pooja to him. Dressed as was her custom in white silk, she was worshipping the with oblations poured into it.

Rama walked into his mother's pooja room. He saw his mother seated before the image with her mind set on offering prayers. All the accessories for the pooja were placed by her side. When Rama entered, Kausalya was offering Arghya to the Lord. Rama stood still and he looked at her. Constant Vratas and

fastings had made her very thin. His face was very grave when he thought of her reaction to the news which he had brought her.

Kausalya turned and she saw Rama. Like a mare rushing to her young colt, Kausalya went to Rama with a smile of infinite sweetness lighting her face. Rama who was ever bent on attending to her slightest wish was now standing before her with his palms folded when she came to him. Rama fell on the ground, clasped her feet in his hands and she lifted him and embraced him. She looked at him with smiling face and spoke to him “Child, born as you are in the illustrious race of the Ishvakus, you are a worthy scion of that race. May you follow in their footsteps and be as famed as they were and may you live long. The noble king will crown you as the Yuvaraja today. You must ever pay respect to your father who is righteous and good.

Kausalya led him to a jeweled seat and placed before him eatables which have been prepared for the morning. Rama was sorely distressed. Because he could not refuse her anything he made a pretence of accepting the seat by placing his hand on it and leaning against it. Rama had up his mind to leave for Dandaka that very day and he thought the moment had come when she should be told.

With a slight hesitation, with his head bent down with his eyes seeking the ground Rama stood and after a moment spoke in a fine voice “Mother, a great misfortune has befallen on you, my Sita and my beloved brother Lakshmana. It happened just how and you do not know about it yet. Mother, this jeweled seat does not befit me now. What I need is an asana made of darbha grass. The time has come when I should abandon all this and go to Dandaka forest and remain there. I am leaving for the forest very soon. I must withdraw my mind from all thoughts of king’s comforts and live in the forest for fourteen years with my mind set on the other world. I must live in fruits and roots gathered by myself in the forest and how can I accept the food you have placed before me. The king will crown Bharatha as the Yuvaraja and he has asked me to dwell in the forest like a Tapasvin. Mother six years and eight more will I spend in the forest and how can I accept the food you have placed before me ? The king will crown Bharatha as the Yuvaraja and he has asked me to dwell in the forest like a Tapasvin. Mother, six years and eight more will I spend in the forest.

Kausalya was listening for a moment she could not grasp what he was saying. And like a god who had been pushed to the earth, like a branch of sala tree felled by an axe, she fell senseless on the ground. Rama went to her, lifted her up tenderly and placed her on a seat. He sat stroking her with loving hands. She regained consciousness and she looked at Rama. She said, “Rama,

if only you had not been born to me, I would not have had to suffer this grief. The only path I was then suffering was the thought that I was a barren woman”. “You know too well that I have never been dear to the king. I was confident that you would make up for the loss by you love for me. I am the eldest queen, no doubt. But I have been insulted by the younger queens of the king and now after you have gone, indignities will be heaped on me. How can I express the depth of pain and unhappiness in my mind ? Tears will now flow constantly from these eyes which will be longing to see you. Death will certainly be welcome. All these years I have been slighted by Kaikeyi and her maids since the king has never treated me well. Even the few companions I have will now avoid me since Kaikeyi’s son will be the king hereafter.

“Rama, it is seventeen years since you were born and I have been able to bear a great deal of unhappiness as you are here by my side. How can I live without looking at your beautiful face ? How can I live in midst of all painful surroundings ? I performed so many Vratas and I have worshipped the Lord daily. All my prayers are for your welfare and they have proved to be fruitless like fruits sour in a salty soil. I am the most unfortunate of all beings and that is why my prayers have been unanswered. My heart is perhaps made of iron. It does not break nor do my limbs give away under the great grief which has suddenly beset me. It was because life would leave the body until the appointed time for death. If it were possible for me to abandon ones life when beset with unbearable grief, then like a cow parted from its calf I will give up this fruitless life of mine at once. Child Rama, what is the use of living without you by my side ? I will come with you to the forest I cannot be here without you”.

Again and again she repeated herself and cried without restraint and Rama stood by her side trying to pacify her and wipe her tears.

LAKSHMANA’S ANGER

Then Lakshmana could not stand it any more and cried! Our father has lost his reasons. His love for Kaikeyi blinds him. But why should Rama sacrifice his throne for the whim of a greedy woman for what crime is my frameless brother banished to the Dandaka Vana. A king should think of what is best for his kingdom, and not what suits his favourite wife.

“I will not allow this, our father walks the way of sin. As god is my witness, I will kill him and his Kaikeyi and the world will forgive my parricide.”

The distraught Kausalya cried “you hear your brother Rama. He has my blessings. I speak as your mother who has as much right to your obedience as your father does. I order you not to go the forest, leaving me at the mercy of the younger queens. If you do, count yourself guilty of the sin of the lord of the rivers of Matruhatya for I will die if you go”.

Rama remained silent. Knowing it was sorrow that spoke anger and threat. He touched his mother’s feet. Quietly he said, “I cannot break my word to my father, that is how the ancient rishis have laid down the law for us. Think how Parasurama cut his mother’s head because of his father asked him to. The Dharma taught in the Sastras cannot be false. The Sastras say that a son who does not obey his father has no place in heaven.

‘Lakshmana, you have sat at our guru’s feet and learnt Dharma. You know about vairagya. You know a man should accept destiny with equanimity be it fortune or misfortune. I know you love me more than anyone else, but love does not turn to violent means for its satisfaction. Violence is never Dharma and you must not give in to your anger. I must go to the forest my fate is there. I must keep my sacred pledge to my father and mother Kaikeyi. He touched Kausalya’s feet again . Say the mantras of fortune over me. Let me go to the Vana. I will return to you as soon as my exile is served. Put away your grief and bless me. It is the way of Dharma I go on and in this world there is no other path to salvation.

Kausalya stared at her son. She saw he was perfectly calm and determined she said slowly Rama. Dharma clearly says a man’s mother is as sacred to him as his father. Both are equal gurus. I command you to stay by my side! But then she broke down and began to sob. ‘Oh my son, I cannot live without you even if I see you for just an hour, it does for me, and I can bear the burden of my life.

Lakshmana cried again, “I will kill the king and his Kaikeyi! You shall not go for the forest.” Rama turned to him and said “sharply you add your anger again to my mother’s grief. You do not help me Lakshmana.”

RAMA’S FIRMNESS

The piteous words of Kausalya would have made anyone else relent. But not Rama. Like an elephant which walks with unconcern even when torches are lit by men to impede his progress Rama with his mind set firmly on the path of Dharma, refused to be moved by the tears of his mother. He was the one person who was capable of talking to his mother who was

almost demented because of excessive grief and to Lakshmana whose throat was dry with anger.

Rama spoke again “Lakshmana, you know me so well and I know you too. Since we are but two aspects of the same truth. How is you do not understand my devotion to Dharma ? Simple rules of conduct have been sit down to man by the elders of you ? Believe in their teachings implicitly. Man should devote himself to Dharma and only to Dharma. One who sets his mind, instead on acquiring Artha, wealth becomes an object of the censure of the wise. The third man who is lost in Kama, the other path is not worthy of praise. If however, a man follows the path of Dharma sit down in the sastras, artha, kama and moksha will follow as a natural sequel to one’s actions.

“Our father has, all these years been famed for his great good qualities, for his righteousness and for his knowledge of all the Vedas and the Shastras. Such a man commands me to do what is not pleasing to you. I will not seek the reason which prompted him to command me thus may be he is angry with me, may be he is unhappy about something, or pleased about something else. It is no matter. I am the last person to question his actions and the motives behind them. I have no right to, nor have you. I only have to obey his commands. He has promised this to Kaikeyi and it is up to me to help me to keep his word. He is the image of Dharma and you and I and my mother too must listen to his words and act accordingly.

“Mother, when such a man is alive, how can you say that you will come with me to the forest ? Grant me leave to go so that I will be able to fulfill my father’s promise.” Give me your blessings and I will come back after the term of my exile is completed. This kingdom and ruling it are not so important that I should sacrifice my good name for it. When compared with each other the rewards of the one are so inferior and so paltry while the other leads me straight to the heavens and grants me immortal fame mother you must let me go.

Rama tried to convince the two about the rightness of his decision to go the Dandaka forest. He made a pradhakshina to his mother. Lakshmana however refused to be convinced or comforted. Rama looked at his brother who was still fuming with anger, whose eyes were red with anger, whose sighs were like hissing of a king cobra. Lakshmana was so fond of his brother that he could not brook this injustice done to him and all the words of Rama would not convince him. Rama touched his head with love and said, “Lakshmana, forget this wrath. Rise above the level of ordinary men and be tranquil under the circumstances. Try to get mental equilibrium. Do not think of the coronation and the disappointment to you. Try and be selfless for my sake and follow my words. The same enthusiasm which was your mind when I knew that I was to

be crowned should be in your heart since I am doing only what is right and what is rewarding to me. See to it that she is pleased my young mother who wishes to avert the coronation. She should have no doubts as to my decision to obey her commands. She must be assumed that her wishes come true. I have never displeased any of my mothers or my father and I do not propose to do so now.

“My father, the king has never spoken an untruth and this incident should not prevent him from gaining a place in heaven. If his word is not kept that will hurt me more than anything else. I will not be able to bear it. I have made up my mind to go to the forest in a happy frame of mind after abandoning all thoughts of the coronation. Mekaya’s daughter can now crown her son Bharatha without any obstacle in her path. She will be happy only when she sees me leave for the forest dressed in tree bark and dark skin. I am in a hurry to leave and make my father sinless.”

Rama was lost in thought for a while. He then shrugged his shoulders and said, “Lakshmana, when I think of the decision of the king yesterday to crown me and the happenings of today. I cannot help thinking that fate is responsible for our fortune. It is fate which makes us reap the fruits of actions in our previous births. It must be because of something which I did in my previous birth which caused this reverse in my fortunes. Or else Kaikeyi have thought giving me pain. Nothing else but fate can explain this behaviour of the queen. Lakshmana, you know how all my mothers are dear to me and how much I love all of them. As for Kaikeyi she has never once made any difference between me and Bharatha. Today her words were so cruel and wounding, I could not believe that it was she who spoke these words. The sudden change in my fortune is the act of fate. I am convinced of it. Kaikeyi who has always been so well behaved, who has always behaved as a princess, who has always known for her gentleness and her sweet nature that Kaikeyi was so different, Lakshmana, she behaved like an ordinary illiterate woman who has never known what decorum is in the presence of her Lord she spoke thus.

‘This is what is known as the will of providence’. Some happenings in the life of man cannot be explained away and the course of something can ever be altered by anyone, however much he try. This act of providence has been proved in the case of Kaikeyi and me. Man is not above to defy fate whose acts are such that man cannot satisfy himself about the happenings having any justification. He is robbed of his peace of mind and he is helpless against fate. It is not possible to gauge the reason for ones being granted happiness, sorrow, disease, gain or loss, birth or death. Everything follows a pattern, no doubt but we cannot understand it. This is fate even the rishis who have their senses under control are not exempt from the away of fate. They are made to forget their daily rituals, become slaves to passions like Kama

and Krodha and that they lose all that they have gained so far. Anything which has been begun in good faith does, at times, get obstructed in its course and taken an unexpected turn and that is the work of fate.

“This is what has happened to us now since yesterday. But then I am not affected by this change in my fortunes. And so you must adopt the same way of thinking. With these very waters which have been placed for my coronation I will have the sacred bath preparing me for the holy task of dwelling in the forest. On seemed thoughts why should I anything to do with any of these royal insignia ? How can the waters meant for the purpose of coronation serve my purpose which is different. Let me use some other water which is meant for my banishment. As for you do not let the fecklessness of the Goddess Lakshmi affect you, my dear brother. Actually I prefer to roam in the forests without a care in the world. Ruling a kingdom is beset by hundred of worries.”

Lakshmana was listening with his head bent down and eyes fixed on the ground. He was still angry. His brows were knit and he sighed like a serpent and his face was fierce to look at. He said, “I do not agree with you. How can you ascribe to fate an action prompted by the avarice of a woman ? Her desire is so great that she has made the king agree to it. And you did not see any injustice in this you just say it is providence. There are people who pretend to be righteous but are at least wicked. By their cleverness and by their deceitfulness they have conspired to make you suffer this banishment and you refuse to see it. I am sure of it or else why had the granting of there two famed boons been delayed all these years. It should have been done years ago. This is just a pretext. Here is an obvious intrigue to get rid of you and you insist an confirming to it by your decision to obey the king, your father. I am still of the opinion that you should occupy the throne against the wishes of Kaikeyi. The king is a slave to his passions and his action is against to all rules of Dharma. He has no right to crown Bharatha when you are here. The world will laught at him. Only a weakling or a man lacking in valour will accept everything that comes his way with maldness and ascribe his misfortunes to fate. A hero on the other hand will certainly find ways and means of overcoming these difficulties which obstruct his progress. Your behaviour as though you are helpless against fate. Let the World see how prowess vanquish fate. Let the coronation take place and with your permission, I will prove to you that the might of my arms is more powerful than fate. No one, except our father will object your coronation; not even the god who guard the eight quarters.

“The king and his young wife have conspired against you and they are the ones to be exiled to the Dandaka forest. Let me stand by your side and see that the coronation takes place. I assure you I can make it happen”.

“These arms of mine, my brother are not just for being smeared with sandal paste and for being an adornment for my body; nor is this bow an ornament I am wearing. The sword of mine is not a decoration. These arrows are not meant to support me when I am walking. They are meant for destroying enemies and I mean to use them properly. Indra himself cannot withstand my valour when I am angry. Wait and see how best I will achieve my purpose of crowning you as the Yuvaraja of the kingdom of Kosala”.

Rama was standing with a sad and wearing expression on his face. Distressed as he was by the many things which had happened since sunrise, he felt this to be the most trying of them all making Lakshmana that he had no intention of accepting the throne even if it were offered to him now. He wiped the tears of Lakshmana and spoke words of wisdom to comfort him. He then said, “Let me tell you once for all Lakshmana. I have made up my mind to obey my father, it is the ultimate drama. I will not change my mind. Do not be angry. It is of no avert. I will not permit you to fight for the throne on my behalf nor will I allow you to talk ill of the king. Try and accept the truth. I will go. Kausalya knows her son’s mind was made up. Nothing would persuade him to abandon what he saw as being Dharma and obedience to his father. In a low voice she said, “I see you will go to the vana no matter, Rama take me with you”.

Rama looked at her and said gently “How will my father fear my exile if you aren’t his side ? You must not abandon him now. He needs you mother and your place is here with him. That is your Dharma”.

She was silent at last she sighed. “I will stay in Ayodhya. May Narayana give me the strength to bear this as well”.

Rama smiled at his mother. “Take strength in Bharatha. He is also your son. He will look after you. Now bless me and let me go. The sooner I will go, the sooner I will return to you”.

Kausalya said, “When fate is ranged against me, what else can I do? Go with my blessing and may your exile be more joyful to you than kingship. May Viswamitra’s Astras protect you in the forest. May your path always be clear, my noble son and your valour. I will wait for your each moment of the cruel year.

She marked a tilaka on Rama’s bow and tied a raksha of protection around his wrist. She embraced her son said, “I know you will return in fourteen years. I will see you in your rightful place on the throne of your

ancestors. Now go while I am staying. Rama lay on her feet. Taking the Padadhuli, he went out without looking back again.

SITA

The news had not yet filtered past the palace doors into the streets of Ayodhya. Rama gained his own palace quickly, by crying to the crowd that time was short. He did not say for what, but the smile which he managed to keep along the way, vanished as soon as he passed his doors. His mind was a whirl and he had broken out in a sweat when he came to Sita.

She saw his face and ran to him with a cry for a moment, he stood staring mutely at her. Then he slumped into a chair and buried head in his hands. He took her hands in and kissed them feverishly and said, "Sita my father has banished me to the Dandaka vana for fourteen years. He once granted two boons to Kaikeyi for saving his lives. Last night she asked that Bharatha be crowned Yuvaraja and that I be exiled to the jungle.

She began to speak, but he raised a hand for her to be quiet. "Listen to me Sita, my time is short. My father is bound in honour to keep his word. It is his Dharma and mine to uphold it. But I want you to remember always that no man who sits upon a throne likes to hear another man being praised. Never praise me in Bharatha's presence or show how much you miss me. Don't speak of me at all before him.

He smiled and stroke at her face. Which does not mean that you forget one. Pray for me Sita keep your vows. I don't now my father and mother will bear this, be loving to them. But remember, no matter what has happened today Sumitra and Kaikeyi are also my mothers. Bharatha and Satrugna will look after you, love them as your own brothers. But remember Bharatha will be king and a king will abandon even his own child if it does not obey him. So tread carefully with Bharatha : from today you are not his older brother's wife but one of his subject.

Sitas eyes did not fill with tears, as he expected they flashed in anger. She cried accordingly, "Rama what have I done to deserve such cruelty from you ? The dharma I learnt in my father's house was perhaps different from what you did here. But I have been taught that for a better or a worse, a wife's dharma is to share her husband's fate."

If you have been banished to Dandaka vana then so have I. I will go with you Rama' my place is at your side. With you, I would walk down the

paths of hell. The jungle will be like a heaven for me. I must disobey you in this, my love; forget my disobedience, as you do the water you leave behind in a glass after drinking.

“I want to come to green river banks with you and to hidden lakes. I want to see deers and tigers, great elephants, and all there is to see in the wild. Can’t Rama who killed the rakshasas protect his wife ? I swear I will never complain as long as you are with me. I will be content to gaze at lotuses on crystal pools and watch swans glide on silver waters. Why fourteen ? Let us spend a hundred years in the forest together.

But Rama said, ‘Sita this is not the time to try are with frivolous arguments. I know you miss me, but we are young and time is on our side. Fourteen years will pass quickly. You must not make this parting hander than it is for both of us. You must obey me. That is your Dharma.

“You are naïve to think that life in the vana is sniffing flowers.” Or watching gentle birds and animals, you don’t know the terror of the jungle. Every waking moment is a night mare for fear of savage beasts, you dream of green river banks, but the rivers are full of crocodiles. There are no paths and deadly serpents slither through the paths. And how will a princess like you sleep on a rough bed of leaves every night clad not in silk but tree bark.

“At times we may not find water to drink for days, at others no food for weeks, even roots or fruits. And how my lone will your tender body bear the ferocity of the seasons. Burning summer, icy winter and rain that soaks you to the bone.”

“Be reasonable, precious Sita, and my exile will be over sooner than your imagine. Now for the first time since he knew her he saw her eyes fill with tears, like lotuses with dew. They split over her lids, drop by drop. She made no more to wipe them and he could not bear the sight she said softly, her voice unchanged’. All that will only odd excitement to our lives. And I just remembered something, when I was ten, some rishis who read the stars came to my father’s palace. Even then, they told me I would spend many years with my husband in the forest. Rama, if you leave me behind, I will take will life, either with poison, or with fin or I will drown myself.

“You are my world. I will be your wife not just in this life, but the next one, and the one after that and forever. When even a moment without you is so painful for me, how will I survive a year, then another three and another ten after those ?

She spoke so calmly and reasonably, that Rama was a little frightened by her. Not his mother or his father, he realized, loved him as Sita did. He rose and elapsed her to him, 'you were born to come even into the jungle with me. I was only testing you. You are the rarest woman on earth and I will take you with me wherever I go. That is an destiny to be together. Let us feed the poor, give alms to our Brahmanas, and all our possessions to our servants. Let us go lightly into the jungle.

Her face lit up like the sun emerging from behind dark clouds.

LAKSHMANA

Lakshmana at the door who heard all this, could not stand it. He burst into the room, fell at Rama's feet and cried, "I will walk before you both in the jungle! You spoke of Satrugna and Bharatha remaining in Ayodhya, but not of me. Which means I will go with you:"

He looked pleadingly at his brother, then at Sita Rama raised him up and said, "I don't doubt Bharatha. He will look after our mothers better than his own and his wife will look after Urmila. And if he does not Rama, it won't take me long to come back and kill him.

"You must take me with you. I will carry your weapons and clean your path before you. I will gather fruit and hunt for you, while Sita and you walk together on mountain slopes. How else will you both eat? Think about it. Rama, you cannot leave her alone every time you go to hunt'.

Suddenly Rama laughed. He embraced his brother and cried, 'you will come with us Lakshmana. I always meant to take you with me, because I could not live without you either. Go to our Acharya Sudhama and ask him for our weapons. I thank god, Kaikeyi has not said we must go unarmed into exile. We will take the two bows Varuna gave us, the sets of armour light as sunrays and the magic quivers. Tell our master we need Varuna's swords, as well. Hurry back, Lakshmana our time is short.

Like a delighted child, Lakshmana hugged Rama and ran to their Acharya's armoury. He was back in no time, his arms full of the glittering weapons, the lord of the sea had given to him. Lakshmana was excited, gone were the tears and the rage, forgotten the animosity against Kaikeyi and their father.

His eyes shining he laid the unearthing weapons at Rama's feet and cried. Rama said, "I want to give away all our possessions as alms, for possessions possess one even from afar. Then we can leave in peace. Go and fetch Vasistha's son Suyagna and his disciples. Let us take their blessings before we leave."

RAMA AND DASARADHA

They gave away everything they owned to their servants Lakshmana and Sita came out into the sun. The Princes carried Varuna's bows and the people were dazzled by those weapons. By now they had heard of the tragedy that has struck Ayodhya like dark lightning. They cried out Rama's name in lament. They had filled the streets to watch him ride the elephant to his coronation, his face under the white parasol. Instead they saw him barefoot, going to bid farewell to his father.

"How can Dasaradha send Rama to the forest ? they cried
'And the tender Sita with him
'Let Kaikeyi rule an empty city ?"

Rama walked through the eddying sea of sorrow, unmoved by what they shouted. He kept his eyes turned from their angry faces and passed on to the Kings palace. His head bowed, Sumantra waited at Dasaradhas gates. But Rama smiled at the old saradhy, an said gently "Sumantra, announce at the king", Sumantra came into Dasaradha. "My Lord Rama, Sita and Lakshmana are here".

The king sighed and said in a clear voice now. "Fetch my wives and the others who are close to us by blood and by service. I want to see Rama with all of them one last time."

Kausalaya came, Sumitra and kaikeyi also. Dasaradha nodded to Sumantra and he showed Rama with Sita and Lakshmana. Rama entered his hands folded. Dasaradha jumped up with a cry and tried to run to his son. But he slumped senseless to the floor. Rama and Lakshmana carried him to his throne.

When the king's eyes fluttered open, Rama stood before him and said, "Lord of the earth, I have come to take leave of you. Sita and Lakshmana will go with me. Give us your blessing."

In wonder, the father stared at his son, who was as calm as ever and no less radiant. He beckoned to Rama to come near and whispered to him

“Kaikeyi had betrayed me. I am bound by oath to her, but you are not. The people want you for their king. Disobey me today Rama and make an old man happy. Take the throne that is yours by force.”

But Rama forced his father’s lips with his hand, “I cannot break your word besides you must rule Ayodhya for many years still. Nine years and five will pass quickly and I will come back to your feet and calsp them in my hands.”

Dasaradha sighed once more. He said slowly ‘Then go noble child, and may this deed of yours be a legend through the world forever, you are the jewel of our line the fulfillment of all the Ishvakus, yet I have a small wish you must grant me. Don’t go today. Spend one last night with your mother and me and leave tomorrow. “Rama said, “If I stay to night, tomorrow you will ask me to stay another night. But I have already gone for my spint is on its way. Abandon your grief my Lord, don’t let your great heart be burdened. I will be happy in the forest. Besides Sita and Lakshmana are going with me, the years will pass swiftly and swiftly I will come back to you. Now give me your blessing and leave.”

Dasaradha embraced Rama and he wept. There was no dry eye in his court, save Kaikeyi’s. She stood apart her face a mask. The king said to Sumantra, “Order my army to go to the forest with Rama let chariots be laden with silks, gold and ornaments for my children. Let Rama’s palace be implied and all his household go with him and the finest cooks. Kaikeyi stamped her foot and said “you want to leave empty coffers and deserted streets for Bharatha to rule! Remember your oath Dasaradha. No they go with Rama he goes clad in bark.”

With a wild cry Dasaradha turned on her, “wretched enemy, is there no limit to the torment you will inflict on me ? Woman, your boons were only Bharatha be crowned and Rama exiled. There was nothing about my wealth or my people and what I do with them and nothing about me or my life you are a serpent I have nurtured at my breast. I will also go into the forest with Rama and you can rule Ayodhya with your son”.

But Rama said to his father “All I need one some clothes made of Valkala, like rishis wear”. Before Rama had finished, Kaikeyi ran out of the Sabha. She came back panting with three rough robes made of strands of bark woven together. She came defiantly to Rama and thrust bundle of coarse cloth into his arms. Her fluttering eyes met his calm gaze and a mad smile curved her lips Rama donned the robe of bark she gave to him and Lakshmana put on another. Dasaradha watched helplessly, almost beyond grief now, one

Valkala robe remained in Kausalya's hand and she held it out to Sita. Sita took the strange garment from Kaikeyi. But try as she would, she could not put it on properly. She did not know how. She stood in that court with some of the robe around her head and some still in her hands, tangled she turns shyly to Rama and he quickly wrapped the rest of it around her waist over the pale silk she wore.

Their hearts breaking, the women of the royal honour cried "Sita hasn't been banished. Leave her with us".

'Take Lakshmana, but not the tender princess'

'How will she live in the jungle ?

When he saw Sita wearing valkala, Vasistha flashed at Kaikeyi in roar anger, "you will stop at nothing, will you ? You have banished Rama. Let Sita rule from his throne if you want to be forgiven at least part of your sin or we will all follow Rama to the forest and build another city there. He will rule us and the forest will be Ayodhya."

"Fallen queen, your ambition has blinded you to one thing. Bharatha will never accept this kingdom you have won for him with treachery. Satrugna and he will follow Rama to the jungle. Take my word for it I know these princes better than I do". Dasaradha seemed to gain courage from Vasistha's anger. He said, "Stop this madness Kaikeyi, Sita shall not wear valkala. Kaikeyi fumed but Sita could put aside her crude cassock".

Rama said to the king 'My mother Kausalya isn't young any more. She will not be able to bear this sorrow unless you help her. If you don't share her burden. She will give up hope and her life with it.

Dasaradha sobbed bitterly. He said "In my past lives I must have separated many children from their parents that I am cursed like this now. And I can't die or grief as I gladly would to be rid of this agony. Because one evil woman wants to own this kingdom this fever patch of diet, all our people must suffer."

He shook his head in despair. He looked imploringly at Kaikeyi. But that queen's heart was set in stone.

Vanquished, Dasaradha said to Sumanta 'yoke my best horses to my chariot and bring it to the door. Take my noble son to the edge of the forest and leave him there. I know that no matter how a man follows. Dharma, the son's of his past loves overtake him inexorably. That is why I, Dasaradha who was once a powerful king can only watch helplessly while my innocent child is banished. And who banishes him ? I, his father who love him like my life and his youngest mother, who did so until today'.

A PAINFUL FAREWELL

The king was silent for a while. Sumantra dragged his steps away from the presence of the king. He stood with his eyes downcast and with tears in his eyes. All knew that the chariot was at the door. The king wiped his tears from his eyes and spoke in a voice which has suddenly grown firm. He said, "Go to the treasury. Calculate how much will be needed for this long stay of Sita in the forest and bring Sita jewels to last her all that while make some she has enough."

Kausalya and the other women of the harem dressed Sita in silks which were brought for her. The ornaments which they made her wear Sita glow like the goddess Lakshmi and it seemed as though she had come down to the earth to bless them all. The entire place was as radiant as the sky, lit by the rays of Sun. Kausalya embraced her and said, "My child Sita, in this world it is common to see a woman being affectionate towards her husband and serving him well as long as he is wealthy and prosperous. But when he is in straitened circumstances this same woman does not respect him. This is the nature of ordinary woman. They have not learnt the real value of things and they bring shame to the houses they are born in and the houses they are wedded to. They are foolish. However, those who know the duties of a Pativrata consider the husband as the only god whom they should worship. And it goes without saying Sita, that you are the most blessed among women. You have taken on yourself the banishment of your husband and you have decided to go with him whenever he goes. He should have been the king this morning and instead he has become a Sanyasi. And you, without any sign of sadness in your sweet face have decided to be with him. You are an example to all women and you may live long," Sita listened to the words of Rama's mother and said, "Mother, my father and mother have taught me how to serve my husband in such a manner that he should always be pleased with me. You have often told me about this. I have been reminded of my duty now by you. I will not be like the women of meagre intelligence who slight their husbands when they are in trouble. Even as the moonlight will not exist without the moon. I will not swear from Dharma.

"The Veena will be mute without the strings. The chariot cannot move unless it has wheels. And a woman, if she is blessed with many children even, will not be happy if she is not with her husband. A father's gift will be limited : mother's will also be limited too and so will be that of the sun. But a husband will give his all to his wife. Mother, I promise you I will honour and obey my husband. He is my god and my everything."

Even in the midst of all her sorrow. Kausalya smiled with happiness at the good fortune of her son who had been blessed with such a wife. Rama came near his mother. He made pradakshina to her and his voice faltered a bit when he said, “Mother do not grieve too much. You must be brave and take care of my unfortunate father. He is unhappy and he needs you. Mother, time will pass fast and my exile will come to an end. Like the night passing soon when one is asleep, these nine years and five will pass and you will see me come back to you”.

He went to Sumithra and Kaikeyi and took the padadhuli from their feet. Kaikeyi flinched from his touch. “If I have ever offended you, forgive me my mothers. I meant no harm. Give me your blessings I will head them doing then exile.

Sumitra said to her son, “serve Rama as you would your father. Lakshmana my child, there is no sin in what you have decided to do. And I know that, with Rama, the jungle for you will be Ayodhya.”

Rama walked around his father in pradakshinam. As grief struck him again, he came back to Kausalya and fell at her feet once more. With Lakshmana and Sita at his side, he stood silently before Dasaradha, with his head bowed. He knelt at his father’s feet and clasped them. Sita and Lakshmana took the king’s blessing.

At last Sumantra said, “Rama the chariot is here!”

Rama turned away from his patients and went out into the sun. In the teeming streets, the people were fanning to celebrate the crowning of a yuvaraja. The women began to wail when Sita, Rama and Lakshmana climbed into Sumantra’s chariot that bore their prince away from them. They reached out hands of grief to him. They stood in the horse’s path.

They cried to Sumantra “Drive so slowly that fourteen years pass on your journey through these streets.

Some lay in front of the chariot wheels and had to be lifted out of the way by the soldiers.

But others cried, ‘Death to Kaikeyi
Death to Dasaradha’
‘We want Rama for our king today’
“He belongs to the people. We will not let him go to the forest”

Rama also cried now. He knew all of them by their names. He had eaten in their houses, and shared their joys and their hopes. He knew who their children were and which child belonged to whom. Parting from his parents he had borne resolutely, but now he could not stop his tears. Sita wept beside him and Lakshmana sobbed. This was a sea of love they ploughed through, their chariot a ship of sorrow. This love was what Rama could hardly bear to be parted from –

He cried to the saradhy 'fly Sumanthra before my heart breaks'

Dasaradha ran out of his palace. For the first time in years, he ran out on to the streets to pursue the chariot that bore his son away from him. But a few steps and he fell and the people had to lift their king from the ground. Then Kausalya, who had controlled herself until now, tried to follow the chariot. Rama heard her voice above the crowd screaming his name.

He heard the king crying, 'stop the chariot Sumanthra, I command you, stop'. But Rama whispered to Sumanthra, 'Fly Sumantra. Say later that you didn't hear him from the crowd'.

He stood up in the chariot, dark and handsome, wearing Valkala, and more luminous than ever. With his fine hands and his soft voice, he asked passage from the swirling crowd. His people who could refuse him nothing, parted and he rode along the path they cleared. As Dasaradha stood benumbed on his palace steps, the banner on his chariot vanished from view. But the old king stood on and some of the sad crowd below him lest Rama change his mind and return.

At last, Kausalya laid a hand on Dasaradha's arm in mercy and leaning in her after many years, he turned back into his palace. The people also began to disperse.

GRIEF

Dasaradha crossed the threshold into the palace, when it struck him like a bow that his son had really gone. The king's legs gave way under him. Kausalya could not bear his weight and Kaikeyi, ran to his side. But when she took his hand, Dasaradha's eyes flew open. He snatched away his hand and cried, "Don't touch me! I never want to see your face again. And if Bharatha is loyal to you, I will not look at him either."

He allowed only Kausalya to support him. Dasaradha pointed through the great palace doors, and said sadly, 'Look at the treat of dust that takes my Rama away from me. Dressed like two tapasvins my sons have gone to sleep on beds of branches and leaves and that flower of a girl with them. How will she endure the thorns that pierce her feet? How will Sita bear the terror of the beasts of the jungle? Kaikeyi I hope you are satisfied with what I have done. I will die soon now and then you and your son can rule Ayodhya over my ashes.

He looked around him by the last light of day streaming through the doors. The palace was dead without Rama like a body out of which the soul had gone.

Dasaradha said to Kausalya "you are my Rama's mother. Forgive me for all the pain I have caused to you. Take me with you to your apartment. Kausalya let me seek my peace in you."

The palace guards carried him to her apartment and set him down on a couch. Kausalya sat beside him. After the sunset the king and his first queen spent all night speaking together of their son, how noble he was. Dasaradha did not stop crying.

ON THE BANKS OF TAMASA

The citizens of Ayodhya walked along with the chariot which was bearing their dear Rama away from them. They could not reconcile themselves to the truth that Rama had been banished. They were still in a daze and they followed the chariot blindly. They kept asking Rama to return to the city and he spoke to them words of gentle persuasion and he beseeched them to let him go. Rama said, "If you have genuine affection for me, you must listen to his words. I ask all of you to give this Rama affection to Bharatha who will soon be here to take up the reigns of kingdom. He is very good sweet natured, and generous and righteous. He will rule just as well as my father has been doing all these days. He is gentle. He is valiant too and you need have no fear when he is your protector. He is endowed with all the qualities needed for ruling a kingdom. As for my going away, it is the command of my father and all of us have to obey. You should try to please the king and the only way to do so will be to let me go and to welcome the proposed coronation of Bharatha.

It was of no avail. The more he spoke the more they bewailed his departure. The crowd was unmanageable. They began to ask the horses asking them to stop and to Sumanthra asking him to pull the reins and to let Rama

remain with them. Rama descended from the chariot. He could not bear to sit in the chariot when old and weak men walked towards him with great difficulty. He began to walk in the street and Sita was with him and Lakshmana. The Brahmins and the old men said, "Rama, we are coming with you. Look, we have brought our household fin with us and we exile with you". One old man rushed up to Rama and said, "Take this umbrella and hide your face from the scorching sun. Your wife looks like a witted flower. Ask her to take shelter in this. We are all devoted to you Rama. You should come back to the city or else, your should take all of us with you. We do not want to stay in Ayodhya without you.

Rama spoke not a word in reply but he walked with speed. The men of the city walked with him too. And all on a sudden as though nature herself did not want Rama to proceed any further, the river Tamasa came into view and soon they reached the banks of the river. Sumanthra descended from the chariot, unyoked the horses and made them drink the waters of the river.

Rama stood staring at the river and its course with a thoughtful frown on his face. He turned to Sita and Lakshmana who were by his side and said 'The first day of exile is almost over. Night is soon to set in and we will spend the night here on the banks of this river Tamasa "Lakshmana, you must make preparations for it. Do not let sadness enter at you heart at any cost. Look, Lakshmana as night draws near, the animals and birds are coming back to their dwelling places. Listen to the noises they are making. As for Ayodhya, the city of my father will be mourning the absence of her dear sons, I am sure."

"I am grieving for my beloved father and mother. They will be weeping incessantly. My only comfort is the righteousness of Bharatha. He will certainly take care of them I know Bharatha and hence my confidence in the well being of father and mother in the days of came. I approve of your coming with me Lakshmana, Sita and I need you. Your must be with me to protect Sita. I am spending the night herewith just water to quench my thirst. I do not need any fruits or roots to eat. I do not feel like eating."

Rama asked Sumanthra to see that the horses were properly grazed and taken care of.

The sun was almost sitting and Rama sat on the bed of leaves prepared by Lakshmana. Rama with Sita by his side slept without any worry. His face was calm and peaceful as that of a child which was sleeping.

Lakshmana could not sleep, nor could Sumanthra. They sat by and spoke of the happenings of the day and about the sudden reversals of fortune

they had gone through. They spoke of none else but Rama and his many qualities which had made him so precious to everyone.

Rama woke up early and he thought of the immense crowd which was still under the spell of sleep. He turned to Lakshmana and said, "Look Lakshmana look at these men. In their love for me they have given up everything and they have come here to the edge of the river. They have decided to go with us or else to take me back with them. They will not let me proceed. I am sure of that, let us therefore go far away from them in our chariot before they wake up from their sleep". Lakshmana agreed with him and they summoned Sumanthra and asked him to yoke the horses quickly to the chariot.

They ascended the chariot and crossed the river easily. Rama descended from it and he told Sumanthra, "I am afraid I have to adopt a ruse to deceive the people of my city. We will stay here you lead the chariot to the North. After proceedings this in that direction for a muhurta, come back to me taking care that you leave no tracks. They will think that I have gone back to Ayodhya and follow the track of the wheels. Once they go back, they will not return. They will be sorry that they have been deceived by me but cannot be helped. I have to resort to this for the sake of their welfare. It is not right that they should spend years on end in the forest which they will surely do. Once they wake up hurry Sumanthra, and do the needful".

In less than an hour the chariot had come back with Sumanthra, Rama, Lakshmana with Sita seated themselves in the golden chariot strictly in accordance with the rules to be followed when a long journey is undertaken, Rama turned his face towards the North, before getting into the chariot they began their journey to the forest.

THE HUNTER KING

Yoked to the swiftest horses in Ayodhya, the fine chariot carried Rama farther and farther. Through towns and villages they flew without stopping, across streams, planning through scented woods and swaying fields. For the night they stopped beneath a large pipal tree out in the open, leagues from any habitation. They lay under portentous stars, which had shone down on the earth through the chasmal vaults of the universe, even since the earth was made. Starlight entered them as subtle destiny, but they lay asleep knowing nothing of its powerful mist.

With dawn the next day, they pressed on and came to the southern lands of Kosala. Here Rama asked Sumanthra to hold his horses. Climbing

down from the chariot he stood gazing across hallow fields in the night of the lonely morning, as the wildflowers around his ankles opened just for him and the birds in the trees sang the rising sun. But when he saw some farmers and their women come out of their simple dwellings, he climbed into the chariot again and told Sumanthra to ride hard.

They came to the cool vedasruti whose waters were known for their sweatness. They forded the river and gained the far bank on they drove and after half a day, came to the sacred Gomathi. They crossed that river also comfortably, for the water was still low and rode on.

Rama said wistfully to Sita. “There are the lands that Manu gave his son Ikshvaku in the Krita Yuga.”

He told them about every land they passed. He know each one’s history intimately and spoke as if they were precious parts of himself. They came to the Syandika and forded her, when suddenly, grief seized Rama. He said In anguish, ‘Sumantra, when will I hunt with you again in the forest of the Sarayu ? When will I see my father and mother again’ ?

But seeing tears spring in the old Saradhy’s eyes, he controlled himself. Now they had reached the southern limit of Kosala Rama stopped the chariot. He climbed down and turned his face North from where they had come. He folded his hands, and said softly “Land of my ancestors, let me leave you. Gods of Kosala, bless me that I return to my mother and my father when my exile is over”.

He raised his head to heaven and said cried, “my people who love me go for the sake of Dharma the timeless wrath. Give me your blessings and I will come back to you in fourteen years which is less than a day for the Devathas.

Rama lay on his face upon the earth and kissed it. Lakshmana and Sita did the same. They claimed back into Sumanthras chariot and he bore them away towards the inscrutable future.

Kosala, the land of the sons of manus, faded into the horizon behind them. They came to the banks of the Ganga, Tripathaga of the three streams that flowed through Swarga, Bhumi and the Pathala. She lay like a sea before them, she who washed the son’s of men; Ganga whom the rishis adored because she was a Goddess; Jahnvi, in whose magical waters the Devas, asuras, gandharvas and Apsaras came to bathe and other beings who were not of humankind.

Her current lapped at her banks. Her waves crested with silver foam. She bore placid streams and spinning whirlpools upon her, side by side. She was alive and in their present mood they were intensely sensible of her attraction. Rama gazed out across the wide water stream he said, "Let us spend this night under this tree".

They sat in silence by the river, watching the sun set in the west. His gold was scattered in the mystic flow that caressed the exiles, soothed them with wonderful whisperings. Peace was upon them, easily the harshness and grief of the past days.

They had chosen to spend the night near the city of shringiberipura which was ruled by an old friend of Rama's, Guha, the fierce king of hunters. Soon enough curious rishis and other bathers in the holy Ganga learnt of Rama's arrival and word reached Guha. He came excitedly out of his city to welcome his friend.

Guha came laden with mattresses of swan's down and a sumptuous feast. He shouted in joy when he saw Rama. The hunter king ran forward to embrace the dark king Rama. Guha said, "Stay with me and rule my city as long as you like. Noble Rama, the honour will be mine" Rama said, "My kind friend, I am moved by you love. But I cannot accept any of your generosity today. Only your affection. I am bound by an oath like a tapasvin for fourteen years. But not these horses, I will be grateful if they can be fed".

When he heard king spent the night with them Rama waded into the river for his evening worship. Standing with the twilight current around his waist, he offered a prayer to Surya. God of day. When he came out Lakshmana washed his brother's feet and wiped them. He pressed them as he did everyday in Ayodhya since they were boys with a smile, Rama lay down beside Sita on the bed of leaves that Lakshman became so expert at making. They both fell asleep almost at once. Sumantra, Lakshmana and Guha stood watch with their weapon.

As the moon rose and rode serenely on the Ganga, Guha said to Lakshmana "You must be tired. Why don't you sleep? Have no fear for your safety to night. Guha and his people stand guard over you". But Lakshmana replied "How can I sleep when Rama and Sita tie on beds of leaves? O Guha, I am thinking of my father, that he will not survive this night. If I feel so sad despite being herewith Rama, what must Dasaradha's grief be in Ayodhya we will never see him alive again. And if he dies, how long will Kuasalya and Sumitra survive in Kaikeyi's court? No. They will die as well."

Lakshmana spoke so earnestly Guha could see the funeral pyres of Dasaradha and his queens before his eyes. That rough hunter also wept with Lakshmana beside the Ganga, and the river carried their grief out to the distant sea like sacrament. The night passed slowly the very darkness was heavy with sorrow

ACROSS THE GANGA

Rama was awakened by the dissonant cries of peacocks calling at the rishis soon. 'Viao', they screamed, viao, all along the river bank and set off a chorus of thrush and koel pigeon tiny warbler. Soon every bird in the crowded seas was alight with song Rama and Lakshmana waded into the transparent river to perform Surya Namaskara.

Rama said to Guha, 'can you give us a boat to cross the Ganga, we must press on and send Sumantra back to Ayodhya as soon as we can : Guha clapped his hands to call one of his men and cried in his musical tongue' a royal boat for the Princes and Princess. Be sure it is one of my own and we have our best Oarsman take them across''.

A brightly painted boat from the harem of shringiberapura was towed to the river for Rama's crossing. The Kshatriyas stopped their bows and quivers to their backs, and their swords to their waists. Guha bowed to Rama, 'Last night I learnt the greatest lesson of my like from you that Dharma is the only path worth walking Rama, I thank you'.

The forester had tears in his eyes. He embraced the prince of Ayodhya and then fell at his feet for his blessing. Rama raised Guha up and hugged him. He said, "you have been a true friend in my need and that is Dharma indeed. They came to the river where the colourful boat floated. Rama turned to Sumanthra." The Saradhy's eyes were red from crying. He stood before his prince, but spoke no word, only gazed into his face. Rama laid his hand on his shoulder and said simply "go back to my father now, Sumanthra".

Sumanthra broke down and cried 'this has never happened in house of the Ishvakus that crowned prince, his wife and his brother are banished into exile. I know worshipping of Devas is of no use if a prince like you must suffer this''.

And he sobbed. Then growing quiet again, he said ruefully, 'blessed are those that dwell in Dandakavana; our loss shall be their gain. All of us born in Ayodhya must have been great sinners in past lives to have known

you as we have, to have watched you grew to manhood and to lose you now for a demented woman's greed. We are damned Rama, not you but those you leave behind"

He embraced the prince and kissed his hand again and again wiping them with his tears. Rama held him close then said, "tell the king that we are happy in exile. Tell him we will return to him in fourteen years, to take the dust from his feet. Give our love to Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi and all mothers of the palace. Tell my father that once he crowns, Bharatha yuvaraja his sorrow which is half for Ayodhya, will ebb from him when he finds how able he is".

"Tell Bharatha to look after all his mothers equally. Tell him he should take care of Kausalya and Sumitra especially; they have been separated from their sons. Give him my blessing, tell him I said, "Rule Ayodhya with dharma and earn a lofty place for yourself in the world to come".

Sumanthra was still disconsolate. "Ayodhya will be like a woman who has lost her child. When I take this chariot through the city gates, there will be such a lament as if I am a messenger with the most evil things that I did not bring you back again. Why, these horses won't drag the chariot without you. I beg you Rama, let me come with you. I will serve you well in the vana.

Rama touched the Saradhy's face with his fingers; I have you to send you back. Otherwise Kaikeyi will not know you have taken me to the jungle and she will torment my father. You don't have to prove your love to me. Sumanthra, I know it well. But your place is beside your king in his dark time. Go, good Saradhy, give me your blessing and go in peace. He turned to Guha "I must wear my hair in Jata. Can you never betch me same say of the Nyagrodha" ?

When the silky milk of the piple tree was brought, Rama and Lakshmana rubbed into their head soon their locks were thick and tangled and they coiled them in Jata like rishis in the forest. Sumantri cried again to see princes transformed. The river back and now. Lakshmana hold the boat steady while Rama and Sita climbed into it and he climbed after them. At last the blue prince raised his hand in farewell and the oarsmen of the hunting people cast off.

Sumanthra and Guha stood on the river bank, waving after the boat. The currents were mild in the morning and they went along rapidly the figures on the bank divided. In midstream, Sita raised her voice in prayer to the

Ganga ‘Devi, queen of the ocean’ Grant that in fourteen years we cross your waters again and seek your blessing on our way to Ayodhya.

Rama and Lakshmana touched the lcear palms for a chamana. They came to the southern bank, thank the boat man and alighted from the read-craft. The Dhandakavana loomed before them. When the oarsmen cast off again, Rama waved once more to Sumanthra and Guha whom they could still see across the river Rama said to Lakshmana, now is the time for waivers. You wall ahead, my brother Sita you walk behind Lakshmana and I will bring up the rear. The jungle is not a place of carelessness. Out of you love you have come with me. But the paths and the years ahead are fraught with damage.

THE THIRD NIGHT OF THE EXILE

When evening approached, the three travellers, Lakshmana, Sita and Rama reached a big tree whose shade seemed to be large enough to accommodate all three of them. They watched the sunset and sat down under the tree. Rama said, “Lakshmana, this is the first night we are spending outside the country. We do not have even the company of Sumanthra. I can see that the emotions are still beyond your control. This should not be so. Compose yourself. To night we can spend here spreading the leaves on the ground”.

They lay down on the ground and spent the night conversing about Ayodhya and the king. Rama said, “The king will be sunk in sorrow to night. As for Kaikeyi she will be extremely happy since her desire has been achieved. A sudden fear is now frightening me. Once Bharatha is made the Yuvaraja, will Kaikeyi leave my father alive ? What will my unfortunate father do alone as he is, without me by his side, old in body, unhappy in mind and entirely in the power of Kaikeyi because of his love for her ? Lakshmana, when I think the change of mind of the king and his sorrow, I feel that kama is more powerful than Dharma, Artha and moksha. Or else how he could have banished me to the forest ? For the sake of his wife, which father will abandon his son who has ever been obedient and loving towards him ? Even an ordinary illiterate man will hesitate to do so. I hope Bharatha will be able to rule the great Kosala unassisted by anyone. If perchance, my father loses his life, because of the sorrow caused by separation from me, Bharatha will be alone with the burden of ruling the kingdom. King Dasaradha who has sacrificed his Dharma and Ardha because of his Kama which held him under its sway will, I am afraid, leave us soon.

“Kaikeyi, who will be deluded by the power which will be hers, will, perhaps, banish my mothers and their dependants. Lakshmana, I am

worried about them. Why should Sumitra suffer for my sake ? I think you should go to Ayodhya. I will have Sita with me and we will live together in the forest. You should go back and protect your mother and mine from the possible tyranny of Kaikeyi. She hates my mother and she is likely to be cruel enough to do injustice to the two queens you must go back and see that Bharatha does not overstep Dharma. I see the urgency Lakshmana. Perhaps in some previous births my mother had separated some mothers from their sons and that is why she is suffering now. At this age when she should be served by me whom she has brought up with such loving care, she has been separated from me. I am unfortunate since I am not able to serve my parents at this stage of their lives. I have been the cause of immense grief to my mother. I am her only son and it is my duty to be by her side. But I am far away and she is grieving for me. Kausalya my mother is, the most unfortunate mother Lakshmana, you know me and my prowess only too well. If I had so desired, I could have single handed made Ayodhya mine and even the entire earth. But one should not misuse one's power. Do you agree ? I am afraid of being called an adharmi and I desire a place in the heavens. That was the sole reason which made me withhold my wrath and renounce the kingdom. "Rama was shedding tears at the thought of his mother and his father and the happening in Ayodhya and so he sat, silent, thoughtful and to Lakshmana he seemed like a fire which had burnt itself to ashes; like the ocean which had become silent. He spoke in a soft and comforting voice." You are right. There will be no joy in the mind of the people of Ayodhya and the city will be sunk in gloom. You are not there and to them it will be like the sky which has no moon to brighten it. Rama, it is not meant that you should grieve so much. You are making Sita and me sad too. Neither Sita nor your servant Lakshmana can live without you even for a moment. Like fish which die when they are taken out of water we will die soon.

"But one thing is certain brother. I have no desire to see my father or my broken Shatrugna or my mother. I do not desire even heaven if its gates should be held open for me, unless you are with me. What has happened has happened and no amount of thought or tears can help us to correct it Bharatha is sure to take good care of our aged father and our mothers too. Do not grieve too much. If you are so unhappy, so will be, and who is to comfort us ?

They took shelter under the spreading Nyagrodha tree and spent the night in peace. Rama found great comfort in the words spoken by Lakshmana. He told him "My beloved Lakshmana, I have shed my grief about my father and my mother. I should not have asked you to go back to Ayodhya. I need you by my side even as you need me. Let us, together spend the stipulated number of years in the forest happily".

In the midst that wide land which had no inhabitants except the birds and animals, the two princes slept under the tree and they looked like lions in the caves of a mountain. Noble looking and fearless. So passed the first night in the forest.

THE ASHRAMA OF BHARADWAJA

After spending a night peacefully under the shade of Nyagrodha tree Rama, Sita and Lakshmana rose up early in the morning. There was a feeling of holiness in their minds and silently worshipped the rising sun, chanting the Gayathri Mantra. They walked fast entering the very heart of the forest. Sights which they had never seen before, confronted their eyes and they walked happily feasting their eyes on the novel scenes and beautiful trees and flowers unknown to city dwellers. Sita was greatly excited at the sight of it all and Rama would smile indulgently whenever she pointed out some thing new to him.

They traveled towards the sacred region of Sangama, where the river Yamuna entered Ganga. The path was not very difficult and the sun had not reached the high heavens either. Rama was looking for a place to rest since the sun was now fast climbing the sky. He said, "Lakshmana, look there, in the distance close to the sacred spot Sangama where the golden waters of the Ganga merge with the midnight blue of the Yamuna, I can perceive a plum of smoke. I gather there is an ashrama there and rishis must be living in that ashrama. I am sure we have reached the sacred Sangama or Prayaga, since the roar of the impact of the two rivers can be heard. I am almost sure it is the ashrama of the great sage Bharadwaja which we are nearing. They walked fast unmindful of the heat of the sun which was rising steadily higher and higher in the sky.

All on a sudden, a cool breeze set in indicating the sun was wheeling towards the west and when it was almost setting they arrived at the ashrama of Bharadwaja.

Rama went to the vicinity of the ashrama for a moment the birds and the deer in the ashrama were startled by the arrival of strangers. The three of them stood some distance from where the rishi resided. They were eager to meet him and pay their respects. They entered the ashrama, prostrated before Bharadwaja and announced themselves. He was a great rishi, so rich in tapas that he was able to know the past, present and the future. He was well read and was greatly respected by all rishis. He was bent on meditation and he had

performed all types of tapas. He had in his ashrama many disciples who were studying the sacred lore and shastras under his guidance.

Rama said, “My Lord, we are the sons of king Dasaradha who rules over Kosala. This is my brother Lakshmana. She is Sita, my wife, and she is accompanied me to the forest. My father has commanded me to live in the forest and this is my brother in his affection to me, has decided to accompany me. We will have to live like rishis there in the Dandaka forest to which I am proceeding as per the wishes of my father. We have come to ask you for your blessings.

Bharadwaja listened to the words of Rama. He spoke softly and affectionately to them and after their meagre repost he indicated to them a place where they could spend the night. Peopled as it was by deer and birds as well as other risihis, the ashrama welcomed Rama. The great sage was extremely happy to have them as his guests. The young princes were seated before the rishi. Bharadwaja said, “Finally after waiting a long time, I am able to see you here Rama. With my inner eye I have seen that the banishment is for no fault of yours”.

“Look at this ashrama and the beautiful spot where it is situated. The kshetra is sacred, the Sangama where the two great rivers mingle. If you so desire, you can spend your time here.

Rama pondered for a moment and said “I am honoured by your invitation. But my Lord, it will not be right. If the people of Ayodhya came to know of the fact that I am here, they will come here often to see me since the ashrama is not too far away from the city. To see me and Sita they will be making frequent journeys to this place and it is not right. This is the sole reason why I have to day myself the happiness of staying in these glorious surroundings. Please suggest to us a place where we can be away from people, where Sita can pursue her worship of the Lord with no one to disturb her”.

Bhardwaja was convinced that Rama spoke the truth when he voiced his fear about the nearness of the city to the ashrama. He said, “Rama, ten krosas from here is the mountain by name Chitrakuta. It is as beautiful as the Gandhamedana mountain. All around this Chitrakuta are tries and waterfalls and lakes which will please the eye. It is inhabited by rishis and it is a hill famed for the number of monkeys dwelling there. Once a man sets his eyes on the peaks of Chitrakuta his mind never will dwell on unholy thoughts and he will be blessed. Several rishis have attained their salvation after performing tapas in Chitrakuta. I consider this hill to be the ideal place for your dwelling, next of course to this ashrama where you are welcome to stay.

The rishis entertained them with great gladness in his heart. He knew who Rama was and it was to him a great blessing that Rama had graced his ashrama. After they had conversed on various topics, they found that night had set in and Rama with Sita and Lakshmana spent a very happy night there in that sacred place.

In the morning Rama approached the rishi who was like Agni, so radiant was he because of his tapas. He said “entertained by your graciousness, we spent the night very happily in your Ashrama please grant us leave to proceed on our journey”.

All through the night the rishis thoughts had been with Rama and his proposed stay in Chitrakuta. He said, “I am of opinion that you should proceed to Chitrakuta. It is a blessed mountain and very picturesque. It is famed among rishis as a spot which has granted them salvation. Elephants and deer are numerous there. Sita and you can wonder on the banks of the river, near waterfalls, on the mountain tops. The caves will be new for Sita and she sleeps too. You will always hear the music made by sparrows and koils. This beautiful Chitrakuta will be the ideal place of you”.

The princes were ready to leave. The rishi blessed them by reciting them special verses meant for those going on a journey and he went with them a short distance as a father will. Bharadwaja told Rama : “When you reach the Sangama where the two rivers meet, proceed towards the east and walk along the banks of Yamuna. Walk along the path worn by constant usage and when you reach a possible place which you think fit, make a raft and cross the river after crossing the river, you must still pursue your course until you come to a Nyagrodha tree. This tree is a sacred tree. It has been worshipped by Siddhas too and it is named ‘Shyama’ you cannot miss it since it is very big and occupies a place which cannot be passed without your seeing it. Let Sita make a Pradakshina to it and offer prayers to the tree. When she worshipped the tree you can all rest a while or go further into the forest. If you travel a distance of another Krosa, you will reach a forest billed with Palasa and Badari trees. The forest will be dark because of the bamboos growing along the banks of Yamuna. The path inside the forest is very beautiful. It is kind to the feet and you do not find the hardships of the forest there. I have often walked in that path.

Rama listened to the directions of Bharadwaja and said, “I will follow the path indicated by you”. They took leave of the rishi who bade them farewell and Bharadwaja went back to his ashrama, his mind still filled with thoughts of Rama and the time he had spent with him. When the rishi had left Rama said, “Lakshmana the sage Bharadwaja is very gracious towards us. We

are fortunate to have found such a god father to guide us”. Talking of the rishi and the picturesque Chitrakuta which they were impatient to reach the brothers, with Sita walking between them walked along the banks of Yamuna. The waters of the river flowing rapidly and they were looking for a suitable place when they could cross the river soon. They reached a spot where the turbulence of the river not so apparent. They asked Sita to rest under a tree. Together they collected dried wood bamboos soft grass and soon they made a raft. They spread grass on it and made it comfortable. Lakshmana collected soft and pliable creepers and wearing them together he made a beautiful seat for Sita. Rama made Sita climb on to the raft and she sat down in the seat made for her. By the side of Sita, Rama and Lakshmana placed their weapons, the fastest, the spade and the clothes and the jewels which the king had given Sita. They pushed the raft into they steered it in the waters and Sita prayed to Yamuna even as she did to Ganga at the beginning of their journey.

When they reached the opposite bank, the southern bank, abandoning the raft they walked further along the banks which were known by the name Yamuna vana. Very soon they reached the Vyagrodha tree which the rishi had told them about. The shade was extremely cool and pleasant since the tree was dense with green leaves. Sita went towards the tree and made pradakshina as told by Bharadwaja. She said, “I salute you, O holy tree. Please make my husband succeed in his undertaking Grant us that we return to Ayodhya safe and see our elders”.

Rama was watching her all the while and said, “Come let us not hurry. Lakshmana, you lead and Sita will walk after you. I will follow her. Remember Lakshmana, if on the way, Sita and wants any flower or fruit you must at once make haste and get it for her. She should be kept happy.

They covered the distance of Krosa and walked in search of a place to stay. Soon they discerned a spot on the river bank. It was very charmingly located and peacocks and monkeys were sporting there. The long trek had tried them and it was decided that the night should be spent in that lovely spot on the river bank.

CHITRAKUTA

With a thousand birds singing, the jungle woke them at dawn. The feathered ones sang the sun in rapture, blessing another day in the world as they have done since there were first birds in its trees to give praise. It had been dark when they settled here the previous night. Now they stood astonished by the loveliness of the place in which they found themselves. There were

yesterday's insoluble sorrows, this was their new life, of vibrant hill green and deep river blue. The flowers here were like pieces of a rainbow broken across the forest and vivacious monkeys followed them again through the trees. They spiced on herds of deers and came upon lakes tranquil as rishis hearts.

The leaves had fallen off the Palasa trees and scarlet flowers blazed in their branches like countless flames. From other trees, beehives hung as little boats. When they ate the fruits of this forest, they know that they had tasted anything to rival them. Tiny nondescript song birds throats fall of musical fire, sang down to incandescent peacocks. Those beautiful and tine deaf fowl screeched back plaintively.

Rama, Sita and Lakshmana walked on until a mountain rose before them out of the foothills. They saw herds of elephants, bison and deer moving on its shoulder streaked silver with shimmering cascades. The echo of the falls drifted across the silence of the valleys, as if borne and the wings of birds. Slowly they made their way up and searched for a place to live in. They came to Valmiki's ashrama and that rishi welcomes them. They took his blessing and climbed on. Then, in a flat clearing within a circle of Eucalyptus and early pine Rama stopped still. He felt certain that this was the place for him them as if here many paths of grace, laid on the earth in invisible arteries converged and imbrued it with exceptional power and auspiciousness. Nearby the Mandakini which flows into Yamuna, gushed over her rocky bed. Rama and Lakshmana collected logs of wood with which they could build a Kutira. But Lakshmana told Rama to stand aside and with wonderful slack, began to lash together their first home in wilderness. He took two days before it was ready a cozy log cottage on the hillside thatched with grass and straw.

Outside and a few yards from the little dwelling was a centre for worship. The construction was clean and strong. Rama hugged his brother crying jovially, 'you couldn't have built it better if I had helped you'. But we must offer a sacrifice of deer's flesh to the gods of the jungle, so that they keep evil away from our Ashrama for fourteen years.

Expert hunter that he was, Lakshman went off to stalk a herd of chital he had seen earlier beside the Mandakini. An hour later, he came back grinning, with a skinned carcass draped over his shoulder. The roasted the stag on a spit. Rama chanted the mantras for Vaastu shanti and offered the meat to the Devas of light, to Rudra and Narayana, the vanadevatas and the Gods who rule men's facts.

Rama bathed and entered the log cottage for the first time. Lakshmana and Sita went in after him. Contentment was upon them. They

could not have wished for better company or more beautiful place in which to Love.

Thus Rama, Sita and Lakshmana arrived on Chitrakuta and settled there. The sorrow of Ayodhya left them alone.

SUMANTRA RETURNS

For a long time after Rama crossed the Ganga, Guha and Sumantra stood on the bank of the river. The old saradhy stood gazing after his princes and Sita look one who watched a bad dream; bemused. Expecting to awaken from it, at an moment. Gently Guha led Sumantra back into his city. He kept the old man with him for a day and night. Until news came back from the jungle that the exiles had reached Bharadwaja Ashrama.

Near upon, the next day, Sumantra bid farewell to Guha. Yoked his horses and rode back to Ayodhya. Three nights and days rode Dasaradha's Saradhy like Vayu, his heart full of sorrow. The fourth evening, when the sun had set he arrived at the gates of Kosala's capital. Nothing stirred in the city. No music in the air. No games of chess were being played in the street corners. No contests of wrestling or marksmanship did Sumantra see in the alleyways. No butter lamps lit Ayodhya. No women strolled out in the hands of her husband. Silence hangover the city.

At the clatter of Sumantras wheels, the people flung open then doors and came out to see if Rama had returned. They crowded the chariot and cried, "Where is Rama ? Where is our Yuvaraja ? Sumantra"?

The old Saradhy hang his head and replied in a whisper. "I left him on the banks of Ganga. He ordered me back to Ayodhya".

Before the word spread and he was mobbed Sumantra snapped his reigns and drive on to Dasaradha's place. The women of the harem saw him coming and when they saw he came alone, hope went from them. They returned back to their apartments in despair crying. Sumantra came to Dasaradha in Kausalya's chambers and knelt before his king; Dasaradha questioned him mutely with blind eyes.

Sumantra said, "we drove south for three days and I left him on the banks of the Ganga. I watched him cross the river. After warning to me, he walked into the forest with Lakshmana and Sita and I saw them no more. The king of hunters, Guha of Srngiberapura had news from his trackers that, three

days ago, the princes and Sita arrived in Bharadwaja's ashrama. As he spoke, Sumantra's gaze roved anxiously over his master. Dasaradha had aged a life in the week since the Saradhy had seen him. He had grown so thin, he might not have eaten at all since Rama left. Pale skin hung loosely on his face, tears leaked from his weary eyes like his life. He sighed with every word he heard and shivered as if with some great terror. Now when he spoke, his voice, which once rang like thunder through his sabha, was faintly audible. Sumantra had to move closer to hear what he said.

"Tell me more, so my pain grows a little less. Though there is no cure for me. Tell me how he slept while you were with him. Did he send a message for me? What did Sita and Lakshmana say? Tell me everything Sumantra; give me some peace".

'They wept my lord before they left me, your sons rubbed their hair with the juice of Vyagrodha and twisted locks of jata on their heads'.

Dasaradha listened to this in silence and he seemed to become absorbed in the images of Rama that rose into his mind. But abruptly he sat erect and tried to get up from his couch. He could not and cried, 'Take me to him Sumantra. I cannot live without my child. Yoke your horses take him to him now.

At his sides, Kausalya and Sumitra stroked his arms and tried to quieten him, though they also cried. Sumantra stood before them in anguish. The king clasped Kausalya's hands. He said to her. He said to her "Forgive me Kausalya forgive me. Don't be angry. Though I betrayed you love, you have always been kind to me. And now look what I have done, forgive me Oh, Kausalya, forgive me."

He sobbed like a heart broken child. Kausalya cradled Dasaradha's head against her. She caressed his face saying "there is nothing to forgive my lord. If I have spoken harshly to you these past days, it is only from my own sorrow.

But Dasaradha had fallen asleep from exhaustion. Suddenly his eyes flew open as if a demon had visited his swoon. They darted here and there, as if searching blindly for something. Then he signed them and shut them once more.

Thus with Kausalya's leave, Sumantra left Dasaradha. He bowed low to the king he had for so many glorious years, and backed out of that chamber.

THE CURSE OF A RISHI

As Kausalya had mentioned; it was the sixth night after Rama had departed. Half the night had passed and the king was now wide awake. He called Kausalya and asked her to sit very close to him. He said, “My queen, when a man does something, whether it is good or bad, he is sure to reap the harvest of his act. A good act will grant him punya while the wrong act will definitely make him suffer from it. If this is not realized, the man is foolish. An action performed with no thought of the consequences will, it is wrong, make the man realize the truth about it and by that time, it is too late, he is unable to stem the tide of retribution which is sure to follow a wrong act. I have to relate to you an accident which took place when I was a young prince.”

I had learnt a difficult trick in archery. I could be listening to the sound of an animal, kill it with an, arrow amid from a distance. This is called ‘Sabdavedhi’ and I was very good at it. It was of great use to me during hunting and I was quite proud of my achievement.

It was the rainy season. The sun had burnt the earth with his fierce rays during summer and the skies had now assumed a darkness because of the rain clouds. The noise made by frogs was welcome since it was an indication that rain would follow soon. I remember everything clearly. The birds were drenched with the rain which had begun to pour suddenly and the trees were the shelters they could find. The mountains were covered by the rainfall and the earth looked like the sea; so full of water was it. Water was flowing from the mountains like snakes winding down its slopes. It was exciting to go out in the rain and armed with my bow and arrows, I went to the banks of Sarayu to hunt.

“I stood still, and to my ears, came the noise made by the elephant drinking water with its trunk. Familiar as I was with Sabdavedi. I took up an arrow and shot it in the direction from which the noise came”.

“A moment passed and to my dismay, I heard the cry of a human being in pain. It was the scream of a man. Then a voice was raised in agony. “Who has shot me like an animal ? I am a rishi, why am I hunted with arrows ? Who are you, sinner ? Come out, let me see you before I die?”

“I scrambled out in shock and saw a young Sanyasi before me, fallen over on his side. My arrow had pierced him right through and protruded evilly from his chest. Its feathers were stained with blood, which gushed from

him and fell on the white sand. Beside him lay his water pot from which all the water had spilled. A legend of pain was in his eyes and anger.

“When he saw me he cried through his lips that frothed blood”.
“Kshatriya! What have I done to deserve your savage barb ? I came to river to fetch water for my old parents who are both blind. Now they die without me thinking that I abandoned them.”

His breath came in a tortured breath, more blood bubbled from his mouth. I fall sobbing at his feet. I told him how I came to shoot him with my arrow. I begged him not to censure me, to believe it had been a mistake I held him in my arms, and between painful gasps he said, “fill the water pot and take it back to my father you will find him a way down this tree. Tell him what happened. Pacify him and try to prevent him from cursing you. As for me, I know you did not mean to kill me and I forgive you.”

“The effort of speaking drained him and he lay quiet for a while. But I saw his eyes graze over, as death came for him. His face contorted in another spasm of agony and he cried to me”. “Draw the arrow from me Kshatriya and let my life follow it. This pain is unbearable and I am dying too slowly.”

‘He smiled wanely at me, and his thin face was so radiant and beautiful. I grasped the shaft of the arrow and with a heave, pulled it dripping from him with one last scream that echoed through those woods, frightening the birds in the trees into flight, his eyes rolled up and he was dead in my arms. Now there was peace in his face; his lips softened into a smile’. For a long time I stood stricken beside him. Then I picked up his water pot and filled it from the river. Summoning all my courage, and on heavy feet that wanted to turn and run back to the comfort of the palace. I made my slow way along that dreadful path through the forest, towards his father’s ashrama. The father heard me before I saw him and thinking I was his son returning with water hailed me.“

They sat at the door to their hut, two old people bent with age and poverty. Their eyes gazed sightlessly at me and I stood silent before them. The old muni said with some asperity. “Why are you standing there so quietly ? Your mother is thirsty; give her the water. This is not the time to be playful”.

“I took a deep breath and gave her the water into the lord woman’s hands. Then I said, ‘I am not your son. My name is Dasaradha and I am the prince of the house of Ishvaku.’”

“I paused and moistened my lips that were dry as deserts. They craned their heads to my voice. Some how, I went in “I have caused you both

great grief. What I have done is unforgivable. But I did not do it wantonly and I beg you to forgive me. The blind father asked, “What have you done Khatriya”?

“I told them as best as I could, how the water pot being filled had sounded like an elephant drinking and how I shot my arrow without looking. The rishi and his wife received by news with grave calm. They were obviously master and mistress of their emotions.”

Slowly, the old man said, “If you have not come here with such courage, my sense would have burst your head from afar like a melon. Take us to our son. We want to touch him one last time with our fingers which for us are our eyes.”

‘In misery, I led them by their wizened hands down the path of sorrow. Kneeling on the wet sand, the father stroked his son’s face and wept. Then the mother knelt beside him. When her fingers felt her son’s cold body and the wound in his side, she screamed and fell over’.

Grimly the old rishi performed the last rites for his son. He asked me to gather dry twigs and branches for the cremation. He piled them over his dead, youth chanting hymns from the Vedas. At last he offered water as tarpana to the departed soul, for his journey in death. Then he lit that fire with a touch of his hands.

As it blazed up, his wife clutched his hand. The rishi turned to me, “you cannot imagine how I suffer at being parted so brutally from my child. I curse you that in your old age, you will also die of the grief of being separated from your son. Before you die, like us.”

THE DEATH OF A KING

Day drawing, the Vandhis and Magadhirs came to the palace of the king, and as was the custom, they stood at the doorway and began to sing the praises of the king and to rouse him from his sleep. They sang in tunes befitting the morning and the rise of the sun and the music was pleasing to the ear. Women from inside apartments brought water and other necessary articles for the king’s morning ablutions. They were outside the chambers where the king was, and stood waiting for the king to wake up.

The women who were around him woke up turned their sleep and tried to wake up their lord. When he would not get up, even the women did not

realize that the king was dead. The unfortunate king Dasaradha had died during the middle of the night and no one knew about it. Suddenly by the lack of movement in his limbs and by the general posture of the sleeping king, they guessed what happened. It was not sleep and they trembled with fear and shock at the calamity.

Neither Kausalya nor Sumitra had woken up yet. The women in the palace knew now that the king died sometime during the night and the queens did not know yet. Their hearts went out to them and a wail rose from their throats a wail fraught with anguish since they had lost their master, their local and their king. The sound roused the sleeping queens and it did not take them long to realize that they had lost everything. They fall on the ground and wept tears of their sorrow and it was not possible for them to realize that their beloved husband was lost to them forever. Dasaradha such a glorious king, such a just ruler, such a noble soul, such a famed warrior now lay dead and it was tragic since Rama's banishment was the cause of his death for five nights the king had lived after Rama had left Ayodhya. On the sixth night he could not bear the pain any longer and died quietly. He had waited for Sumantra, perhaps to tell him about Rama when he realized that Rama had gone that he would not come back for years to come. The noble heart cracked and his breath left his body without anyone knowing; like water leaking from a cracked pot.

He had been a friend of Indra, the lord of the heavens and when he was ruling, the earth was like heaven. The people loved him as though he was their father and such a king had come to his tragic end because of the ambition of one woman. He was the king whom Narayana chose as the one worthy to be his father and grieving for his son, the unfortunate died of a broken heart and condemned by the world for his unjust act.

He was dead and he looked like a fire which had died down like the ocean which had dried up, like the sun devoid of his brilliance.

Kausalya took his head and placed it on her lap. She wept with an abandon which was painful to watch. She had lost Rama and now her lord was dead and she repeated that she had nothing left to live for and that she would ascend the funeral pyre with the king. With great difficulty the other women in the palace took her away and comforted her with empty words which meant nothing to all.

Soon the city learnt the terrible truth that their king was dead. Ministers hurried to the palace and now the people were crowding the doorway of the palace and the streets. One calamity following another was something they could not take and there was a shocked silence. People did not know what

was to happen. So, they stood, all of them, outside the palace waiting for an indication of what would take place.

Blessed as he was with four sons, yet the death occurred when not one of them was by his side. The courtiers with Vasistha conferred and decided that Bharatha should be sent for and that the king's body should be preserved in oil.

The painful day came to an end and night set in. The city which had been mourning the absence of Rama now found this to be unbearable. They had loved their king everyone talked about Kaikeyi and her cruelty which had caused all this unhappiness to all of them. No one slept and all through the night could be heard all the solos and wails and so the night passed.

Everyone woke up to another day and it seemed to the wise men of the court that panic would set in unless some took the initiative and did something. There assembled in the council hall all the wise men who had been advisers to the king and they were led by Vasistha the preceptor. And they said, "The king died because of the terrible unhappiness caused by the separation from his beloved son Rama. And the night was to us, a terrible night lost as are without a father. The palace is empty. Rama has gone and with him went Lakshmana. Bharatha is in Kekaya with his brother Satrugna. The kingdom will be orphaned unless we take some decision. A kingless country is vulnerable and there should be no aggression by enemy kings when we are in this plight. As for the people there will be no control over them and so very soon Dharma will disappear and that will indeed be a sad state of affairs. There must be some one to rule the country. The king's son will have to be crowned as early as possible. We depend on your wisdom, great sage to do the deed needful and save the country from destruction." Vasistha addressed the ministers and the rishis who had assembled there and he said, "Bharatha has been living in Rajagriha and we will dispatch messengers to Kekaya to fetch him as early as possible. There is no cause for us to be alarmed unnecessarily."

Vasistha called Siddhardha, Vijaya Ashoka and Nandana and said, "I will tell you what should be done. You must shed this grief first and get interested in action. Take the fastest horses in the stable and go to the city of Kekaya. You must meet Bharatha and repeat this message to him." Your preceptor sends you his blessings and wishes you well. Since there is some work which you have to perform at once, return to Ayodhya immediately. You should not tell him either about the banishment of Rama or about the end of the king. Carry with you the usual silks and gems which one king should take when he greets another king".

Very soon the messengers were on their way. They traveled northwards crossing the river Ganga and turned westwards. Panchala was soon left behind and they came to the river Ikshumathi. They travelled fast and after a long journey they reached Girivraja. They did not tarry there but proceeded from there and that very night they reached the city by name Rajagriha. This city was the capital of Kekaya and the young sons of Dasaradha had been spending sometime with the old king Ashvapathi and his son Yudhajit.

As the messengers rode as if death rode behind them, while Ayodhya stayed awake mourning. Bharatha had no inkling of the momentous events at home. He lay asleep in Rajagriha and was visited by nightmares such as come to a man but once or twice in his life.

He dreamt his father was perched on a precipice his clothes soiled and bent and his hair flying in an eerie wind. Bharatha watched Dasaradha fall from that cliff, down, down into a pit of extremity. Then he saw the king again covered in a filth, drinking black oil out of cupped palms.

The dream shifted in evil. He saw all the oceans of the earth dried up and a broken moon fallen into the seabed where numberless fish lay marooned and grasping. His dream turned dark again, again in that darkness a great white elephant crashed trumpeting through a field of cruel spikes planted in the ground, trying blindly find his way home.

Dasaradha reappeared in his soils nightmare. His hair hung to his shoulders. Completely white and his face was calm and toothless. He rode in a cart pulled by mules and wore a garland of wildflowers around his neck.

Bharatha awoke with a cry his bed drenched with the sweat of fear. Shatrughna was at his side shaking him "Bharatha, wake up! You are having a bad dream."

Bharatha sat bolt upright in his bed, clutching his brother's hand. His eyes were wide; he looked like a hunted animal.

"I had such a nightmare Shatrughna' I saw our father ride in a cart drawn by mules. You know what they say about dreaming of a mule cart."

Shatrughna shook his head. Bharatha's breathing had grown easier now. He said "That smoke from the pyre of the one riding in the cart will quickly grace the sky. Something terrible has happened in Ayodhya I hear for the king, and for Rama and Lakshmana. My body feels as if it is on fire and my eyes burn. Shatrughna I hate myself strangely and I don't know why."

The new day was just dawning, when they heard the sound of horses hooves in the court yard below. Bharatha jumped up and ran to the window. He saw his dream had been vindicated and cried ‘Messengers from Ayodhya’.

The exhausted messengers were received in Asvapati’s sabha. Through Bharatha, they presented the gifts they had bought. That prince was to impatient question the riders and hurried through the formalities.

Then he cried, “Is my father well ? And my brothers and mothers ? Have you come with bad news?”

The leaders of those messengers gave a start, but he said with a quick smile. “Why do you expect bad news my prince ? All is well in Ayodhya. But your guru Vasistha sends urgently for you, saying you must return at once”?

“What has happened ?” Cried Bharatha

“We may not tell. But be sure”

“Devi Lakshmi smiles on you”

Bharatha turned to Asvapati, “Pitamaha, my guru calls me and I must go. But send for me at any time and I will gladly come again.”

The oldman’s face grew sad. He rose from his thrown and embraced Bharatha. “Kaikeyi is fortunate to have a son like you. Bless you, my child. Take my blessings to my mother and your brothers and my warm greetings to your noble father and great guru.”

Aswapati ordered Bharathas chariot to be laden with gifts and a train to follow him. But Bharatha was so preoccupied he scarcely noticed all this. He mounted the chariot and cried, “My Saradhy my heart is full of fear fly ahead.”

BHARATHA

Past elegant and splendid cities, through plains and violet valleys Bharatha rose. But his thought remained drawn inwards, because dried would not leave him, four days they rode, before they came on borders of Kosala. After another day; by the thin light of the rising sun they saw the golden turrets of Ayodhya.

Bharatha's face lit up. Shatrughna stood up in the chariot and roared, "Home! How I have missed you Ayodhya."

But as they drew near the city, the fear in Bharatha's heart was stronger than ever. He clutched Shatrughna's arm.

'Listen, I don't hear a sound. What happened to all the musicians, the dancers and the chess players? Where are the markets and the hawkers, and the gypsies? No scent of women's perfume hangs on the air. The streets are deserted, as if everyone in Ayodhya is dead'.

They came to the inner gate the carved and painted are called Vijayantha. Dry garlands hung from the triumphal arches overhead. And though the guards rose and cried as they always did "Jaya Vijayee Bhava", the welcome was far from warm.

Bharatha saw the people begin to emerge from their homes and fill the streets. It seemed to him that they were all in mourning and looked at him coldly. His heart pounding, he came to the palace. He kept down from the chariot, took the steps three at a time and ran to his father's chambers while the guards in the corridors, stared strangely at him. His father was not in his rooms.

Bharatha ran to his mother's apartment, he thought he would find the king there. Kaikeyi came out when she heard his step in the passage. When he saw his mother, he knelt at her feet. She raised him up and embraced him fiercely. He felt her tremble.

Kaikeyi asked in an every voice. "How are my father and brother?"

"Well, mother, and they send then love and blessings to you. But what has happened here? Where is father? Why was I sent for?" Kaikeyi said, "Your father, the noble Dasaradha a father to his people, has attained the condition that all the livery find one day". Bharatha's eyes rolled up and he fell. When he came to his senses, he sobbed. "There is nothing left to live for. Since I was a boy whenever I came in here I saw my father on that couch. Now it is empty, forever. My life is over Oh, bring me to Rama; I need my brother".

For a time, Kaikeyi stood watching while her maids ministered to him. They gave water to drink and pressed wet cloths on his forehead, which he pushed impatiently, which he pushed impatiently. Now Bharatha's mother came to him. Running long fingers through his hair she said, "Come, come, my son, it is unmanly to give in to grief like this'.

Like a wounded animal Bharatha cried, “What happened to him mother ? I thought I was perhaps coming home to being crowned Yuvaraja. And, instead I find thus”.

Slowly he roared and sat on the floor near Dasaradha’s couch, stroking as if his father’s feet were there. He asked, “What were my father’s last words to men”.

Without blushing, Kaikeyi replied, “He sobbed like a child when death drew near. But he cried only ‘Rama’. ‘Sita’ and Lakshmana I did not hear him say your name once. His last words were, “Fortunate shall they be who live to the Rama return to Ayodhya with Sita and Lakshmana.”

“Where were Rama and Lakshmana when my father died ? Where is Rama now ? Casually Kaikeyi said, “Rama has gone to the Dandaka vana with Lakshmana and Sita. Your father banished him.”

Her son cried out as if she had stable him. He shut his ears with his hands. “My father banished Rama to the forest ? Why ? Did he kill someone ? Did he steal or reduce another man’s wife ? Tell me”.

“Bharatha held his mother by his arms and shook her like a doll. Kaikeyi cried to him to let her go. Then embers of evil smouldering in her eyes, she hissed ‘Listen to me Bharatha.”

Something in her tune stopped him still. He waited for her to speak. Kaikeyi drew a breath and said, “Rama committed none of those skins. But when the king planned to crown him yuvaraja. I reminded him of those boons he had given me when I saved his life. I told him I wanted Rama banished for fourteen years and you crowned yuvaraja”.

She went nearer him. And so far from herself had Kaikeyi come, she did not notice her son recoil from her in horror. She caressed his face, her nails were long and painted like a queen’s mother’s, rather than plain and elipped like a widows. Claspig him to her, she said, “Your father loved Rama too much and he died when his son went away. But all that is the past. Bharatha, the future of Ayodhya is in your hands. Set aside your boyishness. You must rule a kingdom now, from this moment. You must be a man and a king”.

Her eyes blazed. Now he saw the madness in them; the powerlust and he pushed her from him so she fell on Dasaradha’s conch. He stood menacingly over her, his eyes glittering, and she covered from him. His voice

was calm when he spoke. All the sorrow was gone and cold rage had taken its place.

‘Monster, how will I live with myself knowing that I am your son ? Why did you drink poison or hang yourself before you had Rama banished ? Why did you drunk yourself or set yourself on fire ?

He had strayed to his sword. But never fear, “if you cannot kill yourself, I will gladly do it for you.” But he paused when his weapon was half draw from its sheath. He thrust it back, and sighed “Rama would never look at me again if I killed you. Be thankful for the one you have banished, evil woman, he stands guarantee for your life or I will swear by my dead father, my sword would be buried in your treacherous breast.”

Kaikeyi backed away from him Bharatha said to her, how have I wronged you that you decided to ruin my life ?

“I am your mother. I have your interest at heart, even if you do not know what is good for you. Put away this childishness. This is not your frivolous youth anymore, but reality be a man and take the throne. I have won for you with such suffering.

“Suffering! My father is dead, Rama sent away like some thief to the jungle and you speak of your suffering. Madwoman, devil, don’t you know that you have ruined the house of Ikshvaku ? Oh! mother how did you do this to Rama?”

Until the other day, you loved him so much I was sure you loved him more than one. I can’t believe the same woman has banished him.

‘Tell me who put you up to this ? How could you think, even for a moment, that I would take the throne that belongs to my brother. He choked again’. Foolish woman, I would rather die. Never once in all generations of Ishvaku king’s has a younger brother usurped his older brother’s throne. Always the younger sons have served the older, and even so our line has flourished.

Mother – my tongue turns to ashes to call you that – your ancestry is faultless and give me some hope that for myself. Otherwise I should kill myself for being your son. Your father and your uncle are noble and perhaps by a life time of penance I can expiate even your sin.

As for your precious throne, for which you have caused all this misery; hear me clearly, serpent, I will leave immediately for the Dandaka vana and bring Rama back for the rest of my life, I will be a slave to my brother so your sin may be forgiven.

Again his hand crept to his sword, as if the temptation to kill her was too much to resist. He moaned “Don’t you see what you have done to all of us. To Kausalya and Sumitra, to my brothers and to me. This is no ordinary sin you committed. You have murdered your husband and banished your son for the sake of or worthless throne! In every age in this land, your name will be spat upon and I fear mine as well for being your blood. Have you seen the way the people look at me ? Bharatha the usurper, they say in their hearts, those who once loved me second only to Rama.”

“For this life and another you will suffer. Wretched kaikeyi, just for the quiet you have caused Kausalya. But why do I stay here wasting my time on a friend while my real mothers languish and my Rama is in the jungle ? I must go and fetch him home. Ayodhya must have a king.

Red eyed, with equal parts of grief and rest, Bharatha stalked out of Kaikeyi’s apartment. She stood staring at him.

BHARATHA’S OATH

Bharatha went to meet the ministers and others who were waiting to see him when they heard that he had returned from Rajagriha. He said, “Believe me I have no desire for the kingdom I do not have and affection left for this woman who was my mother. I knew nothing of the carnation which the king was contemplating. I was far away in Kekaya with my brother Satrugna. All of you are aware of it. As for the forest life which has been meted out to my noble brother Rama and to Sita with Lakshmana I knew it not”. Bharatha was sobbing as though his heart would break. Kausalya heard the voice of Bharatha and told Sumitra “Bharatha, the son of cruel Kaikeyi has come back from Kekaya. I would like to see him. I would like to see this prince who has been blessed with so much forethought.

Sorrow had made Kausalya bitter and here words had a sharpness which they did not have before. Her face had lost its glow and her silks were sorted and uncared for. Her form trembled often and her steps were faltering. She had grown old overnight when she lost her lord and son.

Bharatha, eager to meet Kausalya was walking fast towards her apartments and she had come out too. They met half way. Bharatha embraced the thin emaciated figure of Kausalya. The queen looked at Bharatha and she spoke words which were extremely wounding. She said, “How easily has the kingdom been won for you by your mother Kaikeyi! Child, you have now no obstacles in your path and you can ascend the throne immediately. Fortunate are you to have such a capable woman for your mother. As for my son, Kaikeyi has managed to send him far away, dressed in tree banks. She seems to be exceptionally happy ever since she did this to my son. I only wish to ask a favour of her. If only she will be good enough to send me where Rama is, she will be the kindest person I have ever known or else, why should I wait for her to wait for me ? Accompanied by Sumitra I will go myself to the forest. I will stay there, since I have nothing left to live for, in Ayodhya. If there is any compassion left in your heart for a grieving old woman, you can help me to reach my sons’ hermitage. I will take with me the household fire and tend it care in the forest. Your mother has won for you the kingdom flowing with wealth, overflowing with prosperity. Enjoy it to your heart’s content with your mother. Only let me find peace in the company of my child”.

Kausalya’s words were sharp and hurting to Bharatha it was like a needle probing a wound which was still bleeding. He was sinless and he suffered under the lashing. He could not bear it and he fell senseless on the floor. He recovered and then he prostrated before her and he clasped her feet in his hands. His tears washed them and he stood up. With folded palms, he stood before her. She could see that he was suffering intensely. He said “Mother, I am innocent and it is not right that you should blame me for something which happened in my absence. You know too well my devotion to Rama. He is like a God to me and I worship him. A great and noble soul is Rama and to him Truth is the only religion to be followed. He has been sent to the forest. But mother do not, even for a moment think that I had been a party to this dreadful act of my mother’s. If I really had done it, then all the punishment which are described in the Vedas will be meted out to me. The sin of bickering a sleeping cow, of a master making a servant work and then refusing to pay him of a king who takes money from the subjects and does not govern them properly of a man who does not humour the rishis who have performed a yaga for him; of a man who talks it of others. Who eats all alone when his wife and children are starving who kills a king, a woman, and old man or a child instead of protecting them. I will suffer like a begger with a Kapala in my hand with tattered clothes covering me.

Mother there are a million other punishments and they will all visit me if you what think of me is true. If I had really tried to get the throne after having my brother banished and my father killed. “I must have sinned in some

other life or else how can my mother, you, who has known me and my love for Rama all these years; how can you believe of this of me”? Kausalya was overcome with self reproach for having spoken so sharply. She gathered sorrowing Bharatha in her arms and said “Do not weep child, do not be sad. I have been very unhappy these days and that has blinded me to such an extent”. I spoke thus to you, you must forgive me. With your sorrow you are only making me increase. May the Gods be praised that your firm mind has not been moved by the temptation of a throne dangled in front of you. You are a noble prince and there is a special place for you in heaven for a selfless man like you.

Kausalya’s tears mingled with his and, to an extent, he was comforted by the words of Kausalya. He was happy that she believed his would and his sincere devotion to Rama.

He spent the night in the apartment of Kausalya and they spent the night in talking of Rama and about the king and the due happening’s of the city when he was away.

LAST RITES

At dawn, there came a soft knock at Kausalya’s door when Shatrugna opened it, he saw Vasistha standing outside. The son of Brahma had come to see Bharatha. The rishi said, “our father’s body will begin to decay if you do not perform the last rites for him”.

Wordlessly Bharatha rose. He followed his guru into the embalming chamber, where Dasaradha’s body lay in state, preserved in oil on a bed of Darbhass grass. Bharatha saw the yellowed skin, the smile of surrender on his father’s face. He wept again broken hearted.

He said, “Dasaradha, why have you left me with such a cruel burden ? How could you have banished Rama ? I am afraid father, bring my brother back to me.”

Vasistha put an arm around him. ‘Compose yourself, my child. Sorrow weakens the mind and you need your strengths more than ever now. You must perform the rituals calmly with courage. The people must not see you like this or they will panic.

Bharatha stopped crying. A sudden numbness was upon him. The priests carried Dasaradha’s body into the Sabha where the Ritviks had assembled. The Brahmana’s performed the last rites with the sacred fire that

Dasaradha kept kindled in his palace, the fire he had worshipped everyday. Oblations were thrown on to it, while Bharatha and Satrughna stood by solemn and silent.

Then a palanquin was brought in, covered with silk embellished with flowers, and the body lifted on. Bharatha and Satrughna walked at the head of the procession. They came out into the dazzling sun. All Ayodhya had gathered in the street to pay its last respects. In the end Dasaradha had redeemed himself with the only sacrifice that could have appeased his people after Rama was banished.

In the royal cremation ground, the pyre was piled high with fragrant wood. The remains of so many illustrious kings had been made ashes here. With Chandana and Sarasa, Padmaka and Devadaru, Dasaradha's pyre had been built. In their palanquins, the queens followed the procession through the sorrowing street. The ritviks intoned the Samaveda. Dasaradha was lifted from his litter and placed ceremonially upon the pile of logs. Tears streamed down Bharatha's face again and he touched his father's pyre alight with a burning branch. It caught, blazed and soon a great sovereign of the earth was made ashes. Kaikeyi dared not attend the cremation.

The princes bathed in the Sarayu and came home to the palace, where they and the queens spent the night lying in the bare ground. On the twelfth day, the Shraddha was performed, and on the thirteenth, the poor were fed and gifts distributed among them. Cow, horses, clothes and land for the landless. Bharatha gave alms, bountifully like his father.

But before the alms giving, at dawn of the thirteenth day, the prince went to the cremation ground to collect Dasaradha's ashes and bones. In the cold morning, as he reached down to pick up those mortal remains with the golden tongs Vasistha handed him, Bharatha broke down once more.

'Father, is this all you are today, a handful of ashes and bones ? Where are you now, mighty Dasaradha; where are all your regal and loving parts?' These grey flakes of ash and a few cold pieces of bone ? I should kill myself today if this is all that life finally is. Vasistha took him by the arm, his guru said sternly 'The women who must cry already do so, you are a Khatriya, behave like one. You should comfort your people and instead you stand here sobbing like a lost child'.

It was a tone of voice his guru seldom used and it brought Bharatha up sharply. The prince looked into his master's eyes and saw such compassion

there. He wiped his tears and controlled himself. With sure semblance of calm, he collected his father's remains, to float them down to the river to the sea.

With Shatrughna at his side, he offered Anjali to the dead king at the cold pyre and came back to the palace. That evening Bharatha and Shatrughna sat together at the apartment, trying to pick up the pieces of their broken lives.

Shatrughna said thoughtfully, "I wonder why Lakshmana did nothing to prevent this. He is my twin and we look alike. He touched his sword meaningfully". "I know what I would have done if I had been here. Yet my brother did nothing. I wonder what stopped him".

With a weary smile, Bharatha said 'Rama must have'. Suddenly they saw a grotesque sight in the doorway. Mandhara stood there wearing garish finery. Her arms were red with sandalwood paste, her bunched body glittered with ornaments she wore a golden girdle round her waist studded with diamonds and rubies. She stood smiling at the brothers, a smile as crooked as her back and warding off the evil from them by cracking her knuckles against her temples.

With a growl, the faithful old doorkeeper pushed her into the room and said, "this is the demon who poisoned your mother's mind. She had Rama exiled and caused your father's death. She is sure that this is the moment of triumph, and wants you know she contrived it."

Shatrughna gave a hiss of anger. Before Bharatha could stop him he sprang at Mandhara and suck her down. He seized her hair and began to drag her around the apartment, and then out into the passage so everyone saw, all the women and the servants. But no one came forward to help Mandhara they all hated her. Her screams and shrills of abuse echoed through the harem.

Shatrughna hauled her along from time to time, he kicked her savagely roaring. "I will reward you for what you have done."

Scattered along that passage in the palace of Ayodhya, Mandhara's ornaments were like stars strewn across the autumn sil. She bled from her nose and mouth and there was a crimson trail where the wrathful prince dragged her. No one moved to stop Shatrughna and it seemed he meant to kill her. Until Kaikeyi arrived there. She ran to Bharatha and begged him! "She has been with me since I was a child. Spare her life for my sake!"

Bharatha looked coldly at his mother 'for your sake'.

Seeming her mistress, Mandhara screamed louder. Kaikeyi shouted an order at the palace guards to restrain Shatrughna; none of them stirred to obey her. Roaring still, Shatrughna dragged the hunchback pausing only to kick her.

Then Kaikeyi screamed at Bharatha. “What would Rama say if he saw this ? Bharatha held up his hand and said ‘Enough Shatrughna.’”

Reluctantly, Shatrughna let Mandhara go. She lay howling on the floor in a wretched heap. Kaikeyi ran forward to kneel beside her and called her maids to bring clothes and ointments to stanch the hag’s wounds. Shatrughna stood smouldering still, sorely tempted to finish what he had begun.

Now Bharatha said clearly, so everyone heard him, Shatrughna except for “Rama my sword would be buried in Kaikeyi’s heart. But it is not dharma to kill a woman, my father.”

He put an arm around Shatrughna and led him away. What Bharatha said spread like light, through Ayodhya

THE THRONE IS YOURS

On the next day, when the sun had rising and when Bharatha and Shatrughna had completed their morning worship of the sun, the ministers of state came to Bharatha and said, ‘Prince Bharatha, king Dasaradha who was like a father to us, has now been gathered to his forefathers Rama with Lakshmana has gone to the Dandaka to dwell for the duration of fourteen years. This land of Kosala should not be without a king. It is up to you now to take up the reigns of the kingdom in your hands and rule it. The articles for the coronation are ready and waiting for you. The people are also expecting to see your coronation. Please accept the throne and rule us as your father did.

Bharatha walked with them to the spot where the many accessories for the coronation were assembled. Silently he made a Pradhakshina to the myriads of pots containing holy water and to the chamaras and the white umbrella. He then came and stood as a raised dais so that the people could see him and hear him. He said, “My beloved brothers in woe, together we are suffering this great calamity which has been visited in us. It is not right that you should talk like this to this to me asking me to take up the ruling of the king into my hands. Since times immemorial, the throne of the Ishvakus has been only reserved for the eldest of the king Rama is the eldest of the king. He will be a

king I will, instead, go to the forest and spent the fourteen years. I have decided to go the forest and bring my dear brother back to Ayodhya. Please help me to do this. Assemble the army and as for me, I will carry all these articles meant for the coronation with me and crown Rama in the forest itself. I will bring him back as the king of Kosala. Rama will certainly be the king. I will not let this woman have her dream realized. I will remain in the forest and expiate her son. Now make the paths to the forest wide enough and good enough for the army. Send people immediately so that we can leave as early as we can. The citizens were thrilled with the words of the king who was selfless.

The next morning Vandhis and Magadhis say the praises of the prince and the sky resounded with the noise setup by the drums and bugles and other instrument. Bharatha's sorrow was intensified by these which were tributes to a king and not to him. Bharathas had woken up because of these and he came out of his chamber and said "Please stop this, I am not the king".

He then told Shatrugna; "Look Satrugna look at the extent of my mothers crime. The king has left Ayodhya in my hands and gone. The image of Dharma has left the country an orphan and like a boat anyone to steer it, it is tottering in the grip of uncertainty. Rama, who would have taken it up as he handles the bow, has been sent away to the forest this a situation.

Poor and unfortunate Bharatha was sorely tried. He was worried about many things and the journey to the forest was now uppermost in his mind. If only Rama could be brought back everything would be alright. In the meantime, while he was conferring with his brother, Vasistha entered the council hall. Resplendent as the Divine Sabha 'Sudhama' the king's council has a glorious sight. The rishi seated himself on a seat which he used to occupy. He asked for his councilors and other officials to assemble there. He said, "We have to make some important decisions. Ask Sumantra to bring the young Prince Bharatha to the council halt."

The hall was soon filled with the people whom Vasistha had summoned. People were already filling the streets and the roof tips even. Bharatha entered the hall filled with the men who had been the advisers of his father. They were all there but the king was not. Both the princes stood still after they had saluted the elders.

Vasistha then said, "Child Bharatha, your father; the king, has left this land for you to rule. He was a righteous man and he acted thus because he did not want to be called Adharmi. As for the reason your brother Rama left for the Dandaka with his wife and Lakshmana, it was the same. Rama did not want his father to be called untruthful. This throne of the Inshvakus is yours. Accept

it and allow yourself to be crowned. Rule this large expanse of land, this Kosala which has been the heritage of your ancestors.

Bharatha listened to the words without any expression on his face. His mind was far away with Rama. He looked at his guru with pained eyes and said, “My lord, you are the person who taught me what Dharma is ever since. I was a child. Having sat at your feet and listened to the nuances of Dharma as expounded by you how is it possible for me to accept the throne ? I am the son of king Dasaradha and from him. I have inherited a sense of justice also. How can a son of Dasaradha take what does not belong to him ?

“The kingdom as well as myself are Rama’s to do what he will. Please do not ask me to remind you of the rule of the line of Ishvakus, that the eldest son has the right to the throne and no other. If I how do something which has not been done before, it will be a blot on the Rama of Ishvakus, it will be a son. It is unbecoming to one like me, born in a noble house and it will unfit me to claim a place in the next world. I do not approve of the sinful act of mother from here I salute Rama the king, who is at this moment dwelling in the forest. I am bent on but one thing; that Rama should rule the kingdom. He is the rightful heir to the throne and he is the person who is capable of ruling the country and not my unfortunate self.

The hall was silent. Every one was touched by the love Bharatha had for his brother and they were pleased with the adherence to Dharma. “I will go to the forest and bring Rama back from there and I will offer the kingdom to him. If I am unable to bring him back, if I do not succeed. I will remain with him and serve him like my brother Lakshmana is doing. I will try my best to install Rama on the throne. I have already asked for the roads to be made ready for the march of the army to the forest

The young prince asked Sumantra to collect the army. Everything was got ready very soon and there was a thrill of anticipation in the mind of everyone. They were sure that Rama would come back with Bharatha and that they would be able to forget the loss of their father Dasaradha in the happiness of being ruled by Rama.

Bharatha took the blessings of Vasistha who was by his side during all the painful days when the preparations were being made. He admired this young pupil of his who seemed to be as great as, if not greater than Rama in the observance of Dharma. He smiled to himself softly when he remembered telling Kaikeyi the same thing on that memorable day when Rama left for the forest. He had told her in the presence of everyone that Bharatha would never

accept the throne and that, he would most probably wear tree bark and remain with Rama in the forest. Vasistha was proud of his pupils.

Bharatha called for his chariot and it was at the doorway in no time. Bharatha who had hopes of bringing Rama back to Ayodhya spoke to Sumanthra “Sumantra, let us hasten to the forest with the army. The country should not be without a king for long let us go.

Bharata and Sathrugna were seated in the chariot driven by Sumanthra. The ministers and others came in chariots, on horse backs and on elephants. The queens went with him too. Kausalya, Sumitra and kaikeyi. Many of the people of Ayodhya also went with Bharatha.

A NIGHT IN ASHRAMA

Like a slow and great river itself, flowing across the earth for the first time, Bharatha’s army crossed the Tamasa. It was a magnificent force, with elephant, horse and chariot and numberless foot soldiers; the common people of Ayodhya walked with these. Sumantra drove Bharatha’s chariot. He knew the way he had taken Rama and followed the trail as if it led to the soul of them all.

Their progress beyond Tamasa was slower. After a week they came to the Ganga and Guha’s city Shringiberapura. Bharatha called the same halt beside the golden river, full of the rumour still Rama had gone this way. From his rampant Guha brow the legions that flew the Kovidara flag and said to the hunters. “Alert our warriors: I think Bharatha comes to kill Rama. Blockade the river fords. He shall cross the Ganga over our dead bodies if he comes evil in his heart.

Guha rode out from his gates with a small company carrying the gifts that a Vassal king brings his emperor. Sumantra saw him coming and said, “Here comes Guha, king of these lands, who loves Rama. He can show the way to him. His hunters know the forest like the palms of their hands.

Guha bowed ceremoniously to Bharatha but his eagle eyes watched the Prince guardedly. He saw the faithful Sumantra and was relieved. He scrutinized Bharatha’s face again and saw no evil there. At last he said, “My land is the garden of your kingdom. Be my guest for the night. But tell me Kshatriya, why do you come to the forest with an army?”

Bharatha flinched. He lowered his gaze and said sadly “I see that my name is sullied even as far from home as this. Rama is dearer to me than

my life. Guha how can I think of harming him ? I have come to take my brother home. After my father's death, Rama is the king of Kosala. Kings do not travel abroad without their armies.

Guha saw the sincerity in Bharatha's eyes; he heard the love in his voice. A smile breaking out on his black face, the hunter embraced him. You one of the some noble seed as Rama! As long as men speak of selflessness in the world. They will take the name of Bharata of Ayodhya. How many men would refuse a throne, and all the power and wealth that came with it for the love of their brother ?

Guha saw tears spring to Bharata's eyes at the very mention of Rama's name. The prince did not sleep most of that night for eagerness to be up early and across the river. The king of the hunting people stayed awake with him, as he had with Lakshmana. They spent the night speaking together of many things, while the army slept.

In the vast silence, which bore the sea of breathing around them and the silken rustling of the river, Guha said, 'Ten days ago, Lakshmana stood watch over Rama and would not sleep though I begged him to'. I said to him, "I love Rama like my own brother. Sleep in peace; I will guard him even as you will".

He replied, "It is not that I have faith in you, Guha. But how can I sleep when I see my Rama and his wife lying on the ground".

Late into the night, Guha told Bharata about the night Rama had spent beside the Ganga. And how the next day, when the brothers had rubbed their hair with the milk of Vyagrodha, they crossed the river and how finally, they walked into two forest, looking like two rishis with Sita between them.

Shatrughna sat beside Bharatha. The fire they had lit shone in their eyes. They listened to Guha till how Rama had refused the foot he had brought him and the mattresses of down. Lakshmana had made a bed of grass and leaves for his brother. The hunter showed them the tree under which Rama and Sita had slept. Bharatha picked up a handful of Darbha grass and held it fervently to his eyes.

Guha said, "If some one had told me that four brothers were as devoted to one another believed him. I wondered what love could be so great that it exceeded the love for kingdom and wealth; especially when you are born from different mothers. But I know Rama and I know how much I love him myself though he is no kin of mine. Bharatha, now that I know your heart let

me tell you this; earlier this evening. I was prepared to kill you if you had come to harm Rama.

Bharatha sighed, “Guha, I have no rest until I see my brother before me!”

A few hours before dawn, the prince lay on the ground, and some semblance of sleep sole over him. But His dreams were dark, and he tossed and turned beside Shatrughna who also slept poorly at his side.

They were up before the sun the next day and Guha came to them and said ‘my oarsmen will ferry you across the river with your people!

Kaikeyi had come because her safety could not be guaranteed in Ayodhya and Vasistha and his rishis were aken across in a river boat called Swastika. Now they had Guha’s hunters for guides, and went surely through the forest along the some trial Rama had taken. They spent one night very near where he had slept and pressed on the next day. Until from a promontory they saw Bharadwaja’s asrama near the confluence of Ganga and Yamuna.

Bharatha left his army a krosa from the hermitage. With Shatrughna and some ministers beside him and Vasistha going before him, he climbed down the slope when he neared the asrama he left the lot of ministers behind and walked in taking only Vasistha with him. Bharadwaja welcomed them with every show of affection; he made them sit by his side when the ritual greetings were over between himself and Vasistha he turned to Bharata “You are king of Ayodhya now, what brings you to the forest ? I would have thought you would be happy on the throne your mother won for you”.

Bharatha said ruefully to Vasistha, ‘Look Master, all the world, even the wisest in it is convinced of my guilt. To Bharadwaja he said, ‘You should not judge me like this holy one. I am innocent. Rama is my brother. If you are so sad at his exile that you can hurt me without knowing the truth, how much greater my sorrow must be that my brother lives in jungle. If you will driet me to him, I have came to crown Rama our king’.

Bharadwaja gazed at Bharatha for a long moment, and then at Vasistha, who inclined at his head to affirm what the prince said Bharadwaja took Bharatas hands. “You have earned exalted place for yourself in heaven. As for Rama, he has gone to Chitrakuta with Sita and Lakshmana. I will show you the way to there tomorrow. But to night you, your great guru and the rest of the party with me.

Bharatha began to protest. But his eyes twinkling, the rishi said, 'my son, there was no need for you to have left your army so far away. Send some one to fetch your soldiers and your people. I want you to entertain to you to night when the army and the people of Ayodhya arrived. Bharadwaja touched some sacred water with his fingers and invoked Viswakarma. At once a light appeared between earth and sky illumining that hermitage. Within it stood the divine artisan. Bharadwaja said, 'My lord, I want to entertain the people of Ayodhya to night'.

As the sun set slowly, it seemed the Asrama and everyone in it supplied through a twilight crack and came by Viswakarma's power into an unearthly realm. Many coloured lamps in the darkening sky. These floated everywhere and transformed the hermitage into a precinct of dreams.

The air was fragrant and uncanny bliss swept the people of Ayodhya and they heard celestial music around them. They saw tall Gandharvas playing on instruments more softly resonant and complex than any they had heard. The great elves sang in voices that brought visions to their enraptured listener's eyes. Then there were unworldly Apsaras, their beauty ineffable, who served Bharadwajas guests and danced for them. And the wine and the food ? One cannot begin to describe the divine fare that passed the mortal lips of the people of Ayodhya that night. Into the early hours, the feast continued the singing, the dancing and the joy.

At dawn Bharatha came to Bharadwaja and said, 'My lord, not as long as they will not forget your hospitality. But now we must press on and find my brother I am afraid that not the company of Gandharvas and Apsaras can long assuage Ayodhya's grief at being parted from Rama ?

The rishi described the way to Chitrakuta, exactly as he had done for Rama. He said, 'I have heard he has built an Asrama near the Mandakini'.

Dasaradha's queens came before the rishi for his blessing. They walked around him Pradakshina and strode without speaking their heads bent and hands folded.

Bharadwaja said, "Bharatha, tell me which queen is which prince's mother"? Bharatha went to Kausalya and put his arm around her. This is my mother Kausalya who bore the noblest man ever born into the world and this is mother Sumitra. Who bore the mighty twins Lakshmana and Shatrughna.

He did not 'go near Kaikeyi : He did not look at her. He said stiffly, my father Dasaradha died because of a woman he loved like his very

life. Out of her greed she pointed him from his eldest son. Oh! She is gentle and feminine to behold : but she is a devil. The Third one whose eyes are dry who has not shed a tear these past days for her dead husband, is my mother Kaikeyi. And the prince heaved a sigh. Bharadwaja laid a hand on Bharatha's arm. 'The ways of fate are inscrutable, my son. Do not judge your mother so harshly. I can see for into time and I tell you there is a deep purpose behind Rama's exile. The Devas, rishis all the hosts of heaven and the races of the earth will profit from it one day. And the clutch of evil shall be loosened for an age. Yet great suffering must go before any great deed, and your mother is only an our willing instrument of destiny. The way ahead is long. Don't be hasty with your judgement.

The army took a while to prepare itself for the march ahead. The people were till intoxicated with the nights magic. But once they thought of Rama, they were soon on their way. Through darkling forests and fording other jungle streams. Bharatha sensed his brother a head of him; he saw Rama's trial clearly with his heart a golden path.

On they marched, and the denizens of the wild were alarmed by the invasion of their privacy. Such a force has never come into this jungle before. Herds of deer scampered up steep hills, calling in alarm. Elephants stopped their lazy feeding to stone and then lumbered away, crashing through bamboo thickets. And overhead another legion following the army of Ayodhya chattering down its displeasure the langin tribes.

When they had marched some krosas along the southern bank of the midnight blue Yamuna, when they had left the long Nyagrodha, Shyama behind them, they came to the edge of a forest more dense than any they had sun yet, and dark as a thundercloud. Out of its heart there loomed a green massif. Its slopes were mantled with wildflowers fallen like vivid rain from the trees, its rock faces were gashed with silver falls. A scented blew down from that mountain and caressed them as if in welcome. Bharatha breathed 'Chitrakuta'.

A smile lit his face and Shatrughna's when they heard the Mandakini gushing down hill in the They knew that in a few hours all their torment would be redressed from for they would see their brother Rama.

Shatrughna cried "Send our best trackers ahead to find his Asrama quickly'.

A REUNION OF BROTHERS

Rama, Sita and Lakshmana sat on the banks of the Mandakini. Sita dangled her feet in the water, while near them and quite unafraid a herd of deer drank from a pool in the river. The day was wearing on. They had grown used to the peace of Chitrakuta and the sorrow of exile did not weigh on their minds anymore. The mountain surroundings of their little Ashrama were so picturesque it was impossible to be unhappy for long in that place.

But this afternoon they heard a alarmed trumpeting and heavy bodies crashing through the jungles. It was a herd of elephants trying to gain the higher reaches of Chitrakuta as if they fled from some implacable enemy. Trampling down banks of bamboo, toppling small trees and crashing ungent into bigger ones, the herd scrambled up the mountain. The great beasts splashed across the river, downstream from where the princes and Sita sat and lumbered like a passing earthquake into the thick forest beyond.

Sita and the princes saw flocks of birds rise screaming out the forest below them and wheel in the sky. They heard the incensed chattering of langur troupes. The deer, which drink peacefully at their side now cocked their faces and listened tensely to the cries of the other jungle folk calling sharply, they too fled up. Rama said to Lakshmana ‘can you see the panic I think a king must have come to hunt in the forest?’

Lakshmana shinned up a tall sala tree. When he looked east he saw the banner of Kosala flown to Bharata’s vanguard flapping in the mountain breeze. He cried down from the tree “Sita, hide! Rama put out the asrama fire. Put on your armour. Pick up your bow danger is here!”

He clambered down feverishly and stood panting. Rama smiled at him and asked ‘who is coming Lakshmana, that you are so alarmed?’

“The one who had you banished. Bharatha has come with our army to make his throne secure. My astras are sad with disuse. Rama : they long to be buried in that traitor’s heart. The scavengers of our jungle will feast a year on the carcasses of his men. Rama said, “So now you would have me kill my brother for the throne of Ayodhya. I know you speak out of love for me; but you should not abandon your good sense. You think Bharatha comes to kill us. But he has convinced our father that the kingdom belongs to me. He comes to offer me the crown and take me back to Ayodhya. Wouldn’t you have done the same thing in his place ? Why do you think that he loves me less than you do ? Do you believe Bharatha would betray me for a mere kingdom?’ Don’t doubt him like this; it hurts me’.

He paused. But anger was on him and he said softly. “Perhaps the truth is that you want the kingdom yourself ? I will tell Bharatha to give it to you and to stay with me in the forest. You will see how readily he agrees. How can you be so suspicious Lakshmana ? This is our brother of whom you speak.”

For a moment Lakshmana stood stricken; then, in the manner of a child he changed the subject. ‘It must be our father coming to us Rama’ Rama stood up to examine the approaching force. ‘Perhaps you are right. I see his favourite horses and there is Shatrunjaya. But I cannot see the king’s white parasol. Let us go back to the asrama. It is time for Sandhya and they are still an hour’s climb away’.

Even as they peered down at it, the army paused under the trees. Bharata had called the halt in deference to Rama’s privacy. His trackers had come back to him in excitement. They pointed to a slope above them and a strip of level ground upon it.

There my Lord ‘said the leader’. “If you look carefully you will see smoke raising into the sky. It could be the asrama of some tapasvins; but I think we have found Rama.”

Bharatha ordered his commanders. ‘Stay here until you hear from me. Sumantra and Guha come with us, and a few trackers.

Shatrughna was already off up and Bharata had to run to catch up with him. Guha went another way with some of his men. When he had gone a krosa, Bharata climbed a lofty sala. He saw the asrama with the trill of a sailor who spots land from his crow’s nest.

He sent word back to Kausalya and Sumitra to follow carefully in their wake. With Guha, Satrughna and Sumantra, keen as anyone else to see Rama again Bharata climbed on as quickly as he could. In the more level places, they ran up the mountain beside the Mandakini. Until they arrived in a clearing in which there stood a cozy wooden cottage made of sala and Asvakarma logs; thatched with leaves and darbha grass spread at its door in welcome.

Through the window Bharatha saw Rama and Lakshmana’s bows inlaid with gold. Varunas weapons; and beside them, quivers in which arrows shine like treasures. Across from the cottage was a raised platform where a fire burned. From here, the smoke they had seen rose into clear sky. Before the fire, his eyes shut and his face tranquil. Rama sat at Sandhya prayer with Sita beside him. Lakshman stood by, with his back to Bharata’s party and his arms

crossed over his chest for a long moment. Bharata stood at the extraordinary sight of Rama, lone of his ornaments, wearing valkala his hair collected in jata and sitting on dharbha grass at worship like Brahma. Then his eyes swan and with a cry, stumbling and falling on the way, he ran head long to his brother.

‘Rama’ Shatrughna also fell at his brother’s feet. Rama raised them up tenderly and embraced them over and over again. Then Lakshmana was among them. Now he saw his brother before him, as he was and not as he had imagined him in his anger. And he remembered how much he loved Bharata. Rama made Bharata sit close to him and welcomed Guha and Sumantra, warmly embracing too. Then he asked ‘Bharata why are you in the jungle, wearing valkala and jata ? You should not have left our father alone. Tell me how he is and how are our mothers ? How is our guru Vasistha ? and Sudhanva ? I have thought of him lately.

Bharata stared at Rama, thinking in the sight of his dark face. He turned away after a moment and said only ‘it has never been the way of the Ishvakus that a younger brother rules the kingdom while his older brother lives. Come back to orphaned Ayodhya, Rama, it languishes without a king.

‘But child, Dasaradha still rules Ayodhya why do you speak of a future that has not yet come to pass?’

Bharata turned his eyes to his brother in anguish and cried “Dasaradha no longer rules Ayodhya. He died of a broken heart. Rama kneced over. Sita ran to fetch water and Bharata and Lakshmana sprinkled it on Rama’s face. But for a long time, he lay where he had fallen.”

When he awoke, he sobbed helplessly. ‘I thought I would return to Ayodhya when fourteen years had passed and take the dust from my father’s feet. Now you tell me he is dead. Now I was not there even to offer tarpana for him. Bharata, I will never come back of Ayodhya. Whose voice will I hear calling my name as Dasaradha used to with such love ? Whose arms will enfold me as his always did ?

Rama lost control of himself. He turned to Sita and tried cried “Did you hear what Bharata had said. The king is dead. Lakshmana you have lost your father’.

And he sobbed and sobbed. At last Bharata said, “Rama you must offer tarpana for him. Shatrughna and I performed anjali in Ayodhya. But I know his soul will not find rest until you offer him holy water.”

Rama grew calm; he wiped his eyes. In a moment, he said, quietly to Lakshmana. "Bring me a cloth to cover my body. Fetch me some ingudi. I will offer tarpana to my father." When the cloth and the humble cake of dry fruit were brought, Rama said, "Sita, you walk in front. Lakshmana, you go behind her and I will follow. Let us go to the river'. From over the crest of the mountain the last rays of the sun fell, scarlet and gold, on the quiet Mandakini. Restarting in grief solemnly waist deep in the water. Facing south he raised his alms above his head.

He said aloud 'father, you have been gathered to our ancestors in Pitriloka. Quench your journey's thirst with this water'. He came out of the river and made the offerings of pride. He broke the ingudi cake ground it with the flesh of a badari fruit, and set the pride down on a seat of darbha grass that Lakshmana prepared. He said 'A man's Gods should accept the food he eats. We now eat this fruit in the name of our father Dasaradha of Ishvaku Gods in heaven, be gracious and accept our offerings.

The four brothers ate the fruit and embraced one another. Then, with their arms linked, the princes of AYodhya came to the Ashrama was night fell.

BHARATHA'S APPEAL

Vasistha came first with the queens. They walked along the path traced out on the banks of the river Mandakini. They knew that thus was the river which had been favoured by Rama for his daily bath and his other rituals. Sumithra and Kausalya were walking slowly and some distance was covered by them. Kausalya said, "Sister, this seems to be the path along which your son Lakshmana walks daily fearing on his manly shoulders the pots of water for the Ashrama where my son stays. He has taken upon himself the task of serving Rama and he is doing it well as I can say'.

As they were walking their eyes lighted on the Darbha grass on which were placed the Pindas Kausalya exclaimed "look on this Pinda which has been offered by the great prince Rama for his dead father. King Dasaradha who was like a god to us, and who lived like a god, who had tasted of all the joys this world had to offer will now be satisfied by this Pinda made up of ingudi and Badari since it has been offered by his beloved son. Can anything be more pathetic than this sight"?

They reached the Ashrama of Rama. This sight of Rama with his Jata was shocking to the mothers. Rama came forward to meet them and

prostrated before them. They stroked them with loving hands and Lakshmana followed Rama and then Sita. Kausalya took Sita in her arms and caressed her as she would a daughter born of her.

Rama saluted his guru Vasistha and so did Lakshmana. Like Indra greeting Bruhaspathi Rama grasped his gurus feet in his hands and placed his head on them. The first flush of grief had abated and when Vasistha asked him to be seated Rama did so and by his side sat Bharatha. Lakshmana and the youngest brother Shatrughna. The ministers had come and so the priests.

Silence, a long silence pervaded the entire place. Every one was looking at Bharatha and wondering what he would say. Glowing like flames from the same fire the brothers sat around their guru and it was a glorious sight. Rama spoke first. He looked at Bharatha and asked him.

“I am eager to know why you have come here to me dressed in tree bark and with your hair matted like ours. Give me some plausible reason for this behaviour of yours.

Bharatha stood up. He folded his palms and suddenly he prostrated before Rama. He then said, “Our father, who was a saint among men, who was renowned the world over for his valour and for his righteousness strayed away from his path of his Dharma and performed an unforgivable act. And because of that he was separated from you and not being able to fear it he lost his life. Our father gained for himself this blemish in an otherwise blameless life because of a woman word happens to be my mother called Kaikeyi. Because of his promise to this sinful woman he did what he did. Neither has she gained the kingdom which she wanted, nor is she happy now since her Lord is dead, her king who loved her to distraction. Her future is terrible to contemplate since it will be a special hell meant for survivors like her.

“Rama, I appeal to you to absolve me of this sin. Please be gracious enough to me to come back to Ayodhya and accept the kingdom which is yours by right. We want you to be crowned. All these people have come to you to join me in appealing to you. You have always granted the wishes of everyone. It is up to you to keep up the reputation you have earned and grant me my wish. Let the clouds be cleared from the skies and let the moon shine in all his splendour as he does in autumnal sky. You should not refuse the desire of all of us. Return to the city and rule the people even as our father did. The orphaned city will find a father in you who would make them all happy”.

Bharatha found great difficulty to talk clearly. Constant weeping, his anger against his mother, and in addition the fear of the censure of the world

had worked havoc in this prince and he was a sad young man trying to voice his eagerness to make Rama go back with him. Rama embraced his brother warmly and spoke to him. “Child Bharatha, you have been born in a noble house. You are blessed with qualities which are not human but divine my glorious Bharatha how can one like you, walking in the path of Dharma, ever be accused of doing a sinful act with the desire to rule the kingdom you are of those rare souls who hold their senses under control. I am yet to find fault with you for anything. You do not know all the facts and that is why you blame your mother. Do not do so. Fathers have every right to command their sons to act according to their wish and this applies to their wives also. You should not blame our revered father for his actions. He is the ruler of the land. He has right to crown me king of the land or to make me dwell in the forest dressed as I am now. Righteous man should respect their mothers, just as much as they do their father’s. When such is the case, when both my father and my mother told me ‘Go to the forest’, how could I act otherwise ? You have been commanded to rule the kingdom and I have been commanded to dwell in the Dandaka forest for fourteen years. The great emperor Dasaratha has so commanded us and he has reached the land of forefathers. It is your duty to act according to his wishes, whether you like it or not. The kingdom has been forced on you, I know, but you cannot escape the responsibility. I will rule over the Dandaka for these few years. My father said so and so it will be. My only aim in my life is to obey my father ; and the three worlds, even if they offered to me, hold no charm for me”. Night was drawing out near and after the worship of the sun, they returned to the ashrama. The night seemed to be interminably long for everyone. Particularly to Bharatha and none of them slept that night.

The sun had risen and they reassembled in the same spot as on the previous evening. No one spoke and they sat silent for a while Bharatha broke the silence and said, “I will recast my words, Rama. My mother has been granted the kingdom which she had desired for my sake and I own it. I accept the fact. Permit me now to make the offering of the kingdom at your blessed feet. Make it yours. This kingdom is now like a dam which has burst its banks because of the floods caused by heavy rain. You can only gather up the broken fragments and make it whole. My trying to do what you should do will be like a donkey trying to imitate a high born horse, like a sparrow trying to soar into the heaven like Garuda. It is a happy state of affairs if one is protected by another and is allowed to live without care. On the contrary to protect someone is indeed a hard task. I will look like a dwarf reaching out to the fruits and flowers on a branch will be beyond his reach. Please have pity on me and on the citizens of Ayodhya who are waiting with eagerness for your word of assent to this prayer”. Rama was very unhappy. But he had no intention of making any compromise with the code of Dharma which he followed implicitly pure of heart and firm in his decision, Rama would not be moved.

Rama replied, 'It is not that I do not understand you, or feel sympathy for you. But fate has ordained that my path leads to the jungle and yours to the throne of Ayodhya. I grant that common sense might cry out otherwise; but fate is beyond more common sense. Once I came out into the wilderness I sensed fate clearly in my heart, the forest calls hue more urgently than Ayodhya. For me Ayodhya is far away. I will surely return to it one day; but not yet.

Think of time Bharatha, how she carries us along helpless on her mysterious currents. Her ways and purposes are always secret and just hers to know. What is gathered today is scattered without warning tomorrow. Think of our father. He led such a great life, just look at his end. Nothing except change is permanent in our lives and nothing but death is final in this world. Death walks at our side on every trial. He wrinkles our skin and turns our hair white. We delight in every sunrise and sunset and forget our lives are shortened by everyone. The seasons come, each with its our allurements, but they take great slices of our lives with them. The relations of men are like ships crossing each other on the ocean, whether with fathers, mothers, wives or children. We meet and are briefly together, only to part inevitably, if not in life then surely in death. We must not make too much of our sorrow. It is nature's way. And who are we to question the wisdom of fate ?

'Bharatha, it is no use trying to swerve me from my path. It is written for me that I live in the jungle for fourteen years and nothing you can say will change my mind. I can feel my destiny here; now that our father is dead, I can feel it more plainly than Rama felt thoughtful. Bharatha was not to be convinced so easily. He let the silence drift for a while then said, "I flatter myself that I know you better than most. Rama you are not moved by life's vicissitudes or trials that shake other men. Leave off your stubbornness in this thing whether it is the Dandaka Vana or Ayodhya makes little difference to you. Come home, if only to save my mother and me from her sin. Let us have at least partial expiation by your return."

"Come home Rama out of your love for me if nothing else. Save me from the crime of sitting on your throne protect me from the world's censure, as an old brother should for a sin I have no wish to commit. Every one knows that when a man nears his end he loves his reason; that is what happened to our father. Your place is in the palace of Ayodhya, on its ancient throne. Only in the twilight of your years must you even think of the forest."

Bharatha paused when Rama was silent, he thought his brother relented. He pressed on "I have brought everything for the coronation. We will

crown you here and take you back with us in triumph. Every nation must have the bestman in it as its king. I am not your equal, the world, you and I we all know that. Give up your obstinacy the people have come up to see you being crowned. They have Rama for the joy you robbed them of you in Ayodhya.

If you do not return, I will stay herewith you. Rama said, ‘You are a worthy scion of Ishvaku and the noble son of a noble father. But there is something you do not know, something that not even Kaikeyi knows, which once our father told me. When Kaikeyi was given to Dasaradha the Kanyasuka promised to your grandfather Asvapati was that his grandson would be crowned king of Ayodhya one day. A gasp went up from the army and the people even Bharatha was visibly startled. Rama said, “Dasaradha could not in conscience forget his oath, anymore than he could the boons he had granted your mother. I was as if Kaikeyi remembered her boons to remind him of the Kanyasuka he had pledged to Asvapati.

‘Bharatha, it was against his will that he agreed to what Kaikeyi asked. He died of grief for what he had to do. How can you say he lost his reason? Our father hated what he did for the sake of dharma, but he knew it had to be done. And now, as soon as he is dead, you expect me to break the solemn oath for which he gave his life’.

But now Vasistha said, ‘Rama, a man has three gurus, his mother, his father and his master who initiates him into the way of the spirit of the three, the third is the most revered because he shows the way to eternal life. As your guru I say to you, for the sake of the house of Ishvaku, for the sake of souls gathered here who depend on you for your mother’s sake; for Bharatha’s sake, and to honour what I say come back to Ayodhya and be crowned. I, Vasistha, tell you that your Dharma will not be tarnished even a little. Rama grew sad to hear his guru, who loved him. But he said, “from my earliest childhood, my parents have been gurus to me. My debt to them is eternal. The love and generosity with which they brought me up has made me whatever I am today. I cannot break the sacred word I gave my father”.

Bharatha could not bear it. He said to Sumantra ‘Spread dharbha grass on the ground for me. Sumantra. Until my brother agrees to come back to Ayodhya and be crowned, I will fast to death, if need be!’.

But taking Bharatha by the arm, Rama laughed. “Bharatha this means of persuasion is not for a Kshatriya! Only Prayopavesa. Don’t compel me like this. I will not go back and it will just add to my sorrow.”

Bharatha cried to the people of Ayodhya. “Why do you stand so quietly ? Why don’t you force him to return ? But the people replied only with an uneasy silence. Having heard what he had to say they seemed to agree Rama about the way of Dharma or else, they saw he could not be moved. But Bharatha cried, ‘If Rama insists that all of us spend fourteen years in the jungle, let me the one who stays here. And let him return to Ayodhya and rule from the throne, he was born to.’”

Rama replied “When my exile is served, I will come home. And I will sit upon the throne of the Ishvakus, if you still wants me to. But now your place is on the throne and mine is in this wilderness. If was our father’s last wish and you should honour it. The rishis murmured among themselves how fortunate Dasaradha was to have sons like these finally Vasistha conceded. ‘Bharatha child, I am afraid Rama is right. For whatever reason, it was your father’s last wish that you rule during the fourteen years of your brother’s exile you are bound in honour to obey your father. Let his death not be in vain!’ Rama’s face sit up.

BHARATHA ASKS FOR THE PADUKAS

Still Bharatha maintained his stand. He asked Rama to change his mind. Rama raised him up from the floor where he was prostrating before him, and placing him on the lap, he said ‘Do not say that you will not be able to rule the kingdom and do not advance that as a reason for asking me to come back with you. I know how wise you are and I know only too well the path of Dharma which you have ever followed. You are capable of ruling the entire earth and the three worlds too. There is no need for you to worry about it. The ministers who were the advisers in our father’s court are with you and they will help you. But you must give up this hope of taking me back with you.

“Bharatha, the radiance may be separated from the moon, the mountain Himavan may, perhaps be seen bereft of its snowy erase. The ocean may overstep the bourne set for it, but I will not break the promise I gave to my father. Child, whether your mother did what she did because of her love for you, or because of her avarice, is immaterial. Your duty is to obey the command of our father and rule the kingdom’. Bharatha’s face was a picture of unhappiness. He now realized that he would have to go back to the city without Rama. He wiped his brimming eyes with his forearm and said.”

“You have commanded me. You are like a father to me and I should do what you ask me to. But one thing is certain. I will not accept the kingdom myself”.

From among the articles he brought for the coronation of Rama in the forest. Bharatha hunted out a pair of sandals in laid with gold. He had evidently hoped Rama to wear Rama during the ceremony. He said, “Here are sandals in laid with gold. I beseech you to stand for a moment. Blessed by the touch of your sacred feet, these sandals will become sanctified and they will fear the burden of ruling the world”. Rama smiled at Bharatha and stood for a moment wearing the sandals as described by Bharatha. He gave them to him after that. Bharatha prostrated before the sandals and said, “My beloved brother, remember I will live wearing these coarse tree bark and deerskin for the next fourteen years and I will retain this matted hair until you remove yours. I will wait for you to come back and I will eat leaves and roots. I will enthrone these sandals and they will rule the kingdom as your symbols. I will rule the kingdom as your representative. The day your banishment is concluded I must see you or else. I will fall into the blazing fire and end my life. You must keep in this mind”. “I will said”, Rama.

He embraced Bharatha and Shatrughna and said ‘Bharatha remember, you must treat your mother with respect. Do not pursue this anger and displeasure. I want you to swear in my name and in the name of Sita that you will do so’. Tears were flowing from the eyes of Rama as he bade farewell to the noble Bharatha. Bharatha took the sandals in his hand and placed them with reverence on his head and he made a Pradakshina to Rama. Three times he went round him and then stood still.

Rama went to each one of the them who had come to see him and spoke to them with affection. Finally he bade farewell to his mothers and to Sumantra with tears in his eyes.

The moment had come when they had come to see him and was painful on either side. When they had left Rama tottered into the ashrama unable to bear the parting from his dear and beloved people and kin’s folk.

BHARATHA’S RETURN – NANDIGRAMA

To some extent Bharatha was happy. He had not been able to take back Rama with him; it was true. But he was able to avoid the sin of accepting the throne. Rama’s sandals would rule the country and he was but a servant of the king. He met Bhardwaja on his way back. After that he told him what had happened at Chitrakuta, he sought the blessings of the rishi. Beyond the Ganga, Guha embraced Bharatha and went back to Sringerapur.

At last Bharatha rode into Ayodhya and passed under the arched gateway. He went and entered the forsaken palace, with Rama's padukas in his hands. Tears rolled down his face when he saw the great Sabha empty and miserable as a durdina; a sunless day the Gods have cursed. Bharatha saw his mothers back to their apartments Kausalya and Sumira were tired but reassured at having seen the sons on Chitrakuta and the issue of who would rule Ayodhya had been resolved. Kaikeyi came home plunged in silence her eyes faraway and blank as if she did not know the world at all anymore or herself Bharatha called a council in the king's court of the old and powerful of the kingdom. He addressed that council. I will not live in luxury while my brother lives in the forest. Until Rama returns I mean to move this sabha to the village of Nandigama. Rama's padukas shall adorn the throne of Kosala and they will rule till he comes home.

Vasistha murmured. And "May your fame live long in this holy land for you are the noblest of men. Bharatha bid farewell to his mothers. It Rama was deprived of their company and love, so would he be. He climbed into his chariot with Rama's Padukas. The court of Ayodhya went with him and the prince followed Vasistha, who had gone before him to Nandigama. The people of Ayodhya went with Bharatha. They would not miss the crowning of Padukas."

At Bharatha's instructions the white parasol was unfurled above the padukas, which were placed on a footstool below the king's throne as if Rama sat there wearing them. And the crown was set above them. Bharatha invoked the Devas "Ones of light which are my brothers but, guide me wherever I discharge the king's Dharma. Bless me that I never swerve from the way of truth, while I rule in Rama's name."

Thus he who ruled in Ayodhya lived in Nandigram like an ascetic and everyday he would spend at least an hour talking to his brother's padukas. But those who might have wondered at Bharatha's extreme devotion had not a touch of madness about it were convinced. The young Kshatriya was as sound as he needed to be. His reign was just one strong in nature. The people felt as if Dasaradha was still alive.

Far away, on an emerald island an awesome and sinister sovereign grew unaccountably disturbed, and he could not bather any why. The evil that possessed Kaikeyi had in some Ravana of Lanka slept poorly when that evil was frustrated by the love of the princes of Ayodhya had fore one another. But the battle between darkness and truth had hardly been joined. Ravana knew nothing yet, I Rama, or that emperor been on would soon be threatened by the blue prince who was an incarnation of grace.

Aranya Kanda



ARANYA KANDA

IN THE FOREST (Leaving Chitrakuta)

After Bharatha went back to Ayodhya, the first few days in Chitrakuta were unhappy Rama saw his brother's tearful face in his mind, and it would not go away.

Around them, the mountain was dotted down with rishis ashramas. The princes often saw some of these hermits on the mountain paths or at the river where they came to draw water and bathe and they exchanged greetings with them. One day the Muni's waved curiosity to Lakshmana from across Mandakini; but they did not come to talk to him as they usually did where the river was narrow.

That evening he mentioned this to Rama. The next day, Rama saw that rishis from all the different Ashramas on Chitrakuta had, congregated in the river bank. They sat in ingent and secretive conclave, glancing over their shoulders time and again, as if they were fearful of being overheard. They saw him but did not so much only whispered on among themselves. Rama crossed the river and went up to them.

He asked, 'Munis, why do you turn away from me today ? Have Lakshmana or I shown you any disrespect ? Or perhaps Sita unwillingly when you came to our Ashrama ? You are ill at ease when you see us. What have we done ?

The old Kulapathi of the largest band of rishis took the prince's hand. "Oh, No. Rama there is no grievance to you or yours. A graver matter concerns us; a demon called Khara has come to Janastana in these forests. He is the cousin of a great Rakshasa of South, a king whose very name we speak only us whispers. For he is an incarnation of evil. The old sage looked around nervously, and then breathed Ravana of Lanka."

'Khara performs bloody rituals in the jungle and offers human fresh to the powers of darkness. Recently he has been sacrificing our brother rishis of Janastana. He is a desecrator of Yagnas a cannibal and we fear him. He has never been vanquished in the battle and he is proof even against our magical siddis. It seems he has heard of your valour and means to try himself against you.

The old hermit sighed. “That is not at all Khara and rakshasas are masters of sorcery. They put out our sacred fires with sudden gusts of wind. The vessels with our offerings vanish before our eyes, or we find them full of excrement we don’t know when the rakshasas as attack us. It is a matter of a day or two. We have decided to leave this place and go to the banks of Malini where the rishi Kanva has his Ashrama”. ‘Come with us Rama, Chitrakuta has become danger for Sita and yourselves’.

Later, at noon Rama walked a way, through the jungle with the rishis to see them on their way.

The princes and Sita stayed in Chitrakuta for a week after the sages left. But sorrow was with them constantly. One day Rama said ‘This is where we received Bharatha and our mothers and heard their tragic news. I cannot wipe their tears and my heart wants me to leave this mountain’.

Before he said Lakshmana cried ‘Muni as well. This place is full of ghosts. Everywhere I turn me. I see Bharata’s face, gazing sadly at me that I every doubted him. Rama let’s leave today’. Sita sat quietly ‘The ashrama does not feel auspicious anymore, as it did when we first came. The same day, they collected their belongings Rama and Lakshmana strapped on their quivers and swords, picked up their bows and they came down the mountain with Sita between them. They left with little regret. The days show Bharatha had come and gone have been anxious ones when the peace they had found on Chitrakuta abandoned them and their minds turned back to dark thoughts of Ayodhya.

ANASUYA

After traveling some distance Rama, Sita and Lakshmana came to the Ashrama of the renowned rishi Atri. They entered in Ashrama and stood still after saluting the grand old man. He considered Rama and Lakshmana as his our sons, so affectionate was his welcome. He entertained his young guests with fruits and he was pleased to see Sita Noble minded Anasuya was the wife of Atri and the old rishi was very proud of her and her Tapa.

He told Sita “Go inside the Ashrama and pay your respects to Anasuya, my wife. She is a great Tapasvin and an emancipated soul. You will be fortunate to have her blessings. He told Rama about her.”

“Once when the world was suffering from a drought for a duration of ten years, Anasuya created fruits and roots for the good of humanity. She made the river Ganga overflow so that the land could become fertile. She has

performed severe tapas for a thousand years. She is famed in all the three years for her tapas, its severity and for the vratas she has observed. She is like a mother to you. Let Sita go to her presence and prostrate before this great lady who is worshiped by everyone.”

Rama spoke to Sita and said, ‘Sita you have heard the words spoken by the great sage. Go at once to the lady and take her blessings Sita hastened towards the inner parts of the ashrama where Anasuya was.

She saw Anasuya. She was weak because of her age; her frame was shrunk and her hair was white. She was so weak that her body trembled always like a plantain tree shaken by a strong breeze. Sita went to the vulnerable old woman and prostrated before her and announced herself to her.

Anasuya was extremely pleased to see Sita and her humility. She said, “It is good that you are righteous by nature. A beautiful young woman like you, brought up in luxury, will find it hard to adopt this forest life. But you have followed Rama to the forest and you have given up all thoughts of comforts and ease because you wanted to be with your Lord. It is a great thing you have done. There will surely be a place in heaven for women like you to whom a husband is worthy of honour, whether he is a king or a mendicant, a saint or a sinner. For pure minded women her husband is her lord and god and he is the only god whom she worship’s. I am very happy to see you are a Pativrata. You will attain great fame and a great name because of you devotion to Rama. “Sita was feeling embarrassed by the praise which was being lavished upon her and she spoke with befilling words”. I have been taught the lesson that the husband is the only god for a woman. Your praise of me because I am doing only what is right is superfluous. There is nothing here to be surprised about mother. Even if my husband is devoid of good qualities. Which are expected in a man still, it would have been my duty to follow him wherever he went. But then, this my lord is my home of all great and noble qualities. He is compassionate. He has never been a slave to the senses. He is stead fast in his affections. He has always tried to please his mother and he is the father’s favourite. His mother Kausalya has been given to his other mothers also. When such man is my husband it is strange that I should be devoted to him and that I have come to the forest with him. Anasuya was listening to the young girl with a smile on her wrinkled face. She was pleased with her.

Sita continued “When I was given away in marriage, my mother taught me these lessons before I left for Ayodhya and Rama’s mother spoke the same words too when I left for the Dandaka with Rama. I have locked the advice safe in my heart and I have tried to follow it as well as I can. I am grateful to you since you have approved of my behaviour. Anasuya said, “Sita,

I have accumulated a wealth of tapas and I am able to grant you any boon you desire and I wish you would ask me for something which can be granted by me, I wish to give you something.”

Sita was surprised at her words. This was the first time she had heard of a woman who had accumulated great tapas to be able to grant boon to others. She smiled softly and said “Mother, all the desires in my heart have been fulfilled, what need have I for boons”? Anasuya was not surprised at the answers from Sita. She did not think that the wife of Rama would have any desires which had to be gratified by her. She said “I bless you with all my heart. My you be fortunate in every way”.

The old lady then brought several articles with her and said, “Sita accept these clothes garlands and Ornaments. I also want to give you these specially prepared perfumes and scented water which will make you look and feel fresh always. Take them and wear them to please your husband even as Lakshmana will please Narayana”

Sita accepted the gifts with joy and she saluted with. Anasuya was an old and revered saint and she made Sita sit by her side. Anasuya stroked her with her old and twisted fingers and said, ‘Sita, I have heard that Rama won you us a Swayamvara. I would like to hear about in detail. Tell me everything about how it happened. I am very eager to hear it from your lips’!

She smiled and said, “Nothing will excite me more than recounting that incident. You must have heard about my father. He is Janaka and he has won a name as a good and very righteous king. He is called a Rajarshi. He is the ruling the country of Videha and Mithila is the capital of the country. Once he wanted to perform a yagna and for that purpose he ploughed the ground meant for it as has been ordained by the priests. I have been told by him that when he was doing so, the earth had split and there he found a small child. He was wonderstruck at the sight of me. He was childless and he took me in his arms and said, ‘This is my daughter’. He was very fond of me.

‘I have also been told that a voice from the sky said! “O King, she is your daughter according to Dharma.” My father brought me up with great affection. When I had grown up and was considered to have reached an age when I should be married, my father was worried about me. No father will consider anyone good enough to be the husband of his daughter even if it be Indra himself. He wanted to give me to use that who would be enough to take my hand in marriage.

“He finally decided to have a Swayamvara for me. He had with him a divine bow given to him by Varuna and two quivers which were inexhaustible. It was a powerful bow and it was not easy for anyone to lift it”. My father had that bow brought before the king’s who had assembled and said, “My daughter will be the wife of the man who will lift the bow and string it. My word is given and I will not go back in it”.

“The kings tried and they all failed. No one could even lift it. They all saluted the bow and went away”.

After a long time, this Rama came to Mithila with the rishi, Viswamitra on the occasion of a Yaga and Lakshmana had come with him. My father welcomed the rishi with great excitement and he was told about the young men who were with Viswamitra. The rishi said, “These young men are the sons of Dasaradha. They have come to see your bow. Show the Divine bow to them”.

“My father at once asked for the bow to be brought. The valiant prince Rama lifted the bow without any effort, strung it and twanged the string. Because of his strength the bow which was held in his left hand broke into two and the sound was like the clamp of thunder. My father was very happy. He had water in a gold vessel bring at and wanted to give me Rama at once. But Rama would not agree to it. He wanted to have his father’s approval before he could accept me.”

“My father sent messengers to Ayodhya and it was only king Dasaradha came to the city that I was given in marriage to Rama. My sister Urmila was given to Lakshmana. This is the story of my marriage to Rama”. Anasuya listened eagerly to the words of Sita as she recounted the story of her wedding she embraced the girl and said, “For a long time I have been wanting to know the details of your wedding and it was good to listen from your lips. You speak very softly and your voice is very beautiful”.

“The evening faded to night and they could hear the noises made by the birds which were returning to their nests. Rishis were coming back to their Ashramas after bathing in the rivers and bringing water in their Kamandalams in their hands. The red fire flames from the evening fires could be seen crimson like the breast of a dove. The forest was dense all round and it was dark. The tame animals in the Ashrama had already gone to sleep and there was a hushed silence everywhere”.

Anasuya said, “Sita look, the sky is studded with stars and the night is far advanced. The moon has returned brightening the heavens. Sita, go

and join your husband. I want to see you dressed in the ornaments and perfumes given by me wear them”.

Sita did as she was bid and she touched the feet of the revered Anasuya. She then walked towards Rama with shy steps. Rama looked her with a smile and knew that Anasuya had made a gift of them to her. She told him about her conversation with the old lady and about the gifts. Rama knew that this was a happening which was unique in the life of a human being, the love of a saintly and noble lady which made her make Sita wear ornaments which she had possessed.

Rama spent the night in the Ashrama of Atri. In the morning they asked the rishi permission to leave. The rishis dwelling in the forest spoke them about the dangers in the forest. They said, “Rama, this forest is inferted with many rakshasas who are fond of human flesh and human blood. Never for a moment should you be careless. Be on your guard always. Follow this path. This is frequented by rishis who go in search of fruits and darbha daily. It will be easy for you to penetrate into the forest if you do not stay away from this path.

Rama listened to their words carefully and after being blessed by them, he walked with Sita and Lakshmana along the path indicated by the rishis. He entered the dense forest and the rishis who were watching their progress lost sight of them. Rama had entered the forest like a sun enters dense clouds. They had entered Dandaka forest.

DEEPER INTO THE JUNGLE

The Dandaka vana was another primeval world. Everywhere they saw rishi ashramas. Darbha grass grew profusely as if just for the hermits and fruits and flowers for munis. Al the forest, at least beside the Muni’s path was alive with a sacred aura. As they made their way they heard the chanting of Vedas around them, as if it was the very air of this place.

Often a sparkling ricket would gush across the path, and they would cross it by stepping on the large stones in the flow. Now and again, they would come up on a clearing with a charmed pool or lake with reverberant lotuses on its water and its banks tangled with plants that belonged a more primitive time of earth. Purple and scarlet, violet and golden; they thrust elaborate tendrils and phallic stamens from feminine cups and leaves. It was an enchanted dimension, the heart of the jungle and it grew stranger as they penetrated deep into it along the hermits trial.

Sometimes, herds of deer stood staring at them, fragile and quivering. The princes walked on in wonder, through the zones of the vana where rishi's Ashramas were not far from the trail and others devoid of any sign of men save the path at their feet. They walked until evening, when they arrived at the edge of a clearing and saw a sprawling Ashrama. As the Kshatriyas stood unstrungling their bows, the very oldest rishi of the Dandaka Vana came form and to greet him.

“Welcome, prince of Dharma, prince of Ayodhya, Rama, your fame travels before you”. The hermit and his fellows gathered round to stare at the blue Prince. The eldest Muni seems satisfied with what he saw and cried, ‘welcome protector of the world, who are worthy of our worship’.

They fed the wayfarers with dark roots that were like home they had tasted, and uncommon maroon and crimson fruit, which weren't they knew; but their flesh was delicious. They spent the night with rishis and discovered that these hermits were the children of the forest who hardly belonged to the world of men. All night they kept their fires burning. Around them wolves howled, and once or twice a prowling tiger shattered the numinous silence with his roar.

The next day the Princes rose early and went on, for some power seemed to call them deep into the jungle.

On they passed and the jungle grew stranger and stranger around them, it was another domain of time. The path still snaked on ahead interminably. The trees were unfamiliar, with brooding lovers and climbed a hundred hands above, reaching for the sun. The buds in the branches were unknown, and though their plumage was often breath taking colourful they screeched weirdly rather than sang. All this jungle was an oppressive place, so unlike Chitrakuta. Suddenly a great fear, a thing of sheer instinct lanced through them. Lakshmana who led the way stopped still and pulled an arrow through his quiver. Sita cried out softly and clues to Rama also drew a shaft and set it loosely to his bow string.

A rank pursulence hung on the air and a deafening silence engulfed them. As they stood motionless, they heard stertorous breathing before them, blocking the path. A tiger skin was wrapped loosely around his waist, slanted crimson eyes glittered in his slaving face; a blood drinker's fangs showed on his lipless mouth. He held a crude Trisula in his hand on which the remains of his last three hunts were impaled, putrefied and flyblown. He was a rakshasa, twenty feet tall.

Before they could recover from the shock of seeing him, with a giant stride he was on them. He snatched Sita up and held her close, hissing like a monstrous lizard. In a reptiles voice, but in a tongue of man he cried, “fate has decided you will have short lives for I am Viradha king of this jungle.”

He peered at them short sightedly, ‘you are odding familiar, but I don’t know who you are. You are dressed like rishis and you must be depraved munis in the jungle with a luscious woman. A disgrace to the Valakala you wear. But I will drink your blood now and make your woman wife you can see she will be happy with me’. He fondled himself obscenely. Sita trembled in devil’s clutch and Rama done not more as the rakshasa had her. But Lakshmana had said defiantly. “Evil one, you are foolish to have crossed our path. You don’t know who we are, but you will die at our hands today.” Viradha cried ‘Tell me who you are ? What are you doing in the heart of Dandaka Vana?’ Softly Rama said, “we are Kshatriyas from the house of Ikshvaku. But tell us about yourself magnificent one?”

The rakshasa laughed a shrill feminine sound and Sita frightened. I am the son of Jaya and Satamada with Brahma’s boons of we invincible to every weapon in heaven and in earth. Your tiny arrows, and your little swords cannot kill me, my strange princes. And I will slake my thirst with your blue blood today!

Quick as thoughts, Rama shot him with seven arrows, eagle feathered and tipped with gold. Those shafts burned like fire. They pierced the rakshasas head and he screamed. But instead of killing him the arrows fell out of him like burnt twigs smoking. With a tree shaking roar Viradha dropped Sita. Rushing at Rama and Lakshmana, he seized then up like babies in his massive arms and ran roaring at the heavy jungle.

Sita wailed, “Don’t leave me.” Lakshmana drew his sword and hewed of Viradha’s left arm and Rama the right; the monster’s screams were like an army being slaughtered. Black blood spouting from him, he dropped them and fell on the ground. They cut him deep with their sword, but he only screamed and cursed them. He would not die.

They held Viradha down together and fastened four hands around his throat. The rakshasa twisted this way and that. But the Kshatriyas were strong and slowly the demon’s eyes rolled up in their sockets. His forked tongue lolled out of his black mouth and he died. As soon as life has left his immense body there was a flash of light and a splendid Gandharva stood before the princes. His hands folded and dazzling the trees with luster, he said in a

melodious voice ‘you are Kausalya’s son Rama, the saviour and your brother is Lakshmana. My name is Tumburu and as you see, I am a Gandharva. Many years ago my lord Kubera, guardian of nine treasures cursed me to be born as a rakshasa. I begged him to take back his curse, but he said, “Dasaradha’s son Rama will kill you one day and then you will free of your friend’s body and return to Devaloka.”

‘For centuries I have waited for you to come. I have waited so long. I forgot myself and I behaved like Viradha’. Again the marvelous being bowed to Rama. He said “A yojana and a half from here is rishi Sharabhanga’s Ashrama. Go to him Kshatriya and seek his blessings. As for my rakshasa’s body. I cannot touch it myself. But if you burry it under the ground, it will die in peace and be earthed again. And I can return my home in the sky.”

Now Sita came flying there sobbing and brantic. She saw Rama and Lakshmana alive and safe and ran to them. Then she saw the Gandharva and he bowed to her. They dug a pit deep enough to contain the swollen corpse of Viradha. They threw his arms in after his body and his trident covered it all with earth and stamped on it. Bowring for the last time, Tumburu vanished in a blur of light. He went whistling like a tree full of birds, for the Gandharva elves are the minstrels of Devaloka.

Rama, Sita and Lakshmana set off in the direction Tumbura had indicated towards Sharabhanga’s Ashrama. They come to a clear stream in which the princes washed Viradha’s blood from themselves. They ate some of the tasty honey the wild rishis had given to them and pressed on. They had no wish to spend the night alone in the jungle at the mercy of its more dangerous denizens.

SHARABHANGA

They had reached the vicinity of the ashrama of sage Sharabhanga. While they were very near, Rama saw something unusual. He saw a chariot and the chariot’s wheel does not touch the ground. They were poised in the air. Four green horses were yoked to it out of the chariot descended or glorious born bright like the rising sun or the flames of a sacrificial fire. He did not touch the earth either and his feet were above the ground. Rama saw that it was wearing ornaments which were resplendent in the light of the sun and his skies were flying in the breeze. He was with several Devas who had accompanied him. Indra entered the ashrama of Sharabhanga.

Rama with Sita and Lakshmana stood some distance away from the Ashrama. He indicated the chariot to the other two and said “Look at that sight. The glorious chariot is staying poised in the air. Green horses are yoked to it. This must be Indra’s chariot and the group of men who went inside are divine beings. They were all looking young and their garments and their bearings was in accordance with those of dwellers in the realm of Indra. I have been given the description of the chariot of Indra and the green horses yoked to it. This must be Indra. Wait for me here a while Lakshmana. I will go near and find out who it was who went inside just now.

As he was proceeding towards the ashrama, Rama saw Indra emerging from it. He had already taken leave of the rishi and he told his attendants. Look! This is Rama who is approaching the Ashrama of Sharabhanga. He should not invite me until the purpose of Avatara is achieved. I should talk to him later. He had to perform an act which no else will be able to. A great task is ahead of him and I will see the completion of it very soon. Let us go away from here before he meets us.

Indra hurried to the chariot and went back of the heavens. Rama stood as one under a spell. He watched the chariot until it was out of sight and he went back to Sita and Lakshmana. He took them with him and entered the ashrama of the great Sharabhanga. The welcome which they had at the ashrama was heartwarming and they were made to seat themselves on the dharbhasanas provided for them. Kama asked the rishi about the divine looking person who had just gone out of the ashrama Sharabhanga said “That was Indra. Indra had come to take me to BRAHMALOKA’ which can be attained only by those who have realized the Brahman. I have earned it by Tapas. But then Rama, I had heard that you have come to the forest, that you are already in Dandakaranya and that I would soon be able to see you I refused to go to BrahmaloKa now since I was keen on entertaining a noble guest like you. I will go to the heavens Rama. I have performed tapas and the wealth of my tapas is enormous. I have gained all the heavenly abodes myself. Take my tapas from me as a gift. I wish to give it all to you. I will then be happy.

Rama, who was well-versed in all the shastras said, “I will have to earn them all for myself on my own, Lord! At the moment, I do not seek the other worlds but a spot here in Dandaka where I can dwell with Lakshmana and Sita.

Sharabhanga smiled gently at the sweet manner in which Rama had evaded the issue and said “Not very far from here is the ashrama of Sutheekshana, a rishi, rich in tapas. If you go to him he will be able to find you a place for your living. Go to the spot where his ashrama is situated. Go in a

direction opposite the flow of this river Mandakini you will come across rivers and flower laden trees and boats filled, boats filled with flowers. You will reach Sutheekshana's ashrama.

“Do me a favour Rama. I know who you are. Rest your eyes with love on me and I will shed this body of mine as a snake shed its skin. He asked for a fire to be burnt and he poured oblations into it. He then entered it.”

Even as they were watching, tongues of flames were licking the old and screne form which was once Sarabhangha. The fire down and a young and handsome form rose out of it. He looked as though he had been made out of light itself so glowing was he. He ascended into the sky and reached the abode of Brahma and welcomed by Brahma.

After the ascension of Sarabhangha to Brahmaloaka the rishis in the forest came to visit Rama. They were in large groups and Rama saluted them all. They said, “you are we have been told, a very valiant prince. Like Indra to Devas, you are to us, the protector. Born in the time of Ishvakus you are endowed with all the qualities of the king's of that line. There is no one in the three world to equal you, in fame, in valour or in righteousness. You are devoted to your father and to you, truth is the religion intimate. We have come to ask a favour of you, we ask this of you, we do not have to remind you of the duties of a king. One who does not give succour to his subjects is tainted with skin. But the king who treats his people like his children, like his very life will be famed as a just king and his fame will last for ever. He will in the acclaim of the gods in the heavens and in Brahmaloaka he will be honoured as a good king.

“Rama we are very unhappy we have you as our king and fear is the predominant feeling in the minds of all of us. Rakshasas are harassing us and we are helpless against them. Come with us and we will show you a sight you have never seen before.

They led Rama to a place nearby and said, “Look Rama, look at that little white mountain can you guess what it is ?”

Rama could not. They said “That is made up of the bones of the myriads of rishis and their disciples who have been killed and eaten by these rakshasas. The dwellers in the ashramas built on the banks of the Pampa on the slopes of Chitrakuta, on the banks of the river Mandakini are greatly oppressed by them. We can no longer bear the atrocities of the rakshasas. Rama when we heard of your arrival, we thanked the Gods above and rushed you for succour. We have no one else to guard us. You are our only refuge. We consider you have come here to help us.”

The pathetic story recounted by the rishis made Rama extremely concerned about their welfare. He said, "It is not right that you should address me thus. I am but your servant and you should command me. It is my duty to enter the great Dandaka forest and to rid you of this menace. It is my personal responsibility. I have been sent by my father, the emperor to this forest. I will take up the duty assigned to me by all of you. My life in the forest will be worthwhile if I can help you. I will fight with the Rakshasas and try to destroy their entire clan. Please have my assurance. Aided by my brother, I will rid this forest of the rakshasas."

The visiting rishis returned to their ashramas with light hearts and Rama proceeded to the Ashrama of Sutheekshna. Some of the rishis accompanied to show them the way and for the pleasure of their company. They indicated several spots in several places where some strange or strange flower was to be found and so they walked along the banks of the river Mandakini.

After they had traversed some distance they came to view a big mountain which looked like to which looked like a large, black cloud. Rama and the other two were now on the fringe of a thick forest, the trees all were dense and it was frightening. After they had penetrated into the forest, they came upon an Ashrama. It was lonely and many fruit trees were surrounding it. Flowers there were in plants and the atmosphere was peaceful.

THE SAGE SUTHEEKSHNA

Rama prostrated himself before the short, cheerful rishi whose cheeks were as bright as the blooms on the trees that flowered extravagantly in his valley, because his tapasya was so profound. Rama said, "Lord Sutheekshna, I am Rama I have come to take your blessing".

Sutheekshna rose and embraced the princes. Laying his palm on his head, he blessed Sita. He cried in the most friendly lovely voice. "Rama, I am so happy you have come! I heard you were on Chitrakuta when last had news of you. You may not know it but since your birth we rishis have kept an eye and watch on you. You may not know it. We have waited for you, and who knows, except that I heard you were coming I may have left this body of mine. A year ago, Indra came to me in a dream and said I had won all the looks with my tapasya even Brahma's."

Sussekshna smiled; he was testing Rama gently. He said, ‘Take all the heavens from me, sweet prince, as my gifts to you. Rama also smiled, and replied. “I must win them for myself. But Lord, Sharabhanga sent me to you. Before he left his body he said you would find me a home in the jungle.”’

The smile never left Sutheekshna’s face; his eyes were alight to see Rama. He cried “stay herewith us. There are roots and fruits a plenty to feed you. You have seen the flowers of my valley, I think they will please your Sita’s heart. The river sing’s for us and you can take a boat into her at any time. Herds of deer come to visit; they are our friends and speak to us in their own way. Stay here, Rama, you will be happy among us’. Rama listened attentively. But then he said, “I fear my Kshatriya blood may get the better of me. I may kill a deer and desecrate this holy place. But to night I accept your gracious hospitality. Tomorrow when we are less tried, we will decide on our next course.

With fruit even more juicy and unusual than they had eaten last two nights, with honey even sweeter and roots that tasted like venison, Sutheekshna entertained his guests ? They had wine brewed from scarlet ferries which made their spirits sore. Late into the night they sang some songs in praise of the gods above and Sita bewitched them all when she joined in. Then she sang by herself in her strong clear voice with her eyes cast down or fixed on Rama’s face.

They slept in peace that night. Suseekshana’s Ashrama was protected by his tapasya and no evil had yet crossed the river. The next morning Rama, Lakshmana and Sita were up early. Rama bathed in the chilled Mandakini, redolent with lotuses. He came to Sutheekshna and soul, ‘I think that we should ‘go on’ a pilgrimage to all the Ashramas in the Dandaka vana. We want to befriend every rishi who lives here. Bless us on our way my Lord’.

Sutheekshna said, “May your journey be safe and joyful. Come back to me when you have met al the munis in our jungle. Sita strapped their quivers on for the princes. Bowing to the sage and hermit, they set off heading still deeper in the forest. As they went, Sita lagged nearer her husband. She kept glancing back at him, until he walked beside her and said, ‘What is troubling you my love ‘? Sita bit her lip and hesitated. Then very softly she said, ‘Dharma is a subtle thing one can be true to it only if one’s mind is entirely without desire’. She looked at him smiling as if she transgressed her bounds already Rama took her hand ‘go on’. She gave a shy laugh. ‘Three since must be avoided if one is to live perfectly in dharma you, Rama, are certainly free of the first two. You have never told a lie and never will. I think even another woman with desire’.

“But it is the third crime against the truth that worries me, ever since you swore to Sharabhangas rishis that you would rid the jungle of its rakshasas. But the jungle is rakshasa’s home. They have not harmed you in anyway. Yet you have sworn to kill them. I am against our going further in the forest.

“Having given your word Rama, the moment you see a rakshasa you will want to kill him. And for you, to think is to act. I have heard the very touch of a weapon is like fire. Varuna’s bow in your hand is fire to your spirit. But you must never shit it unprovoked. You must not kill even a rakshasa unless he attacks you first.”

“Rama you wear the Valkala of a tapasvin you must honour what you wear. My love, Dharma is, most of all peace. Rama smiled and said solemnly ‘I swear by our love that I never kill anyone even a rakshasa unless I am provoked. But you must consider what provocation is. It is my Kshatriya Dharma to help those who seek my protection, as the rishis have done. The forces of darkness and light are always at war in the world. The earth prospers, human king thrives because of the prayers of these holy ones who dwell in the forest. Their penance is for the wear of all men.

The rakshasas who feed on their flesh are cause of evil. It is my dharma to save the world from them, just think of the rishis plight. But for the fear of the rakshasas, they cannot still their minds in peace and draw heavens grace down for the earth’s nurture. Sita, the world will fall into anarchy without the tapasya of these saintly man I should have offered to protect them without their asking. Their worship is more vital to the earth than the throne of Ayodhya. They are the sacred support of the people, my love, of us all. They are the holders of the world. We may lose our lives fighting the forces of evil, but fight them we must as we are able. It is the very reason why fate has brought up into the Dandaka vana!

She was quiet Rama put his arm around her. “Your concern moves me don’t ever think that I am not aware of it. And to watch over my dharma is your concern what else’s. But I realize with each day in the jungle, in every fiber in my body, that I have been born for a purpose just beyond being the prince of Ayodhya. A powerful destruction seems to call me Sita one that I do not understand.

She looked into her husband’s youthful face and saw how its lines were firming into manhood. Not just a world, but an eternity seemed to separate them from Ayodhya now. And Sita was a little frightened.

THE GREATNESS OF AGHSTYA

Rama walked fast and Sita walked behind him. Lakshmana followed them with bow in hand and so they walked. They passed several places, coppices rivulets and sandy banks where Sarasa birds and Chakravaka birds were numerous. They passed ponds with lotuses blowing on their faces and they saw herds of dens and also wild bulls and nogs. Because of the dense trees, the sun did not worry them and when evening drew near they reached a pleasant lake full of sweet and cold water. The water birds were numerous there.

After a while they reached the dwellings of the rishis in Dandakaranya. There were numerous Ashramas and great was the joy in the minds of the rishis when they saw the royal guests.

Rama was welcomed everywhere and he would spend several days together in one ashrama and then go to another and come back to the ones he had visited before and thus they spent then days happily. In some places they spent ten months and in some, a year. Several ashramas hosted him for four months and thus in different places nearly ten years.

Ten years had passed by and Rama, remembering the injunctions of Suteekshana returned to his ashrama. He spent sometime there and once Rama asked the rishis. "I have been told that the great and revered Agastya is living in this forest. The forest is so large and so intricate are the path in it that I have not been able to know where his ashrama is located. Where does this great man live ? I want to go there and pay my respects to him. I have had this desire in my mind for a long time now". Susheekshana said, 'Rama I have always waiting to tell you this'. Go and visit Agastya and you have asked me the way to his ashrama. I will tell you how to reach the ashrama of Agastya. Go southwards from here for a distance of four yojanas. There you will find the beautiful ashrama of Agastya's brother. Spend a night there in those sylvan surroundings. Agastya's brother will be happy to have you with him as his guest.

"After spending a night there you can proceed in the morning to the ashrama of Agastya you should continue southwards and after you cover a distance of one yojana you will find yourself in Agastya's ashrama. Since you are eager to visit the famed rishi, I think that you sleave as early as possible."

Rama was only too happy to begin his journey. Sita and Lakshmana were ready to leave at once and soon they were on their way. They pursued their path which had been indicated by Susheekshna and the view was

picturesque. Rama was enjoying himself and told Lakshmana. ‘Look there is an ashrama set in the midst of trees and that should be the ashrama of Agastya’s brother. Look at the trees with their head drooping as though they are unable to bear the weight of the flowers. I can see Samitha here and there, gathered for the kindling of sacred fire Darbha grass with the dew drops still on the tips look like they are set with gems. I can see smoke rishis from the ashrama. Look at the dense smoke like a cloud! Did you know that this entire south was made safe for the rishis dwelling here by the power of Agastya’s tapas.

“Once there were two rakshasas brothers and their names were Ilvala and Vatapi. They were always engaged in killing Brahmins who were here. Their method was novel. Ilvala would assume the garb of a Brahmin. He will talk the purest language and he would accept a Brahmin passing by and tell him that it was his fathers Shradda and ther he would be honoured if the Brahmin would accept his hospitality. The deluded Brahmin would agree. Ilvala would become his brother to become a goat. The goat would be killed in a feast would be prepared by Ilvala. After he consumed the entire food the Brahmin would be ready to get up. Ilvala would shout “Vatapi, come out’ As soon as a he was called the brother would bleat like a goat and tearing the entrails of the guest, he would jump out. They would then make a meal of the dead guest. This went on for a long time. The devas were not able to do anything about it. Finally they went to Agastya and asked him to help the unfortunate inmates of the forest. He agreed.

On a particular day he went fast the place where Ilvala was said to wait for a possible victim. Agastya walked slowly past and sure enough. Ilvala was there and the request was made as was usual with him. Agastya agreed to be the guest at the Shraddha. Vatapi in the form of a goat was killed and it was consumed after it had been cooked. When the meal was over Ilvala gave the offering of water in the out stretched palm of Agastya and cried out “Vatapi come out”. “Nothing happened. The rakshasa called again and still Vatapi did not appear. Agastya laughed at the discomfiture of Illvala and said, “Vatapi in the form of a goat had been consumed by me and he had been well digested by me. It is of no use calling him. He is not there to respond your summons”. Illvala was dumbfounded and he was furious with the sage. He sprang at Agastya with the desire to kill him. Agastya looked at him in anger and he was burnt to ashes. This ashrama is that of his brother. Come let us go there we have reached the hermitage. I think!

It was evening when they entered the ashrama of his brother. They went to the presence of his brother who welcomes him with great excitement. They spent the night there.

In the morning Rama went to the rishi and said, “Salutations to you we spent a happy night here. We want you to grant us leave to go and visit your illustrious brother”.

After taking leave of him Rama and Sita with Lakshmana went in search of the ashrama. What impressed them most was the picture sequences of the Dandaka forest. Wherever they looked, nothing but beauty met their eyes. It was the sight of the magnificent trees some of them rich with dense green leaves some with edible fruits and some flowers whose perfume was exceedingly sweet. Everywhere there were animals, monkeys, elephants and flocks of birds and they flew in the sky making patterns as they flew in groups.

Rama was walking fast and he was excited at the thought of meeting the great Agastya. The yojana has been covered and Rama said, ‘Lakshmana, the trees looked well cared for and the deer are tame. Even the birds are flying without any fear. We must have come near our destination. See the clothes of ashrama dwellers are hanging out in the sun to dry. I can smell the ghee which has been poured as an oblation into the fire. Come, I can see the ashrama which is very near. Let us hurry.

“We will be meeting the great Agastya at whose command the mountain Vindhya stopped growing. I have held him in great regard and I am very happy that we are able to see him in person now. He is worshipped by men and gods alike. He will give us his blessings”.

‘Lakshmana, I will wait herewith Sita. Go to the presence of the rishi and tell him that I am waiting to pay my respects to him”.

AGASTYA MUNI

Lakshmana went into the ashrama and found an Acolyte there. He said “I am king Dasaradha’s son. My name is Lakshmana my brother Rama and his wife Sita are waiting outside. Please tell Agastya muni we want to take the dust from his feet.”

The sishya went into the Agnihotrasala where the fire of worship burned. Agastya stood unmoving before it his arms crossed over his chest, a flame himself. The disciple waited silently until his master opened his eyes and asked, “What is it “?

‘Two sons of Dasaradha have come to visit you, the older one with his wife. They seek your blessing’.

A smile breaking in his deep face. Agastya said, "For so long now, I have been waiting here. At least Rama has come. Bring them to me with honour, you should not have made them to wait. Don't know who Rama is" ?

Never had that Sishya seen his reclusive guru so excited to receive a visitor. He hurried back to Lakshmana and cried with new respect in his voice. "Call your brother! Come quickly, the master is ready to meet you".

Rama entered the ashramas with Sita and Agastya came out to welcome him. Rama lay at Rishis feet along with Sita and Lakshmana. Blessing them, raising them up affectionately the great sage led them into the Agnihotra and make them sit round the fire first of and he insisted them to eat some things.

Then he said to Rama, "I have heard you are the lineage of Dharma. Stay with me for a while. You shall be more than welcome. He studied the princes face intently, as if to satisfy by himself that he was truly who they said. Rama met his gaze humbly but unwaveringly and at last the rishi rose and went into his Kubera. He returned shortly and his arms were with full of resplendent weapons! He laid them before the brothers. "These are for you".

A magnificent blow sparkled with diamonds, emeralds and rubies. An uncanny sense of familiarity overcame Rama and he reached out to strike that weapon.

Agastya said "The Brahmadata was made by Viswakarma and Brahma's gift to Mahavishnu. Here are two quivers Indra gave to me this sword in its silver sheath and no astra would place this armour.

"This is the flow Narayana used against the astras against the asuras in the war that was fought in Devaloka. It is yours now Rama when the time comes. You will need a chariot to face the Lord of evil. Indra's Saradhy Matali will fly down to you from Devaloka with Indra's own Radha."

Bowing Rama received the weapons. A thrill course through him and an urgent sense of destiny was upon him again; of some great task to be accomplished and an implacable enemy who waited for him beyond the sunset.

They spent that night in Agastya's ashrama. It was a moonless night and the silence was deep. Before they fell asleep, they sat around the fire watching the white owls like sprites in the trees.

The next morning Agastya said, ‘Did you sleep well ? Rama ? Were you comfortable Rama said warmly we felt we were back in our father’s house in Ayodhya; so lovingly did your shishyas look after us’ ? They sat before the awesome rishi and he said, ‘Rama your exile draws to an end. You will return to Ayodhya with glory. How fortunate Dasaradha is to have a son like you to bring him honour’.

Rama said softly “My lord, I have been happy in the Dandaka vana. My exile has not been an ordeal, but a joy. How else would I have met all the holy men I have during these years and learnt what I have from them ? But I don’t think my father owes any honour he has to me. He earned his place in heaven with a virtuous life.”

When he thought of Dasaradha, briefly Rama’s face was clouded by sorrow. But he put aside those sad reflections and said, ‘we seek a quiet place to live in, these last years we have left in the jungle. Can you help us Muni’ ?

Agastya thought a moment, then said brightly ‘Do you know the story of jungle called the Dandaka ? In ancient time, Dandaka was your own ancestor ? He was Ishwaku’s brother. He abandoned this land of his because Sukracharyas, the Asura guru, cursed it. It was not a forest then and such bright came to the kingdom that for five hundred yojanas even down to the Vindhya mountains, it was a desolation.

In the days when men and beasts had fled the cursed land a jungle sprang up here by dark sorcery: though no clouds would gather in the sky or even the wind blow through this place. No rishi dared to build his ashrama because this forest was a home of evil, where only rakshasas lived. No Devas or Gandharvas came here for fear.

‘One day I wandered down from Himalayas and fate brought me to this place I was the first man to enter Dandaka vana in an age, and the rain followed me and the wind, unleashed we had a storm like the deluge. Bolts of lightning fell from the sky, immolating many of the rakshasas and it rained ten days without let. How the parched earth welcomed my coming’.

Yama’s messengers, thrived in the forest. But I stilled them with mantras, and I burned the flesh eating plants that grew at night’s heart with fire from my mind. I had carried blessed seeds from Himavan with me. I scattered them through the endless darkness. Noble trees sprang up here, and bore flowers and fruit. At my tapasya the rivers of the earth flowed back through the

Dandakaranya; lakes and pools formed with lotuses floating on their waters again and swans’.

‘When they heard the old forest was transformed the rishis came back. But the curse of Sukra had not been exercised entirely parts of the jungle were still fastnesses of evil and not all the rakshasas had gone away for many years they were quiet. But Rama, since the day you arrived Chitrakuta, a madness seems to grip them. By sun and moon they came out of their lairs to hunt our people. As if the devils knew their time is short and wanted to indulge themselves while they are still alive.’ “Sukras curse on this place was removed when your eyes first fell upon it. I have heard in the east, where you lived for ten years, there are no rakshasas left. But rid of the demons in the south. Fate has sent you to us for this.” Rama inclined his head gravely, to say he would do as the muni asked. Now Agastya looked at Sita and said warmly ‘What a rare woman your life is! Poets speak of woman’s natures as being as fickle as lightening. When their men are favoured by fortune, they are happy to be their wives, but as their husbands fall on hard times they abandon them. But now this jewel of Mithila care for her always kshatriya. She is a Pativrata, a goddess among women.

She blushed; her eyes built with proud tears Rama said, “We are moved by your lone, my Lord! If you will tell us a place beside a river we can live, I will clear the jungle of its rakshasas. Sita will be happiest if we are also near some flowering trees.

For just a moment Agastya paused to think before he said, “Two yojanas from here, near the Godavari is Panchavati. It has a wealth of fruit trees and savoury roots; it has herds of gentle deer. I would love nothing better to have you spend the rest your exile with me. But it is not to be. Great events have been conceived in times womb and wait to be borne into the world. To Panchavati you must go Rama : your destiny awaits you there”.

Agastya’s lofty brow was knit at what he saw lay in the store for the princess. He shook his head to clear of it that vision and said somberly “Yes Panchavati is truly beautiful and quiet just to build you an Ashrama. Do you see the wood of Madhuka trees, which stretches almost to the horizon ? Pass through it and you will come to a lofty Nyagrodha. From the Nyagrodha, you must climb North. Panchavati is not far away the rest of your exile there!

Rama rose and touched Agastya’s feet and Lakshmana and Sita after him. They made a Pradakshina around the shiny weapons he had given them. Then picking them up, taking the rishi’s blessing with them they walked away in the direction he has indicated.

PANCHAVATI

While they were walking towards Panchavati. Rama saw in the way an immense eagle which was perched on the very Nyagrodha tree which Agastya has mentioned. The brothers were almost sure that it was a rakshasa who had assumed this form and was waiting for them.

Rama asked the bird 'who are you' ? The bird was greatly excited at the sight of the princes. He said, "Children, I am a great friend of your father. When Rama heard that he was his father's friend he was extremely happy. He wanted to know more about him and how the friendship between the two had begun. The bird told him about himself. This was the story."

"Kashyapa prajapati had several daughters. One of whom was known as Shyemi. You must have heard of Vinatha, who had two sons, one is Aruna, the charioteer of the Sun and the other is Garuda, the vehicle of Narayana himself. Aruna married Shyeni and he had two sons, both eagles, taking after their mother. I am the younger of the two and my elder brother is Sampathi. My name is Jatayu. This forest is very fierce and dangerous. If you so desire I will live with you and be your companion. When you have to go out with Lakshmana I will be with Sita and guard her".

Rama embraced Jatayu with affection since he was his father's friend and thanked him for his offer which he accepted gratefully. The four of them traveled towards Panchavati.

Guided by Jatayu they reached it very soon and Rama thought to himself "it is fortunate that we have found a friend in Jatayu I can leave Sita in safe hands and destroy the rakshasas like fire burns up moths"!

They have arrived at Panchavati. Rama looked around and said, "Lakshmana, this is the place indicated by the sage Agastya. Look at those trees laden with flowers and the river which is so near. This must be Panchavati. Look around Lakshmana. You know too well the kind of place I would like. Look for a place where there is enough water for us to perform our daily worship of the gods. Sita should be happy and we should have peace. Sita should be around and Samitha, Darbha grass and flowers should be within reach build for us an ashrama in such a place.

Lakshmana said, "I am but your servant Rama. I will build the ashrama but the choice of the location should be yours. I will not presume to know where it should be". Rama smiled at the words of Lakshmana and together they looked around for a suitable place. After some rambling around

they found the ideal place. Rama took Lakshmana's hand in his and said, "Look this place seems to me the best suited our purpose. The ground level and it is surrounded by trees in abundance. Build an ashrama here for us. Close by is a small stream and perform of lotuses floating on its surface reaches us here and just across, some distance here is the river Godavari which the rishi told us about. There are mountains and the herd of deer are roaming in the slopes. Peacocks are dancing everywhere and the mountains have some minerals that glow red, white and yellow. The green of the trees together with these. Colours present the appearance of a painted picture. The elephants stand out against this colourful background as though they are etched in space. I like this picturesque Panchavati let us live here!

Lakshmana built an ashrama there on the site indicated by Rama. He brought lotuses from river Godavari after bathing in it. He made an offering of the flowers to the gods that guarded the forest and spoke words prescribed for averting evil. He went to Rama and Sita. He told them that the ashrama was ready for them.

Rama saw how will planned it was and how sturdily built. He was enchanted with it. He embraced him warmly and said, "Lakshmana I am very pleased with you. You have done me a very good service and the only way I can thank you for it is to embrace you. You are wise, you are righteous and even without being told about it, you know what my wishes are. My father, I think is not dead but it is here, before me in the form of my brother. Rama was shedding tears of joy and Lakshmana stood with an embarrassed smile on his face.

They lived happily in that ashrama for a long while without any disturbance. Without any worry. Sita enjoyed herself collecting flowers and strining them making friends with the birds, the deer and the peacocks. Rama was like Indra in the Amaravathi. He was happy.

Once during the season of Hemantha when the waters were chilly the river was bitter cold in the morning they had entered the Godavari Lakshmana at once thought of Bharatha and said "Bharatha will also be bathing in the cold waters of Sarayu now. He is performing tapas because of his devotion to you my brother. He has abandoned all the comforts of a palace the power which was given to him to rule the kingdom and like a tapasvin, he wears coarse cloth and slaps on a floor. He must have risen before sunrise and proceeded to the river Sarayu even as we are doing now.

'I do not know how is able to bear the cold. What a noble brother you have Rama. Dark like you he is so handsome and he will never act in a

manner distasteful to anyone. Always smiling in talks he has been very dear to all. He has won for himself the heavens because of his devotion to you’.

“Rama, they say that generally, men inherit the qualities of mother and not the father. In the case of Bharatha, our dear brother, the saying has been falsified”.

I still cannot understand how kaikeyi, the queen of such a noble king and the mother of noble Bharatha, could have been so evil minded’. Rama was listening to his words and said “My dear Lakshmana do not think of our mother. King on talking of Bharatha. It is pleasing to my ears. When you speak his name my mind has become sad and greatly distressed, thinking of my beloved brother. I have also thought often of him and his pleasuring ways. I cannot forget the tragic manner in which we parted when in Chitrakuta I refused to go back with him to Ayodhya. He was so disappointed and his tear stained face, when he finally had to accept my words as final, is ever before my eyes and I cannot sleep at times thinking of him. I see him walking with padukas placed on his head, and his eyes streaming with unheeded tears. Bharatha, my beloved Bharatha, how much he loves me! I wonder when we all be reunited.”

They spent their times in talking about old days, about their mothers their dear departed father and so time passed them by unheeded. They spent very happy and peaceful days at Panchavati.

SURPANAKA

The princes and Sita fell into a pleasant routine. They would wake up early in the morning, go to the river, bathe and worship the rising sun. Rama and Sita would walk back hand in hand, while Lakshmana followed with the water pot. They wandered through the surrounding forests, exploring them, enjoying them or they basked in the sun daylong, living for the green moment, while deer said then in Sitas lap and peacocks ate out of her hands.

But one day evil arrived in their lives announcing itself comically. Surpanaka, the rakhasi, arrived in Panchavati. She was the spoilt sister of the emperor of evil who lived on the distant island of Lanka, while his power spread from his throne like a great sickness through the world. Brought by fate, Surpanaka, on her hunt, came to the groves in Panchavati. She scented humans in the Ashrama. She saw Rama from behind a tree and she was smitten.

She looked at him. She turned and looked again. Her heart stood still at his unearthly beauty. She had never liked anyone and Surpanaka wanted him herself. She longed to run her fingers through the tangled mass of his hair. She yearned to stroke his face and clasp him tightly in her arms. She wondered who this was handsome as Kamadeva and as dark and blue.

Surpanaka was as ugly a rakshasi as ever lived. She was old with sin and years of devouring human flesh. She was bloated and mishappen. Her voice was a harsh croak her hair was a deity, copper her eyes were tiny, cunning and cruel she was fanged and altogether hideous, but she was a mistress of Maya. She could change her form as she liked, though she could not change the evil from her soul.

With just a thought she turned herself into an Apsara like beauty. Ravishing now she came up to the princes. She ignored Sita and Lakshmana, fluttering her lashes at him swaying her hips and bending low so he could see her cleavage, she said seductively to Rama “Who are you stranger ? How have you come to this home of rakshasas, when you are no rakshasa yourself ?”

Rama looked into her eyes and knew who she was. He said, ‘I am Dasaradha’s son Rama and I have come to live in the jungle for fourteen years. They are my brother Lakshmana and wife Sita. And who are you ? You seem to belong here for you are a rakshasi I think’ :

She blushed. She tittered. She said ‘I am no rakshasi Rama, I am Surpanaka. Ravana of Lanka, emperor of the world is my brother. I live in Janastana with my brothers Khara and Dushana. I have two more brothers, who are in Lanka with Ravana, Kumbhakarna who sleeps all year and Vibheeshana who is so full of Dharma that hardly is a rakshasa’.

She smiled at him. ‘But all that is beside the point, my delectable prince fate brought me here and the moment I saw you, I knew I must have you for my husband, you are the most handsome man I ever set my eyes on. I have Maya and I can be as beautiful as you want. I am powerful Rama I will look after you. We are meant for each other what can this pale Sita can do for you ? She at best is fit to be my morning meal’ ?

And she laughed uproariously at her joke. Rama said, “exquisite Surpanaka, I am a married man and I live with this pale Sita of mine. I don’t think a great princess like you could bear to be my second wife. But my brother Lakshmana is alone. He is younger and fairer than I am. He will make the perfect husband for you. Marry him and you will own him all to yourself”. Surpanaka turned to Lakshmana. She saw he was handsome and string too.

She saw the muscles rippling on his arms and his chest. She switched her attention to him. Caressing the younger prince's face, the rakshasi said, "Lakshmana we shall be happy together in the Dandaka Vana, let us be married charming Kshatriya, ah, you are so sweet; let us be lovers."

But Lakshmana protested. "I am only my brother's man. How will a princess like you be married to a servant? You should coax my brother a little more Persuade him with your Mayasakthi; better that you are his second wife than my only one. Woo, him lovely Surpanaka. He will leave his pale princess for you.

Surpanaka saw the wisdom of what Lakshmana said. She turned back to Rama. 'You spurn me for this limp hag of yours. I will eat her and then we can be happy together'.

With a roar, she rushed at Sita, just in turn Rama sprang up and caught her. Quick as light Lakshmana drew his sword and cut off her ears and her nose, so dark blood spouted from her screaming in shock, a demoness again, Surpanaka fled into the forest. But Sita trembled. Though she said nothing of it, she had a powerful premonition of evil; as if already, upon a distant throne she sensed a malevolent emperor, a terrible being who turned his baleful gaze in them across vast spaces.

Howling like a storm, Surpanaka fled through the Dandaka vana. Birds and beasts scattered at her passage, clutching her face she went, roaring and streaking. While blood gushed through her clans and splashed into her thick feet. Through the dim jungle she flew all the way to Janastana, the city of rakshasas. She fell in a heap before her cousin Khara, demon king of the forest.

When he saw what had happened to her Khara roared louder than she did. Like some great serpent he hissed "who has done this to you? Who courts his death so fondly? Who has tried a noose around his own neck. I will drink his blood today? and vultures and kites shall have his carcass to feed in. Tell me Surpanaka which Deva or Daitya has been a fool?" Surpanaka sobbed inconsolably for a while. Servants washed her wounds and stopped the flow of blood with populates of herbs and leaves. Then her green eyes flashing she said, "Haven't you heard of the three strangers who live in Panchavati. Her face grew dreamy. Two are princes handsome as if the nobility of Kshatriya kind has been gathered just in them. Their limbs are strong and graceful, their eyes are long as lotus petals, their skins are bronzed as if they have lived open for may years. They wear Valkala and Jata like rishis, but they say they are sons of Dasaradha of Ayodhya. O Khara, they are as enchanting as Gandharvas. They

have wonderful weapons with them and seem to be great archers. They are called Rama and Lakshmana’.

Her face grew dark. A spasm of hatred twisted her coarse features. ‘Then there is she. She wears no bark, but her fine silks and ornaments not of the earth, diamonds and rubies like I have never seen. Because of her the friendly princes maimed me. Help me Khara I want to drink their blood. With Surpanaka showing them the way those Rakshasas came to Rama’s ashrama. They came like rain clouds chased by the wind. When Rama saw them, he said softly to Lakshmana’ watch Sita. It seems I have a battle to fight.

Fitting an arrow to his bow, he stood waiting Rama hatred the Rakshasas ‘Why do you came armed with tridents and swords ? We are Khatriyas living here in peace. We wish no one any lawn. The rakshasas leaned! We have come to drink your blood and have your woman. Rama said ‘I have heard the rishis of the jungle have no peace because of you. Look here is the bow of Varuna raised against you. If you value your lives fly!

He stamped his foot as if he was chasing away some dogs. But those mountains rakshasas roared like thunder. They rushed at the prince casting their trisulas against him. He was so quick Rama’s hands moved but they saw their tridents in shards. Next moment they themselves lay dead their bodies throwing to ashes with the heat of the serpentine narachas with which he had shot them for a bowman like Rama this was child’s play.

Surpanaka stood openmouthed at his archery. He smiled at her and playfully raised it again with a shriek, she fled back to Khara. She said nothing to him at first, but sobbed incoherently.

Her abominable cons growled. ‘Now what is it Surpanaka ? I sent my men to avenge you ? What else do you want Surpanaka managed’. There is a new pool in Panchavati of your rakshasa’s blood. She shivered “I did not see Rama bend his bow or hear our men scream one instant they rushed at him, the next they lay dead with his arrows buried in them to their feathers. Khara shared at her disbelievingly. Surpanaka hissed”, if Ravana and Kumbha Karna had been here, they would not let this pass. Are you afraid, you disgrace to our family ? Khara you are not fit to rule terrified of two humans how Ravana would laugh if he heard this ?

Khara was mad with anger at the insults which she was hurling at him. He said, “Stop talking like this. My anger is trying to burst its bonds like a sea in stormy weather who says I am scared of Rama ? How dare you to insult like this, I will this very moment go and dispatch them to Yama’s lands.”

Surpanaka was glad to see that he was going to fight with Rama. She began to praise him and he called his commander Dhushana and said, 'Collect our army let the fourteen thousand warriors who are extremely powerful, brave and fearless get ready to fight with this unknown man who seems to have killed fourteen of our best men. Hasten to collect the weapons and bring me my chariot yoked with the best horses. I have decided to fight with this small man and kill him today.'

Khara's chariot had arrived. It was beautifully made covered with gold and set with gems, the chariot gleamed like the sun. The inlay work was wonderful and it was a work of art. Fully equipped with all the weapons needed for fighting, Khara entered the chariot and he was surrounded by the entire army and Dhushana was with him. The army set out in its march. Fourteen thousands of rakshasas to kill two human beings. Out of Janastana screamed out the immense army and the noise rose to the skies. Led by the footmen the army advanced fast and in the midst of the sea of warriors gleamed the chariot of Khara like the sun in the midst of rain clouds filled with hailstorms.

Everywhere evil omens could be seen. Suddenly there appeared a crimson cloud in the sky and there rained a ghastly rain of blood on the army while they were in the royal path the horse tripped and fell down. There was a cry of black round the ruin of the sun and on the pillar which carried the banner sat an eagle. Several other omens all indicating some great calamity were seen by all of them. But Khara paid no heed to them.

"I am not affected by these manifestations of nature" he said "It is only weak and cowardly men who attach any importance to such things. I have no fear with my arrows, I can fell the stars from the sky. I will make even death enter his our city. Unless and until I kill that arrogant Rama and his brother I will not return to my city. It is well known that there has not been anyone so far, who has been able to meet me in fight. Indra, riding on his Irawatha, cannot face me. What then should be the fate of these mere men?"

The army was infused with enthusiasm by the words of the master and they also did not heed the omens any longer.

Rishis, Devas, Siddhas and Charamas with the Gandharvas filled the sky to watch the encounter. They spoke among themselves "Narayana has taken upon himself the task of riding the world of these sinners and we are fortunate to witness the killing of this huge army by Rama. Let us wish him to be victorious and let us pray that the same fate will be met by the grandson of

Pulastya. Rama has been born for the sole purpose of killing Ravana and this fight is but the forerunner of the great achievement of his near future”.

Twelve of his chief fighters surrounded Khara our more Mahakapala, Stulaksha Pramathi and Trishiras brought up the rear of army. Dushama was at the fore brut like evil planets, hurrying towards the sun and moon to harass them, these rakshas and rushed towards Rama and Lakshmana.

Rama, in the meantime, was in his ashrama and he too saw the evil omens which spelt misfortune to the rakshasas. He told Lakshmana “Look on these omens. It is a sure indication that the rakshasas all be destroyed. As for my bow it seems to throat as though impatient to be used. My arrows are already fuming and I can almost see the smoke coming from them! From what the shastras say, these evil omens indicate that the rakshasas all be destroyed. A dreadful war is in the offing, a number of lives will be lost. My right hand is throbbing and that means that I will be the victor. I can hear the noise made by the army which is approaching us. Evidently that woman has not been idle. It has been said by the wise that a man who desires to be victorious should anticipate danger and be ready to face it. He should make all the preparations before hand. Take your bow and arrow, Lakshmana and with Sita, go to a cave whose entrance is hidden by the trees and which is accessible to anyone. I know that I am denying you the pleasure of using your arms but the safety of Sita is just essential. The sinful sister of Ravana may cause harm when we are both engaged in fighting. You unassisted will be able to destroy this any of rakshasas. But I want to do it myself, since it is a promise to the rishis. You must guard Sita safely.

Lakshmana took up his bow and arrows and as Rama had instructed him, he led Sita, to a safe care. Rama wanted to see them enter the cave and sighed with relief. He put on his armour and he strung his bow strapped his quiver to his shoulder and stood there looking as glorious as fire which burns without smoke. The rishis in the forest thought that Lord Mahadeva was there before them, with his lamed Pinaka in his hands : the anger on the brow of Rama was like the third eye of the lord.

Rama waited and the noise of the army came louder to his ears. He pulled the string of his bow and the noise of the twinge was frightening. The army was approaching him and very soon it was close at hand. Even the Vanadevatas were not able to look at Rama who was looking like an image of fury and they thought too that this was now Mahadeva must have looked when he destroyed the yagna of Daksha.

Khara arrived in Panchavati. He stopped his legion and with a horrible roar, the rakshas attacked. Like the rays of the sun, the demons' arrows, tridents and javelins covered the sky. They fell on Rama like lightening. The prince was struck but never wounded because his Kavacha was magical. Then he replied. His arms were a blur, so not the Devas and rishis could see them. Like mortal thoughts his around flared at the rakshasas and they fell in swarms, hardly knowing they died.

Rama strung his bow with astras. Nalika, Naracha, and vikranti blazed starful at the shocked demons. They could not fear the missiles brought and fled back to Khara, some of them screaming others whimpering like children.

Astounded by Rama's valour, Khara rallied his people and advanced himself. Collecting their scattered carnage teaming around their king the rakshasas changed Rama again. But quick as wishes, he drew a Gandharvasti from his quiver and chanting its mantra shot it at the demon army. The rakshasas saw a blinding fireball borne at them through the sky. The unearthly weapon broke, whistling among them. The astra separated into a thousand arrows of ire and light. Rama's shafts filled the quarters. They turned into separates with heads of flames and fell in the howling demons. One shaft for each rakshasas. Each arrow took a life consuming the find it stuck, making ashes of him.

Sudden desolation took Khara's army. Then Dushana plunged out of the ranks like streak lightening in his black chariot. His fangs were bared : myriad sorceries flashed around him to show he was a rakshasa with great powers of Maya. Dushana's demons, the occult phadanga of Khara's army, Khara's army rushed at Rama. They cast their spells at him; flaming trees rocks that exploded over his head disgorging and other sorceries and fine spitting serpents.

Dushana barely saw Rama raise his bow or the fan arrows that flew at him as the heart of an instant. They cut down his chariot horses. Another binding shaft killed his charioteer three more pierced his armour, plunging agony through his blood. Roaming in shock Dhushana raised his mace and rushed at Rama. But so calmly that prince cut off the rakshasas arms with two crescent tipped arrows and slew him with another through his heart.

The rakshasas who remained alive stood frozen around Khara. How could one man could fight like this ? Like two armies name shot two more astras at Khara's legions. The mans has perused like little mountains felled by Indra's vajra of a thousand joints. At last just Khara and his three headed,

loathsome and completing fearless commander. This are left alive amidst the smoking ruin of is army of fourteen thousand speechless. Khara mourned his brother Dhushana. Trisiras cried 'Leave the Kshatriyas to me. I will drink in blood today'!

Roaring from three months on three grotesque heads, Trisira flew at Rama. He too was a Mayavi a sorcerer and he struck the prince at three arrows, complex and quick as sunbeams. Rama could not cut them down; at the last moment, he made them harmless with a mantra. Yet they strong him and he cried, "Rakshasa, you have struck me thrice. No ordinary archery could do this!"

Fourteen arrows deep as time flew in formation from Rama's bow. They pierced the rakshasa's horses and flew on up. They cut down the banner on his chariot. Killed his charioteer and finally they crashed into Trisira's chest so his six eyes bulged round. He rose scratching from the wreckage of his radha and Rama took his heads from his swollen body with three more light like shafts. The demon's blood flowed across Panchavati in three black rills: while his heads rolled down the hills side.

Roaring louder than ever to keep his own courage up, Khara, king of the jungle came to fight. He was more of an archer than Trisiras and a fine battle broke out. The Devas above sighed, when from his whirlwind chariot Khara split varuna's bow in Rama's hand. Rama seized up the Brahma Datta and its jewels radiated shafts of fear into the heart of the rakshasa's heart. Now Rama's arrows sang as they flamed at the demon's king. But Khara was a worthy adversary it was true that Indra would have hesitated to fight him.

In the heat of a battle, crimson eyes Rama "cried serpent of the jungle, all your sins have borne brunt today. Prepare to die."

But Khara roared back, "you crow because you killed a handful of common soldiers. But I am Khara your death and this mace in my hand will send you to Yama. Bid farewell to your life, perceiving, I mean to drink your blood before the sun sets. Only then I sleep in peace in night."

His dark mace raised aloft, he flew at Rama. But Rama shattered that dine weapon with a single shaft. He cried to be bewildered rakshahsa. "Sleep you will Khara : upon the earth as you would in the arms of a woman you have long desired. And the rishis of the Dandaka Vana will roam in freedom again".

With maya Khara grew tall as a hill. He pulled up a sala tree by its roots and flung it at Rama. But the prince dodged it nimbly and struck the rakshasa with twenty sizzling arrows so he screamed and tore them out of his flesh like poison thorns. Rama stepped back for the demon ran at him again with his bare hands. He strung the Brahmadaatta with an aindrastra. Invoking the king of Devas, he shot Khara through his chest with that final weapon.

One moment, the rakshasa rushed at Rama with his claws outstretched to seize his throat the next he screamed as the astra struck him and his flesh fell away from his skeleton, in anxiety to escape the intolerable pain of that missile. His heart exploded, then his giant head, and nothing was left of Khara, but patches of blood, skin and a heap of bones on the ground.

This triumph of Avatara was beyond their wildest hopes and the Devas raised down shimmering petals, like fireflies on Rama. The sky was full of Gandharva's songs, and dancing Apsaras cast their shadows on saffron clouds above the sunset. Rama looked around him and saw the ground strewn with the corpses of the rakshasas and their elephants and horses as plentifully as a Yagnasala is with darbha grass. He sighed and feeling suddenly exhausted sat down among the dead.

Their faces shining Lakshmana and Sita emerged from the cave. Sita ran to Rama and flung her arms around him. Lakshmana fetched water from the river and with equal love his brother and his wife bathed his wounds. Again and again, Sita would embrace her husband. Her eyes were full of tears : of sorrow to see his injuries and also excitement at his dazzling victory.

RAVANA TOLD ABOUT JANASTANA

There was a rakshasa by name Akampana. He had some how managed to escape unearthed and he rushed to Lanka. He went straight to the raksha monarch Ravana and said, "My lord all the rakshasas in Janastana have been killed. Khara is dead, so also Dhushana and Trisiras. I managed to escape alive from there.

Hearing these terse sentences from Akampana words which spelt the devastation of his entire outpost in the forest, Ravana looked hard at Akampana who stood trembling Ravana's eyes were red with anger and asked. "Which foolish person was destroyed my favourite janastana ? Evidently his death is very near. He will not be able to escape death at my hands even if he tries to find succour in the celestial places. Having wronged me and displeased me, he cannot enter the land of Indra since Indra is afraid of me. So is Kubera,

so is Yama, the god of death I am death to death himself and I can burn Agni with my wrath. I can send even Brahma to his death. Tell me who did it ?”

Akampana, seeing the wrath of his master was talking words which faltered so much that he had to say it twice before he could make himself understood. He spoke just one word. ‘A man; A man did it’.

‘A man’ asked Ravana “A human being ? I never heard of any army marching into Janastana none of the spies have reported any such progress to me. And you say a man destroyed our Khara and his army. How did it happen?”

“Not an army, my Lord” said Akampana “it was just a man, just one single man with a bow and arrow “?”

Ravana stared at him and thought that Akampana had lost his reason. Akampana continued in his wavering voice “Please listen to me patiently my lord. It is unbelievable but true. I hear there was a king by name Dasaradha and he belonged to the race of sun. He has a son by name Rama. This Rama has come to the Dandaka forest. He is as strong as a lion. He is young and he has wild shoulders like a wild bull. His arms are round and long. He is dark and his fame was spread, far and wide. He is valiant and he is a great archer. Single handed he killed fourteen thousand rakshasas and Khara, Dhushana and Trishira have all been killed by him.

Ravana still would not believe that such a thing was possible. He said “Perhaps Indra has sent a host of his army to assist this man. Tell me the truth”.

“No my king “said Akampana”. No one came to his aid. He is unbelievably powerful. He is a great archer. He seems to be conversant with all astras. He made me think of Indra while he was fighting. He is so glorious. He has a very valiant brother by name Lakshmana. He is equally powerful though he did not take part in his war. He is just as hands as Rama and he is charming like the moon. Every arrow sent by Rama became a serpent with five heads and killed a rakshasa. The handful of Rakshasas left alive are unable even to sleep since Rama haunts their dream. Janastana is a waste land now”.

Ravana said, “I will go at once to Janastana and kill these two brothers Rama and Lakshmana”.

Akampana said, “I would not advise you to do so, lord, I will tell you more about Rama. His fame as a warrior is known in all these three worlds. He can stop the flow of a river with his arrows. He can destroy the heaven with

stars, the planets, the sun and the Moon if need be. He can if he so desired raise the earth out of the ocean if it gets submerged. He can plunge the world into sea by breaking its bounds if he wants to. He can destroy the universe and create a new one entirely. He cannot be conquered by anyone like you. It will be like a sinner desiring to enter the heavens. In fare war you cannot defeat Rama. I can suggest a method by which you can punish Rama.

Rama has a wife and her name is Sita. She is young and she is beautiful. They say that her beauty is unequalled in all the three worlds. Her limbs are tender and delicately made. Her waist is slim. She is a jewel among women. No woman, whether she is divine, or gandharva or apsara or danavi can equal her in beauty. Need I say anything about human beings them ? I suggest that you go Dandaka and steal the woman from Rama. He is so devoted to her that once she has gone, he will take thought and die unable to live without her.

Ravana considered the words of Akampana and said, “I like your suggestion. I am quite pleased with the idea. Tomorrow when the sun rises I will go alone to Dandaka in my chariot. I will capture Sita and bring her to Lanka.”

Ravana called for his chariot and the golden chariot which had donkeys yoked it came and waited for him at the doorway. This chariot could fly in the sky and it could travel for. Rama went in it to the ashrama of Maricha the son of Tataka. Maricha was how an ascetic and he had built an Ashrama for himself. He was supposed to have spurned the comforts of a palace and single life of an Ashrama. He was excited at the thought of the emperor paying a visit to him and he entertained him as best as he could with fruits and such like forest fare. He placed a seat for Ravana and made him comfortable.

Maricha then said “I hope you are well and I am certain that some important reason lies behind this gracious visit of yours to my humble abode. Please tell me if I can, I will do what you command me to do”.

Ravana the great warrior, Ravana who had learnt the art of talking pleasingly and convincingly, smiled at Maricha and said, “You are right I have a reason for coming to your ashrama asking you for assistance. Uncle, did you know that the entire army in Janastana has ben wiped out”? “Janastana wiped out” repeated Maricha. He was filled with wonder. But how my lord ? Our army is invincible. Khara is there and how can this have happened ?”

“By mere a man named Rama” said Ravana. He saw the rakashasa trembling as he heard the name of Rama. Maricha was scared out of his wits

and sweat was pouring down his face. Ravana paid no attention to his reaction and went on talking “Evidently Rama seems to possess some kind of power or else this could not have happened. I wish to capture the wife of this Rama and bring her away to Lanka, I need your help in this. That is the only way to punish Rama”.

Maricha said, “Ravana, some one evidently want to see you dead or else he could not have spoken to you about Sita. Some one pretending to be your friend is really your enemy and he has done this mischief. Have you insulted anyone and is he trying to seek revenge thus ? You are the lord of the rakshasas of the world and some one is jealous of you and wants to make you lose everything you possess.

The one who suggested this evil deed is your enemy. It is trying to extract the fangs of some poisonous snake. Your attempt to steal Sita. Rama is not to be approached by anyone in warfare. There is no one like him. He is like a wild elephant which will crush you if you taunt it. He is like a lion which is sleeping do not try to rouse him. He is like a sea which is full of sharks and whales. Do not jump into it unwarily.

“Listen to my words of advice. I mean well. I have your well being in mind when I speak thus. Go back to Lanka and go back to your beloved wives. Leave this Sita alone. Let Rama live happily in the forest. Do not have anything to do with him. He is a dangerous curt agonist”.

Ravana was not frightened of the powers of Rama which they all seemed to talk about. He listened with unconcern when Maricha spoke about his well being. But he valued the words of Maricha and considered them to be those of a wise old man. He therefore, went back to his palace and decided to give up the thought of Sita.

SURPANAKA AND HER TALE OF WOE

Surpanaka was desperate. Her brothers were all killed and their army destroyed. The janastana was not empty of her kinsmen and she was frightened of the valour of Rama. She decided to go to Lanka and tell Ravana about the entire happening's in Janastana. She went to Lanka. Her brother Ravana was in the council hall and she went there.

Ravana was glowing like Indra in the midst of Devas. His throne was made of gold and silver and there were pearls, corals and gems which gleamed in it. Ravana was like fire which was burning on a golden shrine.

Invincible by all the Devas and danavas, this Ravana was a warrior who was extremely noble looking. His chest was scarred because once the elephant Airavata, Indras mount had gored him. Ravana also bore the signs of Indra's vajra having scorched his immense chest. His broad chest was beautiful and there was something exceedingly magnificent about this great warrior dark and handsome, he was the favourite of Mahadeva. He was the great grand son of Brahma. Ravana was a hater of the Devas and he was unrighteous. He did not hesitate to take the wives of others if he so desired. He did not hesitate to disturb the yagnas performed by the rishis and the ascetics in the forest.

Ravana was proficient in the use of all weapons. He knew the astras and their incantation. Once he had gone down to the nether world and fought with Vasuki, the king of serpents. He had defeated Kubera his half brother in a fight and had captured for himself the Vimana by name Pushpaka which could fly in the air. He played havoc in Kubera's pleasure garden by name chaitra and in Indra's garden; Nandana. He had queried all the Devas and they were considered by him to be his vassals. He had performed severe tapas and had pleased Brahma. He had obtained boons from him. He had asked immunity from death at the hands of Devas gandharvas and every living being he could think of. He had forgotten then to include the names of Naras and Vangeas. Since they were too insignificant and negligible to be considered even and he did not think of them. He had once lifted the mount Kailasa and he had pleased Lord Mahadeva with his singing of Sama with the Veena as an accompaniments.

In thinking of the unrighteousness of Ravana one should not forget the greatness of this personage. He was great. There was no about it. There was no one equal to him in beauty, in prowess, in valour, in generosity in the skill of fine arts, in his power to capture the minds of women, in his learning, in his mastery of the sacred lore. He was a personage in whose presence the Devas were all made to pale into insignificance. There was no one like Ravana.

Surpanaka stood for a long moment looking at the heap of glory that was Ravana. She knew that this son of Vishnuvasa this great hero would avenge the insult which had been rankling in her bosom like a thorn which could not be removed. She went near him and began to talk. For a moment Ravana could not recognize her. Her face was disfigured and her voice was also sounding different. She said, "A king indeed! You are ever lost in the pleasures of the harem and you do not have of anything else. You do what you please and you have no thoughts of others. You have forgotten what is happening outside the earth drunk as you are with your power. But there are some truths that should be known by you. There is a danger which is nearing you and you are ignorant of it. When a king indulges in lust excessively people will lose their

respect for him. A king who forgets his duties and refuses to perform them at the proper time will be destroyed in course of time because of his carelessness and with him his kingdom will also be lost. You have no efficient spies evidently nor have you been interested in seeing the welfare of your people. Your enemies, the Devas will surely be planning your destruction and you should be careful. But you have not paid enough attention to the ruling of your kingdom. I have come to tell you something.

‘Janastana is destroyed, wiped out. Khara, Dhushana and Trisiras with all the others have all been killed and nothing is left in Janastana to tell people that it is your strong hold in Dandaka. A man, mere man, by the name of Rama has done this and he has made Dandaka a happy place for the rishis who were dwelling there’.

“My dear brother, you are too careless to be a good ruler. You think there is no one like you that you know all that is to be known that you are in accessible, invincible. You are too arrogant and such a king as you will be sure to earn the contempt of others since you are too indifferent. You are complacent and that is why this has happened.

“Once you lose your position as king you will be like clothes which are soiled. Like flowers which have been used and thrown away. It is only if you are alert all the time with your senses under control, well informed about all the many things which go on in your kingdom, that you will not be lost on the throne. Though asleep such a king will be considered to be awake since his sense of justice will never go to sleep and he will be loved by all.”

‘In your ignorance about the tragedy at Janastana, you have proved that you are unfit to be a king. You will soon be without a kingdom’!

Ravana who was proud of his wealth, his prowess and popularity, had been listening to the trade by his sister. He considered the words she had used, and without losing his temper; he let her complete her task. Slowly his anger mounted and he glared at her. He said, ‘who is this Rama ? How powerful he is ? What is he like in appearance ? Is he really all that powerful ? Have you found out why he has come to Dandaka ? You say that he killed my army and my chief men single handed ? What are his weapons like ?

The mention of Rama made her angry once again and she remembered him and his scathing smile which she had not understood then. She could not help dwelling on the beauty of Rama which had captured her.

‘Rama is the son of an emperor named Dasaradha’ she said ‘He has long arms and his eyes are long and liquid. He wears the bark and deerskin and he is like Manmadha. He has a bow he strings and out of it shoot forth arrows which are called Narachas. I stood there nearby when he was fighting I saw Rama.’

‘I could not see when he bent his bow, when he fixed the arrow to the string, when he left the bow. All I saw was the incessant stream of arrows and they devastated like a failed of corn after a hailstorm. In a muhurtha and a half, this Rama destroyed the fourteen thousand strong and with a Khara Dushana and Trisira and other leaders in the army. The rishis in Dandaka now moving about without the fear of rakshasas. Rama would have killed me. But he is not desirous of killing a woman and so he maimed me and left me alive’ Rama has a brother, who is his right hand.

‘It seems to me it is Rama’s very life which has taken a form and a name and moves about by the name Lakshmana. They are so dear to each other. He is just as valiant as his brother. He is devoted to Rama. He is efficient and he is invincible. He will never fail in a talk he has undertaken. Lakshmana is wise and strong.’

‘Rama has a wife and her name is Sita. She is the daughter of ‘Janaka’, the king of Videha. My dear brother, she is very beautiful. Her eyes are long and large and her face is as charming as a moon, she is very dear to Rama and she loves him. She is bent on saving him’.

‘Her hair is lay, her nose is very finely chiseled and the tip is tilted up provocatively. Her thighs are so well sculptured it is unbelievable. I had never seen the like of her. She has the perfection mentioned in the treatises mentioned on beauties. She is famed for her beauty all over the world and her devotion for Rama. The forest seems to boast of a second Lakshmi by her presence there’. Her complexion is that of molten gold. I saw her slender fingers had pink and rounded nails. Her waist is slim and her figure is quite the most captivating figure I have ever seen. No Yaksha woman, or a Gandharva maid or one from the heavens can equal her in beauty. There has not been born a woman as beautiful as Sita in this world. I am certain of that.

This perfection, I thought would be the ideal wife for you and you, the perfect mate for her. Your wide chest is where her beautiful arms should find refuse. I tried to capture her and bring as a gift and that was when Lakshmana did this to me and maimed me for life. If you set your charming eyes on this woman you will be stricken with the arrow of the god of love. Kill that Rama and bring his wife with you to Lanka.

‘Brother your prowess is well known. It will be an easy task for you to capture Sita after killing the two princes. You can be happy and the rakshasas will be without fear. You have to avenge the death of the thousands of rakshasas in Janastana’.

MARICHA PURSUADED

Ravan sat alone in his court. Light from the sea and the sky streamed in on him through the tall bay windows. Before his mind's eye there floated a face conjured by Surpanaka, which seemed to call out to him with unearthly perfection. Below the face he saw flawless limbs like none he had ever caressed.

He sat at thinking only of how he could possess the woman of his dreams; Sita whom he had not even seen, but who had already haunted him inexorably. Plan after plan rose in his ten heads, some obscure, some almost plausible. Plan after plan he rejected in a spirit of complete solemnity. Ravana had decided he must have Sita; not only for revenge, but also to pleasure of his bed.

After he knew the Kshatriya had done to Khara and others Ravana was not rash enough to confront Rama. Despite what Surpanaka said the Rakshasa was neither complacent nor foolish. Rama was a dangerous enemy he must be stalked cautiously. Ravana sat lost in thought for a while. Then he rose, strode out to his stables and ordered his flying chariot to be yoked to the uncanny mules.

Over the smoky sea flew the demon bright as a jewel in the sky. His white silks flapped around him. His golden ear rings shone in the sun. He was still deep in thought. He wanted to tackle the one whose asrama he was headed for in just the right tone. The Lord of Lanka was bound, again for his uncle Maricha's hermitage.

Ravana sat perfectly still in his chariot, unmoved by the picturesque Bharatavarsha unfolding below him. Painted forests and flowing plain, rivers like silver threads laid across the mountains thrusting up all these he ignored. His thoughts were his masters, and they were far away. He wrapped himself against the wind and sat dreaming in the chariot and scheming. At last he saw the Dandaka vana. As he flew low and shrouded in maya so he was unvincible, he saw the giant Nyagrodha tree sat Jatayu sat when Rama first saw him.

Maricha's ashrama was not far when that hermit saw Ravana's chariot descending on him from the clear sky, he trembled. Maricha guessed what must be in his nephew's mind that he had returned. But he was afraid of Ravana and went to welcome with a smile on his face with fruit, dark mushrooms and soft venison, Maricha entertained his royal guest.

When Ravana had settled himself comfortably and eaten two ripe red mangoes in silence, Maricha said, 'I hope all is well in Lanka the queens of my Lord' ?

Ravana gazed at him briefly. As was then way, nine of his faces were hidden. But the inscrutable eyes of the main face were turned unquickly on poor Maricha. He branched and offered his terrible guest more fruit. But Ravana declined, thrusting the bowl away with the back of his long hand.

At last, he said with a sigh 'Uncle, I have no peace of mind and I have come to you for comfort of word from you is balm to my distress'. Maricha betrayed nothing of his thoughts 'Tell me, my king, what troubles you ?' 'Oh, I am suffering Maricha and only you can console me. SURpanaka came to Lanka today the prince who killed Khara had her nose and ears cut off. Not one or two of our people were slain by this Rama, but fourteen thousand. He is certainly a great archer but just think uncle, he must be a great sinner as well, that his father banished such a warrior from his kingdom.

Now, in exile he has crossed my path. He is a blot on the face of Khatriya kind and he must die for no reason, he maimed my sister then he murdered fourteen thousand of my best rakshasas and my cousin Khara. Maricha I am a king. I cannot ignore such a kind of provocation of my people ignore respect on me.

Maricha thought 'better than lose gone life. But he said nothing only waited to hear what Ravana said. He wanted in silence to what is emperor intended by way of revenge. Ravana resumed softly'. He is evil this Rama and powerful. The only way to kill him is to take his wife away from him so he does not know where she has gone.

Maricha's heart gave a lurch. Ravana saw fear leap into his demon's eye and ignored it 'Uncle, you must help me. With you at my side I do not fear even the Devas. You are wise and gifted beyond anyone's common understanding you are my hope in this enterprise. Listen to my plan'.

Maricha's hands shook; he had broken out in a sweat. It seemed to him his life was forfeit, anyway he viewed his predicament. If he did not go along Ravana, the rakshasa would kill him. If he did Kama would. Maricha shivered with strange cold this warm afternoon. He nodded humbly to Ravana to indicate, he would indicate to his plan. Ravana said, 'Uncle, master of maya, turn yourself into a golden deer. If Sita sees you at Panchavati, she will ask Rama and Lakshmana to capture the creature for her. With all your guile, Maricha, lead the two princes far from the ashrama and from Sita. As Rahu does the light of moon. I will seize her and fly with her to Lanka.

Rama's heart will break and he will become easy prey for me. I will revenge my cousins, my sister and fly with her to Lanka. Not a word that, just hearing about her, he wanted Sita for his bed. But Maricha guessed as surely as if Ravana had confessed his lust. Maricha's mouth was dry. He licked his lips and stood goggling at Ravana as if his eye lids had lost then power to blink. At last he said slowly 'Ravana, you said you needed comfort because your heart was troubled, you have come to the right person. Now listen to me'.

He folded his hands to Ravana "You are an emperor and fawning courtiers surround you. They are not sincere. They will say anything to please you even if their counsel reads you to your death, of old it has been said that it is rare indeed to find an honest and blunt counselor, who truly cares for his sovereign. It is rarer still to find a king who listens to an advisor.

'Ravana your spies have been asleep, basking in your glory, behaving you are invincible or surely you would have heard of Rama earlier and you might have prevented the slaughter of Khara and the fourteen thousand. Rama is more powerful than Indra or Varuna. He came to rid the jungle of our people. His work is done and if you leave him alone he will return peacefully to Ayodhya'.

The prince is no adharmi. No evil sits upon his heart no sin stains his spirit that he will be easy to kill. He came to the jungle to keep his father's honour. He came forsaking a throne that was his for the taking. Rama is an embodiment of Dharma. If you kidnap his wife, you may as well leap into a fire and save him the trouble of killing you, which Ravana, he surely will.

'Go hence to Lanka. Ask Vibhushana's advice and you will find he says exactly as I do. I want you to save you from death of Ravana. Listen to me. Don't be swayed by the moment's passion, take heed for your future. Ravana said nothing, but stared calmly at Maricha, so that rakshasa said, 'once I lived in the Northern forests at the feet of the Himalayas. What days those were. I was as strong as thousand elephants and we ate hermits' flesh and

ruined every sacrifice at the forest for years Viswamitra tried to perform a yagna in that vana. But each time it neared its completion, Subhahu and I would desecrate it.

One day, we attacked the yagnasala wher Viswamitra sat chanting Vedas, with flits we went; blood excrement and rotten meat to cast at the holy fire. Suddenly I saw a young man, handsome as the moon who stood guard over Viswamitras yagna. He was no more than sixteen years old, tender and innocence upon his face for a moment, I was arrested by his show beauty. Then roaring. I hurled my filth at the agni.

‘I scarcely saw that youth fit his arrow to the bow and Ravana. I was lifted from the ground and carried into the sky my body and soul on fire. I was borne a thousand leagues by the astra with which he shot me, and flung into the sea. That was Rama. He was only a lay then, a stripling.

Maricha paused; his chest hearing. He prayed fervently that Ravana would be convinced by him. How could he explain Rama’s prowess to the king ?

He argued. ‘You know your sister as well as I do. I am sure she provoked the brothers, that they cut off her nose and ears. She must have taunted Khara to attack Rama. Then what choice did the prince have except defend himself. I speak to you from my heart, as not merely my nephew or my king. Be guided by me Ravana, you have vanquished many great enemies in battle but this Khatriya, different. All the wise say he is Vishnu’s avatara’.

Maricha was silent hoping good sense would dawn on his sovereign. But like one’s whose evil hour has come, Ravana was impervious to wise counsel. The old rakshasas words fell by the way like seeds in a desert.

After a moments tense silence, Ravana said softly as ever. “I am not afraid uncle. My mind is made up. Sita must be taken. I did not came to you for my advice but your help!

His voice had an unpleasant edge to it now. He bared a fang briefly and Maricha trembled Ravana said, “Don’t let the freedom I gave you as an elder go to you head. Don’t forget who I am obedience, unquestioning obedience to me Maricha is your Dharma”.

Those terrible eyes bored into Maricha’s frightened ones. Some of the heads appeared briefly in a haze to glare at this insignificant demon that dewed throat Ravana.

Ravana said, ‘Uncle, be a golden deer with silver speckles with me enchant Sita’s heart when I have taken her, I want nothing more from you. Come we will go in the chariot and arrive quickly.’

Maricha still hesitated. Ravana studied his fingernails and said in deadly quiet “If you value your life, uncle Maricha I think I should do as I say”. Maricha said, ‘the moment I see Rama again, I will die. Ravana, this is the last chance to save yourself’.

THE GOLDEN DEER

Ravana did not care for the words of Maricha. As soon as he agreed to do his bidding Ravana stood up and Maricha said, “Come, let us go”. They came to the doorway of the Ashrama which Maricha had built for himself. He took a last look at the spot which had granted him refuge all these days. Ravana was walking fast and he waited impatiently while Maricha said, ‘Once Rama’s eye light on me that means I am dead. No one who has incurred his displeasure has escaped the arrows of Rama. I realize today that you are extremely wicked and I know that Rama punish you for that. You will certainly be dead very soon.’

Ravana did not hear a word of what he was saying. His mind was faraway. But he embraced Maricha and said, I am now very pleased with you. Come with me. My chariot pulled by the magical donkey is waiting at the door. Let us go soon. I am impatient to reach Dandaka.

The chariot traveled in air and very soon they had reached the neighbourhood of Rama’s ashrama. Ravana saw it from a distance. They descended the chariot and Ravana took Maricha by hand and said, “See that is Rama’s dwelling place. Come make haste”.

Maricha changed himself into a deer. The deer was golden in hue as though it had been made of molten gold. The face was white and dark and there were silver spots on the body of the deer. They gleamed in the light of the sun. The neck was long and bent at a charming angle. The horns gleamed and they seemed to have gems set in them. The deer was wandering about on the grass covered frontage of the ashrama. It walked, it ran, it frisked and it jumped around. It danced around, almost all over the place. At times it would step fastly and at other times it would be bent on eating the grass. It walked about near the Karnikara trees which surrounded the ashrama and it wandered around with the sole purpose of tempting Sita. Deer which were grazing around knew by instinct that this was no deer and they ran away in panic from him. Maricha

would have loved to eat one of the many deer which were there but he knew he could not do so and she came to pluck them for herself. The deer which was prancing around till now came very near where she was and stood still grazing.

Suddenly Sita saw the deer. Her eyes were filled with amazement at the beautiful picture in front of her. The deer was unbelievably beautiful. While she gathered her flowers her eyes were trained only in the deer which was frisking around and which wandered here, there and everywhere remembering to be within her neighbourhood all the time.

Sita called out Ravana and Lakshmana. They came out and they saw the deer. Lakshmana looked at the deer for a long moment and said “Rama my dear brother, I am sure that this is not a deer. As a matter of fact, I am sure this is our old friend Maricha whom you left alive long ago and who escaped again from us, very recently. He had assumed the form of a deer then, do you remember ? An ordinary deer though, not one as fascinating as this specimen here. But this deer is Maricha. Several rishis in the forest have been killed by him, this glister like that of a rainbow are like the gandharva nagari we see in the sky; a mirage, a deceptive appearance which seems to be real but is not. “Rama have you ever heard of a deer with the skin of gold, with silver spots and jeweled horns ? This is the Maya of that rakshasa I am sine of it.”

Sit smiled at Lakshmana. There was disbelief in her eyes. She said, “Rama this deer has stolen my heart. Please, please capture it for me. I will have a palymate I have seem herds of deer in the forest and several of them came to us the ashrama. There are tame and gentle. But then, I am yet to see a deer as beautiful as before me. It seems to me that the moon has come down to the earth. It is perfect. I am fascinated by it. If you capture is alive it will be great. After we go back to Ayodhya it will be an object of wonder to all the inmates of the palace. If hobber, you cannot take it alive, its skin at least be taken. It is unique in its beauty. Rama I have never felt like this before. Never before I have been so veniment in any desire to possess something. It is unwomanly and I feel it is against my nature to behave like this. But this deer is captivating, there is no doubt about it”. Rama was standing there, smiling at the excitement of Sita. She had never seen so excited before. He looked at the deer and he had to agree with Sita. Its beauty was unworldly. Even if he feel a victim to the Maya of Maricha. He said, “Lakshmana, Sita wants this deer. I have not seen such a deer before either, and this eagerness of Sita to possess it is understandable. Even Indra’s garden Nandana or Kubera’s chitra will not have such a deer I am sure. Look at its tongue when it licks up the grass! Does it not seem like a streak of lighting ? or a tongue of fame. When even a man like me a falling a victim to the charms of this animal. What then of a young woman who is accustomed to play with animals like this ? I will try to get it for her.

“Lakshmana, you suspect that it is not a deer but our old Maricha. In which case my duty to chase it and kill it to save the Dandaka from his mischief. Once, do you remember very telling you about Vatapi who would assume the form of a goat to deceive the victims and was killed by Agastya. When I think of Agastya when I think of Agastya I remember him telling me that I should take care to please Sita in everyway. Lakshmana, you must remain here and guard Sita. I will chase this deer and kill it most probably unless I manage to capture it alive; Slowly I am also getting the feeling that this is not a deer at all. Lakshmana, be very careful in taking care of Sita. With a single arrow I will kill this deer and bring it with me. Jatayu is also here and he will help you to take care of Sita. You must be extremely alert. Be on the look out for danger. I smell danger. I am afraid some danger is awaiting us and Sita is mainly involved in it. Clasp your bow firmly in your hand and be ready to tackle danger. It seems to be very close.

“I am not able to define it but I am getting of a feeling that some crisis is imminent in our lives. Guard, Sita and I will return I will relation with the deer, dead or dive as the case may be.

THE DARK MENDICANT

He strapped his sword to his waist, his bow share in his hand and Rama chased the golden deer through the Dandaka vana. It led him along so cunningly, he grew more and more convinced it was no stag but an every disguised. The deer seemed to realize he would not kill it, until he was sure it was not a deer. It would stop in its tracks, gleaming under the trees of the grim forest. It would let him come too close and then his heart would soften seeing what a lovely creature it was, its eyes so soulful. But just as he drew near enough to make a spring and take it the golden stag would prance away deeper into the forest as if it mocked him.

So the chase went on. The deer led Rama farther and farther from the ashrama. It tantalized him by vanishing; he thought he had lost it and turned back. Then he glimpsed a flash of gold from behind a tree, like a crack of the moon through dark clouds and he was off after it again.

An hour of this and Rama was convinced a rakshasa led him on this chase. He decided to kill it the next time it showed itself. If it was a creature of Maya, as he suspected an ordinary arrow would not kill the deer; and it would alert the golden thing that he had changed his mind about taking it alive with a soft Mantra. Rama drew an astra from his quiver. Now he waited; he knew it would return even if he stopped following it.

Rama stood very still beside a small clearing and he did not have long to wait. The golden stag stepped into the glade, near enough to have him chase it again, too far to seize quick as a thought, Rama raised his bow and shot the arrow through the creature's heart with a horrible scream. Maricha fell, his body a rakshasa again cut almost in two by the shaft of fire. He lay panting, dying. But before his life was gone Maricha, the sorcerer threw back his head and in an uncanny likeness of Rama's voice, screamed piercingly 'Sita! Lakshmana! Help me! Then again, and unconvincingly because his agony was genuine'.

The next moment he was dead. Hearing the rakshasa's scream like that in his voice, dread gripped Rama. Some great mischief was afoot and he was so far from the ashrama anxiety burning him, he turned and ran back at a lope.

In Panchavati at the edge of the coppice around the ashrama, Sita heard Maricha scream and cried, "That was Rama, fly to him Lakshmana."

But Lakshmana stood silent and would not answer her in the mood she was in. She trembled her eyes filled with tears. Shaking him she said angrily "Why do you stand there as if you didn't hear Rama cry out" ?

A shadow crossed her face. She backed away from Lakshmana. "O evil one! She breathed. So you don't love your brother after all, you want him dead. So you can make me your wife".

Hurt sprang into Lakshmana's eyes. He said patiently, "Sita calm yourself. No rakshasa, danava, gandharva, deva, not any of all these can make Rama cry out like that. He will be back with the head of the Devil that turned himself into a golden deer.

But Sita's eye blazed. 'You are an Anaya, you are a blot on the Ishvaku name, that you can be so calm while your brother is being killed. You have waited patiently for this godsend either for yourself, or for Bharata's sake; pretending to love for Rama while you have always been his worst enemy.

"But if you think, I will ever be yours, banish the thought, Lakshmana. I will kill myself rather than let you touch me! Lakshmana cringed. He folded his hands before her and cried. Sita how can you even think of men. The wounds of battle, I can bear gladly; and arrows of fire, but not these savage words from you. I only waited here because he told you not to leave me for an instant whatever happened. But I cannot bear to listen to you anymore. I am too afraid; I feel grave danger very near. May the vana devatas preserve you from harm!"

Tears in his eyes, glancing back over his shoulder to see if she would relent, Lakshmana followed the awful cry into the jungle.

Ravana waited impatiently in a nearby thicket for Lakshmana to leave. He heard Maricha cry out in Rama's voice and a smile lit his dark lips. His uncle had served him well in his last moment. As soon as Lakshmana had gone, with just a thought Ravana transformed into a parivrijaka. He was was a wondering mendicant, clad in ochre robes, a Kamandalu and a battered umbrella in his hands, his hair matted into jata, wooden sandals to his feet, rudrakha round his neck and wrists. Only his eyes betrayed anything of what he truly was.

As night accosts evening, when the sun has set and the moon is yet to rise, Ravana came to Sita, alone in the ashrama. He came softly, yet in a fever, to the door of the hermitage and stood staring in at her she had her back turned to him. Before he went, Lakshmana had drawn a magical line across this door an occult rekha. It protected the doorway so no one could enter the dwelling unless they were asked in. At this time of power Ravana hesitated.

For the first time the demon saw Sita and he was inflamed, jaded with love of any woman he wanted casually, of the most beautiful woman of all the races, it was an age since Ravana had been moved by a person like the one that seized him now. In fact he had never felt such desire, for never in all his years he had never felt such desire. The very chastiness of her was fire to his blood. He was mad for her.

He knew his time was short. He coughed softly at her back. Sita whirled around with a cry, thinking Rama had returned. She was an edge since she inspired scream of Maricha and stood wringing her hands. The trees around Panchavati and the trees around in their branches all held her breath. The river stumbled over her bed at what Sita was about to do. She would invite the terrible mendicant inside and break the spell of Lakshmana's rekha.

Ravana stood utterly still when Sita turned and faced him. Not even in his wildest of fancies could he imagine the beauty of Sita. The moment the rakshasa saw her face to face, whatever hope there might have been of his turning back was gone. His very soul was lost. An absolute love seized the demon of Lanka.

He murmured some mantras from the veda to calm himself; he had to restrain the blinding lust he had felt. Sita folded her hands to the Parivrajaka. If any instinct warned her that he was not what he seemed to be, it was blurred by her anxiety for Rama. Maricha's cry still echoed in her mind.

Barely keeping the hoarseness from his voice Ravana said, “who are you, young woman ? Your skin is like burnished gold; you are as fragrant as a pool of lotuses. Tell me are you Parvati came unknown into the forest ? Or Indra’s Sachi ? Or Lakshmi perhaps ? Or are you Bhudevi or Rati ? Your teeth are pearls string together ? Your body is so perfect I can believe you are real. What can I say of your eyes, your face, your hair, your breasts, your waist, I can hold in your hand. Say that I have never seen anyone whose beauty remotely approaches yours.”

‘Yet you are neither a Deva woman nor a gandharvi ? Don’t you know that this forest is with full of rakshasas ? Go back to where you came from lest any of them see you. For they are wild demons who must possess what they desire. Who are you ? To whom do you belong. Tell me how you came to this vana ? Unusual talk indeed for a mendicant of a holy order. But Sita decided he spoke in good faith for only in good faith had all the rishis she had ever met spoken to her’. Sita would have blushed to hear him she may have resented what he said. But today she merely fetched a Darbhasana for him as she would for any Sanyasi and said, ‘come’ inside Muni, sit down!

As that moment, Lakshmana’s rekha was broken and the forest heaved a sigh. Now fate would take its course. Ravana stepped smiling across threshold. Sita had no eyes for her visitor. Time and again her anxious gaze scanned the tree through her door to see if Rama and Lakshmana returned. Then in her feverish state, she thought she must answer the Parivrajaka’s questions. She must please him or supposed he cursed her?

Sita said “I am Janaka’s daughter Sita. I am Rama of Ayodhya’s wife. Twelve years ago Dasaradha was about to crown my husband Yuvaraja. But his queen Kaikeyi held him to his word, given a long time ago for saving his life that he would grant two boons, whatever she wanted. She asked that Rama be banished to the Dandaka vana for fourteen years and her own son Bharatha be crowned Yuvaraja”.

“Have you heard of my husband Rama ? My lord ? He is famed for his Dharma and his valour. Do be comfortable in our home. Rama and Lakshmana will return shortly and they will be happy to see you!”

He saw her eyes darted repeatedly to the open door. Now being so close to her, hearing her husky voice, Ravana said ‘Sita, have you heard of a great rakshasa called Ravana ? All the beings of the three worlds live in terror of him’, his very name strikes fear in their hearts!

He gazed her with untold longing. He was wise enough to know he was a lost man. He put restraint behind him and said, 'I, Sita am Ravana of Lanka'.

And when his eyes blazed darkness. She knew he spoke the truth. A banding pretence desire nacked in his voice since the moment "I saw you, my heart has burned with a love it has never known before. Came to Lanka with me; it is a jewel in the ocean. My city is built on a mountain and if you look out of any window you can see azure water stretching away to be horizon. Day and night you hear the wash of the waves, like an ancient song. There are gardens in my palace such as you may dream of they are love her than Indra's Nandana."

'This forest life is not for your, come with me become my queen. From now on, my heart is yours to command'.

He spoke simply without artifice and Sita was angry when she saw he was completely serious. She said, "Listen to me, O king. Rama is everything to me; my life, my world, my sun, my stars, you know nothing about him. He is the greatest man alive. Your asking me to go with you is like the jackal importuning the lion's mate. 'You don't understand how dangerous you desire is. Rakshasa, go away from here. Save your life while you can, before my husband comes back and kills you'.

Now the demon's presence unnerved her. She sensed the enormous evil of him and his desire for her across the room like a beast of prey. She saw how his eyes burned. Speech ebbed from her in fright and her limbs shook as if she was in death's presence.

Ravana saw she finally realized who he was with a smile on his assumed features he said slowly 'You know nothing about me Sita let me tell you a little. I am, Visvasrava's son. Kubera is my brother and I vanquished him in battle. Because of me he abandoned his city and went to live on Koalas. I keep his Pushpaka Vimana in my palace.

'I am Ravana, at whose name Indra trembles and sends me tribute. Vayu blows softly, gently on my island. Is that not enough for you, my perfect Sita? Forget Rama, he is just a man' Ravana laughed 'just a boy, who hasn't the courage to defy his old father. What can be give a fascinating woman like you? You need a king to love you. Your are born for greatness, Sita, to be my queen. Don't waste yourself. Came away with me.

She shivered. But hearing abjectness also in his voice, she took courage and cried “you say Kubera is your brother you say the great Visravas is your father. How can you of all people speak like this to another man’s wife ? Ravana, if he sees you here Rama’s arrows will cleave your heart. Begone, rakshasa, fly”.

How she rued everything she had said to poor Lakshmana. But it was too late for remorse. Ravana rose in anger. He clapped his hands twice and stood before her as he was in nature demon. His skin sly and his fangs bared in a smile. Ten heads, all of them terrible, stared at her. Some licked their lips, some grinned and all the eyes on ten heads shrine with lust.

In his voice deep as the sea, harsh as the wind in a desert and grave as death, the rakshasa said to Sita ‘Once again, I beg you accept my love willingly. Now you see whom I am. I swear to you, upon my honour that moved Mahadeva himself, that never once, tender one, will I displease you in the smallest thing. I will be your slave. I will love you forever. Rama has nothing to offer you. Turn away from him Sita be mine from today.

Sita darted for the door with a growl he caught her. Easily as if she was a child. He draped her across his shoulder and strode out where his chariot was.

She screamed ‘Rama save me!’

Ravana climbed into the chariot with her flailing in his arms. ‘Lakshamana’ screamed Sita, but she had suit him away.

Without a whisper the mule chariot rose from the ground and Sita saw earth fail steeply away. Panting like an animal caught in a hunters share she cried to her Karnikara trees “O my friends, tell Rama that Ravana took me, Ravana of Lanka”.

Then the chariot was high enough, and it flashed south through the sky towards distant, exotic Lanka.

JATAYU’S DEATH

Ravana was jubilant since his plans had been carried out without a hitch and he did not spare a thought for Maricha who had died for his sake. He was trying to go as fast as he could. While the chariot was speeding away from Janastana, Sita saw Jatayu perched on a tree. She called out to him in

desperation “Jatayu! Revered Sir, this Rakshasa is carrying me away. He pretends that he is valiant but he is a coward. He entered on ashrama when Ravana and Lakshmana were not there and he had captured me. He is armed and no one can accost him, please, tell Rama that Ravana has carried away his Sita. Sobs stopped her from speaking further.

Jatayu who had gone to sleep on top of the tree woke up when he heard her piteous cry. He tried to take to Ravana. He said, “Ravana, I am Jatayu and I am extremely powerful. I have been called righteous by everyone. I am telling you this Rama is a great man and a dangerous opponent. He is the lord of the world. You are trying to steal his wife. This is a wrong act you are contemplating. You are a famous king and you should try to follow the right path which is indicated by Sastras. If the king does something wrong how can he win the respects of his subjects ? You should protect our women as you would your sister or mother. Do not be impulsive and court infamy and death. Rama has not wronged you in anyway and you should not do this to him. If you think of the episode in Janastana, it is because of Surpanaka. She incited Khara to fight with Rama and Rama has to die of his foolishness. Tell me truly why are you acting like this ? Give up this madness. Else, you will regret it later. A man can carry only so much burden which he is capable of carrying and he can eat only as much he digests. If either of these is in excess then the man suffers for it. Ravana, I am old you are young you have a chariot and you are armed while I have none of these things. And yet, let me assure you, I will not let you to take her away and watch without interfering. If you will take my advice and leave her, you will be forgiven. If on the other hand, you insist on persisting with your sinfulness, you must fight with me first. I challenge to fight first fight me, I will this very moment, make you lose your chariot and later your life”.

Ravana had not bargained for this unforeseen obstacle in his path. He was furious with the old bird which tried to far his way. He began to fight with Jatayu and the encounter with between the rakshasa and the bird was a glorious sight. Ravana hurt the bird with arrows and Jatayu was able to fight with his claws, his wings and his beak. He hurt Ravana and blood was pouring from his wounds Jatayu was able to withstand all the arrows of Ravana. He broke the jeweled bow which Ravana held in his hand and later, his armour also. The donkeys which were yoked to Ravana’s chariot were killed and the chariot was crushed to powder. All this the bird was able to achieve with the help of his beak, wings and claws. Ravana held Sita firmly in his arm and came down to earth. He saw that Jatayu was how weak and tried. Ravana rose up into the skies once again and so did Jatayu. He went near Ravana. He hurt him in several places. He tried to talk to him also. Ravana was now desperate. The valour of the old bird was amazing. He took up his sword and flashing it at Jatayu, he cut off both the wings of the bird. Jatayu had no more fight left in

him and he fell to the ground. Sita was sorely distressed at the happenings. The old bird had died and it was because of her. Then she wept loudly for the old friend of Dasaradha.

She extricated herself from the grip of Ravana, and running to the old bird, she covered him with her arms and wept for him. Ravana came near her and pulled her with a rough hand. She screamed “Rama, Rama” and he would not leave her. Again he took her in his arms and placed her on his thigh. He then rose up in the sky.

Nature stood still when this outrage happened. The day was now dark as night. The sun lost his luster and the wind stood still. There was only one happy person and that was Brahma, the creator. He said : “What had to happen, has now happened”! The rishis were unhappy at the plight of Sita.

Decked with glittering ornaments and draped in yellow silk, Sita looked like a streak of lightning against a dark dense cloud held as she was against the chest of mighty Ravana she was wearing lotuses in her hair and they lay scattered about after falling on Ravana. Her face had lost all its glow and was like the lotus during the season when frost kills the flower. Against the dark hue of Ravana her face was like the moon breaking through the clouds enveloping it. The flowers from her hair were falling on the ground and they seemed to ask her to take them again, so forlorn they looked. Her anklet fell down on the earth while she was sailing in the sky held in the arms of Ravana.

The fish in the rivers seemed to sigh with sadness when Sita was carried away. The wild animals followed the shadow cast by the rakshasa and they were growling with anger. The deer in the forest which had played with her so often were now shedding tears. The Vana Devatas were terrified of Ravana and they could not help Sita.

“Rama, Lakshmana, can you hear me ? Can you not come to my rescue” ? shouted Sita as loudly as she could but they were not able to hear her. They were far away.

Ravana was pleased with himself. He was carrying Sita in his arms and he did not know that he had sought but his death and even then carrying it in his arms thinking that it would be but a source of happiness to him.

She tried to beg him to let her go. She tried to convince him that her lord would kill him if he carried away this. She spoke scathing words and she uttered angry threats but all in vain. Ravana had paid no heed to anything she said and so they moved in the sky.

She looked down and they were passing a mountain. She could discern five monkeys setting on top of it. A sudden thought came to her. She quickly removed her ornaments several of them, and she took a piece of her upper garment. She tied up the jewels in the piece of silk and threw it at the monkeys and hoped that sure how, somewhere Rama would, meet them and they would tell him about her. Ravana had not noticed this and he sailed happily along without a care. The monkeys saw the beautiful woman in the arms of a rakshasa and they saw that he was traveling southwards. They heard her crying out “Rama, Rama, Lakshmana” and they wondered who she was.

Ravana went fast, like an arrow released from a taut string and he traveled fast towards Lanka. He crossed the sea and still he held her firmly in his left hand knowing that she might prefer to kill herself by falling into sea.

Sita was death incarnate for him and he knew it not. He carried her into Lanka. He arrived in the sea and entered his antahpura the kept her a captive there and he surrounded her with rakshasas. He instructed them “Without my knowing, this woman by name Sita should not be allowed to see anyone: nor should anyone see her. Give her anything she asks for whether it is silks, food or jewels. She had ‘only to ask and it should be hers’!

He then called eight of his henchmen and said “you must have, by now heard about the death of Khara and the end of others at Janastana. This was caused by a man named Rama. My only desire to avenge the death of these. Go at once to janastana and go armed. You should remain there and spy on the movements of Rama. I must get frequent reports as to what he is doing. Attempts should be made by you to kill him if possible. I know how valiant you are and that is why I am sending you to janastana”.

The eight warriors left at once for janastana and Ravana was happy since he had punished Rama and he had got for himself the most beautiful woman in the three worlds.

SITA IN LANKA

Ravana allowed himself a moment to gloat. He had some revenge now for the death of Khara and the others. Rama must already be heartbroken. Better still, the master of evil had just abducted the most beautiful woman in the world. It was true she resisted him! But how long her stubbornness lasted? In his considerable experience with women, the best of them, always resisted him at first. Perhaps they were afraid, or they did not wish to seem wanten. But not

one had held out for long. Finally they all succumbed and were glad of it, once he took them to his bed.

The rakshasa did not believe there was any exception to this rule, not even Sita, the most beautiful of them all. He would be gentle at first; that would win her over. But then the rakshasa was hardy himself today. There was already an important difference between Sita and all the others. The rest had been conquests, prey for the beast. Today he was the conquered one. The moment he laid eyes on her, Ravana had fallen hopelessly in love. He no longer knew what he did only that his every moment was full of her eyes, her hands, her skin, her voice.

Like a ship on or a stormy sea, was Sita surrounded by Ravana's rakshasis. But Sita did not raise her face to them. He seized her arm and pulled her roughly through the palace. He dragged her up flights of silver stairs, stood her at gold framed windows that gazed out at spectacular views of the ocean. He hauled her on to a lofty terrace with curved pillars of solid gold and flung out his arms to show how vast and how splendid were his island and his city. But she did not see the lakes, the sprawling gardens their deer and peacock, exotic trees and banks of rare flowers bought here from the world over. Her heart was frozen with fear.

Impatiently Ravana said, "I am the emperor of ten million rakshasas across the earth. All of them shall be your subjects. You will have glory and power beyond your dreams. The thousand princesses in my harem shall be your hand maidens. Forget your Rama. He is too feeble for a woman of your beauty. Compare us and you will know the difference between a weakling boy and a great king.

"Forget him Sita, you will never see him again. Accept that destiny contrived to place you in my hands"; because you belong with me come for me show you the Pushpaka Vimana we will roam in the sky in it. Accept my love, no one has been offered it before. Let your eyes look at me and your heart be glad. Knowing how much I love you. The declaration of love came so naturally from the monster. Such tenderness was in his voice and he might have been amazed to hear himself. But Site only sobbed more bitterly to listen to him, her hope grew diminished with every word she heard. They came down the silver stairway's again, and out into a walled pleasure garden".

He said softly 'you don't realize what it is I lay at your feet. But you will soon; when you see it is the earth I offer you. Look I kneel before you my precious one'.

He did so impulsively and laid his head at her feet! But she leapt back from him and set a long blade of grass she drew out of the ground like a green sword between them. Sita said, coldly “you know nothing of my Rama that you compare yourself to him. He will come to Lanka and kill you as he did Khara. You have desecrated the sanctity of my body by touching me with your hands, Rakshasa, Rama’s arrows will colour the earth with your blood.”

You boast that you are more powerful than the devas and the Danavas. But my prince will raze your city and feed you to the god of death. You say that you are a great warrior, yet you have the character of a thief in the night. Coward, that you are, who can kidnap a woman defenseless. Ravana, I have come to Lanka to become your death.

His face turned red at her taunts. He bared his fangs and snarled at her like an animal. Then, controlling himself, he said quietly ‘I am not moved by the greatness of your little Kshatriya. I have drunk the blood of a thousand princes like him. As for you, you have exactly one year to consider my love. Yes, I love you or you would already be dead for what you have said to me. If you accept this love that consumes me, you shall be queen of the world at my side.

Now his nine heads appeared and Sita gasped to see him again. The central one was silent, thoughtful. But the right on top the smallest evil one, sneered. “If you don’t come to me in a year, you will be cut in small pieces and be my morning meal instead.”

Nine heads laughed madly and fell to whispered discussion among themselves about which choice she should make. His main face dark, his lips still throbbing at what she had dared say to him, Ravana turned and stalked out of the Ashokavana where he had brought her again.

RAMA’S LAMENT

Rama had killed Maricha and was hurrying towards the Ashrama. He suspected some serious scheming on the part of the rakshasas. This guise of Maricha’s was too much of a coincidence. Maricha knew how deadly were the arrows of Rama and yet he had accepted the commission to lure Rama away from the ashrama. He knew that he would be killed. Surely something stupendous was at stake of Maricha had been instigated to risk his life and lose it, if necessary for achieving this end. Lost in thought Rama walked fast. He saw ill omens all along the way. A jackal howled fearfully and Rama was startled. “Some danger is awaiting me, I am sure of it” said Rama to himself”. I

think the rakshasas are even now eating up my Sita Maricha called out to Sita and Laskhamana in my voice when he was dying. Perhaps Lakshmana believed it and thinking it was genuine and leaving Sita alone, perhaps he is coming to my aid. I am convinced that the plan is to kill Sita or else why this guise of Maricha ? Why should he call Lakshmana's name and Sita's while dying ? I am certain that Lakshmana has left her alone and is coming to me. I am, at the moment, the object of the hatred of the ashasas at Janastana and the only manner in which they can hurt me is to kill Sita. I felt they have planned it. I must hurry.

Several other bad omens greeted Rama and he walked with worried steps. His mind was full of the two whom he had left behind in the ashrama. When he was approaching the famed Janastana, he saw Lakshmana. His face was greatly troubled and Rama waited for him to come near. The eyes of Lakshmana were red since he had been shedding tears and Rama held him into his hands. He then held him by his left hand and spoke in a voice sweeter than honey to his brother. "Lakshmana, my dear Lakshmana, you have left Sita alone in the ashrama and have come away here. It should never have been done by you. I did not expect you here. I do not know what has happened to Sita. I hope she is well. I hope she is safe. I have been seeing nothing but a series of evil omens and my mind is full of misgivings. Either Sita has been eaten up by the inmates of this place. Lakshmana, my child, we will see Sita live". "You were right Lakshmana. The golden deer which deceived even Sita and me was Maricha and you found him out even by looking at him. I should have listened to you and killed him even then. But fate willed it otherwise. He had been sent to drive me away from here and he succeeded in doing and succeeded in doing that though he paid for it with his life later. He had to go back to the form of a rakshasa before dying. When he cried out Sita's name and yours I knew there was some mischief which had been planned and that Sita was some how involved in it as the victim. Lakshmana, my left eye is throbbing and the birds are flying in the wrong direction. I do know for certain that we will not find Sita in the ashrama. Either she is dead or she is abducted by the rakshasa. I wonder if my beloved Sita is alive ?

Lakshmana was feeling very unhappy at the thought of Sita saying all alone in the ashrama. Rama said, "She came with me to the Dandaka since she could not live without me. I was a mendicant without a kingdom and a wonderer in the forest and yet she preferred that life with me to the comforts of the palace since she loved me. I cannot live without her even for a moment. She is more precious to me than the three worlds". Will my Sita be alive ? I wonder if my exile will be fruitless, finally. If Sita so will I and when you go back to Ayodhya you may see Kaikeyi happy in the thought that her desire has been fulfilled. My mother will die of a broken heart when she hears of this

Lakshmana. I can assure you of one thing. If Sita is alive, I will remain the ashrama or else I shall give up my life.

‘Tell me, Lakshmana, why did you leave her alone and care here? When that sinful Maricha called out to you it must have worried you and Sita must have been really concerned and must have sent you to assist me I guess this is what must have happened. By listening to her you have done something which is harmful to her. The rakshasas have been able to take her away. What am I to do now?’!

They had almost reached the ashrama by now and Rama, unhappy and sorely tried, torn by the certainty that Sita was dead, tired, thirsty hungry because of the long chase after the golden deer, came to the vicinity of the Ashrama. He was signing and he looked everywhere for Sita. He searched in all her favourite haunts and he called out: ‘what I dreaded has happened. Sita is gone’. He was sunk in woe and he sat on the ground as though his limbs could not bear him up any longer Lakshmana stood silently by the side of Rama and except for the tears which were flowing all the time he spoke not a word. Rama asked him, “Lakshmana, with the assurance that you will be taking care of my Sita I went at chasing that deer”. Why did you come alone leading her alone”?

Lakshmana could not talk. Sobs choked him and finally he said, “I did not abandon her willingly. She spoke such harsh words Rama, it was unbearable. I had to come. When we heard the names of both of us calling out to us piteously. Sita heard it and at once she became greatly upset and asked me to go to you for help. I tried to convince her that no one could hurt you, that no evil could befall you and that it was an Asura Maya which made the voice sound like your. But she insisted on me going. I said that no one in the three worlds can hurt you. But she would not listen. She said, ‘You will never have your wishes granted. You refuse to go to the aid of Rama in spite of his calling for you. He is evidently not loved by you. You have conspired with Bharata and that is why you came with Rama to the forest. Your intentions have been evil right through. You are Rama’s enemy’. Rama my beloved brother. I was not able to be on the words spoken by her and yet I did not move from there. But she threatened to kill herself if I did not come to you help. In a fit of anger, with my eyes filled with tears I left the ashrama and walked towards you. This is what happened Lakshmana sobbed like a child.

Rama, who was like one demented, heard Lakshmana and said, ‘you know me and my prowess. And yet, because Sita spoke words which were sharp and wounding, you left her and came away. It is wrong child. What you did. When a woman is angry, she will talk without paying any attention to the sense of what she is saying she will not be aware of what she is saying. Sita

was worried and she was angry because of that. You disobeyed me Lakshmana and now what has happened! You gave way to your emotions and forget to do my bidding. As for that Maricha, he took me very far from here. Since he was a rakshasa his voice could reach you at this distance and he has accomplished what he set out to”.

Rama was saying the something again and again. ‘Sita must be dead. I am sure that she has been eaten up by a rakshasa’. They had now reached the ashrama. It looked desolate and Rama entered it with eager steps. He walked all over the place and he did not find her. The ashrama appeared like a lotus pond during the cold season. The trees appeared like they were weeping. The flowers were faded and the birds and the deer were looking sad too. Rama saw the seat made of Dharbha grass to have been pulled here and there and the deerskin was thrown on the ground. Like an ordinary man, Rama was now lamenting his wife’s death.

“Perhaps she has been taken away by force, or perhaps she has been killed. Is she a captive or is still in the forest ? May be, she has gone to collect fruits for me or to pluck flowers to make a garland. The river! Perhaps that is where she has gone, to bring water. He searched everywhere and he did not see her. He wondered from tree to tree; from shrub to shrub asking them if they had seen his Sita. He went near her favourite trees, the Tilaka, Ashoka, Karnikara, Kritama and several others and said “She must have baded you farewell when she went away. Will you not tell me where she is “? He looked at the deer and said, “She has eyes like you she was very fond of you, will you tell me where she is“ ?

Rama was inconsolable and Lakshmana could do nothing to pacify him. The brothers ran around all over the vicinity of the ashrama and could not find Sita. Rama saw the confusion in the ashrama and concluded that she had been taken away from the forcibly. Rama cried out “Lakshmana I cannot live without Sita. When I am dead my father will not look at me with love since I have not been able to take care of my wife ?

Lakshmana spoke softly to him. He said “Rama, my brother, do not give away to grief like this. The forest is so large and there are many caves and so many hiding places here. She may be hidden some where by some one. Let us made an attempt to look for her methodically. She loved the trees and the river bank was her favourite place. Let us go and search every where. Rouse from this despondency and let us look for her.

Rama tried to do so but could not with a very great effort he controlled himself and together, they began to search for Sita all over again.

Lakshmana was the greatest source of comfort to Rama then. He argued that she could not have gone far since Lakshmana had just left the ashrama when he encountered Rama. She must have been kept some where very near. They did not bargain for the maya of Ravana which helped him to fly in the air and carry her far away from Janastana Lakshmana tried to help Rama to regain his mental poise and it was not easy.

The search was over and they did not find her. Rama was spent with sorrow and fatigue and he was silent for a muhurta.

He did not know what to do. His limbs were all limp and his face had lost its luster, its habitual calmness.

Lakshmana spoke words of comfort to him but it was of no avail. Rama said, "I do not think there is a great sinner than me in this world. That is why misfortune after misfortune visit me and they have made me lose my reason. My mind and my thinking have all been shattered by this series of calamities. I must have committed several sins which are unforgivable. The punishment for them is meted out to me in this birth. Lakshmana, I lose my kingdom I lost my kinsmen and I lost my beloved father. I remember these and that makes me unhappy. I am wondering in the forest like a beggar and my unhappiness had become assuaged and made me bearable because of this peaceful life in the forest. My pain was no longer fresh and painful but like a heap of dead and dried leaves. But how with the loss of Sita, the unhappiness has been kindled again it is burning up. Sita, my queen has been captured by a law born rakshasa and is in great danger. I am certain of that Lakshmana, look at this slab of potene. This is where we once sat and talked far long about many things. Sita could not have gone alone to the river bank or to gather flowers all by herself. She is very timid woman. This sun will know where she has gone and he will not tell me; this wind which is present everywhere will know where Sita has been taken but will no tell me". Again and again Rama would call out to Sita and Lakshmana was unhappy. He had never seen his brother give way to grief thus and it was painful.

He took Rama to a place nearby and made him sit down without overstepping the decorum of a Youngman talking to his elder brother. Lakshmana said, "My dear brother, abandon this grief and let me see your fortitude. Let us set about search for her in a thorough manner. It is only men with firmness who will be able to achieve their desires. They will not give into frustration even if their attempts are not fruitful in the beginning".

His words fell on deaf ears. Rama sat as one bemused and there was no way of comforting him. He sent Lakshmana to the banks of the

Godavari to look for Sita and to please him. Lakshmana went there and came back to say that she was not there. Lakshmana's grief was intensified since he felt that because of him and his anger, Sita had been abducted. Rama went himself to Godavari and asked her 'Tell me, where is my Sita? You must be knowing where she is'?

"Afraid of Ravana, the river would not tell him though Sita had asked her to. All the animals and trees stood silent though they knew and had been asked by Sita to tell Rama that she was being carried away by Ravana" Rama said.

"Who will comfort me now and make me forget my misfortunes? I lost my Kingdom, my father and I was forced to live the life of a sanyasi. She was here and I did not mind any of these happenings, but now Sita is gone and I am the most wretched of human beings. Lakshmana, how can I live without her? Come, let us search Janastana once again and this hill. She may still be found. Lakshmana, look at the deer. They seemed to be trying me to tell something. Their eyes are eloquent. They look at me and then somewhere else. I am sure they know. And turning to the deer Rama asked their "Where is Sita"? They all turned their eyes towards south and with their heads they indicated the sky and ran the direction they shown as if to say "She was carried away fast in the air and towards the South". Again and again they showed as though in pantomime the manner in which she had been taken away. Lakshmana was extremely astute and he said "These deer are telling us something. They are indicating the south, it means that she must have gone that way. Let us go south Rama. We may get a clue as to where she has been kept captive.

WRATH

Scanning the trees and the undergrowth along the way the princes came south in search of Sita. At the edge of the Ashrama, Rama pointed to some lotus petals that lay crushed on the earth. He whispered. She was taken this way. I gathered these lotuses for her this morning and she wore them in her hair.

Then his eyes rolled in his head and madness seized him again. Rama raged at the mountain. Say where she went, silent witness or I will crush you with an astra his eyes flying, he turned to Lakshmana 'I will consume the river. I will smash mountain into dust. Watch me my brother I will burn up the earth'.

He drew an awesome shaft from his quiver, an astra made of fire that ends the stars and began to fit it in the bowstring. Just then Lakshmana pointed to the ground with a cry. They saw splayed footprints in some soft earth where Ravana had trodden. Rama forgot his fury and Lakshmana cried out again; ahead of them lay the rakshasas broken sky chariot and his dead mules, mutilated by Jatayu.

In great splashes, they saw blood everywhere Rama breathed. There was more than one raksahsa. They bought over her and devoured her. Lakshmana said, "Look here".

On the ground, river by Jatayus beak, lay Ravana's gold irland-bow the fot of its jewel put out. Rama picked it up and examined it. He said in amazement. 'Only a great warrior could weld this bow'. They saw the white parasol that lay rent and broken Rama breathed 'Sita was taken by a king'.

Then they saw Ravana's Saradhy dead on the ground. 'A rakshasa' whispered "Rama his courage ebbing from him. We were right, it was a conspiracy of demons. But which king flew here in a mule chariot to abduct Sita?"

Lakshmana only stared mutely at his brother. The tragedy was plain to him. Rama said slowly. 'If they meant to avenge the death of Khara and the slaughter of his army, they have succeeded beyond their finest hopes. He laughed bitterly'. 'I cannot live without her, Lakshmana, I will kill myself'.

He grew silent and his face was dark. A rare glitter in his gentle eyes. Rama said 'Do you remember what you said to me in Ayodhya after Kaikeyi had banished us'?

"How can I forget the day that changed our lives "? You said I was too soft and I think you were right. That day I kept dharma in the place of all Ayodhya. From that day my family and I think even the gods who rule our fates mistook my gentleness for cowardice that now they allowed my Sita to be taken from me.

"But from today I will be another man, Lakshmana the softness of the moon will give way to the blazing heat of the sun. The rakshasas of the world will feel my wrath; the Devas, the Gardharvas and the yakshas will know who Rama is. I will burn up the earth. I will make ashes of heaven. I will dislodge the planets from their orbits and consume fire and air. I will drain the seas with my asters. The darkness of eternal night will be complete for I will put out all the stars in the sky. He was transformed before his brother. Rama was more awesome than he had been when he humbled stormy parasurama;

again he was more god than man. Lakshmana fell at his feet. ‘Rama, this rage does not suit you. Your emotion have always been your slaves. But now your anger rules you and I am afraid, I beg you calm yourself, be gentle again. I dare not look at your face for what I see in it. The foot prints on the earth are still fresh. I am sure Sita isn’t dead. We will find her, if we only look for her:

But stood above him breathing hard. Lakshmana cried “If we do not find her. You can burn up the earth. But a least let us look.”

But Rama seemed undecided what he wanted to do first look for Sita and consume the world. His eyes were still full of pale light and Lakshmana said, “you bore your sorrow like a Kshatriya when our father banished you from Ayodhya. The fortitude was kingly. But if you succumb like this to grief, how will your subjects rely on you “? ‘Rama, who among the living has not had to bear suffering ? Great Nahusha was made a python for a hundred years Yayathi was cast out of heaven. Even Viswamitra lost a hundred sons in just a day. The earth is convulsed by quakes and eruptions. The sun and the moon, the eyes of the universe are eclipsed by palm. No one escapes fate’s or deals. But how often you have said to me that one should not let one’s mind be broken by them.

‘You of all men must never give in sorrow. Be yourself again Rama. How can you think of burning of the world for one man’s sin ? You should seek out the sinner and consume with your wrath’.

Rama heaved a sigh and the darkness left his face. Next moment he hugged Lakshmana and there were tears in his eyes!

“What would I do without you ? You have shown me the way of Dharma and I will do as you say. But anguish rolls me and I cannot think clearly. Be the thinker for both of us decide our next course until I am calm again.”

Lakshmana said, ‘Lt us first comb Janastan for some sign of Sita. If we don’t find her, we will go south as the deer said to’.

MEETING WITH JATAYU

“Rama was still labouring under the anger which threatened the world. Together they looked for Sita in he Janastana and it was a vain search. And while they were looking about, suddenly they came upon Jatayu. He was an the ground like a small hillock and his body was soaked in blood. Rama

said, “Lakshmana it must be a rakshasa who has assumed the guest of an eagle. He has eaten Sita. His body is covered with blood which is hers. I am going to kill him now”. With his bow clasped in his hand Rama approached the fallen eagle. Jatayu was dying and he was spitting blood. With great difficulty he spoke.

“Rama do not waste your time wandering around here. I know you are searching for Sita. My life as well as Sita have both been taken away by Ravana. When she was alone in the ashrama. Sita was abducted by Ravana I saw him carrying her away. I tried my best to rescue her from him. I fought with him. I broke his bow and his chariot and killed his charioteer. He fell to the ground. But I could not fight for long. I had caused as much havoc as I could with my beak and my claws and my wings. Ravana took up his sword and cut off my wings. When he knew that I was helpless he lifted her again and flowing into the skies and speeded away from here. I am not a rakshasa my son “?

Rama’s woe was great. This eagle this friend of his father and their guardian, had been true to his word and had tried to save Sita from the clutches of Ravana and he could not do so. Rama fell on the ground and embracing the dying eagle, he cried like a child. ‘Lakshmana’ he said “We were banished from our country. We were made to live in the forest Dandaka. We have father to us, has been killed. Misfortune like this is more virulent than poison. It is so intense it burns up even the god of fire. If I should now touch the waters of the sea, my misfortune will dry it up. In the entire world there is no one more unfortunate than me I have been pushed into this deep pit of pain by fate and because of my ill-luck this great soul is dying.

Rama sat there, shedding tears and stroking the dying eagle with loving hands. And so they sat for a while. Rama said, “Lakshmana, life is fast ebbing from the body of noble Jatayu. His movements are stilled and his own breath remains and that will leave him very soon. He has turned his sad eyes on us” Rama turned to the dying bird and asked “Tell me, if you can, more about what happened and how it happened, what prompted Ravana to take away my beloved Sita from me ? How have I offended him that he should do this to me”?

“I have done him no wrong. What does he look like ? How strong is he ? How does he act. Where does he live ? If you can talk, tell me about him “?

Jatayu was sorry to see Rama unhappy. He was finding it hard even to breathe. And yet with great effort, he spoke : She was carried away by him. He was like a whirlwind and she was dazed. He traveled southwards.

Child, my life is fast slipping by. I am not able to see. Hold me in your arms let me find release from the bandage called life when I am held by you. But one thing I can tell you. The time when Ravana carried her away is called Vinda or Vyaga'. It is certainly that a lost thing will be found if it is lost or stolen during that time Ravana did not know it or was careless about it. He is sure to die at your hands and you will get Sita back after killing Ravana I am sure of it. Be without sorrow Rama". Jatayu was gasping and blood was spurting from his mouth and he said "The son of Vishravas, the brother of Kubera. He could speak no more and Jatayu has died. Rama was heart broken. He said, "Lakshmana remember when we came back from Agastya's ashrama we met Jatayu. He said he would guard Sita when we should both be absent from the ashrama and he did what he promised to do. But fate is so powerful that it wins every time. For many years Jatayu had been living in this Dandaka and he is gone. Nothing can equal the sorrow I am suffering because of the death of Jatayu. He died for me. He was so much like our father in his love for us. Lakshmana, collect wood. I will rub the arani and out of the twigs cause a fire. Jatayu him myself.

Rama covered the dead Jatayu in his hands and walked towards the banks of Godavari Darbha was placed on the ground and he placed Jatayu on it. Lakshmana brought dry wood and made pyre and said, "King of birds, may you reach the heavens meant for those accumulated punya by performing good deeds I grant you permission to dwell in thee worlds Rama touched the pyre with the fire he had himself kindled with the arani twigs. He offered Anjali to the dead bird and made offerings of Pinda to pacify the Pitrus. Rama recited the verses meant for performing Shradda for the dead the Princes came to the river Godavari and bathed there. They then performed the tarpana for Jatayu according to the rules prescribed in the sastras. Jatayu reached the heavens meant for the rishis.

THE THRONE IS YOURS

Jatayu's death, and cremating him made Rama forget his anger. Even the grief of Sita's disappearance mellowed, when he saw the golden eagle had died for her sake. Rama grew quieter and more determined. Lakshmana's terror subsided with his brothers brief madness. But he would never forget how fearsome his gentle Rama had been during the moments when he wanted to burn the earth Lakshmana heaved a sigh of relief. He had no doubt that his brother could consume the world.

They went south now and joyless journey they had without Sita. They missed her lively observations about this mighty true, tiny slower, and the

other little deer with eyes too big for his face. She was not with then to make the jungle come alive with the miracle of her endless fascination and the Dandaka vana was a wan place as forlorn as the princes themselves. Wrapped in groom they munched on. Though his tread was former now, not a word did Rama speak. Lakshmana walked in silence at his side his eyes peeled for any further sign of Sita.

They walked three krosas from Janastana and came to the jungle called Krauncharanya. This was a black forest, with hardly a sun beam breaking through the dense thatch of branches and leaves above. Often they saw flaring eyes stormy at them from behind a great tree trunk or a black thicket as they went cautiously along. Their bows were fitted with arrows ready in their hands. Their progress was slow because they stumbled along through pitch darkness. Frequently they sat on a convenient tree root or a smooth rock to rest. This was a dangerous jungle and they needed all their wits about them to pass safely through it.

They went three krosas, laboriously, through that den test of vanas; while nameless creatures moved unseen through the matted branches. Then they saw sunlight ahead and came out into the open. They stood in a clearing shading their eyes from the glare, until slowly their vision adjusted itself to the sun.

They saw a cave before them and at its mouth stood a rakshasi gazing at them with interest. In fact she stared just at Lakshmana. When she saw the princes notices her, she detached herself from the cave mouth and came ambling towards them with long strides. She was all smiles and fluttering eyes lashes.

Laying a hand on him enticingly, she said in her coarse, mannish voice to Lakshmana. "I am Ayomukhi, came into my cave, fair stranger. I am a mistress of love. Let us range the green jungle and the hill slopes of Krauncharaya together making love by daylight and darkness, moonlight and starlight".

"She stroled his cheek; she let her hand rove over his chest. With a cry of rage. Lakshmana drew his sword and lopped off not just her nose and ears, but her heavy breasts as well and she fled shrieking and gushing scarlet into her cave. They walked into the jungle before them, forbidding as the one they had emerged from. They crept from and with Ayomukhi's howls ringing in their cons.

Abruptly Lakshmana stopped in the dark. He whispered to Rama. 'My left side throbs and mind is full of fear. Something evil lies in wait not far ahead'.

A Vanjulaka bird cried its them letting cry. Rama touched his brother's arm. "By the omen of Vanjulaka's cry, we will overcome whatever it is."

More carefully than ever, they crept along through the darkness ahead of them, they saw the forest thinned and again there was now a palpable thing. They went gingerly towards the light. Then they saw two enormous hands flashed out from the trees like lightening and seized them. Rustling against leaves, scraping against tree trunks and branches, struggling but held firm they were hauled a long way towards brightness and the strangest monster they had ever seen.

He was mountainous. But he had no head or legs just a huge barrel of a trunk with these arms, nearly a yojana long attached to it. A single gigantic eye was set in the middle of his hirsute body. Below it was a fanged maw. All around the rakashasa were splashes of blood and bones picked clean and the intestines and skins of creatures he had eaten among them deer and bear, elephant and tiger. The giant eye regarded them hungrily and the slavering mouth grinned. The creatures breath was a fetid roar.

He said in a thick lisp, "Kabandha is lucky today. Long time since Kabandha has eaten human meat ? He licked his lips and, yawning his mouth wide, its stretch unbearable, he brought his captives slowly towards it. He paused and manipulated his fingers, each one thick as a young tree, to loose the deerskin and Valkala they wore. These he did not want to eat. Momentarily, the princes arms were free, quick as light, they drew their swords and hacked off Kabandha's hands at their wrists.

His eyes rolled in shock. His roars shook the jungle. Kabandha lived by hunting with his hands and eye, for he had no legs. But life went out of him now, with the gushers of blood his severed wrists. His eye streamed tears and through the rest of his screaming, he cried shrilly at them ? Who are you humans ? "Who are you ? Lakshmana said, "We are Rama and Lakshmana. And who are you awful one?" A bitter laugh came from Kabandha. He blinked his eye several times in some deep remembrance. At last, in a voice transformed, he said "It is my good fortune that brought you" to me today. I think my long suffering is over. I was not as ugly as you see me now. O Lakshmana! Once my home was Dhanu, and I was as handsome as you. And I was arrogant. I would frighten the rishis of the forest with my maya. I would assume on monstrous form or another, and roar at them from behind the trees.

But one day, I startled a hermit who had a quick temper and he cursed me. “Be this monster from now”. Since then “I have been like this”. I begged him to take back his curse, and he said, “When Dasaradha’s son Rama cuts off your hands and die, you have your splendour back.”

‘I also offended Indra and he sloughed my legs with his Vajrayudha’. Brahma said to me “Live hunting with your arms Dhanu.”

‘Cremate me Rama, release me from my bondage’. Rama said ‘My wife Sita has been abducted by a rakshasa called Ravana’. We only know his name. ‘Do you know any more about him ? You have been here for so long; you must know many things’. Kabandha said, “Dig a deep pit and cremate me in it. Then I will have my old powers back and know all things. Don’t hesitate, Khatriyas; your apparent cruelty shall be kindness. For without my hands I will die anyway and slowly. I beg you hurry old memories already flood back into my mind. I can’t see them clearly.

The princes collected dry branches and twigs. They dug a pit deep to put Kabandha and they burned him. The flames had scarcely begun to lick at the rakshasa when he was released from his curse. In a flash of light, a dazzling figure sprang up from that pit. Dhanu, the archer of the sky. Next moment a chariot, made of star light and yoked to shining horses flew down to bear him away to Devaloka.

There is a prince of Vanaras called Sugriva. He lives on Risyamuka, the mountain that casts its shadow over the pampasaras. Your destiny and Sugriva’s one are bound together, you must find him.

‘He is the son Surya Deva, the ancestor of the Ishvakus he will be like a brother to you. He will ask for your help but in return he will do anything to help you to find Sita. Like his father the sun, he knows everything that happens on the face of the earth. Swear an oath of friendship with him by a sacred fire and he will certainly help you’.

Rama asked, “how will I find the Pampa ? This path we are standing on, which Kabandha straddled, is lined with trees whose sires grow in heaven. At its end, you will come to a garden not less beautiful than the Nandana or Chitra. Beyond this garden is as pristine a lake as you will find in this world. The lotuses that grow on it were once brought down to the earth by the Devas. The flowers of the Pampa never fade, nor do its fruit rot. Its water is as clear as the heart of a rishi, and you can see down to the white sand on its bed. Swans and cranes and birds from unknown lands come to drink from it. The Pampasaras is so sacred Rama, that it will restore your faith.

By that lake, once the great rishi Matanga lived with his sishyas. In his ashrama you will still find an old woman called Sabari.

A smile lit Dhanu's face. As I did when I was Kabandha, she also waits for 'Vishnu's avathara'. He laughed. 'But only to worship you, not devour you! She is so pure that she has been called a hundred times to Swarga. But she waits to see the face and the human form of Rama to Ayodhya'. Impatient to be away among staring fields, Dhanu's horses tossed their shimmering manes. Dhanu patted their necks, and spoke to them in a resonant tongue.

He said to Rama and Lakshmana, 'Farewell now, I have so much to do. West of lake Pampa is the Rishyamooka'. You will find Sugriva in one of the caves of that mountain. May your quest be fruitful Rama. May you fulfill the destiny you were born for!

The lustrous one bowed to the princes. Then his chariot rose into the air and flew straight towards the stars, leaving a silver trail across the sky.

SHABARI

The two princes were in a happy frame of mind since Kabandha had given them some kind of assistance by asking them to meet the chief of the Vanaras. They talked about it as they travelled towards the west along the path indicated by Kabandha. They looked around and saw the trees and flowers which were to be found everywhere. But they paid no heed to them. Their only thought was to reach Rishyamooka as early as possible and to meet Sugriva. At the foot of the hill they saw a place which seemed to them safe enough from the wild animals and, since the sun had set, they deemed it wise not to go any further in the dark.

They spent the night there and early in the morning they made preparations to continue their journey. They saw that they had covered quite some distance now. They had reached the western bank of the lake Pampa which had been mentioned by Kabandha. From there they could see a small Ashrama. Rama had been looking for this Ashrama since he had been told that Shabari, an old woman was waiting for his coming. This was, to him, more important than even meeting Sugriva. They walked towards the Ashrama. It was surrounded on all sides by trees and shrubs and they entered the Ashrama of Shabari.

Shabari stood up with great excitement and she prostrated before Rama and then before Lakshmana. Rama spoke to her in his sweet and pleasant voice, “You are rich in Tapas. Have you shed all the deseries of the world? Is your tapas increasing day by day? Have you conquered anger? Have you learnt to live on meager fare ? How are your vratas helping you in finding peace ? Has your service to the great been fruitful ? Have you realized that you are ready to leave ?”

The old woman Shabari stood humbly before Rama and said, “My tapas have been fruitful now, at this moment, since my eyes have lighted on you. The rishis have been served by me faithfully and it has granted me the reward; I have seen you. My life has not been lived in vain since you have graced me with your presence and I have earned a place in heaven. I hae been purified since your eyes have rested on this body of mine and I will certainly attain salvation. “The rishis whom I served went to the heavens in the many chariots sent for them by the celestials”. I was asked by them to stay on here. They told “Rama will visit this sacred ashrama of yours and with him will come Lakshmana his brother. Honour these guests and then you can enter the heavenly abode meant for you”. Rama my lord, for entertaining you, I have been collecting fruits from the trees on the banks of Pampa this many a day. I have kept them carefully”. Rama looked at Shabari whose birth was that of huntress and he said, you have, by your tapas, won a place for yourself in the heaven; what is more, you have been able to reach the Brahmi state. From Dhanu, who was cursed to be a Kabandha, I heard the greatness of your tapas. I would like to spend sometime here and look at the surroundings of your Ashrama.

Shabari said, “This place is famed by the name Matangavana rishis made it a sacrificed spot because of the tapas and the yagas they have performed here. They were so old that their hands would tremble while offering the flowers on the Vedi. Because of the tapas of the rishis, this vedi which is called Pratyakshali glows like sunlight and illumines all the quarters. They were thin and weak and old and they could not go out and gather the waters for the Yaga and so the waters from the oceans reached them on their own accord. They bathed here and the tree bark which they were wearing is still on the trees and they are not dry. The blue lotuses and other flowers are as fresh as they were on the day they were used for worship. The place has this specialty.

They went round the ashrama and Rama partook of the fruits which sabari had saved up for him. She asked him “My desire has been fulfilled. I have entertained you and I am ready to depart for the other world. Please grant me leave to do so”.

Rama said, "You are holy and with a pure heart, you have worshiped the rishis. I have been worshipped by you. May your desires be granted and may you reach the heavens where the rishis are the rishis whom you served faithfully. When they were here".

Shabari who was a Brahma Gnani, who had shed all attachments and desires, meditated on the God of fire, after touching water with her hand. She was consumed by fire and became a mass of flames. Out of it she looked like a celestial damsel. She ascended to heavens.

THE LAKE BY NAME PAMPA

They resumed their journey and they talked of the huntress Shabari and her devotion to Rama. Rama was amazed at the glory of the rishis who could summer the waters of the ocean at will to serve them and he said, "Lakshmana, I am chastened by this experience. Look how the tigers and the deer are playing together! What a hollowed spot this is! The Seven seas have flowed here and it is a very pure ashrama. I have found peace here. My mind is now rid of the agitation which had been troubling me till now. I have found strength which will help me fear the separation from Sita. Something tells me that we are on the brink of discovering something which will be of great benefit to us. Come, let us hurry towards Rishyamooka and let us locate lake Pampa which is said to the cling to the foot of the mountain. Kabandha told us that Sugriva is there and that he is in constant fear of his brother Vali. Our destination is Rishyamooka and we should meet Sugriva as early as possible and forge a friendship with him as we have been advised to. Sugriva will organize a search for Sita and I am sure she will be found.

Lakshmana was equally impatient and together they hurried onwards. They passed many trees and small forests and soon they were near the lake which was named Matangasaras.

They bathed in its cool waters and went further. After they had gone some distance they were greeted by the fragrance which was part of the famed lake Pampa. There seemed to be an exhilaration in the air and they forgot their failure and walked on. They reached the banks of the beautiful lake Pampa.

It was a magnificent sight. On the banks were flowering trees of all types. Ashoka, Tilaka, Punnaga, Bakula and the perfume was over flowering. There were lotus everywhere and the water in the lake was clear as crystal. The lake seemed to have been the haunt of even the celestials. The

grassy banks were strewn with flowers of all hues and it seemed as though a rich carpet had been laid there. The mango trees were many and the birds were making music. Peacocks were dancing and the lake Pampa was exceedingly beautiful.

Rama looked at the lavishness with which nature had adorned the lake and he was overcome with sorrow. He said, "Lakshmana, child, as Kabandha said, there at some distance is the mountain Rishyamooka where Sugriva dwells. You go and meet him".

RAMA'S GRIEF

As the brothers walked around the lake, with a fragrant breeze caressing their senses and their minds, Rama sighed "Lakshmana, this place where the seven seas flowed has calmed me I feel we are close to finding some news of Sita".

They walked briskly towards Rishyamooka that loomed ahead. Through charmed woods, through fragrant forests of Ashoka, Bakula and Tilaka and others nameless and resplendent with blooms, they came again to the Pampasaras in another, wilder place. The lake was heavy with lotuses. Some white as fresh as snow and others dark as too light skies. The water was transparent and they saw the spotless sand on the lake's bed.

Tiger and deer roamed the banks of the Pampa saras together. The predator claimed of his blood lust in this zone of enchantment, where the ground was mantled with unfading flowers in every resonant hue. This place was nearer to heaven touched in every resonant hue, touched by its deep rapture, Rama and Lakshmana bathed in the crystal water white curious peacocks watched them, with royal phomage unfurled. Silvery fish nibbled delicately at their bodies and little song birds made a feast of music in the living trees.

When they came out of the lake, Lakshmana saw his brother's eyes were wet with tears. Rama said hoarsely "Go alone to the Rishyamooka." I will stay here. My heart is full of Sita. She smiles before my eyes, she whispers to me from the water. I feel her fingers on my skin.

The tears split down his face. Spring was in the air. A Malaya breeze blew down from Rishyamooka, velvet fingered and the lotuses, crimson, magenta and dark cyan, swayed in it. Rama cried, "Lakshmana, this mountain breeze unhinges me. My heart is weak and my limbs. Go on by yourself, my broken and seek out Sugriva".

‘Spring is a cruel time for lovers parted by fate. The scent of the sandalwood tree makes my blood course. Kama seems to play with the flowers on the trees and vines and the honey bees are in tune with him. The branches are entwined so they seem to make love looking how can I not think of Sita ?’

Lakshmana did not know what to say. But this grief of Rama’s was gentler and he saw no harm in it. His brother cried ‘Listen to the water fowl, how their awkward songs used to make her laugh. She once took me by the hand to show me these birds at their games. Ah, I can hear her laughter now and it burns me like fire!’

“There was a lively symphony by all the birds. Some honked in quaint voices. Others warbled effortlessly, golden throated and mellifluous. The peacocks strut for their hens. This breeze of Vasantha is fire to my body. I ache for Sita, for her soft eyes, her voice and the touch of her hands. Oh Lakshmana she must also yearn for me. How will we stay alive without each other ?”

Rama sat on the ground and sobbed. Lakshmana sat besides him, and put an arm round his shoulders. So they remained for a long time and his brother let Rama cry out some of his sorrow.

After a while, Lakshmana said, “You dharma is to tread the winding path that leads to Sita. Don’t abandon your courage. Fate is leading your down a strained road. Rama you are the Kshatriya who gave up his kingdom for the sake of Dharma. You don’t need me to tell you that there is no resisting fate why you are led along this painful way is mysterious. But there it is and you must negotiate all its twists and turns bravely. Don’t give in to grief: remember this path leads all the way back to Ayohdya”. Lakshmana spoke softly, persuasively. ‘Let your arrows flow out from you like a river to the sea. Believe me, you will find Ravana and kill him. And Sita will be with you again. ‘Shed your sorrow and arise. You are not an ordinary that you can let anguish overwhelm you. You are Rama, the king of this world. There is an enemy whom destiny has set before us and our way winds on past his death. But we must find him first’.

Rama heard him out in silence while he stared out across the waters of the breeze stroked lake. Abruptly he wiped his eyes and rose. He hugged Lakshmana and said, “Yet again you have restored my courage. It was surely written that you come with me into exile. For without you, I would have been lost long ago and wondering the wastes of madness. Come my wise, precious brother, let us find the monkey on the Rishyamooka. They walked towards the Rishyamooka.

Kidhkinda Kanda



KISHKINDHA KANDA

SUGRIVA SENDS HANUMAN TO RAMA

Sugriva was seated on one of the peaks of the hill and he had four monkeys with him. From this vantage point he could see every thing, everywhere and his roving eyes rested on Rama and Lakshmana who had arrived at the foot of the hill. They were walking slowly with halting steps. Their eyes were questioning and seemed to be looking for something. They were eager to find out where Sugriva was and seeing them and their searching looks, Sugriva's mind was alerted and fear crept into his heart. From a distance he and Sugriva, though brave by nature, was sorely perplexed at the sight of strangers in the vicinity of his hiding place the sight of strangers on the hill. He was afraid of them and he did not know what to do. They were all scared of the coming of them and quickly they hid themselves in a cave which was nearby.

Sugriva was afraid since these tapasvins are armed. His eyes were wandering all over the place and his fear was excessive. He was only too well aware of the strength of his brother Vali and his own inefficiency as far as Vali was concerned. With his voice trembling with fear he said, "These two are sent by Vali. I am sure of it or else how could they have passed the forest which was considered to be impenetrable? They are dressed as Sanyasins but that is only a guise since they carry bows and arrows and I can see the gleam of swords at their waists. No tapasvin will attire himself thus. Let us choose a safe place where he can hide ourselves."

Sugriva's ministers were with him and the chief of them was Hanuman. He knew the dread which was in the heart of Sugriva. Hanuman who was well versed in the heart of conversing spoke with humility: "Forget this fear of Vali, my lord. This mountain is safe from the attack of Vali since he is forbidden by the rishis curse to set foot on it. I do not see Vali anywhere. Be firm on your faith as far as the safety of this Rishyamooka is concerned".

Sugriva said, "Look at the persons coming this way Hanuman. They look like divine beings. They are handsome and they seem to be extremely strong. They are armed and I am frightened, and so you will be, if you had been oppressed as I have been. I suspect them to have been sent by Vali to kill me. I am sure of it".

"Kings have different people to aid them in their rule. It is essential for us to know who they are before we dismiss them as harmless wonderers. Vali is clever and capable of using human beings as his aids.

Hanuman, I want you to go to them. Talk to them cleverly and get all the information about them. Try and see if you can find out the reason for their coming here. You are wise and you will be able to find out information about them. I know. If they are glileless win them over with flattening words and make them reveal their real purpose of incoming to this mountain. Go to these men who are armed with bow and arrows and find out about them. It will be easy for you to find out if they are good men. If they are make friends with them”.

Hanuman who was the son of Vayu, agreed to obey the commands of his master and proceeded to where Rama and his dear Lakshmana was wondering. To appear in the disguise of a Brahmachari seemed to be a wise decision since he did not know who the strangers were. From the top of the mountain he reached the neighbourhood of the princes very soon since he leaped from tree to tree and from rock to rock. He went to the presence of Rama and Lakshmana and welcomed them to the mountain with very sweet words and in a charming manner.

Hanuman said, “You seem to be rajarshis and you appear to be divine beings. I have been watching you and you are looking for something on the slopes of this mountain. You are watching the trees and the herds of deer which pass you by and you are to my mind, observing strict penance. I am intrigued to be as to who you may be. You, appear to be Sanyasins but you weapons and the fact that you are both armed seemed to belie it”.

“I can see eagerness in your steps and a semblance of impatience as though you are seeking something. Bravery seems to have taken a form in the two of you. Serene as the surface of a lake your faces express some sorrow lodged in your mind. Your gaits that of lions, your wide chest and your powerful arms, your bows which are as glorious as the bow of Indra, make me eager to know who you may be.”

“Your handsomeness is captivating. I am convinced that you are royal personages though your garbs are those of mendicants. This mountain, the river which flows here the water of Pampa have gained an added glow because of your presence. You resemble each other so much that I can easily guess that you are brothers with your eyes like the petals of the lotus with your divine looks you make me wonder. It seems to me as though the sun and the moon have abandoned the heavens and have come down to the earth for some heavenly purpose. What is the reason behind your wandering to this place which is devoid of human beings ? Your arms are bare but it is apparent that they should be wearing ornaments made of gold. Perhaps you have come here to guard this beautiful mountain which is even more lovely than the Vindhya or Meru. Your bows which are looking so powerful and these arrows like flames

are never at rest. I am some once your anger is roused. These swords look like serpents which are asleep. They gleam like serpents which have shed their skins.

“I will tell you who I am. There is a good and powerful monkey chief by name Sugriva. He has been driven out of his kingdom by his brother and this Sugriva has been wandering about on the slopes of this Rishyamooka. My name is Hanuman and I have been sent by him to find out about you. Sugriva desires friendship with you. I am a monkey and I can assume any form I wish. To find about you, I assumed this guise of a Brahmachari. As I told you I am a monkey and I am the son of Vayu. I am one of the faithful servants of Sugriva and one of his mentors.”

Hanuman said nothing more and stood waiting for their reply. Rama was thrilled by the words of Hanuman. He turned to Lakshmana and said, “Lakshmana, we have been looking for Sugriva and this messenger from him is his mentor. He has approached me with a desire to be friends with me. This Hanuman speaks beautifully. He seems to be a sincere person and pure in mind. I want you to talk to him. I am sure he is well versed in Vedas or else he would not have been able to talk so well. He knows all the three Vedas.

“He is a master of grammar man and while he spoke, I could not find a single mistake in the formation of his sentences. His entire personality is very attractive and his voice is very pleasing and attractive too. Pitched low in the Madhyama, his voice is musical short and spontaneous. It was genuine, straight from his heart and I could detect no deception in him. His words were so well formed, scholarly, cleanly spoken, that they are to be praised to the utmost. With his words which rose from the heart, heck and head which are bewitching, how can an enemy resist him ? Fortunate is Sugriva to have such a gem as his minister. All his desires and plans will succeed if Hanuman is the mentor for them. His deed all be accomplished by the messenger himself, so capable is he”.

Lakshmana turned to Hanuman and said, “We have already been told about your master Sugriva and about the misfortune which has been visited on him. We have been wandering here on the slopes of this mountain in search of this same Sugriva. We were asked to meet him and forge a friendship with him. Please think about own desire and the commands of your master and what you think is the best under the circumstances we will think anything you deem is wise”. Hanuman was extremely pleased with his words. He was happy about the success of his mission. He decided to take them to the presence of Sugriva and wished that the friendship between the two should be formed at once. He thought to himself.

“They have also come to the forest with some task where they need assistance. It seems as though the troubles of my master will soon be things of the past because of these two men. He may regain his kingdom”. Hanuman asked Rama, “Can you tell me why you are wandering in these fearful forests on the banks of river Pampa ? It is ridden with fierce animals and there is not a single human being here. I am curious to know“.

Again Rama looked at Lakshmana as if to say “Answer him” Lakshmana said, “There was an emperor named Dasaradha who ruled the world. He was a righteous man and never once has swerved from the path of Ganga. He had no enemies since he did not consider anyone to be such. He had performed many yagnas and he was a devotee of Lord. This is the eldest son and he is called Rama. The word of his father is sacred to him. Rama is a great soul. He has conquered his senses and he is famed for his prowess. He was asked by his father to spend fourteen years in the Dandaka forest and I accompanied him. I am his younger brother. To me the only God is my brother and my only religion is to obey him in everything Lakshmana is my name.

“Even as the glory of the sun cannot exist without the sun, Sita the wife of Rama, came with him to the forest. When she happened to be alone in the ashrama. Sita was captured by a rakshasa and we do not know where he dwells. While we were wondering in search of my brother’s wife we came across Dhanu, a celestial being, who had been pushed down to the earth because of a curse. He told us that there is a chieftain of the monkeys celled Sugriva and that we should seek him out. We were told that we would help us in our search. He said, “Sugriva is a great hero and he will certainly help you to find your wife. He will find out who stole her and fire where she is! Dharma went back to heavens after telling us about your king. Here is where he is supposed to live. Rama and I are on this hill Rishyamooka for the sole purpose of meeting Sugriva. Your master, we seek his help. My brother wants to help him in his quest for his wife.”

“It is indeed the Vagaries of fate which have made a play thing of this noble Rama, the son of Dasaradha, the refuge of all those who are in trouble the name of Dharma and truth the sole hope of the entire populace of Kosala, the honoured prince of the country, the eldest son of the emperor, a hero whose prowess and valour are known to all the world. This Rama is now reduced a state when he has to seek the help of others to achieve his end. Rama is such in sorrow and your master should help him”.

Overcome with emotion Lakshmana was talking while tears poured down his face. Hanuman watched him and said “It is the good fortune of my

master Sugriva that such a noble soul who is without anger. Who has the senses under control who is a god among human beings, should desire friendship with him. His troubles are over and my master will be happy once he makes friendship with you ? They stood silent for a moment and Hanuman continued “I will take you to Sugriva. He had his share of misfortunes. He was driven out of his kingdom and his wife was taken from him by his brother Vali. He has been treated ill by his brother and believe me, my master will do his utmost to find Sita for you”. Laskhamana turned to Rama and said, “Rama, I fell that our task will be accomplished with the help of the chief of monkeys. This son of Vayu seems to be a faithful person. In fact he seems to be incapable of ever uttering a falsehood”. Hanuman took both of them on his broad back and went to the presence of Sugriva.

The peak where Sugriva was dwelling was named Malaya and it was part of Rishyamooka. Hanuman went to the presence of Sugriva with his brothers and told him. This is Rama. He is a very wide man and a great warrior. He has his brother with him and I met them when they were wandering about “Hanuman told Sugriva about the circumstances which had brought them to Dandaka and now to Rishyamooka”. He has been asked to meet you ? said Hanuman. “He was told that he should seek your aid in searching for Sita. These two brothers are valiant and powerful and it is but meet that you should honour them accordingly.

A FRIENDSHIP SWORN

Sugriva said warmly to Rama. “I have heard of your valour. It is my good fortune that brings you to Rishyamooka you would honour me by being my friend”.

He held out his hand Rama took it and they embraced again. At once Hanuman produced two arani twigs and lit a fire. He worshipped the flames with flowers and other jungle offerings. Hand in hand Rama and Sugriva walked round the Agni to solemnize their friendship. In the age old ways of Vanaras, they chanted together. You are my friend from now on we share everything joy and sorrow.

They embraced again and there was a feeling of great auspiciousness upon them, of a friendship well struck up Sugriva broke a branch from a sala tree. He laid it on the ground and made Rama sit on it. At once Hanuman tore another branch from a sandalwood tree and set it down for Lakshmana who smiled at his thoughtfulness.

But Sugriva's said to his new friend 'Rama, I am a miserable monkey. With fists like iron and fangs like daggers. My brother Vali drove me from my kingdom. And he has taken my wife Rama for himself. Because of a rishis curse, he may not set foot on his mountain and I have sought shelter here. But my courage is broken and every breath I draw is in fear'. He looked pleadingly at Rama. 'Help me my friend. I seek refuge in you'.

With piteous little cries, he bent himself at the prince's feet. Rama was moved. BY Sugriva's gentle appearance, he felt the monkey the kings cause was just. He said, 'Sugriva, I will kill your brother for you'.

Sugriva danced for joy, 'With your coming Rama, I have hope again. I find certain that my kingdom back and my wife. You shall end my fears. After years I will sleep in peace, without being tormented by dreams of death'.

As Rama and Sugriva spoke, far away in Lanka, Sita's left eye like a lotus petal throbbed : and Vali's tawny eye in Ksihkindha and Ravana's coppery one as well.

Sugriva said, "Hanuman told me about you Rama; how your Sita was abducted. My friend, whether she is hidden in Patala or in Swarga. I swear my people will find her for you."

He passed and smiled at the prince and stroked his cheek. Sugriva said, 'Have no doubt fate intended our paths to cross. Let me tell you what we saw a few days ago. We sat on the loftiest branches of that Sala tree, when, suddenly the sky above was rent with the shirk cries of a woman.

When we turned our eyes up we saw a strange sight A rakshasa dark as a rain cloud and as big, flew across the firmament. As the thunder cloud does the streak of lightning, he held a beautiful woman in the crook of his arm. She wriggled like a queen of serpents to get free, but he held her fast. She cried, Rama! Lakshmana"! and we did not know who she was, or to whom she called.

'But all at once, a little bundle fell on us out of the sky. It was her ornaments, tied in yellow silk. We kept the bundle safely in case anyone came for it'. Rama was on his feet. "Why didn't you tell me before ? Show be the bundle , Sugriva".

One of the monkeys loped into the care and brought back a silken bundle. With trembling hands, Rama took it from the Vanara. He at once that it

was Sita's. He touched it to his eyes and undid the knotted square of silk. When he saw the ornaments inside, poor Rama fainted.

The monkeys sprang away to fetch water to revive the stricken Kshatriya. Slowly, at Sugriva's long fingered ministrations he regained consciousness. Rama held the jewels out to Lakshmana and said, 'I don't know the bangles and two necklace, but the anklets are Sita's. All these years. I saw them every morning when I knelt at her feet and she 'blessed me' Rama setup; his face was grim. He said to Sugriva 'Tell me more about the demon who took Sita from me. Tell me where he lives and I will go and send him to the Yama's city'.

Sugriva, who was a loving and kindy monkey, wiped his own eyes. He touched Rama's arm and said gently. "I know nothing else Rama only that he was a rakshasa. But I swear to you. I will discover anything there is to know about him. Sooner than you think, Sita will be with you again and you will be rid of your grief. Calm yourself, my prince, sorrow does not suit you."

Rama was so touched at Sugriva's solicitude he fell quiet. He even managed a wan smile, and said, "I am sorry my friend. Your concern warms my heart and my heart tells me that, like seeds sown in a fertile ground, your words will be a rich harvest. In adversity it is a rare and fortunate to find a friend like you. From now I depend on you to find Sita for me. And I swear to you on our friendship. I will do anything to make you happy, anything to remove your own sorrow."

Sugriva cried, "The gods smile on me at last, that they brought you to me. Looking at you, I felt that your love I can have heaven for the asking. What then is a monkey kingdom? I have your friendship sworn by a sacred fire. I could have no other blessing. I will help you Rama. I swear it in the name of our friendship."

VALI AND SUGRIVA

They had been talking for a while and Rama had regained his composure. The sight of Sita's bangles and jewels had upset him but he was now his old self and he waited for Sugriva to tell him about the quarrel he had with his brother, Lakshmana, Rama, Sugriva and Hanuman were all seated on branches of trees which had felled on the ground.

"Rama" began Sugriva, "I have been spending my days in constant fear of my brother'. I have been illtreated by him and he has been

trying to kill me. I have eluded death thus far and I am afraid of him all the time and of his threat to kill me. It is up to you to help me. I must be rid of this fear of Vali forever. I want peace of mind”.

Rama smiled softly and said, ‘As you rightly observed, a friend considers the grief of his friend as his own and tries to help him. To hurt is second in nature to an enemy and I will kill Vali who has stolen your wife. Look at these arrows of mine. These feathered friends of mine, inlaid with gold have the power to kill even as Indra’s Vajra. They are like angry serpents and they have never failed me. Your brother, who is a brother but in name has become your enemy. I assure that you will see him fallen on the ground like a mountain split by a thunderbolt.

Sugriva embraced Rama for warmth of his affection and said, ‘I will unburden my unhappiness to you. I was driven away from my country by my arrogant brother. Those who were dear to me were imprisoned. He has sent several monkeys to kill me but they have been killed by me. I thought that you were also sent by him. Such is my fear of him that I would not welcome you to Rishyamooka. I was certain that you were here to hurt me. Your bow and arrows made me more suspicious than ever. A man in danger and dread is afraid of the passing breeze even. These four are my faithful friends and because of their words of comfort I am alive. I will tell you the story of ours’.

“Vali is my elder brother. He was my father’s favourite and he was very dear to me. I was devoted to him. After the death of my father he was crowned king since he was the elder son. I was his subject and I obeyed him in everything he said we were very happy together”.

There was an Asura by name Mayavi and he was the eldest son of Dundubhi. It has been said that there was an enmity between him and Vali over some woman. One night when every one was asleep Mayavi came to Kishkindha, where Vali was ruling. He roared at the doorway and called out to Vali to fight with him. My brother was sleeping soundly and he was roused from his sleep. He rushed to answer the challenge of Asura. His wives and myself requested him not to be impulsive and asked him to think twice before rushing to the fight. But he would not be stopped. Because of my love for him I went with him. Mayavi who challenged Vali, saw the two of us emerging from the gateway and he was suddenly afraid. He began to run. We pursued him and we covered a considerable distance. It was not a dark night since the moon was shining and lighted our way. Suddenly the asura vanished from our sight. He had entered a cave whose mouth was well hidden by grass and creepers which were growing there. We went there too and waited for him to come out. Vali knew that he had entered the cave since he saw him to do so.

His anger know no bounds and he told me. “Sugriva, I will enter the cave and kill that asura”. Till I came back you should wait here right at the cave and kill that asura. Till I came back you should wait here right at the mouth of this cave. Guard it very carefully, “Prostrating before him, I told that I would do so! Vali entered the cave!”

“Believe me Rama, one year passed since he entered the cave and I stood waiting for him; I was afraid to leave the spot and, at the same time afraid of the happenings inside the cave. I did not know what was taking place. I was afraid that my brother was faring poorly in the fight with asura. I was unhappy and yet I staged on since Vali had told me that I should”.

“After a long time, out of the cave flowed blood. I was horrified to see much blood frothing out of the mouth of the cave. I thought I heard the roar of the Asura and I thought I heard the voice of the brother weak and helpless in the grip of death. I assumed that my brother was dead and I was very sad. But I was afraid of the Asura I was sure he would come out and kill me too. Therefore, I took a large boulder and closed the mouth of the cave with it and after offering Tarpana to my brother came back to Kishkindha. I did not tell anyone about the happenings at the cave. But they pressed me and forced the truth out of me”.

After due consideration the ministers decided to crown me as the king. I was ruling the kingdom and suddenly one day, Vali came! He saw that I had been made king and his eyes grew red with anger. He imprisoned the ministers who had crowned me and spoke harshly to me. He spoke words which hurt like arrows. Still I did not talk back since he was my elder brother. I fell at his feet he came to the city. He did not heed my humble love!

I said, “it is fortunate that you are alive and you have come back to us. You are our lord and please take this white umbrella. Which is rightfully yours. For a whole year I waited at the mouth of the cave and you did not come out. Later I saw blood gushing out of it and I grieved. I was certain that you had been killed. I was scared lest the Asura should how attack me. When such a powerful fighter like you had been vanished, I did not have hope of bring able to withstand his strength. I therefore, closed the mouth of the cave to prevent his coming out and came back to our Kishkindha. I never asked to be made a king. The citizens and ministers thought that the country needed a king and since I am the younger brother of their king, they crowned me. But all that’s over, my brother. Now that you have come back what is yours. I will, as before be your devoted slave. I have guarded the kingdom carefully, and please be seated on the throne. Do not be angry with me I stand as a suppliant before you. Do not spurn me since I mean you no harm.

“Vali would not listen to my words. He would not look at me and he spoke insultingly in the midst of entire court”. This answer had told you only first half of the story. After I had entered the cave I was able to kill Mayavati after a long interval of more than a year. It was his blood which flooded cave and flowed out. When I tried I found that the mouth of the cave had been closed up. I could not find the mouth of the king closed. I could not find the opening at all.

I called out ‘Sugriva’ several times and there was no response. It was all to no purpose. I was only wasting my breath. Finally I broke the rock into bits with my fist broke to and I came out and hurried to Kishkindha.

“And who do I find ? This brother of mine is seated on the throne. I know that he grabbed the chance that came his way and his intention was to get rid of me”.

I tried to tell him this death was the last thing that I desired but it was of no avail. He threw me out of the city. I had no place to call mine. I wandered all over the world and I finally came to Rishyamooka. Vali cannot come here because of a curse and so I feel secure only here. I have told you everything Rama and it is a painful story. Even at the distance of time, when I remember the incidents, they come back fresh to my mind.

He was crying openly now and it was Rama’s turn to pacify him.

DUNDUBHI

Sugriva said, “Rama, my brother is no ordinary vanara. He can leap across the sea. He can break a peak from a mountain and cast it into the waves. When we roamed the jungle together in our happier days, he would draw out great trees by their roots in exuberance as if were blades of grass.

‘Once many’ years ago, there was another Asura called Dundubhi. He was as strong as a thousand elephants. He had sat long years in Tapasya and a boon of strength from Brahma. Dundubhi came to the ocean and cried to Varuna “Come out and fight. I can find no one else to battle with”.

But Varuna knew about Brahma’s boon, and replied. “You are too strong for me, Dundhubhi. In the quarter of the gods there is a mountain called Himavan. He is the lord of all mountains, he will fight you”.

Like an arrow Dundhubhi flew to the Himalayas. He plucked a few peaks from that icy range and hurled them down or smashed them to dust with terrific fists. Himavan appeared upon his loftiest massif like a great white cloud. Like thunder he said to the asura “Why do you disturb my peace ? I am a tapasvin and know nothing of war. I cannot fight you”.

Dundhubhi roared “Like it or not, you shall fight me! Or you must find some one else well”.

Himavan said, “In the south there is a beautiful city called Kishkindha. Vali the Vanara rules it. He is Indra’s son. You shall have little satisfaction from water, rocks on trees. But Vali will give you the fight you crave”.

Dundhubhi assumed his favourite fighting form a stupendous bison. He flew through the air like a thundercloud in a storm and came to Kishkindha at twilight. At the gates of our city, he roared his challenge to Vali. He stood shorting and lowering horribly, and pawing the earth. When he bellowed he sounded like a grating Dundubhi. Vali was in his harem when the asura challenged him. He came storming out to the palace gates, bringing his women with him his arms still around them. He cried “Stop your following Asura! leave my gates if you have your life.

But Dundhubhi had come for battle, and he replied “You can boast before your women if it makes you feel bold. You can even have a whole night with them. I can wait until morning. Just remember to indulge yourself to your heart’s content because this will be your last night on earth”.

Vali bared his fangs and snarled at the asura. To provoke him Dundubhi cried “Himavan said you would give me a good fight. Looking at you, I doubt it. But we shall see as soon as you came out from behind your women’s skirts”.

Vali grew very still. He led his women back to his harem. Putting on the golden garland his father once gave him, he came forth, chattering his rage as we Vanaras do. Harem’s and long mighty arms locked the earth shook around them. But slowly, that immense Asura, the bison lost ground to my brother. With a ringing cry, Vali lifted the demon into the air and dashed him on the ground, again and again. Until life fled his shattered body and Dundubhi lay dead at Vali’s feet. The jungle rang with Vali’s roars.

‘But my brother was not satisfied; as if he could have had a longer battle with Dundubhi. Still beating his chest, dancing, he lifted up the asura’s

body once more. Whirling it round over his head he flung it into the sky. It flew aloft for yojanas. But when it flew over Pampa and Rishyamooka, the black blood from the demon's corpse fell on Matanga rishi. When the carcass fell on the earth the sage's precious trees and plants, which he thought of his own children were crushed.

With mystic sight, Matanga saw who had done this. He cursed my brother. "Let Vali and his Vanaras die if they set foot in this forest of or mountains above my ashramas."

All Vali's vanaras in the jungle around the ashrama came scurrying back to Kishkindha. He was amazed to see them swarm to him in such panic. They cried out all together, so he could not make head or tail of what they said. He roared at them to be quiet.

Then one old monkey said "You desecrated holy ground with the asura's carcass. Rishi Matanga has cursed you that neither you or any of yours may set his foot on his forest, or you die"!

Vali flew to the muni and lay at his feet. "Forgive me my lord, I did not realize what I did".

But Matanga only rose and walked away and the curse remained. Vali fled back to Kishkindha; he felt his limbs grow weak as a woman's in the munis ashrama. Not since then has my brother came to Rishyamooka or near the Pampa Saras. Protected by that old curse, I live here today in safety. Come with me, Rama, I want to show you something.

He led the prince to a towering sala tree. Its bole as thick as ten men. 'Vali could shake all the leave from this tree with his hands. He could pull it by its roots. Rama, I feel anxious about you fighting with him'.

Lakshmana laughed. 'You worry too much. Sugriva, But tell us what can Rama do to convince you he is stronger than your brother Vali'?

SUGRIVA HAS DOUBTS

Sugriva had a shame faced look on his face. He did not know that his words were so transparent nor did he realize till he spoke how astute Lakshmana was. He was certainly afraid of Vali and he did want to make sure that Rama was strong enough to fulfill his promise to Sugriva. He said "You should not misunderstand me. Please do not think that I have no faith in Rama

and his prowess or in his words. I have but then the fear I have of Vali is so great, so terrible that I am dubious about the success of the task Rama has undertaken.

“Once my brother pierced these seven sala trees with seven arrows one by one. Just one arrow was enough to pierce one tree. I have thought up two tests for Rama. If he can also pierce each of these trees with an arrow and if he can lift up the skeleton of Dundubhi with one foot and fling it to a distance of a hundred bows, I will be certain that Rama is more powerful than Vali and I can be sure that Vali is as good as dead.

Sugriva stood still for a few moments and turning to Rama he said, “Rama as I told you before, my brother is very powerful. Asuras are afraid to meet him in single encounters and he has ever been defeated in any fight as yet. Even the Devas have been amazed at his feet. And all these many successes have made him arrogant and constant fear of him has made me unhappy. I have found a good friend in you and I have come to you for succour. Please do not for a moment, think that I am testing your strength or that I am trying to insult you to display your ability. I have not seen you before and it is my fear which makes me act thus.

Rama listened to the words of Sugriva and, with a sweet smile he said, “It is but natural for you to be doubtful about my accomplishments, that is, as far as fighting is concerned. I will try to convince you”.

Rama walked up to the skeleton of Dundubhi and lifting it with his toe, he threw it to a distance of ten yojanas. Sugriva was quite impressed but not enough.

His doubting mind said, “Rama, when Vali threw his body away, it was much heavier, filled as it was with blood and flesh. Now it is a frame work of bones. And again, he did it when he was tired and as for you, you are fresh and full of great enthusiasm. Even this fact amazing as it is, does not make me quite sure of my future. If only you can pierce one of these sala trees with a single arrow. I can be certain of your ascendancy over Vali. Please, Rama, string your bow and with an arrow, pierce all these sala trees. I will be satisfied. I will know then that you are the best among men; that you are, among archers what the sun is among the luminaries; what Himavan among mountains; what the lion is among animals.

Rama took up his bow in his hand. He strung it and he fixed an arrow to it. He pulled it far and then released it. He had aimed it at a sala tree.

The arrow glittering with its tip of gold, streaked through the air, pierced all the seven sala trees and entered the earth. After splitting the ground, it came back to the quiver of Rama and rested there.

The five monkeys were amazed at the feat and they were jumping in the air because of the excitement Sugriva was jubilant. He spoke again and again about the certainty of the death of Vali. His doubts had been cleared and to make up for his impertinence in doubting Rama he praised him in glowing terms.

He could not contain himself. He said, “Rama let us not waste time you must kill Vali today and rid my heart of the thorn which has been there for so many years. Rama embraced Sugriva and with a smile at Lakshmana he said, ‘Let us go to Kishkindha now. Sugriva, you go first and summon your brother to fight with you’”.

They went fast towards Kishkindha. In the dense forest Rama and Lakshmana concealed themselves behind some trees and stood waiting.

Sugriva was dressed to fight. He went to the gateway of Kishkindha and summoned Vali with a terrible roar.

AN ARROW FROM THE LEAVES

Sugriva stood at the gates of Kishkindha and roared a ringing challenge to Vali. Rama and Lakshmana hid themselves behind some trees and waited. Vali was amazed at what he heard, his cowardly brother. Whose nerve he thought he had broken for ever had come to fight. He would show him; he would manage him. He laughed aloud in his court. Great Vali cried “Sugriva has come to challenge me. Has he gone mad? Or is he so sick of his exile that he prefers to die”?

Vali came out of the city gates like sun. He was Indra’s son a mighty Vanara in his prime. He did not say a word to his brother. With a roar, Vali charged Sugriva as full ages of the jungle still do and knocked him to the ground. Emboldened by the thought of Rama hidden in the jungle, Sugriva jumped up and fought back.

As they fought both vanaras grew tall as trees. They rained blows like thunder and lightning on each other. Like Budha and Angaraka who fought across the sky in ancient times the brother battled in the jungle outside the secret city. Each blow was like Indra’s Vajra striking and the forest shuddered.

Rama fitted an arrow to the bow. He rose his bowstring to his ear and waited his chance. But he could not tell Vali from Sugriva. They were like twins as alike the Aswins from Vanara in the hot fray of curses and blows; but he could not. When he saw that no golden arrow flashed out from the jungle to deliver him from his brother, Sugriva panicked. He cringed from the fight, and once Vali unleashed a flurry of blows to his head. Sugriva spat blood. He turned tail and fled howling through the forest.

Vali chased him until he reached the boundary of Matanga's boundary. He roared after his brother 'don't come back or I will kill you'.

He did not see Rama anywhere and not pausing even to look over his shoulder, Sugriva flew screaming back to Rishyamooka. Only when he has scampered up the loftiest peak did he sobbing his sense of betrayal on a mind worn crag. Shortly Rama, Lakshmana and Hanuman arrived on the mountain. Sugriva was terrified monkey now. He shivered and banged his bangs. He growled; he turned away from Rama. At last he whined. "You came here offering me friendship. You showed me how strong you were. But instead of killing Vali you stood by while he almost killed me".

He was so angry he would have attacked the prince. He wiped the blood from his nose and mouth and studied it briefly moaning. He shivered at how close he had come to dying. Tears in his eyes, 'Rama cried, 'I could not tell you tell you and Vali apart. You look so alike. You walk and fight exactly like each other. My bow was bent my arrow was ready, but I could not tell if I aimed at Vali or at you. I did not want to kill you instead of your brother.

Sugriva stopped whining. He scratched his head and considered thus. The Vanara laughed nervously, as the truth of what had happened dawned on him. Rama said, "You must not lose heart. We will kill Vali before tomorrow's sunset. Lakshmana make a garland for Sugriva with some Gajapuspi Vine. So I can tell him from his brother and I will know which one to Kill.

Drawing his sword Lakshmana severed a length of the colourful elephant flower creeper. Tying its end together he made a garland for Sugriva and draped it round the Vanara's neck. They slept that night without much comfort often Sugriva groaned in his sleep. When his dreams showed him his brother, fangs bared, hands out stretched to throttle him.

The next day, the rushing sun saw them at the gates of Kishkindha once more. Rama had to reassure Sugriva repeatedly hugging the wounded

Vanara. Comforting him. At last Lakshmana said bluntly that the choice was either to trust Rama or return to his life of terror on Rishyamooka.

Again the Kshatriya's hid themselves behind a trees entwined with a deep creeper with them were Hanuman, Nala, Thara and Neela who was once Sugriva's Senapati. For a clearer view Rama climbed into one of the leafy branches.

Sugriva drew a deep breath. Taking the last shreds of courage in his hands, he rattled the wooden gates. He kicked those gates and roared his challenge to his brother within the city. In his wife's bed Vali awoke in surprise. Vali leapt out of bed and clothed himself. He would not let Sugriva off alive today.

But his queen, the sage and comely Tara said, "only yesterday you gave Sugriva a beating, and he is back already. If I know him he would sick licking his wounds for a year before he dared return. I am sure he has not come alone. Be careful Vali, my every instinct warns me of danger."

Vali stared at her in surprise. Tara said! Angada told me two khatriyas have been in the jungle lately. Their names are Rama and Lakshmana. I am sure Sugriva has their help that he dares come so boldly to our gates.

"I have heard Rama has no equal as an archer that he blazes like the fire at the end of the yugas. Listen to me today, Vali : befriend Sugriva and crown him Yuvaraja end this enmity, it will benefit us all. After all he is your brother who once loved you. Perhaps he did not be about the cave and the Asura. My heart quails for you, my love; Don't make an enemy of Rama!

But Vali was too angry at being woken from his morning dreams in her arms to pay Tara any heed. He cried "How can I let him taunt me at my gates ? What kind of king shall I be if I don't respond with a fight ? As for Rama I have heard he is an embodiment of Dharma. Even if he could, how will such a prince kill me when he has no quarrel with me ? But for your sake, I won't kill my foolish brother. I will only give him a sounder beating than he had yesterday and he will never come back".

Tara came out into the passage with Vali. She had tears in her eyes and she clasped him tightly, her slim born quivering in his arms. He laughed you are frightened for nothing. Go back inside I will come back to you as soon as I have chased that fool away with the thrashing he is howling for!

Helpers, Tara went back into her apartment. Vali swaggered of his gates, roaring for Sugriva. His brother sprang at him with fresh courage that the actual moment of battle was here. Raging like two storms they fought their blows were like earthquakes.

Rama waited in his tree hoping that, by a miracle perhaps Sugriva would kill his brother without his help. He knew if he shot Vali down with his arrow that Rama would cling to his name for ever; and a stain on white cloth is always starker for being on otherwise taintless fabric tensely, Rama waited. Vali struck Sugriva with fists of thunder and Sugriva uprooted a young sala and and struck his brother back. They had grown tree tall again in titanic combat.

Rama waited for a miracle. But again, it was Sugriva who tried first. Perhaps because he relied on the strength of another while Vali counted just on himself. Suddenly courage failed Sugriva. Vali struck him three awfull blows in his temples and his knees buckled. He swayed on his feet and began to fall. Then Rama shot Vali though the chest from his tree the sound of his bow string was like the end of the world. The sky shook and the earth, at Vali's scream when Rama's arrow pierced him like fire. He topped like a tree felled by an axe. With a crash Vali fell to Rama's cunning shaft and at once the sky was dark as dusk over Kishkindha, They say Vali the Vanara fell like the Iindradhanush falls on to the earth on the Purnima day of Aswayuja, when the rainbow is pulled down after the festival of the king of the Devas.

VALI'S CENSURE

With a single arrow Rama had hunt Vali and he was on the ground and he looked like a fallen God. The moment he fell the kingdom was born and helpless as the night sky without a moon. He was not looking fatigued nor was there any sign of death in him. His splendour had not faded. His golden garland was brilliant and he was looking glorious with the gift of Indra. He was as beautiful as he was before the fight and the garland made him look like the sunset cloud with an edge of gold. So he lay on the ground.

Rama accompanied by Lakshmana came out of the screens of trees and walked towards Vali who was like a flame without smoke like the king Yayathi who fell to the earth when his punya was all exhausted, like the sun who had fallen on the ground at the end of the yuga. Vali was lying on the ground, Vali who was the son of Indra was as powerful.

Rama approached him and with him went Lakshmana Vali had regained consciousness and he looked at the approaching figure of the two

brothers. He waited them to come near. Rama stood there one hand loosely clasping the bow and the other, unstringing it. Vali said, "I was fighting with my brother. When I was absorbed in the fight I was hit in the chest by an arrow coming from out of now is here. Tell me, how does it benefit you to fight with an opponent who did not offer you any fight ? I had no quarrel with you and get hiding behind the trees you have killed me. To what purpose ? What did you gain by it ?

"You are the son of an emperor, born in a noble family. You are said to have great, good and noble qualities. They say you are valiant, generous and righteous. I have heard praises of you. You are indeed a famous personage." You are said to be compassionate and you are the have of Kindliness and mercy. Your valour is not of this world. You are well acquainted with the rules of conduct and you are said to have observed all the rules of Dharma all these years.

"A king should be afraid of committing sinful acts and he should have the senses under his control. He should have patience and manliness, truthfulness and valour should be his ornaments. He should punish only those who have offended him, when Sugriva called me the second time, Tara warned me about you and laughed her fears since I had great faith in you noble birth and your great qualities. I was fighting with someone else and I had not encountered you. I told her that you would never agree to fight with me thus".

"My belief is wrong. I see now you are an Adharmi, you are like a well covered with grass and therefore is more treacherous than an open well. You are a sinner in the guise of a good man and you are like fire covered by ashes. I have done you no wrong. I did not came to your country and offend you. I have not insulted you in any matter. Why then did you kill Me ? I am a monkey dwelling in the forest and so as Sugriva. We were fighting our personal fight and you were not in anyway challenged by me. You took it upon yourself to aim your arrow at me and killed me. Why ? You are a Kshatriya and you are well versed in all the nuances of Dharma. You are called the image of Dharma and I was deceived by your reputation. Your righteousness is just a pretence. You are a prince Rama and we are animals dwelling in the forest. Fighting over trivial things like a piece of land as a few pieces of gold or a woman, are all natural to us. How does our travel affect you ? Kings have the power to curse or pardon. But they are not expected to misuse their power.

"As for you it seems to me that you act according to your wish and you are the prove to be affected by anger. You have not followed the rules of conduct set down for a prince, a Kshatriya. Irrespective of whether it is right or wrong you have become addicted to the use of bow and arrow. You are not

completely righteous nor are you firm in your thinking. You are easily swayed by your emotions”.

“Rama today you have killed me who is innocent. This act of yours is cruel and unforgivable. When the wise question you about it, what will be your explanation ? I have also been taught the rules of Dharma.”

“I have been told that one who kills a king, one who kills a Brahmin, a cow one who steals the wealth belonging to another, one who enjoys hunting animals, who does not believe god who marries when his elder brother is still unmarried who reveals a secret to the world, who is avaricious, who betrays his trusted friend, who lusts after the wife of his preceptor, all these will be doomed to dwell in hell meant for great sinners”.

“You may say that a prince has a right to kill an animal as a hunter does. But I am a monkey. My skin is not of any use as an apparel like the skin of the deer. My bones and hair are of any use to anyone. My flesh is not eaten by men. Brahmins and Kshatriyas are allowed to eat the flesh of animal, which have five nails. I do not belong to that group”.

“If I had listened to the words of warning spoken by my beloved Tara, I would not have come to this sad end. It is a pity that a righteous king like Dasaradha should have a son like you. This act of yours is against all codes of Dharma and I have become the victim of an unrighteous man.”

“If you had challenged me and fought with me, you would certainly have been defeated by me. But like a serpent which creeps under the grass and crawls up to a sleeping man and bites him you have attacked me. I know why you have killed me. You wished to please Sugriva by this act of yours and in return he has to find your lost wife for you. If you had approached me first. I would certainly have brought her from where she is imprisoned and that in a single day. I have put a nose on the neck of that sinful Ravana and dragged him to your presence.”

“After I am dead Sugriva will ascend the throne. That is lawful. I ask you, may demand of you, that you justify your act are convince me that what you did is right. I am willing to listen”.

The brave Vali, the son of Indra, was in great pain and his voice was growing faint as he spoke to Rama. His words had now ceased and he looked at Rama.

Rama listened patiently to the accusations of Vali. The monkey king spoke words which were true to the Dharma, which were just and which were spoken quite softly. There was no harshness in the voice of Vali. When he said these things. Rama looked at Vali for a long moment. He was like the sun whose glory had been dimmed like a rain cloud which had been emptied of its waters; like fire which had died down.

THE LIGHT BEYOND

For a long moment, Rama stood silent and grieved over the dying Vali. Then he said quietly 'I fear you don't understand everything about Dharma. Lakshmana and I belong to the house of sun. It is our Dharma in the name of the king my brother Bharatha in Ayodhya to punish those that sin'. We are the Kshatriya's of the earth. The solemn power to judge is vested in us.

"You speak of Dharma. But you seem to know that by Dharma a man has three fathers in the world; his own father, his guru and his older brother. In this world and older brother should treat his younger brother like a son. Sugriva was a loving and obedient brother to you. But you drove him from your kingdom; worse still you took his Ruma for yourself'.

"That is why I shot you down today, Vanara. You broke Dharma by keeping your brother's wife. I could not but judge you and kill you for what you made Sugriva suffer. He and I have sworn friendship by an oath of Agni. He is as dear to me as Lakshmana. If anyone treated my brother as you have done Sugriva I would kill him. The oaths I swear are not empty; they find me in honour."

'It is not appearance by which we judge, but by the soul. Sugriva is a pure and untainted soul; while you, who are so powerful, who are a great king of your people, are lost in darkness you are beyond the pale of Dharma, a king like you must not be left alive'.

Vali's breath wheezed painfully, and his eyes shone with unworldly knowledge streaming into his heart at what the Avatara said. Now he heard transcendent echoes in the blue prince's words, and they enfolded him, consoled him on the threshold of death.

Rama was saying. 'The princes of Ikshvaku rule the world. You say I shot you from hiding. But through time, the kings of the earth set traps for wild creatures of the building. We hunted them from trees or with nests. You

are strong and valiant. But as you say yourself, you are a Vanara an animal. I did not break Dharma I hunted you’.

Not for Rama said was Vali assuaged, but for his unearthly voice and the visions that unfurled in the Vanara’s head as he listened, like golden lotuses, thousand petalled. Rama’s love washed into him in a tide. The dying monkey saw hidden realms of life opening before him and he knew that Rama killed him in compassion and in forgiveness of all his sins. He knew that death was only the beginning of a deeper more glorious existence. It was redemption. Rama’s voice opened a path of light out of the bondage of the body and he had a glimpse of what lay beyond. Vali understood who this dark prince was who stood before him. A smile touched his lips and his eyes softened. He knew Rama had not only killed him but also, delivered him into eternal life.

Then he thought of his son and Vali was snatched back into anxiety. He took Rama’s hand held it tightly and breathed. ‘Now I know who you are my lord. Forgive me that I doubted you. But a great care holds my sprint back in this world. My son Angada is still tender. He is my only child; he has to learn much yet and he will pine for his father’s love. I am not worried about anyone else not even my queen’.

‘Who was you has everything, prince of light. What is a Vanara kingdom, when he who has your love can be a king in heaven ? Protect my son, Rama; let him be as dear to you as Lakshmana or Bharatha. And my Tara. Don’t let Sugriva harm her’. The light around Rama grew blinding and the dying Vanara saw it was the light of his own soul. His heart was awash on the sea of splendour; flowing in waves from the blue Khatriya only Vali saw Rama as truly he was.

In ecstasy. Vali cried, “I answered Sugriva’s challenge just to due at your hand! If I lived a thousand lives each time I would not die any other way look after Angada. Lord, let your blessings be up on him”.

Vali’s breath came in ragged gasps as Rama knelt beside him and took his hand.

Rama said, ‘only fate decides how a man shall die. When he is born already deep in his body the secret of death nestles; no man may live a moment longer than he was born to I swear Angada shall have my protection, and he will be as dear to Sugriva as he was to you. I will see to that’.

Suddenly they heard heart broken wailing from within the walls of Kishkindha. They heard the shrill yowls of the Vanara’s panic when they

learnt their king was slain. The moneys fled into the jungle in every direction, for fear that they too would be killed. Above the bedlam. Rama and Vali heard the ululating lament of a queen. Tara came out of the palace, bringing her son Angada with her.

TARA'S GRIEF

Vali had never defeated by anyone. He had killed so many asuras. Even as Indra hurls his vajra, vali would hunt huge rocks at his opponents and his prowess was known in all the three worlds. His voice was like the rambling of a thunder and his valour was greater than that of Indra. Such a hero was now lying on the ground and she looked around. Tara saw Rama who stood still with the bow in his hand, at Lakshmana and at Sugriva, her husband's brother. She looked down at the ground and saw the unconscious form of Vali. Tara fell on the ground and clasping him in her arms, set up a wale of woe which was heart rending. Angada was sobbing along with his mother and Sugriva was sorely grieved at the sight of them.

Tara saw the arrow which had lodged in her husband's chest and again and again she embraced him.

"I am Tara, my lord" she cried "I am your dear wife and when I am calling you, why do you not answer me ? Come with me and we will go back to the palace. This hard bed is unbecoming to you. Evidently you are more in love with the earth or else you would have heard my piteous appeal. There is now another city like Kishkindha which has been prepared for you in the heavens and it seems to me, you prefer that. My heart is very hard or else how can it still beat and not break into a thousand pieces after seeming on the ground, with your life ebbing away ? Why did you not listen to me when I asked you not to fight with Sugriva ? If you had only paid heed to my words of warning you would not have been dead. It was fate which made you a victim to the guiles of your brother. Your son Angada, who had known what hardship is wile now be a dependant on Sugriva and I wonder how he will be treated. I am afraid.

"Child Angada, take a last look at your valiant father. You will never see him again. Rama has kept his promise to his friend and has dispatched your father to the heavens. Sugriva, the kingdom is yours. Your enemy is killed and you will be reunited with Rama. All your desires will now be fulfilled. I hope you are happy".

“Vali, my lord, how is it you are deaf to my leadings and my voices. Have you forgotten me so soon”?

She wept bitter tears and her piteous weeping was painful to watch. Again and again she called out to Vali and asked him not to leave her and her son and go away. Finally she decided to cast off her life by fasting unto death. Hanuman came to her and tried to comfort her. He said, “A man reaps the fruits of the actions he has performed; actions whether good or bad and death grants him these fruits. No man’s actions depend in those of another. The human body is like bubble on the surface of water no one need mourn for another since we are all to be pitied. You are in a pitiable state and you feel sorry for Vali who is dead you are drowned in a misfortune and you feel that Vali is unfortunate. There is no cause for grief in this world where, everything is transient. It is no not right that you think of giving us your life. You have a son and it is your duty to protect him. Think of his future and make up your mind to act in such a way as to ensure his safety and good. You are a wise lady and you know only too well what the ultimate truth is; birth and death are inevitable and life on earth s not permanent. That is the reason why a man should try and perform as good acts as he can.

This Vali who was a great king and on whom depended all his subjects is now dead. He know the codes of behaviour. He was sweet – spoken, generous and he was very patient. He has attained the world meant for good people and so he should not be mourned. “You are the queen of this kingdom and your son, young Angada looks to you for comfort. All the subjects look to you for assurance. Abandon this grief and this decision to lay down your life. Angada will surely be the king. Let him be prepared to perform his duties which a son has to. The Vedas say that it is for this purpose that a son is born to a man. Angada should perform the final rites of his father. After he has done his duty Angada will be crowned as Yuvaraja. Your thoughts must now be only for the welfare of your son”.

Tara refused to be comforted and she would not give up the thought of death. Vali had recovered from his faint and with great difficulty he tried to breath and his eyes lighted on Sugriva. He called him affectionately by name and called him to his side. He said, “Sugriva, I am sad that I wronged you because of my pride and arrogance. Evidently fate was against your showing the affection which brothers normally should. That happiness was denied to us. No one could alter the decrees of fate. You know only too well that I am dying. Accept this kingdom from me I am giving up my life, my son, the immense wealth which was mine and the great fame I had earned you must now listen to my last wishes you must fulfill them”.

“Look at this son of muni, Angada, who stands with the pain of separation from me. I love him to distraction and I have taken very good care of him. He is dearer to me than my very life and, bereaved as he is, it is up to you to treat him as your son and take good care of him. I am certain that you will do so. He is valiant and in the fight that is to ensue with the rakshasas Ravana. Angada will be at the forefront. He will display his prowess and make a name of himself. This Tara, the dear daughter? Sushena, is a very wise woman. She knows the subtle tricks of state craft. She knows how to react to any unforeseen situation. Take her advice in everything. If she approves of a thing, then it is certain to be correct. You have lot of responsibility of helping Rama. You must do it properly. Sin will cling to you if you fail in your duty. Also Rama can be very angry if he wants to. He will punish you. Sugriva lastly take this golden garland from me. It is divine and you must wear it. Once dead the effect will go. So take it before my life ebbs out.

Listening to the words of Vali. Sugriva's pleasure at having got the kingdom was all gone. With sobs he took the garland from Vali and he placed round his neck.

Vali had no regrets now. He called Angada to his side and said, “Child Angada remember to be aware of the altered circumstances and the situation which now are facing. Do not pay much attention to things which are apt to displease you. Accept happiness and sorrow as they come and do not be moved by them. You must please Sugriva in every way. Perhaps you may not be petted and loved as much by him as you were by me. Do not mind it. Remember to avoid those who are his enemies. Be neither too attached to anyone or should you be completely indifferent. Adopt the middle course and try to find comfort in the guardianship of Sugriva”.

Vali's end was fast approaching. When he had spoken to his son he struggled in pain because of the arrow which was lodged inside him and a moment later he died.

Tara was inconsolable. Neela, one of the chiefs approached the body of Vali and gently he pulled out the arrow. Tara made Angada prostrate before the dead form of Vali. Sugriva was shedding tears and he went to the presence of Rama and said “Rama you kept your word and Vali is dead. But now I have lost interest in the worldly things which once seemed unattainable. The death of Vali, my brother, the sorrow of his queen the helpless look in the eyes of Angada have all made me averse to the thought of becoming the king. I wished for the death of Vali and it was because of my anger and wickedness; I am full of repentance. I will continue to live on top of Rishyamooka I will find peace there. During all the many fights we had, Vali could have killed me. But

the he would say “I do not have the heart to kill you, Go and stay out of my sight. That meant he loved and I did not realize it. I should never have wished for his death. It was my greed for wealth and the kingdom which made me wish for it. I am a sinner I am not fit to rule a kingdom my servants will do my bidding and search for Sita. I will not break my promise to you. But I do not want to live anymore. I will fall into the fire and burn to death”.

Rama was, by nature very compassionate and he was very unhappy to see the grief. Tara was made to rise up from the side of Vali and she looked at Rama. She said to him, “I have heard about you and your good nature. You should take pity on me and the use of the same arrow on me with which you killed my husband I will be united with him and he will be happy. He cannot be without me. You have been separated from your wife and you know how painful it is and surely you will not want Vali to suffer as you do. He needs me, I assure you, the sin of killing a woman will not cling to you please do this one favour.

Rama was sorely distressed by her sorrow. He spoke words of comfort to her. He said “You are the wife of hero and you should not give way to despair. Fate rules the world and the Vedas say that everything functions according to the will of Brahma. All the three world have to obey his wishes and you cannot over rule the dictates of fate. Your son Angada will be the yuvaraja and seeing him, you will forget your sorrow. No woman who has a hero for husband and a hero for son will give into grief. Abandon this despair”. He comforted all of them with his gentle words and he then asked them to perform the last rites for Vali. He spoke about the power of fate over everyone and everything. He said, “No one can circumvent fate. In this world fate is the only powerful cause for every happening. No man does anything on his own; nor is he free to command anyone to do anything. Fate is the soul power which rules the actions of man fate is neither partial nor has it any personal gain or loss to sustain. Fate makes man suffer or enjoy pleasure and man is helpless in the hands of fate. Vali has been the plaything of fate and he has now reached the heavens which he has earned. Rouse up yourself from this despondency and perform the rites for Vali”.

Lakshmana spoke to Sugriva to do the needful. He organized the entire proceedings and soon the palanquin, richly decorated was ready. Vali was placed in it and carried to the pyre which had been prepared with sandal and other scented woods. They placed Vali on it and Angada touched it with fire. They bathed later in the cool waters of the river which flowed nearby and after offering Tarpana to the departed soul they returned to the city Kishkindha.

KING OF THE VANARAS

The vanaras gathered outside Kishkindha outside the cave that led into the secret city. The monkey chieftains were all there anxiety was writ large on their faces, it was plain in their uneasy movements and nervous chattering. At the cunningly concealed cave mouth. Hanuman came to Rama and said, "By your grace Sugriva has the kingdom of his ancestors. Advice him what to do next. He feels guilty and talks of killing himself. Our people are alarmed; they want a strong king to rule them.

Rama said to Hanuman, "To keep my father's word I may not enter any city, or village even, until the fourteen years of my exile are over. But let Sugriva be taken into Kishkindha and crowned.

Rama turned to Sugriva, and said aloud before all the vanaras, 'Don't waste your grief. If you are truly sorry go into Kishkindha and take up the reigns of kingdom. Crown Angada Yuvaraja. He is a noble prince and he will bring honour to Vali's name and yours'.

Rama paused and looked around him at the tress of spring, festive with flowers and the birds full of songs in their branches. He said slowly "It is Shravana. The monsoon soon will be upon us. Lakshmana and I will find a cave on the mountain to live until the rain passed. For four months, it will rain without let. But when the month of Kartika arrives, you must keep your promise to me that you will find Sita. I will wait until then".

"But now go into our city. O King of the jungle, and be crowned. It is a time of transition, when your people need you most of all. Be strong and sit upon your throne with Dharma beside you. I know you will be a great king. Go my friend, go in peace".

Sugriva knelt at Rama's feet for his blessings. But Rama raised him up and embraced him. The princes of Ayodhya went back into the forest from where they had come. Sugriva entered the hidden city of Kishkindha and he was crowned as the king of the vanaras. At the same ceremony, he made Angada the yuvaraja and embraced him like his own son. Bitterness had melted from Sugriva's heart; only remorse for his brother's death remained.

Then, at last, his wife Ruma came to him. Crooning in joy, he clasped her to him and his life began anew. Sugriva began a long and happy rule as king of the olden and free race of the vanaras.

THE RAINS AND AFTER

Rama and Lakshmana came to the mountain called Prasravana. They found a large, dry cave, its floor so smooth and clean that it may have been created just for the princes of Ayodhya to live in. They had barely laid out beds of grass themselves when the heavens opened for four months, with hardly a day when they saw the sun, it poured on the world. The wind howled on the valley below the cave and great trees bent their crowns to the power of Vayu and Indra.

The jungle grow visibly with the succour of the monsoon. When the sun did emerge from behind scudding cloud banks and shone down into the world for an hour or two, the two brothers marveled at the lash creepers that wound themselves around giant trees, almost a fresh foot each day and thrust gaudy flowers and sensuous pistils at the steaming forest. The trees were covered in soft new leaves, and the grass and the foliage all sheathed with warm, wet life. The animals of the jungle mated in abandon during the rains, beside swollen trees and an tangled hills. The birds in the trees all lovers. Serpents entwined in damp nests and insects mounted their mates under flowering bushes and slabs of rock, in fervent ritual.

Once the moon had risen and Rama saw the moonlit peak all of Prasravana from the mouth of the cave where they were staying. His thoughts flew to Sita and he broke down. Lakshmana was his sole comfort. He said “Rama, you must be brave, you should not be unhappy. You have told me that one who loses his mental equipoise will cause all his actions to go waste. You are powerful and you will him back Sita from that rakshasa after killing him. Do not give way to despair. You are able to break or make this entire Universe. Why then should we worry about this sole enemy ? Let the rainy days pass and soon the reason shared will here. We will then be able to locate Sita. Ravana will be killed. It not as though you do not know your strength. Like fire which is covered with ashes needs an ahuti of ghee to make it glow again I am trying to remind you of your prowess.”

Rama was touched by the tenderness with which Lakshmana was taking care of him. He said, “Child, Lakshmana, you have ever been devoted to me and your love for me is in finite. You speak right words at the right time. I realize the enervating effect sorrow has on one. I will try and shed it. I will wait for the caring of Sharad. I will wait for Sugriva’s and when the rains cease. It is hard to be patient but I will wait”.

Lakshmana said, “Rama, Sugriva will do the needful and he will organize the search for Sita. These days will pass and soon we can act. This inaction is making me impatient too and we will soon see the end of it”.

The four months had come to an end and the skies were reigning their blue. Sugriva should set about his task; the search for Sita. But he found that Sugriva, after many years of exile had come back to luxury and in this state of mind, had forgotten himself and the duty he owed to Rama. He was busy enjoying himself with wine and women.

Hanuman who know the nuances of Dharma who was ever wise, saw that the time had come when the king should shaken out of his complacency. The skies were clear and there was no longer the sound of thunder or flash. Moonlight was chaste and white and the moon shed its soft radiance on the terraces of the king’s palace and still he did not wake up to the fact that the time had come when he should remember his promise. Sugriva was spending his days and nights in tasting the joys who had been denied so long. He had left the affairs of the kingdom in the hands of ministers and was, himself, always in the harem.

Hanuman went to the presence of Sugriva and spoke to him words full of wisdom. They were words of advice but spoken very humbly. He said, “My lord, this kingdom has been restored to you and also your dear wife. There is still something undone. You should return the favour done to you by your friend. It is not for me as your mentor. I have assumed that you will follow my advice. I need not tell you what you must do now. When a man knows how to act as befits the nobility of his character and keeps his word which spread far and wide. He will be honoured.

“I know your good nature and it is up to you to help Rama who was responsible for you to become the king. You should now set aside your other interest and devote yourself entirely to the task undertaken by you. No man should prove unfaithful to a friend my lord, please make all arrangements for the search for Sita. We have promised Rama that we will do this. Even though he is impatient to learn about her, Rama is too noble to trouble you and remind you of your duty.”

‘Shravana is long past and the four months are over. The rains have ceased and the time has come when you should act. Collect the vanaras to go in search of Sita. It should not seem as though you are indifferent about Rama once you have gained what you desired. You should not wait to be reminded of your duty. Rama can easily destroy the three worlds. He is very much upset by this delay. I am sure. But he is attached to you and he expects to

remain your friend. He is still patient and he is waiting for sure kind of communication from you telling him that you are keeping your promise in mind and that you have not forgotten about it’.

“If Rama becomes angry, no one can save you from his anger. Commanded by you, hordes of vanaras should search for Sita everywhere. After finding out the hiding place where Ravana has imprisoned her, we will be able to say that we have returned the favour done to us by Rama. Please make arrangements for the host of Vanaras to assemble in Kishkindha as early as possible”.

Sugriva listened to the words spoken by the wise Hanuman. He thought for a while and then he sent for Neela and told him. “Neela see that my entire army led by the different chiefs assemble. Let them to come as fast as they can to our city. They must be here within fifteen days from today. If anyone dares to treat this command casually, he will be executed. Ask Angada to represent me and arrange about the collection of the army”. After this Sugriva went back to his harem.

GRIEF AND ANGER

More than a month and half passed after the monsoon. A month of aching nights, when he lay awake and Sita’s face and her tender form drifted before his eyes like visions and stoked his despair. One day Rama broke down.

Lakshmana returned from his foray into the jungle, where he had gone to hunt. He found Rama laid out at the cave mouth. His face was tear stained and anguished his mind had sought relief from its torment in unconsciousness. Lakshmana sprinkled sparkling stream water on his brother’s face, and Rama revived. He sat up shaking his head in misery helplessly pleading in his eyes.

Lakshmana cried ‘I should never have left you alone. You must not torture yourself with memories; they only rob you of your courage. The rains are over Sugriva must already have sent his people on the quest for Sita. Take heart Rama, the way ahead is shorter than you think. You will be with her soon’.

But Rama said, “The season and the mood of the forest inflame me with longing. There are times when I cannot help myself. Lakshmana, she is in the hands of a devil. My heart tells me he is no ordinary rakshasa, but a great creature of darkness. And I fear for her life.

Sugriva swore he would begin his search for Sita as soon as the rains broke. Sharada had been with us for more than a month, and there is no news from the vanara. These four months have been like a hundred years for me, but it seems Sugriva has forgotten his promise. He is indifferent, now that he has what he wanted. You say I must – be calm. But I cannot help myself anymore, my body is on fire.

“Go to Sugriva and tell him from me. The most contemptible man is who forgets his friends after he has used them and has no further need for them.”

‘Ask him if he wants to hear the sound of my bowstring again. Remind him how I killed Vali and of the debt he owes me. Rouse him from lust; wake him to my pain and my need.’

“Tell Sugriva I said “The portal through Vali left the world is still open. If you break your word to me, you will follow your brother out of his life. Hurry Sugriva, before despair becomes my master and I come to kill you. You are still my friend; but don’t mock my friendship any longer.”

They had heard of Sugriva’s long debauch from some wondering Vanaras. Lakhmana said softly. ‘The monkey does not deserve his throne. I will go and kill him in his harem. Let Angada rule Kishkindha. Vali was right, he would have helped you sooner than his brother has cared to. Sugriva has forgotten he owes everything he has today’.

Lakshmana strapped on his quiver. At once, Rama said, “I wish I had not showed you my anger. You must not be hasty. Lakshmana, give Sugriva every chance to justify himself before you even think of killing him.”

‘Tell him gently that for the covenant we made with Agni as our witness, he and I are friends for life. He must have reasons for his delay, be patient when you speak to him. Speak kindly’. Lakshmana bowed to his brother, as formally as he might have in the Sabha of Ayodhya and strode away through the jungle towards the secret city of the vanaras. As he went, his mind swings between reason and anger. He must obey Rama and give Sugriva every chance to explain himself. But if the monkey king could not satisfy him. Lakshmana would not wait for Rama to come and kill Sugriva, he would do it himself. Didn’t the knavish creature know Rama’s plight ? Had he place in his heart only for his own grief ? Such a selfish heart should be cloven with an arrow.

Lakshmana could not bear to see Rama as he had been their past months. He couldn’t bear the hunted looks in his eyes, the lines of pain that had

appeared on his face. As all men do who love another as intensely as Lakshmana did his brother, he felt Rama's anguish as if it was his own. At time he felt it even more than Rama did, during long nights when he sat and watched his brother toss and turn in his sleep and wept for him.

His bow clasped in his hand, gleaming like silver of a rainbow with its jeweled inlay, Lakshman stalked grimly towards Kishkindha.

THE FURY OF LAKSHMANA

Situated between two peaks could be seen the city by name Kishkindha. The entrance to the city was through a cave and it was inaccessible to anyone, guarded as it was, by the Vanaras who had been posted at the mouth of cave. Lakshmana saw these monkeys and his lips throbbed in anger when he thought of their master. The Vanaras saw him approaching and ignorant as they were as to who he was, they made haste to defend the city by taking up trees in their hands and arming themselves with rocks which lay near at hand. The sight of the monkeys and their attempts to attack him, if need be made Lakshmana doubly angry. Seeing his fury they became frightened and ran away from his presence. He looked like death at the end of yuga.

The monkeys hurried to the mansion of the king and announced to Sugriva the arrival of Lakshmana and the told him about the extreme anger which sat on his bow, Sugriva was drunk and he lost to the world in the embrace of Tara. He could not attach any importance to the words of monkeys. The ministers of the king, realising the anger that was threatening the city, led the army out to accost the intruder Angada guarded the several entrances to the city.

Lakshmana saw the army marching out to the city gates. He was beside himself with fury. His eyes were crimson with rage and he signed when he thought of his brother languishing in the cave and the reception while he was getting at the gate of Kishkindha. Angada came out of the city to meet him. He saw the angry face of Lakshmana and he thought that Lakshmana was like the king of serpents Adishesha. The young prince was worried and afraid. He came and stood near the angry brother of Rama. Words would not come out of his lips since his tongue was clearing to the roof of his mouth. Lakshmana looked at him and said, 'Child Angada, let my arrival be announced to Sugriva. Tell him : Rama's brother, the destroyer of enemies is wanting at your door. He has come as an emissary from your friend Rama who is sunk in sorrow. If there is a shred of Dharma in your king, let him do what has to be done' child, Angada, repeat these words to your king and bring me back his reply!"

Angada was scared out of his wits by the words of Lakshmana. He rushed to his uncle and told him, “Lakshmana is here! His face was pale and there was nothing but fear in it. He prostrated before Sugriva and his mother. He repeated the words of Lakshmana. The slothful king was still unaware of the danger which was threatening him. He was so drunk he could not open his eyes. The terrified noise made by the monkeys could be heard even inside the palace. Sugriva was roused out of his stupor by their shouting. His ministers who had been told about the arrival of Lakshmana came to the presence of Sugriva. They tried to make him realize the great threat to their security. After he had regained a semblance of waterfulness Sugriva was addressed by Hanuman”. My Lord, the Kosala brothers Rama and Lakshmana, are truthful and righteous your friendship was promised to them and they have helped you to reign this kingdom which you had lost me one of them. Lakshmana the younger is waiting at the city gate and he is holding his bow in his hand which is causing this panic in the army. Angada our prince has been sent to you your duty. Lakshmana is extremely angry and he looks as though he burns the world with his angry eyes. You should now go and pacify him. When Rama sends him to you it means that you should assure them that you will do the needful about the search of Sita.

Sugriva was wide awake now and he stood up from his couch. He spoke to him. “I have done nothing to offend them. I don’t know why Lakshmana should come to me with anger in his eyes. He is finding fault with him and when I am not afraid of this Lakshmana nor do I fear his brother Rama. I am only distressed that a friend should be angry with me. It is always easy to form a friendship. But to maintain friendship is not easy. Because of the mind and its fickle nature, the slightest carelessness is apt to spoil friendship. That is why I am afraid. I know that I can never repay the benefit I have derived from Rama. I owe everything to him”.

Hanuman said, “It is but meet that you should speak thus and assure us that you have not forgotten what Rama has done for you. To oblige you he dispatched to the city of Yama Vali who was valiant like Indra. And now, without any obstacles in your path, you have ascended the throne”.

“Rama is not seriously angry with you. It is slight a displeasure he has expressed through his brother. I am sure of it. You have been, to an extent, careless and you have allowed time to lapse. You have not kept track of the seasons. The rainy months have gone and now it is the season shored with beautiful the forest with its fresh green look. The sky is rid of the dense clouds and the nights are the nights are bright with the stars and planets which shine in the azure sky. The rivers are no longer filled with turbid water, but we see clearness in every water spot in every lake and every river. The time has come

when you should remember the promise you made to Rama and that is the reason which brings the brother of Rama to your doorsteps now. Rama has been separated from his wife and he has been counting the days when the pangs of separation will come to an end. Painted in mind and heart he has sent Lakshmana to you. If the words of the messenger are slightly tense and sharp, please do not be offended by them. I find that the only way to pacify Lakshmana is to go to him with folded palms and ask him for his pardon. I am your well wisher and so I have made bold to talk, to you so humbly so as to do what you should do. It is my duty to serve you from the wrath of a righteous man who has been sorely tried.

“Remember my Lord, If Rama should be really angry, if he should take the bow in his hand and string it, the three worlds will tremble and he can destroy them all. If Rama should change in his feelings towards you then nothing can save you or us. Please remember the debt you owe him and make certain that he does not way to anger you should not be indifferent to these valiant brothers from Ayodhya even in your thoughts. Rama has great affection for you and you should make every attempt to retain that affection”.

Hanuman’s words has the proper effect. Lakshmana was requested to enter the city and very humbly he was conducted inside the Kishkindha. The doorkeepers saluted him with great respect and they were frightened to see the anger on his brow. He walked along the path which led to the mansion of the king. Soon he reached the doorway and he entered it like the sun entering a dark cloud. It was jealously guarded and no one tried to impede his progress.

Lakshmana entered the palace and passed several sections and terraces which were richly decorated. He reached the Anahpura of Sugriva and paused at the doorway. Music could be heard from inside and the tramping of the strings of Veena. Beautiful women were to be found everywhere. Unused as to the company of women, Lakshmana was feeling quite shy and embarrassed by them. He could not bear it and to shut out the music of them, he twanged the bow string. He stood apart in a corner of the hall.

THE DIPLOMACY OF TARA

Sugriva turned pale when he heard the thunder of Lakshmana’s bowstring. For all his boasting, he dare bit face the angry prince. Terror gripped the vanara king and his far stood an end. He turned to the lovely Tara and said, my queen, this Kshatriya’s real nature is gentle, and he is easily calmed as he is roused, go to him here and I will speak to him.

Lakshmana waited in a corner away from the eyes of a woman in the harem. When the lovely Tara came to him in the warden hall where he stood, she sensed his tenseness and his fury. Hesitant by he came her eyes cast down and half open from all the wine she had drunk with Sugriva. Her slender body quivered with fear, like a lotus in a breeze. Yet she came with a great poise and was entirely queenly. Lakshmana knew who she was but not why she had come thinking even, that she had been sent to seduce him, he turned his back on her and stood glaring out of a window. But Tara came softly up to him.

She said, “Be welcome to Kishkindha, O Kshatriya. But great Lakshmana, you came in anger. Tell me what is the cause of your rage at which our city trembles ? Who has been foolish enough to light a fire in a forest of dry trees”?

She touched him swift and deep. “What man could ignore Tara’s beautiful voice, or her utterly feminine presence ? This was not the kind of battle Lakshmana relished. With an effort, he steadied himself and quietened the disconcerting tumult in his body. He said to her decorously ‘My lady, your husband has sent you to placate me. But don’t be blind to what he has done. Once he became king, he has forgotten Rama who restored his kingdom to him. Wine and women are all his remembers, and Dharma is far from his mind. These months that Sugriva has spent indulging himself, from mind. These months that Sugriva has spent Rama has languished in the forest, with grief driving him to the edge of madness. Is this the friendship that Sugriva swore, with Agni as his witness ? He has betrayed us, and an ingrate. He steadied himself and quietened the disconcerting tumult in his body.

Lakshmana spoke quietly. But there was in his words and his eyes still shouldered dangerously. Tara did not reply at once, she considered what to say. Her task was a delicate and grave one and she knew it.

At last she said, “Kshatriya even great rishis fall pray to the temptations of Kama. What then of a fickle monkey whose nature you will know? After years of being denied in the wilderness. Sugriva could hardly help indulging himself. He fell so avidly to pleasure that he left even the governance of the kingdom to his ministers.

But noble Lakshmana, Sugriva had no desire to hunt Rama or you. It isn’t that he does not value your friendship, he was merely lost in a sensuous dream. You have woken him from stupor now let Rama. Who is tolerance embodied forgive him!

Lakshmana looked at this bewitching queen, and thought who could refuse her anything she wanted ? But he also made no immediate reply only gazed at her.

Tara said, 'I think you should also know, my lord, that Sugriva has already ordered his vanaras to come to Kishkindha. He means to send them forth in every direction on the quest for Sita. He did this even before you come here. Hundred thousands of monkeys from all over the world already fly to us at their king's command'.

She saw Lakshmana give a start at this news she had subtly kept for the last. She saw his eyes soften and knew her little battle was won. She had saved Kishkindha and its king from immediate danger. Tara said 'came with me to Antahpura. I can see you are pure and strong and will not be tainted by its sights. Sugriva is waiting for you'.

She walked before him through winding, climbing, simian corridors, along knotted branches of the ancestral tree into which the complex palace was built and they came to the Antahpura. Sugriva's harem. Inside the vanara king sat upon a couch of gaudy brocade. He wore fine garments. He sat among his women, with his arms around the delectable Rama. Lakshmana's fury sparked alive again and Tara sighed to herself at how indiscreet her lord was.

Sugriva sprang up when he saw Lakshmana. The Khastriya's eyes burned with anger. But the ways of monkeys and men are a world apart and little could Sugriva understand that seeing him with Ruma could infuriate the human as it did. He came forward guilelessly to greet the fair prince shambling up to him, his long arms trailing the floor. He folded his arms solemnly to Lakshmana, and stood silent, his most brown eyes gazing at the warrior's face.

Between his teeth, Lakshmana said, "A compassionate king, who is concerned about the sufferings of others, gains fame for himself in the world. A truthful king, who remembers favours he has received and is grateful for them, deserves his renown. But a king who strays from dharma, who forgets his solemn oath sworn to his friend. There is no one worse than him. There is redemption from every sin in this world. Prayaschitta for even the murder of a Brahmin. But where is the salvation for an ungrateful man?"

Sugriva, you lied to us when you swore you would help find Sita. Rama kept his word to you for your sake, he took Vali's life. But when you had what you wanted, you ignored Rama's need. The gates through which Vali went are not shut. If you don't honour your oath sworn before Agni. Rama's arrows

will send you after your brother. Rama bids me tell you there is still time for you to relent. But hurry Sugriva, before both your time and his mercy run out Lakshmana spoke fiercely. It seems the calmness that Tara had brought to his split was shaken at the sight of Sugriva at his dalliance. While Rama waited in anguish for the Vanara to find Sita. Tara wanted Sugriva to be quiet. Let in his drunken anxiety, he said the wrong thing.

She said quickly ‘You leap to the wrong conclusions, my prince. Sugriva is not a liar; nor has he forgotten his oath. Sugriva loves Rama. For Rama this vanara will sacrifice everything, even his kingdom. Why he would gladly abandon Rama and me, for Rama’s sake. Even in my bed, my husband speaks of Rama. I have told you, mighty Lakshmana, Sugriva has called his legion vanaras to help him, to send them to the corners of the earth to seek Sita out shed your anger good Kshatriya the vanaras will discover Sita swiftly. Wherever she may be hidden’.

When Tara spoke of Sugriva’s devotion to Rama, the transformation that came Lakshmana was marvelous. He’s body grew calms and a smile hit his hands are face like the sun breaking through dark clouds. Sugriva breathed a sigh of relief; his drunkenness had left him. He took gingerly breathed a sigh of relief; his drunkenness had left him. He took Lakshmana to his apartment.

He sat him down in a couch and crowning in affection said, “How can you ever think that I would forget Rama when I owe him everything I have today ? Nothing can ever repay my debt to your brother. I may be just a vanara, but I am not such an ingrate. Not that a Kshatriya who can shoot are arrow through seven sala trees needs my help. But for what it is worth, all my resources are Rama’s to use. Why, my very life belongs to hi”.

‘And when he sets out to the rakshasa who took Sita I will follow him with my army. I will follow Rama anywhere; let me forgive me just once’.

Wringling his hands, he stood before Lakshmana. The vapours of anger had risen away from that princes mind. He said slowly ‘with you at his side, loving Sugriva, Rama will surely vanquish his enemy. But now come with me to Prasravana. Rama needs to see you to restore his faith. As for me. I speak harshly because I have watched my brothers’ anguish these five months and found it hard to fear. Sugriva forgive me for what I said impetuously’.

There was a genuine sorrow in the Vanara’s eyes to hear about Rama. He turned to Hanuman ‘my monkeys from Vindhya and Himavan, Mahdendra and Kailasa march on Kishkindha even now. Send word to them

make haste. Fifteen days was the limit I set. Five have already passed. Rama is in pain my people must be here in ten days.

Before he had finished speaking, they had heard an alarm in the streets below them and the noise came towards the palace. Through the window, Sugriva saw that his colourful people had begun to arrive from far flung parts of the earth. They came to his door with gifts for their king and he welcomed them graciously.

When he had seen to the comfort of those first troupes Sugriva called for his palanquin. He climbed into it with Lakshmana and they set out for Pravrana. The hefty, long limbed vanaras loped through the forest, flying lightly though the lower branches of the trees when passage was difficult on the ground. They arrived at the cave to which Lakshmana guided them with jungle instructions of tree, rock and stream. By now he was no stranger to the vanara and he knew how those who lived here found their way. Sugriva alighted from the wooden litter, he came nervously into Rama's presence. As soon as the vanara saw the prince he gave a low cry and stretched himself on his face at Rama's feet, his tail coiled his eyes lowered for shame. But Rama raised up the great monkey and embraced him. Only gently did he chide him, saying with a smile 'my friend Dharma. Kama and Artha should be of equal importance in one's life. To be aware of only Kama is as dangerous as falling asleep on the brittle branch of a tree I hope you remember your promise to me Sugriva, that you would find my Sita'.

His eyes everywhere, except to Rama's face. Sugriva said, you are like a god to me; Everything I have today is because of you. How can I forget what I promised you Rama ? Even as we speak thousands of monkeys converge on Kishkindha. The first monkey tribes have already arrived. Soon the city and the hillside will swarm with my people.

"When they all are here, I will give the command and they will fly to comb the world. Wherever Rama has hidden her my vanaras will discover your Sita".

Sugriva took Rama's hand and stroked it. "You shall not have long to wait; bear with me just ten days more".

Rama saw he spoke the truth. He saw the monkey king's love in his eyes and, knowing his simple nature, he gladly forgave Sugriva. He put the delay down to his own Karma, and hugged his friend. At least now what arrangements Sugriva had made to find Sita. This was infinitely better than the hell he had been in, not knowing if the vanara meant to keep don's word at all.

THE BEGINNING OF THE SEARCH

Ten days passed and the army had assembled and was ready to leave. Sugriva went to Rama and said, 'Rama my army is ready and I will send it in the four directions and ask them to look for Sita. They are all as eager as I am to serve you at the end of their lives. Command them to do your bidding'. Rama was very happy with Sugriva and said, "My friend, let them find out where Ravana dwells and let them find out if Sita is alive. If they are able to get these two bits of information I will then decide as to what should be done later. In this connection, neither Lakshmana nor I have any right to command this immense army. You should do it. You are their master and you should ask them to do the needful. You are a friend and a wise man. You know how to act in every situation. You are the person to take care of everything'.

Sugriva summoned a monkey chief by name Virata and asked him to take a portion of his army and travel eastwards. He said, "Search for Sita in the caves and the slopes of the mountains. Travel across the forests, rivers and rivulets. Cross the rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswathi. Sindhu river will be in your path and you will see whose waters glisten like gems. Search for her in the countries which they have to traverse and he stipulated a month as the time limit. He said, "You must achieve your ends by the month. If you tarry longer. You will have to face death. Come back with success crowning your efforts".

Sugriva decided to send Hanuman to south and the leader of the deputation was Angada. The chosen few were in this group. Sugriva described the south in detail and then he summoned Sushena, the father of Tara. He told Rama who he was and added that Sushena, was one of his most able chiefs. Sugriva paid respect due to him as the father of Tara and said. "Take a portion of the army and go in the westerly direction to search for Sita". He described in detail the several countries and mountains which had to be crossed and passed. Sushena left with his army. Shatabali another chief was asked to take army towards the North.

After he had assigned their tasks to the different chiefs, Sugriva asked Hanuman to listen to his special instructions. He said, "Hanuman, in my opinion, there is no one as capable as you are doing my bidding. There is no place which is inaccessible to you. Nothing on the face of earth nor sky with its myriad clouds nor all the seven seas can impede your progress. You know about the many spots on this earth and in the other world also.

'Your valour, your speed which is very like that of your father are all unequalled. I entrust you the task of discovering the whereabouts of Sita. I consider you to be the ablest of my men and I am certain that you will be able to achieve our aim when others fail'. Sugriva added "I feel that Sita is somewhere

in the south since on the memorable day when she dropped the bundle of jewels on the Rishyamooka the rakshasa was traveling fast in that direction. I am sure he has imprisoned her there”.

Rama was listening to the words of Sugriva. He felt that Hanuman would be the one to see Sita. Ever since the day Hanuman came to him on the slopes of Rishyamooka on that unforgettable day Rama had been greatly impressed by the wisdom of Hanuman his humility his valour. Rama felt as though he had already achieved the purpose of this journey and he spoke with great affection. “Hanuman, I agree with your king and I feel that you will be one to find Sita’ Rama removed his ring from his finger and said, “Take this with you and give it to Sita so that she will be convinced that you have been sent by me”. Rama felt a deep sense of contentment which was absent from his mind all these days and he knew that Hanuman bring him news of Sita. Hanuman received the ring with his palms cupped together and holding it above his head, he prostrated before Rama.

Sugriva asked the entire army to hung towards achieving the then gal. The army made up of the monkeys covered the earth like fireflies in the forest and they set out in their quest.

IN THE SOUTH

The Vanara armies went in pageant from Prasravana some under the trees, some through the leafy, nimble ways of their branches, and the hillside was emptied of a hundred thousand monkeys.

At the cave mouth, Rama turned to Sugriva and said with a smile “When you described the far countries to your chieftains I felt you had seen them all with your eyes. How do you know so much about earth, Sugriva?”

Sugriva said, ‘Rama when my brother Vali pursued me in anger, once, I fled through the world. Through forests and across the earth, rivers, over mountains and through mazes of caves I flew with him after me. He chased me across the earth and I fled for my life with my four ministers. Finally Hanuman reminded me of Matanga’s cense and we came out of the North to Rishyamooka. My eyes saw the world in terror. Fear held them wide open and every detail is engraved on my memory, for years Vali chased me Rama and for years I flew before him’.

Teasingly Rama asked “Isn’t it time you returned to your palace ? Tara waits for you, Sugriva, and Rama and many others. I will see you in a month, when the moon is full again.”

In hope Rama waited. When grew dejected, Lakshmana was beside him to divert him from his grief. His brother took Rama on long walks through the jungle of endless fascination. Lakshmana would always say that, sooner than Rama thought Sita would be found.

Virata in the west, Sushena in the east, and Shatabali in the North combed those quarters for Sita. Great Vanara legions poured through forests and across rivers, over mountains and into deep caves, questioning the wild folk they met along the way, cajoling or threatening them as they saw fit. The monkeys searched the corners of Bharatavarsha for Ravana’s or lair. But they found not trace of him, or her whom they sought. After mouth given them was over, they came back disappointed and apprehensive to Kishkindha and Prasravana.

Sugriva stood on the hill’s shoulder with Rama, overlooking his forces that had returned to him empty handed. He said quietly. ‘These I never expected to find Sita. Didn’t we see the rakshasa fore her way to the south. Be of firm faith to Rama. Vayus son Hanuman will return with news of your wife’.

The force of Vanara that went south with Hanuman, Angada and Tara as its head came across all the lands that Sugriva had described to them. ‘They were exactly as he said. The intricate caves of the Vindhya mountains, its thick jungles the hidden fissures behind may fall that plunged down mountain slopes they searched but found no sign of Ravana or Sita, nor gleaned any news of them from them from the denizens of those parts. Forest after forest they combed, and with each one they passed without finding her their dejection grew.

Once they wandered into the strangest vana any one of them had ever seen. The trees of that forest had neither leaves nor flowers. Riverbeds they saw here, but no drop of water between their banks. It was a dread forest where no blade of grass grew, where no living creature drew breath. The silence of the lifeless realm was absolute and Angada’s monkeys were unnerved. Huddling together, the Vanara army crept breathlessly, through that waste land and at its very heart they saw a rishi sat in tapasya. His austere face shone, his Jata was piled high and near him was a charming pool on whose bank flowering trees grew and trees laden with fruit.

They did not know it, neither did they disturb the solemn muni at his tapasya but he was Kanda. Years ago his son of sixteen summers had been lost in this same forest. When after lays of searching frenziedly for him, the rishi did not find the boy, he cursed the forest and everything in it to be desolate for ever.

Silently the Vanaras passed though the eerie place. They came further south. Quite suddenly, they saw trees ahead of them full of lush green leaves. They heard all the sounds of a living jungle; streams full of gushing water, and branches full of birds that sang among brilliant flowers and their scents. Fierce tiger, elephant and deer they saw and the monkeys heaved a sigh of relief that the bizane zone of death had ended.

But they had hardly entered the living jungle, when a rakshasa, whose body faced one way and his head another, attached them with a roar. Gibbering in fight all the vanaras save. Hanuman and Tara scampered into the nearest trees. Not that their perches were safe, because the rakshasa was as tall as any tree that grew there. Angada faced the strange monster alone.

In a wink, Vali's son grew as tall as the demon and cried to Hanuman "It is Ravana, uncle and I will kill him".

Before the rakshasa recovered from his surprise. Angada smashed his head with a blow. The rakshasa fell oozing blood and brains. As he died he told them he was not Ravana, but the rishi Maricha's son. Would they please release him from the bondage of his fiendish body by burning him ? A thousand monkeys dug a pit for the rakshasa. In no time, they covered him with dry branches and set him alight. They saw a spirit from rise from the fire and, hands folded ascend into the sky.

On they pressed. This was a jungle of endless hills and each one had a honey comb of caves scooped to its side. Patiently, the Vanaras searched every hill and cave flowing into those mazes in a tide of monkeys'. And they came out again shaking their heads, chattering in frustration. When they had combed the southern most jungle without success, Angada's Vanaras gathered around a great tree that grew in a clearing at the forest limit. Restless and despondent, wave upon wave of the monkey folk stood around then prince.

Angada said to them "The wise say that unwavering purposiveness in adversity leads to success. Don't be discouraged we still have a weak left. Let us forget our tiredness and begin again. We may have overlooked the one cave in which the demon hold her."

The Vanaras cheered him loudly. Like a golden river they flowed away from the conclave around the solemn tree. Shouting encouragement to each other, they climbed the silver hill, Rajata which was named for its pale colour. Cautiously, they peered into every cave on that silvery hill. Each one they entered and searched and they finally reached the summit. But they found no Sita, nor any clue of her.

They came back to Vindhya through the dead forest. Cave by cave they searched that mountain. Wood by wood, but not here did they find the princess. The last week of the month, Sugriva had given them elapsed. Hunger, thirst and the weakness of the final week's frantic efforts had taken their toll of the monkeys. The army was exhausted. Great were the numbers and the appetite of that force, and they had denuded the jungles through which they passed of all their fruit.

Suddenly a young Vanara at the foot of the mountain they were combing tried to Angada and Hanuman. 'My lords come and look! A cave we haven't seen before'.

They scrambled down the slope and saw that there was indeed a cave mouth. Overgrown with foliage and flowering creepers and veiled by a stand of trees, as well as if nature had conspired to keep that cave hidden 'from the eyes of strangers. As they stood, gazing they felt a gust of air to blow at them. The bushes across the mysterious opening were agitated and the vanara leapt back in alarm. But only a white stork and some painted teal winged their way out from the cave squawking at the conjugation of monkeys.

A delicious fragrance wafted around the vanaras, invitingly. By now hunger changed then stomachs as much as failure did their spirits and they were desperate to discover what lay within the cave mouth. They pulled away creepers, bent bushes and small tress and in single file, slowly, and often painfully, when some thorny plants scratched their hands and faces, managed to push their way in.

The cave was called the Rikshabila. But Angada's monkeys did not know his. All was dark inside. When the creepers and bushes outside sprang back into place, no glimmer of light penetrated the blackness within. The monkeys held tightly on to the another's hands, forming a long chain of vanaras. Now they crept forward, so no one was afraid or lost in that perpetrial night. Outside, hearing that an unexploded cave had been discovered more and more vanaras arrived at the cave mouth. Bending back tree and bush, pulling aside creepers, they also crawled into Rikshabila.

For an hour and a yojana, the vanara crept along the perfectly dark turned. When the roof was low, they were forced to crawl on all fours. As they went, they were swathed in the ether end scent, always wafted to them from ahead. Then Angada who led the way cried ‘light’.

The vanaras at the head of the chain emerged into another cavern with a height, sloping roof. They gasped when they shaded their eyes against the glare, before them. They saw a garden bathed in mellow light. A profusion of trees grew here. But they were golden Trees! Their blooms shone with the colours that stirred the soul; calescent colours that were not any of the rainbow; or of this world; but beyond both. From these flowers, the quintessential fragrance that had swept over them seeped all the way to the cave mouth.

Clear pools dotted the garden, their water scintillating as if they were made of droplets of diamonds and pearls. An exuberance of water swam on these and warbled in joy. But there was more imposing mansions of silver stood among the groves of golden trees. In awe, the vanaras stole forward. They saw the paths at their feet were of beaten gold and like, the mansions entrusted with thousands of tiny precious stones. Apart from the bird’s songs a deep silence hung over the garden of enchantment which was smelly a relic from another age of the earth.

On soft feet the wide eyes monkey fork ventured cautiously into the first palatial edifice. They found it deserted. They came out and went into another, but that too had no living soul within its splendid walls. The vanaras roamed the wonderful streets for some time; and they saw no one; until, all at once, Hanuman and Angada felt they were being watched.

Hanuman glanced at his prince. Angada’s eyes roped up and down the airy street. He said, “Something is here”.

The next moment, there was a quaint flash of light and a very tall woman stood before them; an ascetic wearing deerskin. She and they both stood still for a moment, staring at each other. Then she smiled at them and folded her palms. Hanuman answered her folding his own hands and bowing deeply at her.

‘Greetings Swamini. We came through a dark turned and we don’t know where we were. We were hungry and thirsty and we saw water birds fly out of a cave – mouth on the hillside. We followed their flight and arrived at this wonderful place. What is this garden and who are you holy one’?

She raised her fin hand in blessing. In olden days great may an the architect of Asuras, who built the fabled Tripura, created this garden. Mayaa worshipped Brahma with a long tapasyaa and the Pitamaha gave him the magical knowledge of architecture, which only usanas processed.

But Maya and Indra had a battle between them over a woman and Indra drove Maya from here with his Vajra Brahma gave. That woman, Hema built these gardens and mansions. As for me, I am Swayamprabha, Merusuvana's daughter; Mena's friend and the guardian of this Rishabila.

'But we stand talking here and I make you weary travelers no proper welcome. You must eat some fruits from my trees and drink some wine to quench your thirst. Come good vanaras'.

They sat in a grove of trees that treathed quite plainly. Swayamprabha served them the gleaming fruit, which none of them had everseen before, which indeed did not grow in the world outside. They were succulent and sweet. But famished though they were, no more than a single fruit each could the vanaras eat. The tasty flesh restored the monkeys spirit, and stilled their hunger completely. They were Swayamprabha served them tasted unearthy too. It fetched the colour back to their faces and made them light headed.

Swayamprabha asked, 'What brings you to the heart of one forest'.

Hanuman said, 'we came in search of Sita'. He told their story from the beginning and Rama's sorrow. When he had finished, he said 'you have been so kind, and I am sure fate led us to you. If there is anything the vanaras can do to repay the debt, you only have to mention it, whatever it may be'. But she smiled, and shook her head. Hanuman said, 'much as we would love to we cannot tarry, for our quests calls us urgently. We hoped 'we may find Sita in this hidden place. But it seems the tide of fortune still runs against us. Shall we return the way we came, or is there any other way back into the world'.

Swayamprabha looked troubled 'usually no one who enters here may even leave. If you search the tunnel through which you came, you will not find it. But I am moved by your mission and I will help you. You must all shut your eyes and not open them until I tell you to. Link your hands and sit perfectly still'.

The Vanaras obeyed her. Without feeling anything, never knowing how it happened and so swiftly they found themselves back in the outside world

though not in the jungle they had searched for Sita. Swayamprabha stood before them tall and serene.

She pointed, 'Beyond the shoulders of this hill lies the Mahodadi; fare you well, and perhaps we shall meet again same day along the winding trails of time. And she vanished before their eyes.

THE DESPAIR OF THE VANARAS

Angada and his followers found themselves on the shore of a sea. Swayamprabha had called it the Mahodadhi. They stood in the shore and watched the fearful waves as they dashed against the sandy shore. The limitless sea which was the abode Varuna was so frightening and at the same time, there was a majestic beauty about it and the monkeys stood for a long time watching the waves and listening to the roar of the sea.

They were greatly dejected. The mouth had passed and they had spent a long time in the caves of Swayamprabha without being aware of the world outside. They sat around and thought about the bleak future that awaited them. The trees around indicated that Vasantha would soon on its way and they trembled at the thought of Sugriva and his wrath. They had achieved nothing and they had not been able to return to Kishkindha either.

Angada presided over the council and he said, 'As you all know we have been sent on this quest by the king. We have neither succeeded in our mission nor have been able to confine ourselves to the time allotted to us. What are we to do now ? You are all the trusted administrators of the king. You are greatly respected by him. It is a pity that I am not able to find a method by which we can circumvent fate. Each one of you is a new and you have all been chosen by the king to travel southwards since he was convinced that Sita is somewhere here. I have been asked to lead you all and I have failed in my duty, the duty which has been assigned to me. I am sure that death is the certain punishment for those who have not been able to follow the king's commands. As I said before, the time allotted to us is over and we are under the sentence of execution if we go back of Kishkindha, I know my king. He is I am unforgiving nature and added to that is the fact that he is the master. He will never forgive us when we go back thus. I find that there is only one way to end this strange adventure. Let us forget to death. I would rather die here voluntarily than face punishment from Sugriva, the king. Let me tell you something else. I was not crowned yuvaraja by Sugriva. Rama, the best among men, who was the one who insisted on this. The king had no affection for me and when he gets the chance he is sure to kill me. He will take full advantage of the situation and

punish me severely. There will be no one to help me and my well-wishers will be surely looking on helplessly when I am punished. I have decided to avoid all that and shed my life here on the sea shore.

The words spoken by the son of Vali melted the hearts of vanaras and they said, “We see that you are speaking wisely. As you say am king is of an unforgiving nature and as for Rama since he loves his wife to distraction, one return causes him great disappointment. Our king, trying to please Rama will certainly executed us. There is no doubt about it. It is unwise for a culprit to be in the presence of his master. We will try once again to find Sita and if we are successful we will be forgiven. Else we will die here with our minds bent on the next world.

There, one of the leaders said, “It is not fitting that we should give way to despair and lose our lives. Let us go back to Rishabila, the cave where we spent such a happy time. We will live there forever. It has been fashioned by Maya and we have enough food there to last us for a life time. We can live being afraid of the king. Why even Indra or Rama cannot touch us there since it is a magic city”.

The others looked at him and then at Angada as if to ask “If you are age able we would like that kind of life. We can live without fear of punishment”.

Hanuman however was worried. He knew that Angada, the prince was a wonderful youngster endowed with rare qualities and he did not want him to despair. Angada was like a moon at the beginning of the brighter fortnight a crescent with promises of becoming a full moon very soon. He was extremely brave and his wisdom was that of Brhaspathi. He was like his father in courage and valour and such a prince was now despondent enough to think of ending his life. Hanuman himself, who was wise beyond words did not want the prince to adopt the line of least resistance by agreeing to the suggestions of Thara.

Of the four ways of influencing people, Sama, Dana, Bheda and Danda. Hanuman decided to use the third, Bheda. He said, “My dear child, you are as valiant as your father, if not more. You are as capable as your father was of ruling the kingdom. And yet, true to your nature, you are being too trustful. The minds of men, and specially those of monkeys are known for their fickleness. These comrades of ours may agree to your suggestion now, about living in the Rishabila, but soon they will not like to be away from wives and children. As for the army which we have brought with us, some of again some of us are old faithful servants of Sugriva and nothing make us disloyal to him. I wish to remind you. Prince that a weak opponent should never try to fight with

our enemy who is stronger than himself. Do not listen to the words of Thara. The cave will not be a sanctioning to us. With a single arrow Lakshmana can destroy us along with the magic city. We were told by the ascetic that Indra's vajra was used to destroy the owner of the cave. When Indra could do it. Our Laskhmana will surely find it child's play to pulverize it. There is no doubt about it. When that situation arises all the monkeys will abandon you and run for then lives. You will be more lonely than a spring tossed in the wind. Lakshmana will spare you out of kindness as far as your life is concerned. But I am sure he will not leave you alone. If however, your return to Kishkindha, we will all go to the king and pray for your life. We will beseech him to be merciful to you. He will be compassionate and he will crown you king after him.

“You have not understood the true nature of our king. He is very righteous. He is affectionate and he is firm in his decisions and actions. He is a good man and he never wish you ill. He is extremely fond of your mother and he will never hunt her. And again, he has no children and he has willingly agreed to make you the Yuvaraja”.

Angada was listening to the word of Hanuman and some how they failed to convince him. “Hanuman is devoted to my uncle and so her speak thus and he expects me to believe him thought Angada to himself and said” I do not agree with you. I do not credit him with all the noble qualities which you have enumerated. He is a very ordinary fickle minded monkey and he is selfish. He is not pure in mind and he is not compassionate. He is not straight nor he is manly or courageous. Consider how he has made his brother's wife to listen to his forcible words and has made her agree to be his wife. Early in his life, he has betrayed his brother by closing up the opening of the cave inside which my father was fighting with his enemy. Can you call such a man as righteous ?

“Take for example the search he organized. It is known to all of us that how he forgot everything about Rama and the debt he owed to Rama. In the presence of fire he had taken a solemn oath that he would do everything he could for Rama and what did he do. As soon as got the kingdom, the king was lost in the pleasures of the harem and he forgot all about the promise he had given to Rama. It was only out of fear for Lakshmana and the Iwary of his bowstring that my worthy uncle woke up from his drunken sleep. He rushes to Rama and, out of sheer terror rest he should also be treated as his brother was, he sent us all in search of Sita. How can I have trust in such an ingrate ? Perhaps he will spare my life for the sake of my mother, but he is sure to imprison me and torture me. I am sure of it.

“I have made up my mind. I will not go back to Kishkindha. Let us sit here on the sea shore and cart off our lives. If anyone is to join me you are welcome to do so. As for me, I am prepared to do prayopavesa here. If you wish to go back you can all go. Please go back and salute the Kosala princes first and then my uncle; the king. Tell them about me. Then tell Rama and after that my mother Tara. It is up to all of you to comfort her. She is very unfortunate she will not be able to bear this news and perhaps she will die when she hears of my death”.

Angada was now sobbing openly and the elders looked on with pity at the young prince. He spread dharbha grass and wept as he did it. And with flowing tears from his eyes he lay down on it with his mind bent on death. All the monkeys cried with sorrow in their hearts. They all sat down too in the sand and decided to join the prince. They touched water with their hands and sat down to die.

They sat on the sands and they looked back on the many events which had led to their present sad condition. They spoke of Rama of his exile to forest of the death of Dasaradha of the travels of the princes with Sita in the Dandaka of then abode in Panchavati. They talked of the destruction of the rakshasas in Janastana and of the abduction of Sita. They were relations to themselves the death of Jatayu, the killing of Vali, Ramas anger and all the many events which finally culminated in their end on the sea shore. Their voices were carried by the wind and the story of Rama was echoes from the surroundings.

SAMPATI

On the mountain behind the Vanaras in a cave swept by ocean winds, lived ‘Sampathi the eagle. He was hungry, and when he saw the monkeys on the beach below his roost, he said to himself. Fate is kind to me today I don’t have to go in search of my next meal; it has come to my cave mouth’.

But Sampati was so old and deaf as well, that he spoke aloud to himself. The wind, which blew at this hour from land to sea carried what he said into Angada’s sharp ears. The Vanara prince jumped up with a shout. ‘Yama has come as an eagle to take us’.

Angada was now so distraught he began to babble. “All the birds and beasts of the jungle loved Rama. Why Jatayu gave his life for the prince of light. And for Rama’s sake we will also be devoured by death. Bu Jatayu was

fortunate; the Rakshasa killed him and he didn't have to face Sugriva's wrath. But if you think of why we are about to die, uncle Hanuman it is because of Kaikeyi. She is the root cause of all this misfortune'.

As he came heaven for dinner. Sampati heard everything Angada said. In his gravelly voice Sampathi called "Who speaks of Jatayu ? Who says Jatayu is dead ? It is a thousand years since I heard my brother's name. Who is the rakshasa that killed him ? Who is Rama ? I am old and weak and I can hardly climb down this mountain. Help me some one. Help me down to the ground and tell me about my brother". At first the Vanaras did not trust the eagle. But Angada went nearer and began the story of Rama again for Sampathi's benefit. The ancient bird wept; when he heard how Jatayu's sacrificed his life for Sita. Angada told Sampathi how Rama cremated Jatayu, and sent his soul to his ancestors. The monkey prince described how Rama came to Rishyamooka and their fruitless search for Sita.

At last he sighed, "Searching for Sita is like seeking the sun at midnight and we have come this shore to die!

The eagle who had wanted to make meal of them, now said gently "Jatayu was my little brother. If I were young I would have flown to Ravana's city to have revenge. But alas, I am too old and infirm now.

His feathers shook. He sobbed like a child and all the vanaras gathered around the great bird. He saw their eagle faces by the dying light. He saw their keen eyes. Sampathi, who had lived alone for so long was moved to tell the monkey folk the story of his life in his resonant and rambling way.

'I am old, ah, I am older than you can imagine, my Vanaras. Would you believe me if I told you that with these eyes I have seen the Vamana Avatara of Lord Vishnu, when he measured the world's with three Strides ? Swarga, Bhoomi and Patala! And now there is Rama. I was there when the Devas and the asuras chinned the sea of milk to have the Amritha from under the waves. I was there when the Halahala was churned up and began to consume the sky. I saw Sita quaff it, and it burnt his throat blue; then they called him Nilakanta.

'I wish I could help Rama, who has come as a man now. But look, my brings are brunt stumps and I cannot fly anymore I was at least a thousand years ago Jatayu and I were much younger then. We were in our prime. We competed fiercely at everything. Once we challenged each other who could fly higher and nearest the sun. It was around the time when Indra slew Vrutasura. Angling our youthful wing we flew into the sky like two arrows. Up and up we

flew for a night and a day and the sun searched us. Still we flew on. We were proud then and each wanted to show he was the stronger one’.

‘As we matched each other, wing beat for wing beat, suddenly I saw Jatayu began to fall behind me. Dizziness overcame him and I turned and clasped him in my wings. In our arrogance we had from near the sun. His body blazed with the wrath of the star. The moment I paused my flight, the breeze no longer flew around me to cool my feathers. My wings took fire. Still holding the unconscious Jatayu in my arms, I plummeted down to the earth. A long, long time I fell burning and also I swooned. I awoke rudely when I crashed on to this mountain. My wings were charred flightless and there was no sign of Jatayu anywhere’.

Again Sampathi’s eyes filled, as he remembered the vertiginous fall that had changed his life. He said “Never since have I seen or heard anything of my brother. Until today when your, my friends bring these sad tidings’.

He wept with grave dignity that aged bird.

Angada said, ‘you say that if you were younger and could fly you would have attacked Ravana in his city. “Do you know where the rakshasa lives”?’

The great eagle wiped his eyes with his ruined wing tips. He drew himself to his full height and he was tall indeed. He towered over the vanaras. His eyes flashed a semblance of their piercing fire of old and Sampati said, ‘I, too saw the lovely Sita as Ravana carried her across the sky. She cried and Struggled but the Rakshasa held her helpless. Her ornaments fell from her in a golden shower and again and again she cried’. Rama Lakshmana, “save me”. Her ornament was a streak.

The lightning against the ominous cloud that was the demon.

‘Now, I remember it must have been Sita. She cried out her husband’s sacred name’.

He paused and their eyes lighted up, the monkeys cried to him. Sampati said, “Indeed I know where Ravana lives; I know the place well”.

Sampathi looked around him again in the gathering twilight and he saw hope flame on the monkey’s faces. The eagle continued ‘Ravana is

vurava's son and Kubera's son. He rules the island of Lanka, a hundred yojana's from this shore. Viswakarma created wonderful Lanka for the rakshasa. As he spoke Sampathi peered out across the sea and his eyes narrowed in concentration. With his burnt wings, he waned the Vanaras who blocked his view out of his way. The monkeys peered where Sampathi did. They saw nothing except smoking waves stretching to the horizon. But Sampathi stood very still his eyes keened his feathers quivering'.

Suddenly, he cried, 'I see her, I see her in Ravana's garden, surrounded by rakshasas. I see her crying'.

Then he grew slack again and looked around at the disbelieving Vanaras. His eyes shone. 'I belong to the eldest race of eagles. Garuda is my kinsman. Our kind can see a mouse from the moon if we set our minds to it, for we hunt from the air. Though I am old and my vision is not what it used to be at a hundred yojanas. I can still see the rustful eyes on Ravana's ten heads and tears in Sita's soft as lotuses'.

When he finished offering solemn Tarpana he came back to the waterline of dry sand. He glowed with some ineffable joy. Angada who saw this cried, "O Sampathi, a great light's upon your feathers I can you tell us how. We can reach Lanka in the sea"?

But the eagle shook his head "My part in this adventure is over. This is the evening I have wanted for more than a thousand years. My friends, in the olden days a rishi lived in this mountain. Once I despaired at my flightlessness and my dependence on my son. Suparshva who has looked after me as if thought, as you did just now of taking of my own life. But even as I stood in this very place and decided to walk into the waves to drown myself that rishi came up behind me and took my wing".

He said, "You shall fly again one day Sampati. Be patient, you have a great task ahead of you still. For one day you will be the eyes that will help Vishnu's son Avatara find his love when that day comes and you have shown an extraordinary army the way to Lanka your wings will sprout alive again. Sampathi, be patient until him."

'So here I am, my Vanaras and here you are, and I have shown you the way to Lanka. I feel a great burden lifted from my spout. I feel a light in my heart'.

Even as he spoke, a golden Lambency was high to eagle's body and he shone like a piece of sun on that dusty shore. Was the Vanaras watched.

Sampathi wings sprouted fresh young plumage before their eyes. His stooped back grew erect. His sucker eyes blazed again. He cried his shrill hunting cry in the ecstasy of his transformation and the beach echoes with it. When the uncanny illumination left his body, it left Sampathi young again and his wings whole one more.

‘It is done’ he cried, dancing for joy. ‘Vanaras look at me: nothing is impossible with faith. You will surely build Lanka, if only you believe, you will. Then launching himself with a few rivers steps, he spread his splendid new wings and crying out rapturously flew up into the darkening sky and vanished.

HOW TO CROSS THE SEA

The monkeys went now filled with new hope and they had to Ramas to how to cross the sea. They were jumping about in sheer joy and to them. Sita was as good as seen and in their minds they returned to Kishkindha with the grad nero’s. They descended from the spot were they were talking to Sampathi and they arrived on the shores of the sea. They assembled there and stood watching the sea, mutely, since their shouts of joy had decreased gradually and had died altogether when they saw the vast expanse of the sea.

They looked and again they looked at the sea which seems to have no shore and each wave was bigger and more fierce than the earlier one. The sight of the majestic sea with its sonorous sound made them feel frightened and the sea seemed as difficult to cross as the sky.

Angada saw the panic which threatened to set in and he spoke words of encouragement to them. He said, “We should not give in to desperation and fear. Fear is the foremost of all evils. Like a snake is able to kin a child fear which is lodged in the mind will make children of his and will destroy us. This is the time when one should display one’s valour and it is not right to feel diffident now we will achieve nothing by hesitation. Let us spend the night in peace and when day dawns we will think up a way to summit this poser”.

Long after the army had slept Angada conferred with the chief members of his team and discussed the future plan of action.

Early in the morning he collected the army round him and spoke to them all. He said, “I wish to know which among is capable of leaping across the sea are win the approbation of the king and Rama who is there among you

who can leap a hundred yojanas ? If it is done we can then be saved from the danger of threatening lives we would have obeyed our king and we would have pleased Rama and his brother and thus relieved our king of the debt he owes to Rama. Come let us know who are all willing to undertake this task which is stupendous”.

No one spoke Angada’s voice was still echoing from the slopes of the hills and only the sea roared louder as if to mock him. He spoke again and again and he got no reply. He then said, “I will ask you in a different way let each one announce how much he is capable of the spirit of competition may whip up some enthusiasm in all of you”.

There seemed to be a star, a ripple of life in the still crowd and slowly they came out with their capability Gaja said that he could keep a distance of ten yojanas and Gavakha said he could do twenty and so it went on thirty, forty, fifty and sixty Dvididha could jump to seventy and other eighty Jambavan not broke his silence and said, “Once when I was much younger. I was more brave and valiant than can be thought of by the stretch of imagination. But those days are past and I have almost reached the opposite shore in this journey through life. But then one cannot ignore the gravity of the task we have undertaken our king made a pact with Rama and we should all strive to make it true. At this stage of life I am only able to leap ninety yojanas. I have no doubt about it. Actually I do not know my powers now. In the days of long ago the Lord was seen by me when he assumed the form of Trivikrama. I had the privilege of making Pradakshina round him. My strength was unparalleled and I had made a name for myself. But I am old now. I do not think I can negotiate this leap across the sea successfully.

Angada’s face was grave and he was worried. What had seemed early the previous day now seemed to pose problems which were new and it seemed to be an impossible task for them to cross the sea. He spoke words of comfort to the sorrowing Jambavan and then said, “I am some of leaping this distance of a hundred yojanas. But I am not quite certain if I will be able to come back. I am doubtful about my strength lasting till I can back”.

Jambavan said, “Child Angada, I am certain that you will be able to leap this distance why you are capable of doing more. You can, I know cross even a thousand yojanas. But my child, should not undertake such a task you are our master and you are here to command us. It is not right that you should do it. We should not let you do own work. You are the only fort which is our refuge. The master is the refuge of the army. You should stay here and guard us even as the fort grants protection to those who have come inside it for succour. It is our duty to guard you across at all costs. You are our prince.

You are like the mother root of a tree without which the tree cannot bear flowers and fruits. You are valiant, intelligent and brave. You are a model to us. You are the heir to the throne and now you are our master. We exist because of you and you should not risk your life.

Angada was quite embarrassed by the affectionate words spoken by Jambavan. He paused for a moment and said, “If I do not go, who else is there ? This has to be undertaken by some one or else we will have to go back to our original decision of Prayopavesa. Please consider the gravity of the situation and will you are you will be able to arrive at a solution”.

Jambavan said, “I will do the needful Angada my Prince. I will do my best and think of a way to achieve our end”.

The entire army was standing still aware of the crisis which has to be faced sure how. Jambavan went to Hanuman who was sitting alone apart lost in thought.

THE SON OF THE WIND

Jambavan said to the moody Hanuman “Why O Son of the mind, do you doubt yourself so much ? But it is the curse of the all the greatest. Those who can’t do a tenth of what you can, those who haven’t a shadow of your strength, stand up and boast about their prowess. While you sit here and listen to them and say nothing. Hanuman, we need a here to leap across the sea and bring glory to vanaras.

But Hanuman was so inconfident, he said with a nervous thought “You have too much regard for me good Jambavan”.

“Do I indeed? Have you forgotten who you are? Vayuputra? Let me remind you of your ancestry and let these monkeys hear who our modest Hanuman truly is. Once Anjana the apsara of heaven was born as a vanara. She was so beautiful the wild wind was smitten by her. She could not resist now either for their love was destined.

Jambavan grew thoughtful, ‘Yes just as it was destined that one day you would sit here on this shore doubting yourself with all your heart. Even as Anjana lay in Vayudeva’s coiling embrace a voice spoke to her out of the sky’ Anjana a soul of matchless glory will be born as your son. He will have no equal in goodness or valour, wisdom or strength. Being his father’s son he will fly more swiftly than Garuda”.

“You have forgotten who you are Hanuman, you have forgotten how when you were just a child, you leapt into the sky because you thought the sun was a fruit you could eat. You flew three hundred yojanas into the air. Indra thought that you are arrogant, and flying his thunderbolt of a thousand joints at you. But son of the wind, the awesome weapon merely grazed your cheek for Brahma blessed you to be immune to every Ayudham when the vajra fell away tamely, your people named you Hanuman the invincible one”.

“Vayu was incensed at Indra and he would not blow at all through the three worlds. At last Indra realized it was a child’s fancy and not arrogance. Which had made you leap up like that. He was not charmed by leaping for sun, but laughing aloud at the thought he also blessed you. He blessed you that you can summon your own death, like a servant whenever you chose”.

Hanuman had risen beside Jambavan on that golden beach. Every word the king of bears seemed to sever a link in the chain that bound his spirit. His eyes shone. His back was very erect. Hanuman smiled, and his doubts left him like mist before sun.

Jambavan continued, “We stand not on the shore of a sea, but at the brunt of despair you are Vayu’s son powerful as the son wind himself. Don’t hesitate Hanuman. Fate is calling you to make your name immortal. You are our hope. Only you can save us all from death. Shed your fear in confidence. Your moment of glory has arrived.

There was stirring of airs above them. The vanaras sensed another implacable presence there. They huddled together and whimpered in fear. But caressed by his father’s subtle fingers. Hanuman began to glow before the monkey’s eyes. His body shone with uncanny splendour and moment by moment as if Jambavan’s words had unleashed the Mahima Siddhi. Hanuman grew bigger and bigger still! As he grew his expression also changed from despondency to one of imperturbable joy. Now grown into a gigantic saviour of his race he smiled benignly down at the astounded vanaras.

He was tall as a hill, he was bright as the morning. He growled up deep in his throat and shook his body like some unimaginable him. The vanaras

clutched at one another for comfort. They no longer saw Sugriva's wise and gentle, faithful and quite minister Hanuman. This was another elemental being who towered over them, his great eyes glowing. This was Hanuman the winds magnificent son; and the challenge of the sea was no longer as daunting as it had seems.

He was titanic already still he grew, until it seemed to the monkeys dwarfed at his feet that the sun would ignite his mane. He was like some great flame and he bowed to the monkey elders and to his prince Angada. When he spoke to them his voice was thunder.

'Agni's friend vayu is powerful' boomed that immense vanara. 'He is tameless and he pervades the universe. I am that vayu's son. No are can leap as far as I can. I can fly a thousand times around Mount Meru. I can fly around the world with the moon'.

It was as if a stranger spoke in their Hanuman's voice. The ocean trembled, when he cried. Do you know the strength of these arms with the sinews of into the earth and plunge the jungle into the sea. I can crush the greatest peaks into dust with my hands. 'And I Hanuman serve Rama'.

The stupendous monkeys smiled from ear to ear. 'And now I will fly across the little sea to find Sita. I will cross the waves in a moment and carry her back to safety. If need be, I will draw Lanka by its roots and bring it to Rama'. "I go now I go"

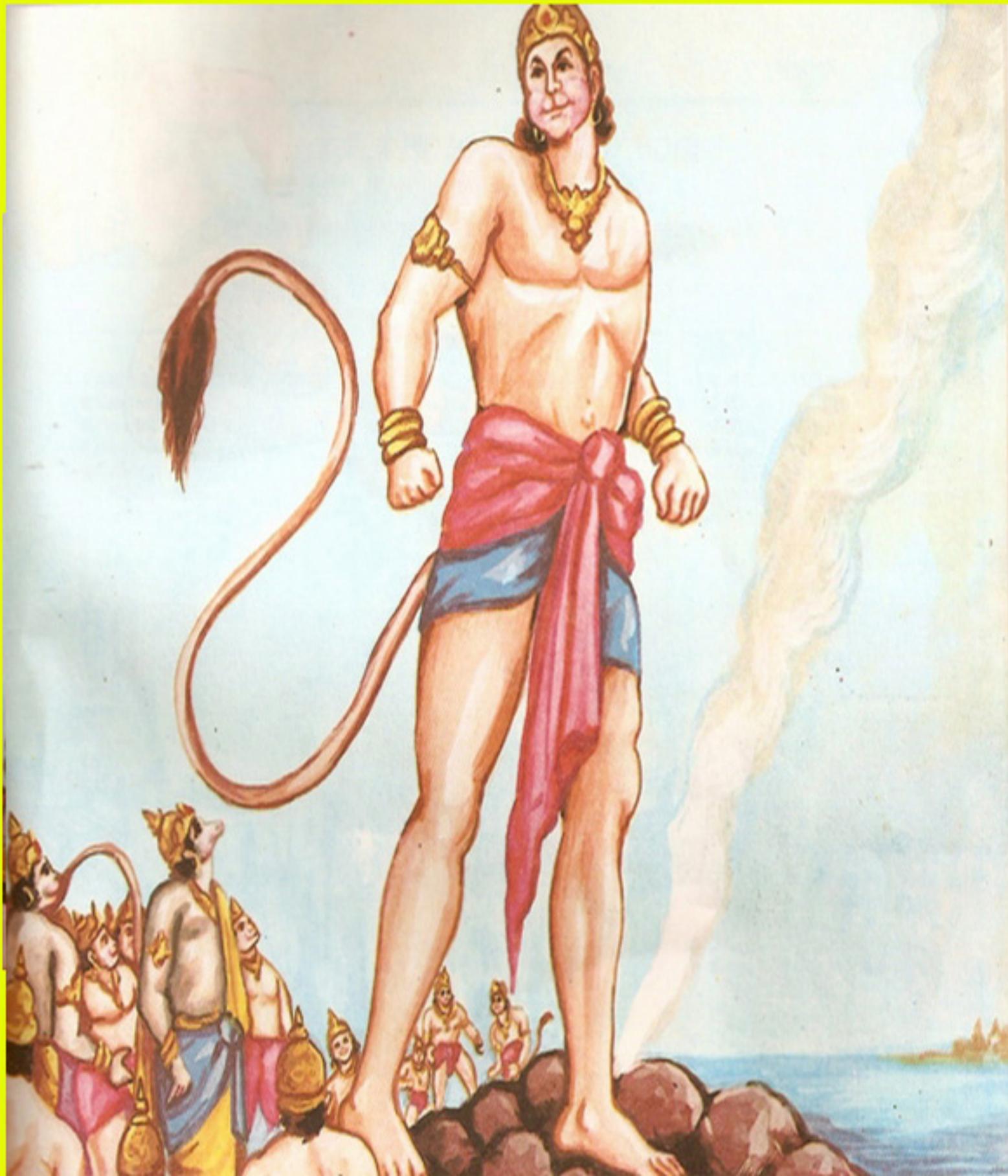
No monkey stood on that shore, who was not slightly relieved that he went. Though he was always kindly, he was so awesome now they would not help being afraid of him. Yet they also rejoiced. Seeing him like that they had no doubt that, wherever she was, Hanuman would find Sita. It seemed that he was always intended to find her none but he. Only he had to be pushed through to the edge of despair before he summoned this Hanuman from within himself this pristine vanara who neither doubted nor knew the meaning of fear.

Jambavan who alone was old enough not to be over whelmed cried, "We will wait upon this shore for you. Sun of the wind. Remember our lives are in your hands".

Hanuman an smiled 'Fear not uncle Jambavan. My prince Angada give me leave. I go now to find Sita in Lanka. But the soft ground will be given if I leap from here. I must climb to the top of the Mahendra where the rock is firm for a thousand hands. From there I will fly and cause the earth no injury.

With a few strides, climbing numbly as monkeys, he gained the summit he sought his people stood on the beach below, watching him. He waves from his height, and it seemed to them he was bigger than the mountain. Far away were the eyes of the son of Anjana and the wind in his mind, he had already reached Lanka and discovered Sita with each foot on a different peak he straddled Mahendra. Hanuman stood swaying in his father's lofty guests, whistling around him in exhilaration. Back and forth he swayed, readying himself for the leap of a hundred yojanas across the plum blossom sea.

Sundara Kanda



SUNDARA KANDA

Hanuman looked like a wall bull with his powerful neck stretched to the full and booking upwards. He was to achieve what no one had till then. He wondered about the mountain top with his powerful strides and he frightened all the animals there. The snakes and wild animals which has been dwelling the mountain were startled and rushed out in panic as the mountain shuddered under him. Mahendra which was rich in minerals was of different hues. There seemed to be a carpet under the feet of Lakshmana a carpet woven of different colours, black and white, red, blue, yellow and the brush pink of lotus. The mountain was also home of Yakshas and Kinnaras. Elephants were roaming about in large numbers and Hanuman had disturbed them all from their places which has been secured then.

He saluted the Gods presiding over the quarters. Srunga, Indra, Vayu and Brahma. He then turned to the east and he saluted his father Vayu with his mind he saluted the valiant brother Rama and Lakshmana. He made obeisance to the seas and rivers.

Hanuman embraced his companions and made up his mind to set out on the memorable journey, the journey in guest of Sita who had been captured by Ravana. The monkeys wished him a safe return and Hanuman walked to the spot which was wide and open. He stood there facing the South. He had now grown enormous in size. He pressed hard on the mountain to gather momentum before he could take the leap. The mountain which is said to firm in the midst of storms and tempests shook under the impact of his huge feet. The trees were all denuded of their flowers and the entire slope was a glorious sight since there was nothing but flowers covering them. The rocks cracked under her feet and smoke was seen to emanate from the cracks formed in the rocks. The animals were crying out in fear and the sound filled in the four quarters. Serpents were spitting virulent poison and the rocks were burning because of poisons. Even the rishis who were there were afraid to stay in the hill and they left in hurry as also the Vidyadharas. They flew into the sky and stood watching the great Hanuman while he prepared himself to take the leap.

He shook himself and roared and it was like the rumbling of a thunder cloud. He swung his large tail in the air and the taut looked like an immense snake pulled by Garuda. He placed. His two hands on the surface of the rock on which he stood. He shrunk his waist and folded his legs. He then thrust out his neck and so he stood poised for the flight into the air. He looked for and held his breath. He turned to the monkeys and said "I will go straight to Lanka as an arrow. Which is released from the bow of Rama. If I do not find Sita there. I will go to the heavens and book for her there. If she is not found

even there, I will return to Lanka and bring Ravana with me bound hand and foot. I will surely return with success. I may even uproot the sky and bring it with me. I will succeed.”

Hanuman was so confident that he had no doubt about his ability to find Sita. Thinking that he was Garuda himself the great Hanuman jumped up with great force. Because of the speed of his course, the trees on the mountain were pulled up with their roots. With the flowering trees rushing along with him Hanuman entered the skies. The trees went with him some distance and it seemed some distance and it seemed as though they were well wishers who went with him some distance to make the journey fruitful. The sea was now a mass of flowers from the trees which had fallen into it after accompanying him some distance. The sea was like a sky which is lit up by a myriad of stars.

Hanuman coursed through the sky like a thunder cloud driven by the air. His arms were like twin snakes and it appeared as though he would drink the sky with his large mouth and people from the celestial regions collected in the sky to see the magnificent sight. The very sea was in an up roar caused by the speed with which Hanuman was passing by. His shadow was cast on the waters of the sea and the shadow was ten yojanas in breadth and thirty yojanas in length. He seemed to be a mountain which was flying in the air during the days before Indra cut off then wings; only this mountain had no wings.

He looked like the moon in a clouded sky as he plunged into the clusters of clouds which were trailing in the sky. Flowers rained on him from the heavens. Since the Devas were eager to have success attending on the mission of Hanuman the sun did not hunt him with his scorching rays and Vayu caressed him with his soft breeze.

While he was thus storming through the air, the kings of oceans thought of honouring this messenger of Rama. He respected the kings of the race of Ishvaku and he thought “I owe my very existence to the Sagara princes and this Hanuman is trying to help a scion of that race. I must provide a halting place for him. Having rested for a while he can easily cover the remaining distance.

He called for the mountain Mainaka which was submerged in the sea. He said “You are able to grow large or small. I ask you now to grow larger and larger. Hanuman is now flying in the air with a desire to reach Lanka. He is going on a mission to reach Sita and to help Rama. You and I are indebted to his ancestors and it is but meet that we should remember it. You must rise up to the surface and provide a resting place for Hanuman. After he has refreshed

himself let him go on with his journey so be it". Said Mainaka and rose out of the sea. Its peak was golden and had earned for the mountain the name "Hiranyanabha" like the sun newly rising out of the clouds the mountain rose out of the waters of the sea and stood up with its golden peak glowing golden in the light of the sun.

When Hanuman saw the mountain emerge thus out of the sea he thought that it was an obstacle in his path and with immense chest he pushed the mountain aside. The soul of the hill took up a form and stood on the peak of the hill and said "Noble Hanuman, we are admiring the stupendous task you have undertaken and the manner in which you are executing it. The lords of the seas asked me to provide a resting place for you. He has a great respect for the race of the king's of the race of the sun. He wanted to help you and thus show his affection for Rama and you. Please relax on top of me for a while and you can go on after a pause. I owe a debt of gratitude to your father. He saved me from the Vajra of Indra by pushing me into the sea. Accept my hospitality".

Hanuman said, "I am touched by your affection hurry and time is of utmost importance. I must not tarry. I have taken an oath that I will not rest until I accomplish what I have undertaken I will proceed on my journey and complete my task."

He took leave of the mountain with a smile and went on with his flight across the sea. He was soon high in the heavens and he was pursuing the path of his father. The Devas who were watching Hanuman were trying to test if obstacles on the way would deter the course of Hanuman. They summoned Surasa the mother of serpents and said, "Hanuman is trying to cross the sea with a desire to reach Lanka. We want you to assume the shape of a big rakshasi and bar his way. We wish to see how he will tackle this unforeseen estimation and how he is going to circumvent it".

She did as she was bid and soon Hanuman found himself accosted by this fierce woman who stood his path in the air. She said, "Happily I have found a prey for my hunger now. You are the gift of gods to me, I think. Enter my mouth." Hanuman folded his palms together and said "I am going on a vital mission. I cannot do what you ask me to when I came back from my destination I will certainly oblige you and enter your mouth. Do not stand in my way". She refused him his plea and said, "This is a boon granted by Brahma that no one can pass one by without entering my mouth" and sintering the word to the action she opened her mouth very wide. Hanuman lost his patience and said "Open our mouth, as large as you can so that you can accommodate me". As her mouth grew larger he became bigger and longer too and when her mouth grew gradually to the size of hundred yojanas. Hanuman contracted his body to

the size of a thumb. He entered the mouth of the rakshasi and came out and it all happened within a matter of a moment. He resumed his original form and said “Farewell to you I have entered your mouth and I came out your bon from Brahma is not false. Let me go now”. Surasa was pleased with him and said “May your journey be fruitful may you achieve your end”.

Hanuman continued his journey in the air. He was flying high now. It was the path of the birds and it was full of rain drops. The rishis like Thumbura used the path and the Devas would frequent on that heavenly track. Hanuman flew and his mind was set on the thing to reach Ravana’s City, Lanka as soon as he could and to look for Sita the queen of Rama.

There was a rakshasi by name Sindhika who saw him pass by. She desired to eat him up. She grasped his shadow and pulled it towards her. Hanuman felt the pull and looked out to find out what was happening. He saw the dreadful form of Sinmhika rising out of the sea. He realized this was the impediment in his path. He grew in size and she opened her mouth at once and it stretched from the waters to the skies. From where he has Hanuman could see into her mouth and contracting himself suddenly, he leaped into her mouth like the sudden fall of India’s Vajrayudha. He killed her and quickly returned to where he was. Growing back to his old size he traveled as though nothing had happened. Like Garuda he flew smooth.

He had covered most of the distance. The hundred yojanas had dismissed now to a much smaller number. Hanuman had cast his eyes around he saw tress and forests which indicating land. He saw the gardens which grew on the mountain by name Malaya. He passed several small rivers and their tributaries and while nearly at the end of his journey he told himself. This form of mine is too big. If I land thus in Lanka. The Rakshasas will be circum about me and it will not be possible to enter the city without being notice. “Hanuman made himself small and insignificant”. He looked like a gnani who, having shed all Moha could now realize the Atmen. He was now a dwarf just three foot in height. He reached opposite side of the sea. He landed on the peak of a hill by name Lamba from there he had the first glimpse of Lanka. Hanuman had crossed the sea which was a hundred yojanas wide and he reached the other shore.

LANKINI HANUMAN ENTERS LANKA

He had achieved the impossible. But he was humble and he did not waste anytime admiring what he had done. Indeed, apart from profound relief that he had not failed. Hanuman felt like else. That was his nature. In the distance on the hill called Trikuta he saw Ravana’s city tasking in the light of

the afternoon sun and set out towards it. On his way he marveled at the lushness of Lanka. He walked through thick glass lands, alive, and swing his way through woods of flowering trees of fragrance as he had never known before. To be safe, Hanuman had landed quite a way from the Rakshasa's city and how he needed to cover a far distance before he arrived at his destination. Gazing around with bright eyes, Hanuman loped along towards Ravana's city.

The sun was sinking to the horizon, when through the trees ahead of him he saw its scarlet and golden shafts reflected from the crystal windows of the monsoons of Lanka. He saw the deep moat that encircled the fortress city in protection, the vigilant patrols of rakshasas which guarded its entrances, the wide clean roads that wound their ways into the liny pates and he will all admiration for what he saw Hanuman had the feeling that Lanka must be as beautiful as Amaravathi and he was not far wrong Viswakarma himself had built this city for Ravana.

At the foot of the Trikuta hill, Hanuman paused above him, in the evening mists that had gathered round it, the rakshasa's city seemed to flout on air!

Lost in thought, and the grandeur of this Lanka before him wondering what manner of demon the king was, who lived in such splendour yet could abduct Sita. Hanuman came to the city gates. The rakshasas who stood guard were ten feet tall. They were fierce and carried weapons of fire nestling at their sides like organs of their bodies. There were so many of them outside the gates hundreds, and Hanuman saw there were twice that number within. He thought that not even the Vanara any, if it ever arrived here, could hope to fight their way past that guard, he saw every man of it was a veteran of may was. All of them wore shining battle sears like ornaments on their arms faced and deep chests.

The Vanara thought, How ferocious they look not Indra's Devas could pass these rakshasa". Then most awful thought of all, 'Will even Rama be able to fight his way into Lanka ? For sure, no more than four of our vanaras can make the leap a cross the sea; Neela Hanuman and Sugriva our king'.

He was perturbed. But he decided build that he would not be swayed by his branching anxieties. He would first tackle the immediate task at hand, to find Sita Hanuman was not sure how to proceed and he felt fear fluttering in his belly. If he was not absolutely careful, and very lucky as well all would be lost, and his great leap would have been in vain.

Even if she was in the city and still alive how would be able to meet her alone ? The fear flared across his mind that, after all Rama may have

to return to Ayodhya without Sita. Hanuman shivered. He scolded himself and swore he would be calm. He decided he would enter Lanka after night fell under cover of darkness. He climbed into the middle branch of a tree, sat hugging himself for the coldness in his heart and watched the sunset in the ocean.

The last sliver of fireball sank below the horizon and the sea was languid as woman after love. Like a shroud pulled over her face before she slept night stole over her and wrapped her in darkness. Hanuman roused himself and decided he was still too big to pass unnoticed into Lanka. He made himself smaller still; he shrank into a tiny marmoset sized monkey, no bigger than kitten.

Once more he crept to the gates of Lanka and hidden in the shrubbery peered into the wondrous city. It was like a city of Gandharvas. Lights were everywhere, glimmering jewels paved the road and encrusted the walls of the houses. Lanka lay before Hanuman like a piece of rich tapestry. As if to help him the moon rose over the trees and ramparts into a sky full of stars. Like a king swan Soma Devas was among lotuses on the dark lake above.

A high, gleaming wall ran around Lanka, made of some unearthly metal so smooth impossible to scale. Hanuman stood gazing it and it confirmed his fears that Lanka would be hard indeed to breach. Protected by the sea, a moat, ferocious rakshasa and this wall that a fly could not climb to Hanuman thought glumly 'I won't be able to deceive this eagle eyes guard if I assume the form of a rakshasa what a city this is, not even my father Vayu may enter into it without Ravana's leave'.

He counted on his fingers the Vanara warriors who were strong enough to storm Lanka, Kumbada, Ajgada, Sushena, Marida, Dwividha, Sugriva, Kusaparva, Ketumala, Hanuman and Jambavan king of beans. Rama and Lakshmana would come too though he could not imagine how they would arrive here. But what would this mere handful do against the might of Lanka's rakshasa's army? Hanuman shivered again with the chill in his heart. He came to a drawbridge across the moat, guarded by another force of rakshasas. He crept stealthily along its underside and gain the far bank in the moon light. He crept along another hundred feet, when he heard a hiss in the dark and a powerful hand snatched him by the scruff of his neck. Two crimson cat's eyes glared at him from the shadow he was snatched into and dimly before him, he saw a luminous and dreadful female form.

It was a secret goddess who had caught him and, amused but mincingly she said, "What have we here? It seems to be no warrior, but a

monkey. But not everything is what it seems to be, and you are very heavy for one so small, who are you and why are you creeping into Lanka ? Don't try to me I saw you crawling under the bridge!"

The necklace of rubies at her throat glowed like embers in the night. Hanuman pretended to be a terrified little monkey. He trembled in her grass and whimpered, "I will tell you beautiful one I will tell you who are you Devi, and why do you terrify me with your fierce eyes and your deep voice. As you can see I am a little monkey. But aware you and why do you stand here in the dark at Lanka's gate ?

She shook him she bared pale fangs and said "I am the spirit of Lanka and I am Lankini and no one pass me for I am the guardian of Ravana's city. Prepare to die monkey. I will pluck your head from your neck with my nails".

Hanuman said, "I saw the beauty of Lanka from yonder peak and I was so enchanted that I came to see nearer".

But she was unmoved by his flattery. Her eyes glinting she snarled 'Foolish monkey, you cannot pass into Lanka. Unless you vanquish me in battle.' Hanuman pleaded. 'I will admire the sights of Lanka and go away as I came. I mean no harm to anyone'.

With a soft howl she struck him across his face. Then Hanuman lost his temper. Bunching his tiny hand into a fist he struck her back squarely on her mouth. Her eyes rolling up, she crumpled to the ground. Yet since she was a woman. Hanuman had not hit her with all his strength. Soon she fluttered open her eyes and shaking her head to clean it sat up. But now she folded her hands to Hanuman and spoke him in awe.

"So the prophecy has come true. Whispered dusky Lankini "Brahma gave me a boon and said I would be invincible at these gates. But he also said that one day a little monkey would come along and when he struck me down, I would know the end of the rakshasas was at hand. 'Her voice fell lower'. And I know what brings you here. It is she it is Sita who brings doom to Lanka."

Hanuman saw she was crying with a sigh Lankini gathered and said, "It is no use my standing guard here any longer. Lankini does not far your way anymore; you are free to enter as your please."

LANKA

Hanuman got rid of the presiding deity of Lanka. He crossed the high wall which surrounded the city. He placed his left foot first when he landed in Lanka. That was the convention; to use the left foot first when he landed in Lanka, the house of an enemy. Boldly he walked through the streets which were decorated with pearls and flowers. It was a beautiful city. The music made by the drums and city bugles on the one hand and the tinkling of bells in the windows of the marvin on the other was pleasing to the ear. It was well built with an eye to artistic perfection and wherever his eyes were cast Hanuman saw beauty and nothing but beauty. He was greatly impressed by the wealth of Ravana and the tastefully decorated city which was his. Hanuman jumped on to the terraces of the houses and went from one house to the next and each was different from other. Music reached his ears from everywhere. The tinkle of the anklets, the rustle of silks and the sight noise made by the ornaments worn by the women. Could be heard everywhere. In between could be heard the sonorous music made by the recitee of Vedas. He could see the section of Ravana's army which stood guard over the city during the night.

They were carrying weapons of all types and it was frightful to imagine the fact of an intruder if he were caught. Hanuman went from house to house mansion, until he finally arrived at what he guessed to be the palace of Ravana the lord of the land.

It was like a portion of heaven itself which has been placed on the earth for the pleasure of the king of rakshasas. The neighing of the horses, the impatient pawing of their hoofs on the ground, the music made by the instruments, greeted Hanuman who had become smaller than a kitten in size. He was not noticed and quietly he entered the Anthahpura of Ravana through the doorway which was exquisitely brought with gold and inlaid with pearls, corals and gems. The scent of incense stick assailed him as he entered the palace.

The moon had reached the zenith now. He had spread his silvery radiance on the earth below and the sleeping city was bathed in moon light. Hanuman stood for a moment contemplating the beauty of the Moon. He looked like a swan captive in a silver cage like a glorious lion in a cave on the Mandara mountain like a warrior seated high on the back of a proud elephant. The moon was casting rays on the earth, the moon whose beauty was like that of the Mandara mountain, like that of the ocean in the evenings, like the soft beauty of the lotus. The mist did not obscure him and he was shining with all his radiance. Most of the inmates were under the influence of drugged sleep. They had, evidently, partaken of wine. Their abandon was amusing and, at the same time pathetic. Many of them had their women by their sides and they

seemed to be very beautiful. Hanuman scanned their faces eagerly and even though they were beautiful all of them, not one of them was Sita. He knew that Sita was more beautiful than all of them and in his mind's eye he had created a picture of her in accordance with the usurpation aseruption given by Rama. The women he was seeing now were not like her.

Hanuman went inside the palace of Ravana and he had to be careful not to be seen by any one. The armed guards were like lions guarding a forest and into that domain entered Hanuman with careful steps.

To him, the palace seemed to be the ornament of the city of Lanka, so exquisitely was it constructed. His fear of being discovered was gone since he had come inside and he had reached the mansion of the king. The king's house was glowing like a sun because of the glow from the gems and gold which were to be found everywhere. The seats, couches, beds, and other articles were all inlaid with gold and set with gems. Ivory and sandalwood were used in making most of them. Hanuman was amazed at the prosperity which was evident from the houses he had visited and luxury there. As he walked, Hanuman's eye lighted on the Pushpaka Vimana, which he had heard, had been bought by Ravana to Lanka after he had vanquished Kubera. Hanuman went from place to place and from anthapura to anthapura and looked in Vani for Sita. All the wealth of Kubera was to be found in the city of Lanka and Hanuman wondered if it was heaven on a city of the Gandharvas which he had been seeing all the while.

Hundred and thousand of beautiful women were sleeping there and he scanned every one of their faces and he was sure that Sita was not there. The women were all brought by Ravana during his encounters with Gandharvas and nagas and kinneras and everyone of the women was in love with Ravana. There were some he brought forcibly but they had succumbed to his charms in course of time. Hanuman was feeling sorry for Ravana who had so many women in his harem and who could have been happy with all of them. He had instead courted death by wanting the wife of Rama.

IN RAVANA'S ANTAHPURA

On and on through the maze of corridors in Ravana's harem tiny Hanuman wandered. Some had floors of marble and yet others were tiled with tinted stone not quarried on earth. As he searched for Sita, wondering again what manner of rakshasa the Lord of Lanka must be for so many of the most

beautiful women in the worlds to be in his antahpura. Hanuman came to a taller road than all others he had eased open to night softly, he entered that apartment which was the only one in the wing of the Seraglio.

The first chamber was a sprawling living room, richly, tastefully furnished. No one was here. 'He tiptoed across its expanse and opened a door in the far corner. The Vanara froze. Before him, in a bed room as big as a court upon a bed of crystal, ivory and Sandalwood at the head of which he saw the white parasol of kingship, slept a rakshasa who could only be Ravana himself. He was darker than Hanuman had imagined his sleeping presence was of a thunder cloud. Golden kundalas hung from his ears; his arms lay long at his sides, down to his knees. He was lean and powerful with not an ounce of superfluous flesh on him. The clothes he slept in were of white silk and the room was redolent with the sandalwood. Paste which had been massaged into his dark skin by women's fire hands.

Hanuman went closer. A potent emanation of evil from the sleeping demon touched him fiercely and like a frightened little monkey he scampered back a few paces. The rakshasa's arms lay like ebony pillars on the spotless sheets. That bed was not made for one sleeper, but Ravana slept alone in it to night. His breathing slow and even, he slept deeply.

Hanuman raised his eyes past Ravana's sleeping form. He saw there was another bed in the room as beautiful wrought as the king's bed was, but smaller. The chamber was dark and Hanuman could not see clearly. He crept around the first bed to the side of the first one. He sighed when he saw how beautiful the woman was who slept in it. Springing upon to the ivory head board, he peered down at the sleeping queen for so, she must be.

She wore ornaments richer than any he had seen all this extraordinary night. The pearls she had so carelessly around her neck were each a princess dowry. When Hanuman saw her skin was golden, he felt a surge of excitement, thus Rama had described Sita's complexion to him. She was so beautiful that, as he gazed at her Hanuman grew convinced she was Rama's love. The Vanara slapped his shoulders in delight he scrambled up and down the pillars of that room. Then he went back to awaken her. Luckily for him, a warming instinct restrained him.

Hanuman thought "By her beauty she must be Sita. But how does she sleep so contentedly in Ravana's bed chamber with a smile carved around her perfect lips?" He slapped himself again across his cheek this time. How even for a moment could he think that Sita would sleep in Ravana's bed? She would rather die! He was right. The breath taking woman who slept above on

her regal bed, was Maya's daughter Mandodari. She was Ravana's queen a rakshasi. Realising his mistake Hanuman crept out of that apartment.

Dejectedly the little monkey wandered again through the palace. Hundreds of sleeping women he saw but none of them was Sita. He wandered into the kitchen, big as mansions, and the wire collar, which stretched interminably, with casks, vats and sparkling bottles in row upon row shelf up on shelf. Hanuman was unhappy about having gazed at the lovely mistresses of Ravana of Lanka; not all of them were fully clothed and some wore nothing at all.

The Vanara said to himself "But my mind is not moved by all the nakedness not by what I saw in the garden. It is the mind that does on not size not the senses. And I am unmoved though I realize how easy it would be for anyone to yield to temptation".

Hanuman wandered out into the rambling gardens around the palace. His eyes roved everywhere in some despair now, he had come this far and nowhere there was sign of Sita. Though exotic streaming green houses Hanuman ranged whimpering to himself now and again, every bit the lost little monkey. The moon had sunk low over the salt ocean and would soon set into burning silver gold waves. He realized he had wandered for hours in Vani. Tears welled in his eyes. The Vanara grew awfully certain that Sita was dead. Perhaps when she refused to give into him, Ravana had killed her.

Hanuman was tempted to make the crossing back to Bharathavarsha by darkness, before the sun rose. But what would Angada and Jambavan say who tried their hopes on hawk ? He thought of the shame of failure and Hanuman persuaded himself to stay on and to search again thoroughly. Once more, the monkey combed Ravana's palace. Scampering up and down the wide golden stairways, he searched all its floors of Anthahpurus. He combed its gardens with their transcend lawns, vivid of the palace he even peered under the beds in each room to be quite sure he had not missed her yet. No Sita did Hanuman find.

He thought 'Sampathi the eagle said he saw her across the sea. Then where is she ? Ravana must have killed her between then and now, and cremated her body or perhaps there are dangerous below the palace where she holds. But I have looked everywhere, and I saw no sign of such a poison, or a straight way leading down to one.

Hanuman perched on top of a round pillar on a flight of stone steps outside the palace and sat hugging himself. Then he thought of Rama. How

would he tell in prince that Sita nowhere to be found in Lanka, that she was probably dead ? He shivered at this thought.

Rama will certainly kill himself moaned poor Hanuman. In mesay he wrapped up his arms even more tightly around himself. He swaged from side to side. Wondering what on earth he could do short of putting an end to himself out here in Lanka. Wretched thoughts followed each other a cross his mind in morbid procession.

‘If Rama dies, Lakshmana won’t stay alive he will also take his life. Bharatha and Satrughna will follow them and so will their mothers. The glory of Ishvaku. House of the Sun, will be extinguished for ever. And the purpose of that handsome, Demon who sleeps so soundly in his bed of crystal and ivory will be well served!

He sighed, and again, a serpentine evil seemed to reach for him from the heart of brooding continued “If Rama dies Sugriva will kill himself for not having kept his word that he would find Sita. Then Rama and Tara will also kill themselves when Tara dies, Angada will hardly stay alive and all this because I failed them”.

Hanuman wanted to cry. As the moon sank into the see on silver. Fire he began to mumble to himself in despair.

“Even if Sita is dead, it is better that I never go back to Kishkindha. If I don’t return, they will at least lives in hope. While if I do, their hearts will be broken. I will go to the jungle and take Sanyasa or better still, I will take myself to an obscure corner of this island and set myself in fire. But they say it is gracious sin to kill oneself worse than murder.”

“Whether I find Sita or no, Ravana I must kill for the grief he has curse or perhaps I should take him back to Kishkindha and let Rama deal with him.”

Now and again he craned his neck to watch luminescent spectacle of the sitting moon. As the last silver sank under foaming waves, suddenly a dyeing beam of moonlight fit a copse at the very edge of his vision. Hanuman got up to his toes and peered at the concealed wood. It was set cunningly in the shadow of the palace so one could see it only as the moon set by the last rays. At first Hanuman did not peer with great hope by now the night had taught him such despair he hardly dared let hope in his heart again.

But stretching on tiptoe he saw there curtains a grove of Ashoka trees below him. He decided he must investigate it at least to satisfy his conscience. He stepped down from his pillar. As he scampered towards the hidden grove, the heaviness lifted away from his heart and a great fresh hope smudged from his body Hanuman cocked his head from side to side wondering. He slightly invoked the eight Vasus and even Rudras the twelve Adityas the seven Maruts; he solemnly saluted them all, begging their forgiveness if arrogance had entered his heart after his leap across the sea. With tears in his eyes he begged them to lead to Sita.

Hanuman prayed to Rama and Lakshmana. He prayed to Sita whom she had never seen. He bowed in the darkness to Indra to his father Vayu to Yama, Surya and Soma. Then cautiously he began to seek a way to Ashokavana. It took a while but he found one. Craftily hidden between a flight of stone steps and a tall hedge. Hanuman crept along carefully. Though there were no rakshasa guards in Ravana's harem out here in the open he might well encounter a night patrol. He knew this was his last chance, a stirring breeze blew around his face.

The Ashokavana lay beyond a high wall that encircled Ravana's palace. It lay between the palace and the sea. Thinking how beautiful Sita must be, Hanuman leapt up on to the wall. He saw the care with which the garden was maintained, its trees elegantly clipped and planted in the ground with knowing design. There were rare trees here, trees even he had never sun before . He saw those that were sons of ancient sires that grew in Indra's Amaravathi; great plants which stirred Hanuman's monkeys heart and spoke to him in silent and primeval tongues of living leaf, twig and blossom.

He leapt lightly down into the Ashokavana. At once the heady scents of a hundred different kinds of night blooming flowers swept over him. He looked up and saw birds in dense blocks roosting in the branches, their heads tucked under their wings. He saw tame deer slept curled up in the bushes and on the lawns koels and peacocks Hanuman saw and they, who were sensitive to the smallest sound, raised their heads in arrogance that an intruder had found his way in here. Little Hanuman saw the eyes of chital and smabur glowing nervously at him from the picked night.

When the birds in the trees grow disturbed and flapped their wings in half sleep flowers from the branches where they roosted steamed down to the ground in scented showers. Hanuman stood covered in petals, a bright little mound. Smiling he shook the flowers from his fun and crept on through the darkness. It could not be long before the sun rose behind him and then he must hide or flee.

Shaking those trees with strength quite incongruous to his size parting creepers and peering into the dark crypts behind their lattices, Hanuman went along a little storm of guest through the Ashokavana. Ahead, he heard the murmur of flowing water peering by just starlight into the gloom, he saw a small stream flowing down a hillock that loomed in the night. This rivulet fed a handful of lotus pools, which reflected the canopy of stars above upon surfaces as little mirrors.

Like jewels those pools lay, banked with white sea sand, there were stairways leading down to them, made of deep slabs of unworldly, Viswakarma of Devaloka had created them and conceived their sublime arrangement. By now, Hanuman was so tired he had to sit somewhere and rest. He saw a Shimshupa tree before him. Its branches hung low, the creepers that clung to it cascaded from its highest twigs in a stream of green colour.

Hanuman sprang up into that tree and sat among its middle branches. Hugging himself again in disappointment, thinking that the surge of hope in his blood as he entered the Ashokavana had deceived him. The little monkey whimpered, but he refused to abandon his quest telling himself that when the sun rose he would see Sita under the bowers of this Ashokavana. Hanuman sat staring around him and often up at the stay strewn across the sky like silver lotuses on another lake. He prayed fervently that his mission may still not prove futile.

HANUMAN SEES SITA

Hanuman thought to himself “May be Sita who has her mind set on Rama who is mourning this separation from him will come to trees garden. This Ashokavana is beautiful, perhaps Sita’s steps will lead her towards this tree. I have been told by Rama that she is extremely fond of trees and flowering shrubs and water falls. This garden seems to be made just for her. She is sure to be fond of a kind of comfort in these surroundings. This river has quite clear water and most probably. Sita will come here to touch the water and worship the sun at dawn.

“If she is alive, I am sure this is the place. She is and I am certain that she will come to this river bank sooner or later.”

The garden is like Indras Nandana or Kubera’s Chitra. It was more beautiful than any heavenly garden. In the light of the moon, the garden looked like the sky and the flowers were like the may stars which pierced the dark night with their bright rays. It was like Gandhamadava laden with intoxicating

perfume which was heavenly. He cast his eyes around and nearby was a beautiful edifice. It had many white pillars which supported it and it was white like the Kailasa peak. The steps leading to it were of coral and the surface was covered with molten gold. The eyes were dazzled by the brilliance of the little temple.

Hanuman was intrigued by it and he looked her and then HE SAW HER IT women who was like a crescent at the beginning of the brighter fortnight she was extremely thin and it was clear that she had been fasting endlessly. Signs escaped her and several hideous looking rakshasas surrounded her. She was beautiful and her beauty had been dimmed by her sorrow like fire is hidden by the clouds of smoke enveloping it. She was draped in a crumpled piece of silk, yellow in colour. Dust had found place all over her body and seemed not to care for it. She had spammed all ornaments. She was white like a lotus stalk which had wilted. She had been grieving for long and she looked like star Rohini which had been swallowed by Angaraka. Tears were flowing from her eyes and she was a picture of despair, this woman with sad eyes. Tired and weak due to her incessant fasting she looked like frightened thoughtful and unhappy. Constant sorrow seemed to have worked havoc on her and surrounded as she was by rakshasa's she could not find a single soul to pity on her. She had been forcibly parted from her dear ones and like a deer in the midst of hounds she looked helpless and lonely. Her hair was twisted into a single strand and like a blur snake it trailed on her back. Meant only to be surrounded by luxury, this lovely woman had nothing but unhappiness as her constant companion. She had never known what it was to be unhappy till then and her large eyes were trying to understand why she was made to suffer.

Hanuman saw her and thought "This is she. This is Sita who has been stolen by this low minded rakshasa. She is all that I had imagined her to be. Her face is like the moon and her eye brows are etched on her face. She is like a goddess who can make her surroundings flow with her radiance. Her hair is dark and her lips are red and full. Her eyes are like the petals of the lotus and this is Sita born on the sacrificial ground and discovered by her father. Dear to the entire world this beautiful woman was seated on the bare earth like a tapasvin. Her sighs are long and frequent. Her sorrow has demired her beauty; like blame covered by smoke her radiance is hidden by her pain. She is the image of forlorn hope. Like a desire which has been frustrated like an unfulfilled task like fame which has been lost as a consequence of false rumors. Because she cannot go to her. Rama she is sunk in despair. This woman with eyes like those of a frightened deer is weak with fear and her eyes can only fill with tears which drop down constantly. She should be the ornament of a harem. She should wear jewels worthy of a queen and she is denuded of them. Pitiably indeed is she who is like the moon which is hidden behind a bark of clouds".

Hanuman was looking at her and thoughts chased each other in his mind and he was sorely distressed at the sight of Rama's Queen. He recognized her with great difficulty since Rama had described a happy woman and thus lady was a picture of woe. He was quite sure that he was looking at Sita. Rama had described several of her ornaments and he saw them all placed on the branches of the tree which was nearer. Her silk which was now soiled and dusty was still yellow and he knew this was the golden yellow silk which Rama had described. He had seen a price of it too which has held the jewels which she had thrown down at them at Rishyamooka. She had been forcibly parted from her Lord but her mind was filled with his image and this was evident from her grief. This was the woman for whom Ravana was planning away. Hanuman could see that she belonged only to Rama and he was all hers. No one had any right to try and influence her, least of all Ravana. Hanuman thought "Rama is meant for Sita and she can belong to him and only him. This love is so strong that it had kept them both alive in spite of their terrible, unbearable separation. Indeed Rama has achieved the impossible by being alive though he is away from her. It is not an easy task. Only he can do it. No one can live even a day after being parted from a woman like her.

Hanuman thought of Rama in his mind and he prostrated before him mentally and sent "Lord, I have found Sita".

Hanuman was overcome with sadness at the sight of the princess who was sorrowing for her lord who was so far away. He thought to himself "Fate is indeed very powerful. I realize it when I see this chaste and pure woman wasting away with sorrow. She was protected by none other than Rama and his valiant brother Lakshmana. Suited to be the wife of Rama in every way this noble lady is made to suffer by fate. Because of his love for her Rama killed Vali. Kabandha who was equal of Ravana was killed. She was rescued earlier from Viradha by these great heroes. In Janastana fourteen thousand rakshasa were killed because Surpanakha threatened this wife of Rama. Khara, Dushana, and Trisuras were dispatched to the abode of Yama for her sake. It was to get her that Rama made Sugriva the king of Kishkindha. For her sake, I crossed the deep sea and came to Lanka I now feel that it will not be a surprising action if Rama should turn the entire universe upside down for her sake. Nothing in this world can equal the glory that is Sita. She is the devoted wife of Rama. Such a woman is the captive of a rakshasa and she is surrounded by these dreadful woman and she is not free even to weep. Because of her love for Rama, she gave up the comforts the palace and walked with him in the Dandaka. She was happy and contented and such a woman is now drowned in sorrow Rama will not rest until he gets her back. Alone, unloved, uncared for she is keeping her like for the sake of Rama whom she hopes to meet sometime.

She has no eyes for the beautiful garden she is captive. Her eyes are with her heart and that is with Rama. My mind is filled with sadness and anger when I see this unhappy woman. Patient as mother earth Sita who had been guarded by the noble princes is now under the watchful eyes of rakshasis. The season is shared and the moon must be making her long for Rama. The season is sure to accentuate her sorrow and anguish.

Hanuman was over come with sorrow and pity for Sita and he leaned back on the branches of Shimsupa tree and sat silent for a long while.

IN THE ASHOKAVANA

Dawn broke over the horizon and the first shafts of pale light divided the sleeping ocean full of dreams from Ravana's land. Hanuman in his tree heard the Vedas being chanted loudly and was startled awake. Within his palace Ravana had also awakened early. The image he awoke with was of Sita's perfect face, he had dreamt of her all night.

The Lord of Lanka rose from his bed. He had no eyes for mandodari, who as she lay asleep with her lips a sigh apart was a picture of sweet seduction. He pulled on the fresh robes of white silk, laid out for him putting on a necklace and golden bracelets so brilliant they dispelled the last straggles of night that lingered wistfully in the world he came out of his apartment. He strode through interminable passages and arrived by his own private entrance in the Ashokavana where his heart lay captive.

But as he went like a storm through the Antahpura's passage. There were others already awake; lovely woman who had dreamt of his virile face and form. They wanted a few moments with him, if not in their beds, at least like this out in the open. All along his way through the harem. They approached him with soft caresses but he strode impatiently along. Those women followed him to the ashokavana, in a smell strong. Some brought chamaras, others held lamps to light his way since the corridors were still dark.

Like Indra surrounded by his apsaras, Rama came out into the crisp dawn. Not looking left or right without a glance at the silken see that lay like a languorous woman herself below Lanka the rakshasa made straight for the little shrine of the white pillar, where Sita slept and distraught.

Hanuman hid himself behind a screen of leaves and peered down at Ravana. Now he saw even more plainly how magnificent the Rakshasa was tall and dark handsome as Kamadeva. His white robe was like froth at the crest of the tem bid sea of presence and power that was Ravana. In his tree Hanuman

had seen other kings of the world, but never are nearly as arresting as awesome, as this emperor. Greatness sat lightly on those rippling shoulders fame and measureless authority radiated from his castrate face. Ravana had the poser to make his cluster of mine heads become invincible at will. At dawn today, he came out with just one face showing, because he did not want to risk repelling Sita.

For all the dark majesty at wore Ravana face was haggard and careworn. The single mindedness with which he stalked to the little temple in Ashokavana cried out that great Ravana was strangely. Vanquished that his vast kingdom meant less to him than the woman who sat sorrowing within that retreat. She had become all the kingdom he wanted, all his heaven and earth. Ravana breathed the image of Sita. He slept and work in her obsession.

From his perch, Hanuman could see into the little temple. He saw Sita grow pale when she knew Ravana had arrived swiftly in a reflex of fear and shame, she covered her body with her hands. Like frightened birds her eyes flew this side and that avoiding his smoldering stare as he came and stood tall and ominous before her. He drank deeply of the sight of her with his red gaze. He did not appear to notice how disheveled she was or the dirt that streaked her eyes flew this way and that streaked her tear stained face. Before him Ravana, master of the worlds, saw only his hopes, his life, his heaven and hell and if he had known it, his death as well. She stared, down at the bare earth she sat upon. She was like a branch blossom laden, but cut away from her mother tree and sorrowing on the ground.

Ravana sighed. In his voice like somnolent thunder he said “Whenever I come here, you try to hide your beauty with your hands. But for me any part of you I see is absolutely beautiful. You are the perfect woman beauty begins with you. Harem, my love Sita, and you will discover how deep it is. My life began when I first saw you ? But you treat me cruelly”.

She said nothing never raised her eyes up to him. Hanuman little monkey in the tree trembled with what he saw and heard.

“You say it was distasteful to abduct you, but you forget I am a rakshasa. It is natural and so entirely honourable for me to take another man’s life if I want her. It is even honourable for me to force myself on you, because I love you. I will wait for your to return my love to give yourself to me willingly you are my day and my night and all my dreams. I feel I was never alive until I saw your face.”

“Abandon thus wretched grief : You were born to be a queen of queens. It does not suit you to sit on the barefoot like this with your clothes soiled your hair unwashed your face covered by a screen of dirt, and starving yourself almost to death. When he made you Brahma crowned his long quest of creation. You are the woman who labored through the ages to make. No man, no Deva or Gandharva why not Brahma himself can resist your beauty. No blame attaches to me for loving you as I do. The fault lies not in my love but in your perfection.”

Colour, a flush of shame touched her cheeks as if his words were fire in her ears. It was not her Rama who spoke them but they came unhindered in to her hearing.

“When ever I look asleep or awake. I see your face even when I am dead, I know my eyes will see nothing else. I do not ask you to return my love with the same passion I have for you. Not even shadow of it. I only ask you to begin to think of kindly of me, to care for me a little I beg you come and rule my palace as my only queen. All the others serve you as Sakhis, even Mandodari. I will be your servant”.

“Everything that is mine shall be yours. Time and again, I have vanquished the Devas and Gandharvas in battle. Apart from what they bring me as tribute. I have taken untold wealth from them the rarest silks and jewels you cannot dream of will be yours even as they should. They will adorn your perfect body as they were made to. All my endless kingdom will be yours, only, set aside the stubborn ‘grief.

‘Sita fate is all powerful. You and I were created for each other. Why else would you have come to me at all by the long and winding way that you did ? Brahma intends that we should be together. Don’t resist the will of the god shed your grief my love. Bathe and put on the finest clothes on earth. Adorn yourself with the most precious ornaments in the three worlds. And let me to look at you ah, let me feast my eyes on you’.

He was helpless for this insane love. Already whenever he was able to tear his thoughts away from Sita and considered what he had plunged into, Ravana realized it was no less than his death he courted so ardently. Six months of the year he had given to her to yield him had passed and she was obdurate as ever. Each passed and she was as obdurate as ever. Each time he came to her she gave him the same answer and with easy visit to the Ashokavana his obsession grew and his despair.

Ravana had no joy or peace any more in the arms of his wives. Out of bold habit he made love to them desolutorily, for the month Sita had been in Lanka. But he found only such aridness in those couplings that he did not attempt anymore to quiet his fatal desire elsewhere. He had not been in Mandodari's bed for five months and the others did not hope to tempt him at all.

Initially his frustration when she saw Sita so lovely before him and so unattainable, would drive Ravana into a frenzy. He would growl and scream at her. But soon he became calmer; for the first helplessness. He realized the only way into her heart was if she decided herself to him.

He had exhausted all his arguments of power, wealth and virility. He persisted in them only out of habit. There was no conviction in him any longer when he boasted to her. At last he knew all he had to offer this most exceptional woman was his love and while doing her best not to be cruel, because she saw that he loved her in his dreadful way, she spurred him over and over again.

“Now out of habit, Ravana said, ‘What can be give you that I cannot ? You are denying your own nature, Sita. Other women have been brought here as spoils of war, as frightened as you were when you first came more so. But when they knew me, none of them resisted me for more than a week. None once they tasted my love ever wanted to leave me. You are stubborn. It is only stubbornness and fear not love, which bind you to your Rama.’”

‘He is not my equal in wealth or power, valour or even tapasya. Forget your wandering hermit. By now, he has lost his mind from sorrow. Be sensible, just think there is no hope of Rama ever seeing you again no hope that he can cross the ocean that separates Lanka from Bharathavarsha. Give up your stubbornness. It is all you have to lose’.

His eyes roved over her slender form and they blazed. He whispered ‘Oh Sita, give yourself to me. I will love you as women only dream of being loved. Rule my heart, and be queen of the world as you were born to be. We will walk hand in hand in this Ashokavana and you will discover the meaning of happiness!

But again she picked up the long blade of grass and set it between herself and him like a naked sword. She said, ‘I am the wife of another man, rakshasa, and my husband is my life. How can you even think of me as becoming yours when I am already given to Rama ? Given not only for this life, but for ever for all the lines that have been and all those that have come. I

have always belonged to Rama, and always will. You have many beautiful women in your harem. Don't you keep them from the lustful gazes of other men? How is it then, you cannot conceive that I would be true to my Rama? That it is natural for me because I love him'.

He looked away from her. Not that anything except her face even when he did. But he could not bear what he said. Never had he encountered with such chastity and to believe in it would mean denying everything and to believe he had lived for. A smile curving his dark lips, Ravana turned his gaze from her.

But Sita went undaunted. "You count death for yourself and your kingdom. Have you know wise men in your sabha. Who advise you against your folly?"

Ravana laughed. "They all know I am a law unto myself. They know I am invincible. She looked up briefly into his eyes and her voice firmer said, 'You have violated Dharma and punishment will come to you more quickly than you think you don't know Rama. He is not what you imagine to be. You speak of this sea being an obstacle between him and me. But I say to you Ravana even if the ocean of stars lay between us, Rama would come to find me'.

Something flickered deep in Ravana's plumbless heart and she saw it in his eyes. But she did not know whether it was fear or a sorrow too distant to feel.

"But it is not too late for you to rakshasa. Take me back to Rama and he will forgive you. I will tell him that you did me no harm. I am part of Rama as the light of the sun is part of the star. Nothing in all the worlds no cause in the yawning eyes of time, will persuade me to give in to you. Take back me to Rama, before doom comes Lanka".

Ravana stared at her in amazement. He looked at his women around him and throwing back his dark head, began to laugh "Are you trying to frighten the lord of the rakshasas at whose name the universe trembles"?

"If Rama is angry. Nothing in this universe can save you. You don't know who he is. Indra's Vajra may fail to harm you, or even Yama's Paasa. But when Rama strings his Kodanda and Lanka shudders. You will know the terror of your death came for you. Like the sun covers the earth with his rays, Rama will cover your city with his eagle feathered astras and each one shall be flaming army armlets for you".

‘Rakshasa there is not escape for you anywhere. Take me back me to Rama and ask his pardon. He is kind beyond your understanding. He will forgive you. Listen me Rama, Ravana. You don’t you have done’.

The smile vanished from his face. In a voice as menacing as a serpents hiss he said “My love for you which you scorn so arrogantly preserves your life. No one else could speak one word for all that you dare say to me and hope to live. I should have you tortured for sparking to me as if I were just anyone, but my love prevents me”.

The veins stood out on his temples from the anguish she caused him. His skin turned a ghastly pallor, his lips twitched. Deep in his eyes, terrible wrath and untold tenderness hunted each other. Shadows dark and bright fitted across his face. He clenched his bits and drew himself erect. He said to her in deadly quiet. “One month more I will give you, out of my great love. Remember to be in my bed before those thirty days are past. If you are not my cooks will serve your to me in pieces for my morning meal.”

The women who had come with Ravana felt sorry for Sita, but none of them dared speak on her part. They flashed fearlessly at Ravana, “you have often called Rama a weakling hermit. When his arrow is burned to its feathers in your flack heart you will know who Rama is very soon, Rakshasa you will soon be a handful of ashes and all your glory with you. Even as you dare book at me with lust in your eyes. You do not know that I could burn you up and myself with my Paativratya. But I will leave you to Rama. Now that I have seen how evil you are, I think fate conspired to make you adduct me. So Rama would come to kill you.”

His lips quivered. But having thrown herself at times mercy, she mocked him, “you say you are the bravest man in all the world you say your vanquished. Indra and Kubera in battle. But you stole me from my ashrama like a thief when my husband was away. Rakshasa you are more a coward than a hero.”

Ravana’s eyes were the colour of the dawn that lay out on the sea. For a long moment, he said nothing but grew very still. Then with a cry he drew a sword and stood over her, the weapon raised in both hands, glinting over her head. Hanuman almost fell out of his tree; he had no time to intervene. A smile tugging at her mouth. Sita raised her face and gazed calmly back into the Demon’s eyes. Thus they remained locked in a silent struggle of wills and the violence of it made the rakshasas around Sita scamper away, whimpering and even Ravana’s mistress drew back in fear. But at last just as Hanuman was

about to fly Sita's rescue, Ravana threw back his face and howled abysmally like a wild beast stuck by our arrow. He thrust his sword back into its sheath, and screeched at her. "What do you want with that adharmi whom his father banished that impoverished half nacked tapasvin when you can have my love ?

Turning in his rakshasis he cried, "Coax her threaten her do anything you have to your talk is to make her to come to me. If you fail I will have your lives as well."

Still he stood staring at her as if his eyes would lose their vision if he turned them from his face. Then one of his once favourite women, Dhanyamalini who grieved for Sita had her Lord came to him in that little temple. As Hanuman watched in amazement, she wound her slender arms around his neck like green vines and kissed him full on his lips so never he surprised. The fascination of Sita was briefly forgotten and his rage. Dharyamalini was terrified the duel of wills between Ravana and Sita would break out again. He was in the mood for it, and the next time he would kill her.

Dharyamalini cried "Why do you waste your time with her ? It has been so my moons since you came to my bed. Every night Ravana I lie awake starling at the stars and wandering will my king came to me to night ? Will he come to drink the fever that burns my body and turns my dream away ? But every night you lie alone, thinking just of Sita she is not worthy of you my, lord come to my bed an let me take your anguish from you. Forget her for a while. Brahma has not willed that she be fortunate to lie in your army."

Bemused and realizing the peril of staying on there, Ravana allowed Dharyamalini to lead him away. After he had left Sita sat quietly drained. A rakshasi brought him some food and water. She ate a morsel and drank just enough to keep her alive.

Later inside the palace, Dhanylakshmi turned crying softly from Ravana. Minister to him tenderly as she could not arouse her king at all. Sita's fall haunted him, and he lay quite impotent in that lovely rakshasis bed.

A RAY OF HOPE

The rakshasis began to harass Sita as commanded by their master. They spoke of the glory of Ravana and tried to influence her. They spoke gently and then harshly and they then tried to threaten her. Nothing would move her. She said "Nothing will make me falter in my love for Rama. There

is no use in your talk you can kill me if you wish to but you cannot make me to change my mind”.

They persisted in their task and Hanuman was listening to everything. She was finding them too oppressive and wiping her eyes with her hand she stood up and walked towards an Ashoka tree which was very near the Shimshupa on which was seated Hanuman. The rakshasis were now shouting at her and they talked among themselves that they could easily kill her cut her up and eat her. Sita was disgusted with them and at the same time she was desperately unhappy she sobbed as though her heart would break. She told herself “Death will not approach man or woman until the appointed time which fate has decreed or else how is it possible for me to be in the midst of these cruel and unfeeling rakshasis and in the palace of this sinner parted from my beloved Rama”? Sita was trembling in every limb and it was pathetic to see her alone with sorrow. She stood leaning a branch of the tree and thought of Rama. She waited “Rama, Lakshmana, my beloved mothers in Ayodhya! I am caught here helpless like a boat tossed about in a stormy sea. The boat is about to sink. I am ready to die. But death has passed me by. I don’t know where Rama is and I am still alive parted as I am from my lord who is like my very life to me. It is a wonder that I am able to live. I must have committed some great and dreadful sin in my previous birth and this suffering is a punishment for it”. Sita’s grief was painful for Hanuman to watch and still he sat quietly on the top of a Shimshupa tree.

When the rakshasis were debating about about killing Sita a wise and good rakshasa woman Trijata by name came to them and said “Please do not talk like this. If you are hungry you can eat me up. Sita is divine and she should not be touched I had a dream and I will relate it to you.”

“I saw Rama wearing a garland of white flowers and he was wearing white silks. He was seated in a Vimana which was made of ivory and the chariot was drawn by a number of swans. Sita was wearing white and Sita was with Rama like the glow is united to the sun. Rama was seated on an elephant with four tusks and with him was Lakshmana. They came to Sita riding on an elephant. Sita was placed in the elephant by Rama and I saw them flying in the sky”.

“The elephant came and halted before our city. Rama came in a chariot drawn by eight bulls. I then saw the entire world swallowed by Rama and it was a fearful sight. In the midst of milky ocean could be seen a white mountain rishis to the surface. On its top was the elephant and riding that elephant could be seen Rama, Lakshmana and Sita. I saw Rama in another lace. He was sitting on a rich and costly couch and he was facing the East.”

“He was being crowned by the rishis and the Devas were worshipping him. This Sita was seated by his side dressed in pure white. To me Rama appeared to be Lord Narayana. He was the Parabrahmam. The heavenly host was around him and divine music could be heard. I then saw Rama with Sita and his brother seats in the Vimana by name Pushpaka and it traveled towards the North. I saw Ravana oil smeared in his body wearing red clothes and wearing a garland of Karavira flowers. He fell from the Pushpaka and now he wore black garments and he was dragged by a woman. I saw him in a chariot drawn by donkeys and it was going towards the South. He was drinking oil and he was laughing loudly. Kumbakarna too was seen by me sinking in a mine as Ravana did. The sons of the king all are seen by me. I saw Vibhishana with a white umbrella over his head and he was wearing rich silks. He was crowned and he went towards Rama seated on an elephant. I saw this city drowned in the sea. I also saw this Lanka which is dear to Ravana burnt by a monkey sent by Rama. According to what I have learnt about the language of dreams. I do understand my dream to mean that Rama will kill Ravana and all his men. Rama will take Sita with them. Do not talk harshly to her. She will remember to be kind to your and not to punish for your ill treatment.”

Sita in the meantime was weeping to her hearts' content. She had no more tears to shed and thought that she would kill herself. She knew that it would be futile to look for a sword or poison in that dreadful place and coming near the branch of the tree and said “I will make a noose of this long hair of mine and hang from this branch”. She stood near the tree and thought of her short life which she had spent so happily and which was to have such a tragic end. And she paused since some good omens visited her all of a sudden.

Heart broken lonely and extremely unhappy. Sita had reached the limit of endurance and decided to end her life. Good omens made her pause in surprise. Her beautiful left eye throbbed suddenly and it was the forerunner of good news. Her left shoulder which was leaning on the tree branch throbbed too and along with her shoulder her left thigh. They indicated that good was in store for her and Sita stood as though she had been carved out of stone. She did not know how to understand the omens. Sunk as she was in the sea of despair how was it possible for anything good to happen to her? Like a seed which had been left on the ground for a long time. Suddenly sprouts tiny leaves, even so into the desolate heart of Sita entered a sliver of hope. There was a semblance of wonderment in her face and her tears did not fall anymore.

Hanuman had heard the words of Trijata as she related her dream. He had seen all that was to be seen and he had heard enough to know how much Sita was suffering. He thought “I wonder what I should do now. I have seen

Sita and I have managed to elude the eyes of the may who guard the city. I have seen the entire city and to a certain extent I know the strength of the fortress of Ravana. Now my immediate duty is to comfort this noble woman who is ready to lay down her life because of her love for Rama. This princess, who has never before known what suffering is has been immersed in a sea of unhappiness and I must hasten to comfort her with my words. If I go back without speaking these words speaking to Sita. I am certain that in good will come out of it. I must do it. I might go back to Rama and tell him that Sita is found. But in the meantime, she may out of despair, end her life. And, there is also this to be considered. Rama will not be satisfied with the fact that I have seen Sita. I will have to tell him that I spoke to her and that I have been of some comfort to her. It is imperative that I should talk to her. How can it be done ? I cannot tell her anything in the presence of rakhasis who are guarding her. The sun has not risen yet and it seems to me that she may kill herself before that. If Rama asks me “What message has Sita sent me”? What am I to tell him if I do not talk to her ? I should not hurry back after taking so much trouble to arrive in Lanka. Rama will be greatly disappointed if I back without seeing her. He may burn me with his looks. Sugriva’s arrival with his immense army will be in new use if Sita and her life before that.”

“I should bide my time and wait for a proper occasion when I can talk to Sita. I must watch the guards and see if I can accomplish my desire when they are careless. I am a small monkey. I am sure they will think me harmless enough. I will talk to her in a manner which will be pleasing to the ear. If I should talk in a faultless manner she may have doubts about whether I am genuine or not. She may think that I am Ravana disguised as a monkey. But there is no other way of accosting her. I only fear that this gentle woman who is so easily frightened will be all the more scared if she sees me or hears me.”

“She may scream without knowing that she has done so and all my plans will go wrong. At once the rakhasis will be alerted and again I would have failed. They will try to surround me and catch me. I will be able to scare them and they will go to their king with the news that a stranger has entered the city. I will be rendered helpless and Sita will be ignorant of me and my message from Rama. I fear that she will either be eaten by the devils around her or else she will kill herself I can avert that only by talking to her. If I should be killed by the rakshasas the joint venture of Rama and Sugriva will never materialize. No one except me can cross the sea and no one will know about Sita unless I go back with the news.

“What should I do now ? I must act after greater deliberation. Even talks which seem to be easy are apt to go wrong and get spoilt if they are entrusted to one who is in efficient. I should make certain as to what should be

done and what should be avoided. If I think I am very clever that arrogance is enough to ruin all the projects that have been thought up by us. My task has to be accomplished. I should use my power of thinking to the utmost. My leaping across the sea should not be a wasted effort. I must make her listen to my words. How am I to do it”?

Hanuman was pondering on the problem for a very long time until he came to a decision. He hit upon a method by which he could introduce himself to Sita without her being startled. He told himself. “I will recount the great qualities of Rama about whom she is thinking all the time. I will recite them her interest will be kindled and slowly and very gradually, she will cast off her bear and have faith in me and my words. The wise Hanuman thought it was the best course to be adopted and began to act accordingly.

HANUMAN MEETS SITA

The branches of Shimshupa tree on which Hanuman was perched grew out a good way from its trunk. Creeping sure-footedly along those branches the vanara went as far as he could without showing himself. The rakshasis who had been ready to kill Sita were frightened by what Trijata said. Most of them wandered back to the little temple and had already fallen asleep under its round pillars. A few conferred together and decided to meet Ravana to tell him that not all their persuasions had moved their wind.

She stood beneath the Ashoka tree gazing out across the ocean with unseeing eyes. She stood fidgeting with her limp plait, torn between her instinct of hope and the terror of her predicament. Suddenly, out of the sky, a little voice spoke. Little but solemn it spoke half to her and half musingly to it self. Strange things this voice was saying it was chanting.

“There was once a king called Dasaradha. He was a rajarshi and great were his power and truth radiant. Legend were his wealth and his valour formed in all three worlds. Mere renowned. Yet was his tapasya of Dasaradha of Ishvaku of the race of Surya Deva. He was as strong as Indra. Kind as a father to his people, noble and generous. Not only among men, but among the gods this king had renown and honour.

Sita looked around her in amazement and she saw no one. But the quaint chanting continued like animate Mantra.

‘Four sons mighty Dasaradha had : the eldest was Rama and the king loved him more than his life Rama is a Kshatriya among Kshatriyas. He is

the greatest archer in the world a terror to his enemies. A protector of his people, wise compassionate and immaculate in Dharma is Rama of Ayodhya.’

She quivered joy making in her the tide of hope singed higher than ever. She stood rapt, listening to the charming voice rambling on ‘To preserve Dasaradha’s honour, Rama went to the jungle renouncing kingdom and comfort , wealth and power with Sita and Lakshmana. Rama went to the Dandaka Vana. Clad in tree bark and skin like any tapasvin the prince of Dharma went into the fearful Vana’.

Fate brought Rama into the jungle where austere rishis whose tapasya blessed the earth, were harassed by rakshasas. The demons discredited the hermits yagnas. They killed the munis and drank their blood Rama slew the evil ones. The forest resounded with his bowstring and far away the emperor of sin trembled on his crystal crown. Deep in his soul he sensed a light come into the world, for the literature from his reign of fear.

‘From a dark stirring in the lord of savagely his brothers attacked Rama at Panchavati. But Rama killed them all. Khara, he dispatched Trisuras, Dushana and fourteen thousand others with luciferic arrows. Sita stood motionless the soft words binding her in a trance.’

‘When Ravana heard about the massacre of his people he was furious. He decided Rama must die. But when the evil we heard of Rama’s prowess he thought cunning and grief were better weapons than arrows with which to fight with the prince of Ayodhya. With the help of golden stage, which was no deer at all he kidnapped Sita from Panchavati.’

Now she was agog to hear what followed for of course, she did not know what happened to Rama after Ravana abducted her. Her face was alight with eagerness. Her eyes darted all around her and up at the leafy branches. Still she saw no one.

The little voice went on serenely ‘grief stricken and consoled by his loyal brother. Rama wandered through the forest seeking his love. And on a mountain in wildness, he made friends with a monkey. The monkey was called Vali and his Sugriva set on the throne of Kishkindha from where he rules monkeys all over the earth.

“At his command Sugriva’s monkeys combed the ends of Bharatavarsha an army of Vanaras led by their prince Angada thought of their quest. But then an eagle called Sampathi. Who is Jatayu’s brother told them where she was. One of those monkeys left across the ocean to this Lanka and

he was the son of the wind. At last he found Sita in Ashokavana. But he did not know how to approach her lest he frighten her. The voice passed then said “Devi I am that Vanara.”

Sita quivered in amazement. Twisting her long plait in her fingers, her eyes full of wonder, full of fear she peered up into the branches of Shimshupa tree. At first she saw nothing nervously she looked around her. Suppose the rakshasis had also asleep inside the white temple. She peered more closely now she scrutinized every branch of the spreading tree slowly. Hanuman climbed out on a leafless fork and smiled sweetly down at her.

Sita gasped when she saw a tiny monkey clad in fire silks his from the colour of the bricks that paved the paths in Ashokvana. Fear had become so much part of her life and Vanara saw it flash across at her perfect features for long moment she stared silently and golden. There seemed to be no harm here at all. But she looked at him through her own suspicious and saw him as a sinister creature. Certain that he was evil, she turned away with a cry. She began to chant Rama and Lakshmana’s names feverishly under her breath.

“I must be dreaming ‘Sita told herself’. “They say that to dream of a monkey is an evil omen. I pray no harm has befallen on Rama and Lakshmana that this monkey speaks to so knowingly of them. I hope my father Janak is well.”

Doubt had its way with her. She saw her hands and said to herself ‘But I am not asleep; it must be madness that grips me in my misery. I think of Rama so much that my imagination is playing’ tricks in me. I hear these words of hope in my desolation though no one speaks them.

She paused considering this for another moment. Then she whispered. ‘But what about the monkey ? He is no figment of my fancy’. She shut her eyes and said in a quavering voice ‘May the gods help me may Indra, Brahma and Agni have mercy on me. May what the monkey says be true’.

Hanuman slipped down the tree and prostrated himself small and elegant at her feet when he rose he held his hands folded together above his head and said to her “Devi, your soiled silk shimmers like sunlight. Your eyes are like rose petals. You seem to be quite perfect, yet you stand here so forlorn cling my to a tree. Like water drops out of a lotus, tears spill from your eyes why do you weep Devi ? What ails you what terrible sorrow ? Who are you ? Are you a Gandharvi, or a Naga Kanya ? Are you an assure a Yakshi or a Kinnera ? Ethereal you are, you are surely not of this world ? Perhaps you are

Rohini separated from the moon; that you are stricken ? Your eyes are so beautiful they were not meant to shed tears.

But I see that your feet rest on the ground. So you must be a human princess. The wife of a great Prince perhaps. Even Rama's wife ? Yes, I do believe you are Sita. When I see your sorrow, I know that no other woman on earth grieves as you do.

Her hand still resting on the Ashoka's branch she said, "I am Dasaradha of Ayodhya's daughter-in-law. I am Janaka of Videha's daughter. I am called Sita and I am Rama's wife. Once Dasaradha wanted to crown Rama Yuvaraja. But on the day of coronation, fate took a cruel hand on one life. When Rama was exiled by Kaikeyi, he told me to stay behind in Ayodhya. But I could not bear to be separated from him and I went with him to the Dandaka. We were so happy together in the forest until Ravana carried me away.

For six months I have lived in terror in Lanka. The Rakshasa give me one more moon to submit to him. At the end of that time when I do not yield, he will have my body served in pieces for his morning meal and my blood in a golden goblet to drink.

She stood distraught before Hanuman.

SITA HEARS ABOUT RAMA

Hanuman listened to the words spoken by Rama Sita : words which were so piteous and tearful. He spoke in reply "Devi, I have been sent hereby Rama I have brought you news of him. Rama is well and he asked me to find out how you are. Lakshmana is always with Rama and he is the only source of comfort to Rama who is grieving for you night and Day. He sends his prostrations to you through me".

Thrilled with the words of which spoke of Rama, he said, There is a proverb which says : "If a man lives in hope, happiness comes his way sooner or later. Within the hundred years of a man's life it will surely happen'. This proverb has been proved true for me."

Hanuman and Sita spoke for a while about the person dear to both of them. Rama, Hanuman when he saw that she began to trust him, went near her. Sita was suddenly doubtful about him. She thought that it was Ravana trying to deceive her. She was suddenly convinced that it was Ravana talking to Rama so that he could approach her. Her limbs failed her and she sat

abandoning the bough she had been cleaning to Hanuman knew that she had lost confidence in him.

He prostrated before her and she would not look at him since she was terrified of him. After a while she turned her head and saw him still on the ground. Prostrate regaining a semblance of courage, she said. "If you are Ravana who is steeped in wickedness, if this is one of your tricks then you are making me more unhappy. You once assumed the garb of an ascetic in the Janastana and deceived me. You have now desired the guise of a monkey and it is evident that you are Ravana. Have you no heart ? Why do you torment me this. Have I not suffered enough"?

Sita paused for a while and with puzzled look said, "Perhaps you are what you are, a messenger from my lord. Looking at you, my mind seems to find some peace. If you are really an emissary from Rama, I bless you. Tell me about Rama. In spite of myself. I feel drawn towards you, and you seem to be good. Tell me about my Lord. Describe him to me. Tell me how he looks."

Torn between doubt and hope Sita was suffering and it was pathetic to see her. She finally decided that it was only Ravana who had come to her in the form of a monkey and she was silent. Hanuman began to speak words which were meant to reassure her. He said, "Trust me Devi, When I tell you that I have come from the presence of Rama. I will describe Rama to you. He is glorious like the sun and pleasing like the moon. Like Kubera he is lord of all the worlds. His power is that of Narayana and his speech is truthful and gentle like that of Brihaspati. He is Manmadha who has assumed human form. He is the home of all that is noble and beautiful. He is angry only if he must be. He is a terror to his enemies and he is the noblest of all men. You will soon see punishment meted to the Villain who brought you away from Rama. State you when you are alone in the ashrama. Rama will soon shoot arrows like tongues of flames at the sinful Ravana and rescue you. Believe me, I have been sent by him to find you. Lakshmana sends his Pranams to you. The king of Vanaras, Sugriva who is the friend of Rama, also sent his prostrations to you through me. It is indeed fortunate that you have been found to be alive in the city of Ravana. Soon, very soon, you will see Rama and Lakshmana enter Lanka with a large army. I am the minister of Sugriva and I have been looking for you all these days. I crossed the sea and came here. My name is Hanuman. I have dared to enter the city of enemy to see you and my mission is now fulfilled. Please do no mistrust me. I have been sent by Rama".

Sita was now certain that he had come from Rama. Pushing her sorrow aside she spoke eagerly to him and asked him, "When did you meet Rama ? Where ? How do you know Lakshmana ? I am eager to know Rama

what happened to him after I had been carried away by Ravana. Talk to me about Rama and sorrow will not find a place in my mind. Describe Rama to me and Lakshmana too. I want to be certain that you know them”.

Hanuman was too happy to talk about Rama his hero. He talked about the Kosala brothers and he related to her about their search for Sita and their coming to Rishyamooks. He described about the first meeting with Rama and Lakshmana and the friendship which was formed between Rama and Sugreeva. He related to her about the jewels she had thrown and about their finding them about Rama’s grief which was inconsolable. Rama had himself had admired the beautiful manner in which Hanuman talked. And he made every effort to make his words convincing to Sita and she listened as if spell bound to his recital. He ended with the journey of a group of them towards the South. He said, “Devi I am the minister of Sugriva and I have been chosen by my king and Rama to convey to you the message that they will soon be here and they will rescue you from. Ravana by killing him. We were searching for you in vain on the slopes of Vindhya mountains and we found that the time which had been stipulated by our king had been exceeded long ago. We were afraid to go back to Kishkindha and we made up our minds to set on the sands foldering the rough sea and to end our lives by fasting. We were fortunate in finding a great eagle which was sitting in a cave in the mountain. He is the brother of Jatayu and when were talking about the death of Jatayu he overheard us and come to us to find out who were and how his brother had did we told him, and he in return told us about our being a captive in the house of Pavana. Our next problem was the width of the sea.

“The sea was a hundred yojanas wide and we were taken aback at the immense task facing us. I was chosen as the one capable of leaping across it and so I came here. I have spent the entire night in ramming all over the city of Lanka. I saw Ravana too in his sleep and I have seen you now. Please accept my words as the truth and recognize me as the messenger from Rama. The brothers are all both well. It is my good fortune that crossing the sea has rewarded me with the sight of you. I will earn great fame because of this. Rama will soon be here and he will take you back with him. You can be some of that”.

Hanuman stood with his palms folded. Sita was convinced that he had come from Rama and her joy was great. Tears of happiness were in her eyes and her face was bright and happy like the full moon after it had been released by Rahu. Hanuman said “Devi, I have told you all that you wanted to hear hit your mind forget the agitations of all these months, I will take lane of you. Tell me what I should do.

Sita was not able to talk since her feelings were mixed. She was happy that Rama remembered her and she was sorry to hear about the sufferings of her beloved because of her. Hanuman said, “Rama has sent you the message that he is well and that he will come soon and rescue you. Please accept this and do not grieve any more”.

Hanuman went near her and gave the signet ring of Rama to Sita. She took it in her hands and looked at it. Tears dropped from her eyes as she thought of Rama and to her he seemed very near. She expressed her gratitude to Hanuman with words which revealed her joy. Her relief was a newly born hope of better days to come. She said, “Hanuman you are a very noble and brave person or else how could you, single handed thwart the entire host of rakshasas! It is a great feat which you have performed : Crossing with sea which is a hundred yojanas wide. You are fearless and even Ravana and his fame do not seem to impress you. If Rama has so much confidence in you that he should choose you as the one to convey his message to me, you must certainly be out of the ordinary. I am happy to know that my lord with his brother is well. These two herbs are grown up to mete our punishment even to the Devas. How is it my Rama has not burnt up the entire world and the seas surrounding it with his anger! Possibly my sorrows have to be suffered by me and that is why he has refrained from it. I am happy that distance has not dimmed his love for me. I am certain that he will come to my rescue and take me with him. Very soon I will see Ravana and all his kinsmen dead on the ground and the city of Lanka will be devastated because of the anger of Rama. He has suffered a lot.”

“Banished from the kingdom he walked in all the forests and all the while he had to protect me. All these years we spent without fear, without worries and finally, this calamity overtook both of us. I hope he has not lost heart. As for me, no my father, nor my mother, nor any one else is as dear to me as Rama and that is the reason why I am able to live.”

Hanuman said, “If Rama had known where you are you would have been returned to him long ago. It was essential for him to discover where Ravana had concealed you. As soon as I back I will tell him all about you and about Lanka. Then Rama accompanied by an immense army monkeys and bears will proceed towards Lanka. Not Devas or Asuras can keep him back nor can they obstruct the course of his deadly arrows. Devi, Rama is very unhappy without you by his side. He is living in a cave on a hill by name Prasravana. Rama does not eat properly nor does he sleep. He does not care for the comforts of his body and he is ever lost in thought. He is indifferent to his surroundings and the people around him. If at any time he gives in to sleep out of sheer exhaustion, he wakes up sun with your name on his lips. If his eyes

light an anything which is pleasing he calls out your name and his sorrow is renewed and he is inconsolable.

Sita was thrilled that Rama thought of her all the time and that he thought of nothing else. At the same time she was sad to know that he was so unhappy that he was neglecting himself. She was silent for a while and Hanuman wanted for her to talk. She said, “Your words make me happy and unhappy too. When I hear that he thinks of nothing else I am pleased and to that he is unhappy makes me unhappy too. It’s the result of one’s actions in a past life which ties a man down and controls his actions. The extreme wealth and happiness of a man or the unbearable sorrow he suffers are all the wages he pays for something good or bad he has done in his pervious birth, fate is something which no one can escape. Take for example, Rama Lakshmana and me Rama has to reach the other shore of this immense sea of sorrow and he is like a broken boat which is fighting a futile battle against the elements. He has to destroy Rakshasa army and their king and then take me back.”

Time, again is against us. I am allowed to stay alive only for two months more. This is the tenth month since I have been brought to this prison Ravana has a brother by name Vibhishana and he has tried to advise his brother that I should be returned to Rama. But his words are of no avail, who has been singled out by death. This was told me by a daughter of the brother of Ravana and her name is Anala. I am certain that Rama will come to Lanka and punish this sinter. I know Rama’s power and it will be like a game for him to destroy the raksha host and take me back with him. Misfortunes will not be able to overcome Rama. Rama is beyond such things.

Hanuman could not fear to think of Sita in the Ashokavana for a duration of another two months. He said, “Devi, Rama will soon be here as I told you with the army of monkeys. If you so desire, I will rescue you how, at once from Ravana. Please allow me to carry you on my back and I will cross the sea with you. I am capable of lifting this entire city and carrying it on my back like Agni, the god of fire carries the Havis to Indra, I will take you to Prasravana hill and leave you with Rama you can reach him and he will be pleased. Like Chandra is united to Rohini, like Indra with Indrani like the sun with Suvarchala you will be united to Rama. No one in this city is capable of following me when I fly across the sea. I will return to the other shore of the sea as easily as I come here. I am able to do it. Please consider my suggestion for what is worth.

Sita was touched with the words of Hanuman. She said with a slight smile of amusement. ‘Hanuman I am afraid of your natural instincts have made think of the impossible you are so small and how will it be possible for

your to carry me and restore me to Rama ? How could you be o impulsive”? Hanuman thought to himself “Sita does not know the personality of my natural instincts and my power. I should let her know that I can assume any shape I will”. He grew in size and standing at a distance from her he let her she how large and powerful he could become. He was as huge as Meru. Sita’s eyes were wonderful.

Hanuman said, “Devi, I am assume any size of please. It was because I wanted to enter the city unnoticed that I made myself smaller than a killer. I can carry Lanka with all its inmates. Its mansions and gardens without any effort. Have no fear about it. I will get you to Rama.”

Sita spoke to him in a gentle voice and said “I have seen now what a powerful person you are I realize today your stature, your speed like that of You father and your radiance Is equal my that of Agni only you could have crossed the sea so easily. No one on this earth is capable of this, I knew. I see that you can easily take me we should think of very aspect of situation. I do not think it will be possible for me to go with you. The speed with which you travel may most probable make me feel uneasy and I may lose consciousness. Perhaps when you fly higher and higher up in the sky. I may feel frightened and slip off your back and fall into the sea. Also there is a likelihood of your having extra responsibility because of me. You will be pursued by Rakshasas when Ravana comes to know of it and you will have to fight with them as well as protect me. At the same time you will also have to pursue your journey. Both of us incur danger because of this thoughtless action. If I should fall of your back and be caught by the rakshasas that will became unbearable for me. I would rather die than try to escape fall and be caught again.

“Apart from all these there is to be considered” and that is, it will not be a credit to Rama if I should be rescued by you and again for a woman like me it is not possible to think of the touch of a stranger. I belong to Rama and I cannot willingly touch another person. Ravana did touch me, but that was forced on me and I did not willingly let myself be carried by him. I was helpless in his grasp. I could do nothing.

The proper thing will be for Rama to come and after killing Ravana to take me back. These rakshasas are to find it sure futile to fight with Rama and he will be death of them. Rama will be fire fed by the passing breeze and there will be no one brave enough to stand before him and give him fight. He will be like the sun dining the end of the world and who can withstand his radiance ? Hanuman go back to Rama and bring the brothers and your king with the army. Let there be a fight and my sorrow will be at an end.

Hanuman was very happy to hear the words of Sita. “Devi he said “Your words are spoken like true chaste woman. It befits you woman and your purity that you should think this. Your argument against finally touched by anyone than your lord is commendable and I salute you first. I will go at once to Rama and tell him about you about the donation of two months which time he should come to our aid. I am ready to go back to Rama I am impatient to go. Have you any words with which I can assure him that I have seen you.” Hanuman stood eagerly waiting for her to speak.

THE CHOODAMANI

Sita said say to Rama, “good Hanuman that Sita reminded him of the day he lay asleep with his head in my lap on Chitrakuta on the banks of the Mandakini. A crow snoopied down and pecked me. I threw a buture at the bird, but it came back again. It flew cawing above my head and repeatedly it plunged down to peck me.”

“When he hear d me to cry out Rama awoke. He saw my blouse had slipped from my shoulders and my face was flushed. He laughed, saying I had let a crow frighten me. The crew flapped away and perched in a tree some distance away. Rama went back to sleep and the bird flew at me again. It swooped down thrice and raked my breast with its claws. Some drops of my blood fell a Rama’s face and he awoke.”

‘When he saw my blood, Rama pulled up a blade of dharbha grass and invoked the Brahmastra. That cow was Indra’s son. Coming alive in a flash of fire the Brahmastra flew from Rama’s hands and hunted the black bird through the sky. He flew quickly as a thought, but the astra stayed behind him sniggering his tail features the moment he stopped, it could consume him. Through the three worlds that crow flew. At last panting and terrified. Indra’s son came and fell sobbing at Rama’s feet.

Rama said “I could forgive your Deva, but what about the Brahmastra ? It must have its pray.

Growing into a forgive of light, tall as the sky, that son of Indra said. ‘Let is have my left eye’ big as a planet, and the Ayudha was appeased. Indra’s son fell at his felt again, saying he had been sent by his father to test the avatara. He begged our forgiveness and returned where he had come from. Remind Rama of that incident Hanuman. If he could send the Brahmastra after a crow that pecked me, what he will do to Ravana who holds me prisoner and torments me ?

Her eyes glinted. “Tell Rama that Sita asks why he has forgotten her ? Why is Ravana still alive after what he has done. What does Lakshmana do to this who is as much as a warrior as his brother ? For all their valour and being matchless. Kshatriyas they cannot comfort me in my misery. It must surely be the sins of my past lives that have come to roost in this one!”

Her fine shoulders shook, as he wept again Hanuman said. “Indifference does not keep the brothers from Lanka. If you saw how poor Rama suffers without you, all your doubts would vanish. Let me fly back to him now and he will be here swiftly. Ravana’s corpse will adorn earth and Lanka will be a heap of ashes, blowing in the sea wind.

Sita said “Touch Rama’s feet for me. Bless the noble Lakshmana who is the rarest treasure on earth. Tell them that I will survive in this place for another month. But not a day longer. After a month Sita will be dead. Rama must come Lanka before the moon returns to Nakshatra where he is to night or he may never see alive again.”

Sita wiped her eyes, she untied a knot at one end of her yellow garment and took out the Choodamani she once wore in her hair. She gave it to Hanuman, who received it bowing. His face lit up and he circled round her in Pradakshina.

Sita said to the “Vanara, give this to Rama. He knows it well. When he sees it, he will think of my mother, of his father Dasaradha and of me. Memories of us three are upon its jewel. Everything depends on you Hanuman. My life is in your hands Hanuman bowed again to her. Again Sita said to him, “Touch my Rama’s feet for me. Tell him he has one month time to come to my rescue Hanuman heard her out patiently, while how she repeated herself, time and again anxiously. At last, he said, Rama will be here sooner than you expect.”

Then thinking of the Vanara going back, she cried; must you go today ? Cant you stay another day and leave tomorrow”?

Hanuman looked uncomfortable. Sita sighed “I will miss you. When you have gone. You have lit my despair with a ray of hope. But I know that the sooner you leave the sooner Rama will come with the Vanara army. She bit her lip as another unthinkable doubt rose in her mind. ‘Hanuman, how will your army of people cross the yawning sea into Lanka ? Vayu, Garuda and Hanuman cross the waves ? But how will the other come ? For that matter, how will Rama ?”

Hanuman said quietly. “The vanaras who serve Sugriva are a magical people. We have ranged the earth. Nothing can stop us not rivers or mountains, jungles or oceans. There are many in Sugriva’s army who are my equals and there are more who are greater than me. Between us we will devise a way to cross the ocean. Devi, remember the march of Dharma is always inexorable. As for Rama and Lakshmana they will sit here on my back. One on each shoulder and fly over the ways to land in Lanka.”

“Let you split be at peace; we will come for you’. ‘Like gentle rain on a field of green shoots has your caning been to me, kind Hanuman remind Rama of another time when we were alone and my Tilaka was rubbed away. Remind him of how he took the dust of the manasle stone and marked my brow with it. Oh, how does he live without me ? Here each moment my life is ready to seep out of me, since my eyes do not see his face. Only with a great effort do I hold it back.”

DESTRUCTION OF THE ASHOKAVANA

Hanuman had taken leave of Sita and was getting already to leave. He prostrated before her and left her presence. After going some distance he told himself. “I have seen Sita and I have spoken to her. But it seems to me there is still left under. I should not go back without letting my presence being known. I should become aggressive and make the rakshasas see my prowess. I should let them realize the power of the army which they will have to face later. A real efficient man is one who does more than what he is expected to do. I was asked to find out Sita’s hiding place, to give the ring to her and to assure her Rama will surely care and rescue her. But then I should try to collect some information I must use several methods by which this can be achieved by which this can be achieved. I must find out the strength of the army of Ravana and if I go back with all the information. I can gather, it will be of great advantage to us later. How I am going to fight the rakshasas fight with me ? It is essential I should try to make it since Ravana will have to get acquainted with our power. I must manoeuvre things in such a way that I can see Ravana and to hear from his lips views on the matter on hand. I will then gladly go back to Kishkinda.

“This garden which is being tended with special care is, evidently the favourite garden of the rakshasa king”. That Sita has been kept captive here is, in, itself proof that is a favourite garden of Ravana. I will set about destroying the garden methodically like fire destroys a heap of dried wood. When he hears about it, Ravana will become very angry. He would dispatch a big army to kill me or capture me. I will destroy the army easily and that will frighten the rakshasa and their king”.

To think was to act and Hanuman began to destroy the Ashokavana. Trees were broken as though they were twigs and creepers were pulled out, tanks were stirred up with so much vigour that the water spilled over and turned muddy. The small hillocks which beautified the garden were reduced to powder and the beloved garden of Ravana was desolate with the dead trees and the flowering shrubs strewn on the ground. Running all over the garden Hanuman made short work of it and there was nothing left of the Ashokavana and its beauty. He then climbed to the top of the entrance and he sat there waiting for things to happen.

He did not have long to wait. There was a great commotion caused by the havoc wrought by Hanuman. The birds and the beasts which have been living at the garden were screeching and howling piteously and it struck terror into the hearts of the citizens of Lanka. The rakshasis who had slept off when Hanuman met Sita now woke up from their drunken stupor and they saw the author of the mischief. He grew in size and even the rakshasas were frightened to see him. They were vaguely aware that they had seen Sita talking to a monkey. They accosted Sita and asked her “Who is this ? Where has he come from ? Why has he come ? Tell us everything we have a vague feeling that we saw you talking to him. What was it about ? Is it true that he spoke to you ? Tell us the truth. Do not be afraid to tell us we will not harm you. We want to know who he is ? Sita said, “I have nothing to do with him since I think he is a rakshasa who can assume what shape he will. It is about you to find out about this one. Only a snake will know about the passage of another snake. You can be sure of that. I feel that this is a rakshasa who can take up any guise as he win. I do not know him and I am just as afraid of his as you are”.

The rakshasis were not convinced by her words. They rushed to the presence of Ravana and told him everything. They described the actions of the monkey. They told him that they were certain about the monkey talking to Sita though she denied it. They said, “We saw that they were talking. Evidently Sita does not want to betray him and so she is refusing to admit that he spoke to her. Is he a messenger from Kubera ? From Indra ? Or perhaps he has been sent by Rama to find all about Sita. But my Lord, all that apart, that the monkey has not left a tree alive in your garden. The spot where Sita was seated, however not unharmed. The Shimsupa tree under which she Sita is unharmed. It is a fierce looking monkey and it should be punished. Should you not put to death one who has dared to talk to Sita”?

Ravana was furious when he heard the fate of his garden. His eyes filled with tears because he loved the Ashokavana. He sent some of his strong rakshasas to subdue the monkey. Eighty thousand rakshasas were sent to fight with the monkey. Hanuman was delighted since he was waiting for just such a

happening. The army surrounded him on all sides and tried to beat him up. Hanuman grew in size and very soon he was frighteningly huge. He struck his great shoulders with his palms and the sound was like thunder reverberating in the sky. He shouted “Rama with his brother Lakshmana is with his friend Sugriva and victory to him. I am Hanuman the son of Vayu and I am the slave of Rama. Not a thousand Ravana’s are capable of withstanding me and my prowess. I will return only after making Lanka shed tears of frustration”.

His war cry was frightful and the rakshasas attacked him altogether. Hanuman pulled out a pillar which was supporting the gateway and with it he beat up the host of rakshasas and he killed everyone of them. News reached Ravana that the entire army had been destroyed. He could not believe it.

He sent Prahastha, one of his ministers and with him went a large army. Hanuman pulled down the very beautiful hall by name Chitya and war-tied for the next consignment of rakshasas. The guardians of the hall which he had destroyed were on him and it is a matter of moments before they were crushed to death. Again and again he would shut out that he was a messenger from Rama and Sugriva was waiting to assist Rama in his march towards Lanka.

Jambumali, the son of Prahastha came to fight with Hanuma. He was handsome, young and arrogant and he was also a good fighter. Hanuman was greatly excited at the thought of fighting with this youngster. His arrows were lodged in the body of Hanuman and a great fight ensued between the two. The stones which were flung at him by Hanuman were broken up by Jambumali with the help of his arrows. After fighting for a while Hanuman revolved the pillar which he held in his hand and after twirling it fast he flung it at the chest of the young fighter. Jambumali was killed and there was a great confusion in the army when this happened. The army was also destroyed and when he heard about it Ravana sent another army with the sons of his ministers to lead it. The noise of their march was like the rumbling of rain clouds and they encountered the lone monkey with a very casual attitude. They were punished soon for it and the river of blood was flowing in the streets of Lanka. Not one was left out of the third consignment of warriors which Ravana had sent under the leadership of the sons of his ministers. Ravana’s anger was mounting.

He now sent five of his army chiefs and they lead another army to fight with Hanuman and they suffered the same fate. Hanuman was enjoying himself immensely and he was announcing that there were thousands of monkeys just as powerful as he was or even more powerful than himself in the

army of Sugriva and they would be coming to Lanka accompanied by Rama and Lakshmana.

Ravana was taken a back at the reports of the valour of this lone monkey who had strayed into his city. He decided to send his son Aksha. This son was very dear to Ravana and he looked with affection to his son the young man who had dressed himself for battle. He had a beautiful bow in his hand and he looked like the first tongue of fire leaping out of the fire fed with Havis by the Brahmins who worshiped the fire. He was wearing an armour of gold and glorious like the sun he ascended the chariot and proceeded towards the place where Hanuman was waiting. He looked near him and looked with admiration at the great monkey which was waiting for the next group of Rakshasas to accost him. Aksha gauged the valour of Hanuman and he thought of his own ability. It has a terrible encounter between the two. The earth quacked and the sun did not shine as he was want to do. The wind stopped flouting the mountains trembled and the sky resounded with noise. The sea was brimming and it was fearful to watch the fight between Hanuman and Aksha. Hanuman was greatly impressed by the manner in which the young prince fought. He told himself "This young man is the young sun and he fights like a great warrior with great valour. I do not have the heart to kill him. He is strong and he is undaunted. He seems to be a very noble youth and it is certain the Devas will be afraid to face him in battle." And yet I have to kill him it is not wise to ignore fire which is raging "Hanuman killed the horses of the chariot of Aksha and then the chariot was broken. Aksha rose into the sky abandoning the broken chariot and Hanuman caught hold of him as Garuda would a snake and twirling him ground. Hanuman dashed him to the ground. Aksha fell down dead and some escaped to tell Ravana about the death of his son".

Ravana was grieved at the unexpected turn events and it took him a while to compose himself. He summoned Indrajit, his valiant son and said, "My son you are familiar with the astras and you are a great warrior. You have to be able to vanquish Indra, the Lord of the heavens and you have gratitude Brahma with your worship and have obtained the astras from him. You are brave and you are intelligent. You are as valiant as I am and I want you to succeed where others have failed your dear brother has been killed and also companies led by jambumali. Something unusual is happening go, my son and after assessing the strength of the enemy fight with him. Evidently it is futile to send an army to subdue this monkey. You should trust your bow to do the needful. It is not pleasing to me at all to send my beloved son to fight as soon as I have lost another. But the situation such that I have to come back with success."

Indrajit was eager to go and fight. He made a Pradakshina to my father, and after taking the blessings of the elders, he set out to fight with Hanuman.

THE COILS OF AN ASTRA

Sweeping through Lanka in his chariot like a dark wind, Indrajit flew at Hanuman. When he neared the Vanara, he pulled on his bow string and Lanka echoed with the sound. Hanuman responded with a burst of wild laughter that here at last was a worthy adversary. The exhilaration of battle was upon him and he longed for a keen fight.

They fought outside Ravana's palace the rakshasa prince and the marauding monkey, tall as a tree. Like thunderstorms colliding they fought roaring exuberantly the air between them thick with Indrajit's arrows and Hanuman's rocks and trees occasionally, both of them paused, panting for neither gave any quarter or yielded an inch of ground. Indrajit was amazed at this monkey who shrugged off his most lethal missiles. And Hanuman wondered at the young rakshasas who was unharmed by his barrage of everything heavy he could lay his hands on. He tore up flag stones and steps of rock and flung them,, spinning like Chakras at Ravana's son, only to see them shot into powder.

At last Indrajit drew an exceptional arrow from his quiver. He shut his eyes, invoking Brahma, the greater, ancestor of the rakshasas once out of affection for his great. Great grandson, Brahma had given Indrajit his own astra. Hanuman grew still at the Brahma mantra he folded his hands. The astra framed at him through the sky. Out of his bhakti, he would not escape it, but allowed it to bind him in hoops of light he sprawled on the ground apparently vanquished.

Hanuman said to himself softly "The boy doesn't know that, by Brahma's own boon to me his Astra can hold me for a moment. But I want to see Ravana face to face before I fly out of Lanka and this is my chance. I am not afraid. Vayu, my father and his friend Agni, protect me."

He lay unprotected while they thought the astra's power had conquered him. The rakshasas crowded around and found him once more with the largest ropes they could find and strips of bark. As soon as the coils of rope touched Hanuman's body. The coils of the astra vanquished. All the great astras are haughty none will stand for other bonds beside its own. When he saw

them running at the fallen monkey with their ropes. Indrajit cried to his soldiers to sting. But they did not hear him in the commotion.

Ravana's son thought that now there would be no restraining Hanuman. But to his surprise the Vanara lay where he had fallen, and allowed himself to be bound and dragged before the Lord of Lanka in his palace. Puzzled Indrajit went with monkey to his father's Sabha.

HANUMAN IN THE COURT OF RAVANA

Ravana saw Hanuman being dragged to his presence. On his arrival at the palace and in the presence of Ravana Hanuman opened his eyes. He saw Ravana the rakshasa, wearing a beautifully made golden crown set with gems and pearls. He was wearing ornaments made of gold and he was wearing the softest of all silks. The perfume of sandal paste which he had used on his chest and arms was filling the entire hall. His eyes were large and beautiful. He was wearing a necklace of pearls round his neck and his arms were beautiful by the bracelets placed on them. He was seated on a throne which was magnificent and he was surrounded by his ministers Prahastha, Nikumbha and others.

Pulled as he was rudely by the jubilant rakshasas, Hanuman looked with amazement at Ravana and kept on looking. He was dazzled by the glory which was Ravana and total himself "What a glorious personage! What beauty? What a courageous look what? What strength? What radiance? it is wonderful to see the many glorious qualities. Which find a home in this king of rakshasas. If only this powerful king had not been an Adharmi, he can easily be the lord of Devas themselves. It is because of his cruel and heartless acts that the three worlds with the Devas and the danavas tremble before him. He is valiant enough".

Ravana who had earned the name because he was making the world cry out of fear of him, looked in front of him and looked into the tarry eyes of Hanuman for a moment he was taken aback and an unknown fear gripped him. He asked himself. "Can this be Nandi the devotee of Mahadeva? Perhaps he has kept his promise and come here. Years back when I lifted the Kailasa peak I insulted Nandi and he cursed me that my defeat will be indicated by himself in the form of a monkey. Can this be Nandi then? Or it Banasura?" Ravana looked at Hanuman with fury in his eyes and turning his eyes on Prahastha his minister, he said, "Where has he come from? What is his purpose in coming here? What did he achieve by destroying the gender and frightening the rakshasas there? Ask him why did he do all this? Why did he come to our city and indulge in the rare pleasure of destroying the army? Ask him".

Prahastha, in response to Ravana's command turned to Hanuman and asked him, "Monkey, have no fear to answer us. You will come to no harm. If you have been sent here by Indra tell us the truth and that at once. You will be let off without being hunt. You are a henchman either of Vaisravana or Yama or Kubera and you have come here to spy the land, I guess. Why did you so ? or perhaps Narayana has sent you here. It is evident that your appearance like that of a monkey is not real but it is a guise which has been put on by you. Your valour is not that of a monkey. We want the truth from you. A lie will mean death to you. Why have you come to the temple sacred to Ravana"?

Hanuman did not reply him. He would not design to talk to a mere minister. He turned to Ravana and said "I have not sent by either by Indra or Yama or Varuna. I have not acquainted with Kubera. Nor I am the emissary of Narayana. I assure you this is not no guise which I have donned but it is my natural self. I am a monkey by birth I was ken an meeting you the king of the rakshasas and with that end in view I destroyed the garden. With a desire for fight several rakshasas came to me and I fought with item only in self defence. Not the Devas or anyone else is capable of binding me with astras. Brahma granted me that boon and that privilege. Because I wanted to meet you, I allowed myself to be bound by the Brahmastra. When I was tied up by the rakshasas the astra lost its power to bind me. But since I had a reason which is intimately concerned with you, the lord this island, I allowed myself to be dragged to the presence of you, the king let it be clearly understand that I am a messenger from Rama, the invincible. Let me be allowed to talk to you and it will be for you benefit". Hanuman paused for a long moment and allowed his words to be grasped by them all.

He then said, "Oh! King, I have come here to your presence, by the wish and command of my king Sugriva. He wishe you well and listen to his words which will be beneficial to you in this world and the next. This is the message of my king. There was a noble king in the lane of the Ishvakus. He was a great warrior and his name was Dasaradha. His eldest son is Rama. He is great warrior too and because of the mandate of his father he came to Dandaka forest accompanied by his brother Lakshmana and wife Sita. His wife Sita who is the daughter of janaka was lost in the forest. Prince Rama arrived in the hill Rishyamooka while he wandered in search of his wife. There he met Sugriva, the monkey and became friends with him. They made a pact and Sugriva promised to organize a search for Sita and in return Rama said that his lost kingdom should be restored to Sugriva. As per promise Rama killed Vali and gave the kingdom to Sugriva his brother. As for Vali your magisty knows him well enough. I think that Vali has been killed by Rama with a single arrow. The king Sugriva sent monkey in all four quarters to look for Sita and they are still enjoyed in the search for the lost princess. They are all powerful and valiant

monkeys. Sure of them are as powerful as Garuda and others as feet as Vayu; as per me, I am the son of Vayu and my name is Hanuman with a desire to locate the hiding. Place of Sita I leaped across the sea which is hundred yojanas in width. While I wand wondering armed I happened Sita in your house. I was surprised at it.

“You are a wise king and you are quite familiar with Dharma and the observance of it. It is not becoming that such a noble person like you should keep another man’s wife captive. It is not fit for men of superior intelligence like you to get involved in acts which are not righteous which Deva or asura will be able to withstand the sharp arrows which will be shut from the bows of Rama and Lakshmana ? No one who has wronged Rama will escape the suffering which is sure to follow; not in three words please consider of words make up your mind to act in such a manner that it will be according to the dictate of Dharma and which will benefit your past, your present and your future. Make haste and return Sita to Rama who is a god among men I have seen Sita and the impossible has been possible for me. The rest is in the hands of Rama.”

‘I saw Sita immersed in sorrow and I am surprised that you do not recognize her to be a five headed serpent whom you have kept with you with so much affection and live. Like food which is mixed with poison cannot be digested the women will prove to be too much for you.

“Thus your life, has been blessed with so much tapas and street observance of several Vratas which demand a control of senses. It has been blessed by Gods. Do you think that it is right that it should all come to the end because of a woman ? You are without any care since your tapas has granted you immunity from death by asuras and Devas ? Still your seem to be forgotten one factor. This Sugrivas is neither a Deva not an asura. He is not a rakshasa and he is not a Danava. Gandharva he is not and he is not an Yaksha nor a Pannaga. He is but a monkey and as per Rama he is a human being. A mere man. O King! Remember this and tell me how you are going to protect yourself. The results of one’s righteousness and those of one’s trespasses against Dharma do not together. Even Dharma is eclipsed if Adharma is harboured in the mind you have so far enjoyed the fruits of your Dharma. There is no doubt about it. And it goes without saying that the fruits of your unrighteousness will also be inflicted on you and you cannot escape them remember the destruction in Janastna. Remember the killing of Vali. Take them as a warning and think again of the friendship of Rama and Sugriva. Consider all this and try to think of a method which will help you to guard yourself from the fate which is imminent. My valour, the valour of a single monkey is enough to destroy the entire city of Lanka. But that is not to way

Rama thinks. He has already decided on the fate of the sinner who has the foolishness to steal his wife from him. Monkeys and bears will from the army of Rama and Indra himself cannot escape punishment if he was offended Rama. What then of a mere rakshasa like you ? You think of Rama's wife as Sita, Woman whom you have captured and imprisoned. Listen to me and understand that she is like the dark night which will swallow the luster and glory of Lanka.

“She is like the noose of death which you have placed on your neck unknowingly. You must realize that Sita is like fire which is certain to burn up this city with its beautiful gardens and mansions. Rama's anger is deadly. Please protect your friends, your kinsmen, ministers and brothers, children, wealth, your women and all the beauties which is Lanka. Listen to my words and act accordingly. Rama can destroy all the entire universe and create it again. There is no one to oppose him in the three worlds. Having offended name it will not be possible for you to live long. No one can help you, nor Indra, nor the Brahma, nor the Rudra”.

Ravana's anger was mounting with every word uttered by Hanuman. He was beside himself with anger and he promptly ordered that the monkey should be put to death.

Vibhishana, the brother of Ravana felt that this was not the right action in the part of Ravana. He was a rakshasa who was righteous minded and he thought about how to dissuade Ravana from taking this wrong decision. The king was very angry and it was not easy to talk to an angry person; more so when he is the king. Vibhishana was wise and he could use words which had the proper effect. He spoke softly to the king. He said “be calm, O king. Do not give way to the anger. Listen to my words. It is a convention among kings that no messenger should be put to death. Your orders that this monkey should be executed is against all kinds of Dharma which a king should observe. It does not become a king like you a great emperor known the world over, to do, this to a mere messenger. I do not have to teach you the nuances of Dharma nor the code about the code behavior. You are at home in the rules of kingship and you know the intricacies of it. When a wise man like you gives in to the sway of anger the proficiency in the sastras which you have attained will all go waste you are the undaunted leader of all of us and it is not right that you should be carried away by anger you should consider the situation calmly and punish the monkey properly.

Ravana was not willing to listen to Vibhishana. His anger had not abated yet. He said “Death as a punishment is not wrong when it is meted out to wicked ones like this monkey. He is a menace and a sinner and I see nothing wrong in putting him to death.

Vibhishana persuaded his arguments and said, “No you should not do so. My lord on no account should a messenger be put to death. The rules are very clear about it. The wise have declared it be so. The punishment should, actually be given to those who have sent him. He is here only to convey the message sent by the enemy. He is doing his duty and by himself he is guiltless. Therefore he should not be killed. Taunt will besmirch your name and if should not be courted you gain nothing by the judgement you have pronounced except the consume of the wise and infamy.

“Attempts should be made to attack the princes who have dispatched the monkey you have any number of god warriors. Who can fight for you to the end. To destroy the two human beings a small any can be sent and your wishes will be done. Only do not kill this monkey. It is not the right thing to do.”

Ravana was convinced now that Vibhishana spoke the truth. He was not willing to court the censure of the wise and the discerning and he accepted the advice of his brother with good grace. Ravana was still worried about Hanuman. He told himself “I am certain that it is Narayana’s glory which has assumed the form of a monkey with the purpose of killing me. Is it his radiance ? Is he Brahma himself ? Or is it the Brahman itself ? I wonder.

Ravana held back his anger with great effort and spoke to Vibhishana.

THE MONKEY’S TAIL

Calming himself Ravana said to his brother ‘you are right. Vibhishana will not have killed the monkey killed. But I punish him for the havoc he has brought to our city.’”

The heads whispered evilly among themselves then a slow smile wreathed the central face. Ravana said, ‘Nothing is more precious to a monkey than his tail. Let the monkey’s fine tail be set on fire let him be sent back with a burnt stump behind him to show that he crossed my path. Yes, let the monkey’s tail be lit and let him be marched through the streets of Lanka. Let my people mock him for what he did today’.

He nodded to his guards and they ran at to fetch a length of cloth. They wound the fabric tightly round the tail. At first Hanuman glowered, he bared his fangs and snarled at his captors. But then he thought. ‘If I allow myself to be paraded through the streets of Lanka, I will be able to see the city

by the day light. What I observe will be useful later, when we bring our army against Ravana’.

He allowed his tail to be wrapped, dipped in oil and set alight. He let Ravana’s guards chase him out of the palace and into the dazzling sun. They hauled him through the city, while the rakshasas lurid the streets jeering and taunting him. Hanuman went quietly as if no fight was left in him; his tail brazed, though he felt no pain yet.

The rakshasas of Ashokavana ran to Sita and cried triumphantly ‘Your friend the red faced monkey is being paraded through our streets with his tail on fire’ ?

Tears springing in her eyes, Sita turned away from them. She began to pray fervently to Agni, God of fire. “If it is true that I have been faithful to Rama, true that I have kept my vows and that my mind has always been pure, then don’t let Hanuman who kept across the sea to find me be burned by your flames. Let your touch upon his tail be as cool as the caress of his father Vayu.”

At once, Agni was soft as sandalwood paste on Hanuman’s tail and Vayu blew gently around his heroic son. The vanara wondered why the flames that leapt around his golden tail did not hurt him at all. He thought ‘My tail burns fiercely yet I feel only a wonderful coolness as if some one anointed me with tender sandal oh, this is even more marvelous than the mountain who rose from the waves. But why should I marvel ? Varuna of the ocean is so devoted to Rama that he bade Mainaka receive me why should I wonder that Agni has decided not to burn my tail when he knows whom I serve’?

Then his wise heart informed him ‘Sita prays for me, and Agni is my father’s friend ?’

He felt he had seen all there was to see in Lanka. He gave a roof rattling roar and in a blink. Hanuman was as tall as the loftiest tower in that city. The next moment he was the little monkey of Ashokavana again small as a cat, and leapt humbly on to the nearest roof top. The ropes that bound him fell away from his body in a useless pave. He leapt down into the street again queering as he came, bigger than he had yet been in Lanka. Pulling up a pillar that stood at an intersection of streets, he struck out of the rakshasas who attacked him feeling a hundred; the rest fled. Great Hanuman stood roaring at the heart of wonderful Lanka and his tail blazed behind him like a quenchless torch.

Then, monkey that he was he squatted on the ground, scratching his golden from wondering what do next what he had come for was accomplished. But another yearning tugged at his mind the itch of the fire in his tail. Hanuman thought. “The Ashokavana is ruined. I have killed many of Ravana’s best warriors today and their blood runs through this evil city. I have killed one of the rakshasas son still my heart is not content. The fire in my tail has been kind to be, but it has been deprived of its fuel. Let me turn the favour of my fathers friend Agni. I will set alight these fire mansions of Lanka to feed his hunger.”

Hanuman was a streak of lightning among the roof tops. He sprang from roof to roof, setting Lanka on fire with his burning tail, while the window billowed around him fanning the flames. Houses caught and blazed and the palaces of the molds, as the conflagration speed. Hanuman, roaring in delight, raced all over the city, touching it alight with his tail as if he lit a thousand incredible lamps for worship at Sandhya.

Rakshasa men, women and children poured out of their haves. “All the city echoed with cries as their fabulous dwellings, created by Viswakram crackled and burned. And everything within them the spoils of a hundred wars, was consumed by Hanuman’s inferno priceless silks, brocades and tapestries were ashes. The gold of Lanka melted and flowed into the livid streets, and the hearts of precious jewels were snuffed out in the flames that enveloped Ravana’s capital. Their pillars cracking in the incendiary heat, mansions came cracking down.

When he had put much of Lanka to torch. Hanuman leapt high into the air and landed with a mighty tremor on the roof of Ravana’s palace. The Vanara ran across that roof, big itself as a city, touching every corner ablaze with his raging tail. Ravana’s palace caught fire and burned like straw. The Agni in the monkey’s tail was fierce and exhilarant the breath with which his father he wind fanned the flames. The harems disgorged their delectable women, screaming above the roar of the fire and the howl of the wind.

Hanuman was an apoplectic beast, exhaltly as the city burned roaring his joy to the sky beating his chest like thunder, celebrating the triumph of the natural jungle over the city of artifice. From Ravana’s palace roof, the Vanara saw that most of Lanka burned, he saw more houses collapse in slides of rubble and sparks. Smiling to himself, still immense he leapt straight form the kings palace to the nearby peak to that of Trikuta. The wind wrapped himself lovingly around his son Hanuman looked behind him and saw his tail still burned with the friendly fire god’s cool flames, his proud tail that gritted magnificent Lanka.

He leapt down to the white beach below the cries of the stunned rakshasas still ringing in his ears. He dipped his tail hissing into the waves and put out the exceptional fire, which had not singed a hair of him. At the very moment when he thanked pristine Agni with all his heart a terrible thought struck Hanuman like an arrow. He whimpered aloud at it.

“I have committed a sin of rage. The wise restrain themselves, but I gave into anger. Sita must have burned with the rest of the city. Everything has been in vain. I have ruined Rama’s life”.

Hanuman stood at the foot of the Trikuta and turning his face to the blazing city, he howled long and mournfully, a grief stricken animal of the jungle. But then, a subtle light shone into the heart. He scratched his head, he cocked it to a side. He shook at it and he thought. ‘If the fire did not even singe my tail, it was because of Sita’s prayer. Then how much more Agni would hold care for the princess herself. He could not have even warmed her, she is so chaste. She is divine no fame could burn her.’

Suddenly he heard voices above him and he saw three bright beings flying through the sky. Their bodies being made of shimmering crystal, their long hair blew. Colourful waves of light behind them. He heard clearly what they said, as if fate had willed them to pass above him at that moment one of the charanas of the air for so they were, said to the others. ‘How amazing it was too. Ravana’s palace fell raging around her all the Ashokavana was consumed. But Sita was calm at the heart of the fire. And the flames did not burn her at all but washed over her like cook waves’.

Hanuman jumped up and down. He danced. He shouted at Rama’s name. He decided once more before he left to see Sita. One great leap and he landed in her presence. Her face lit up, and she cried “Oh! Hanuman you alone are enough to wipe Lanka from the face of earth. You are mightier than I imagined. But fly now good Vanara, fly to Rama with my message”.

Hanuman said, Don’t be anxious Devi, Rama will be here in a few days with the Vanara army until then may the Panchabhuta the very elements protect you. Sita said, ‘fly Hanuman, fly to my husband’.

Hanuman leapt back on to the Trikuta’s summit and from there on to another mountain called Arishta. Now he grew tall as he had been upon Mahendra across the sea, he towered into the sky like one mountain standing on another. As he paced the hill top, seeking a hard place to launch himself from Hanuman crushed the rocks under his feet to dust and Arishta shook just as Mahendra had facing North, the golden Vanara stared for a moment at the

foaming tide far below. He crouched down every muscle tank for the leap. With a cry that made the ocean quail. Hanuman launched himself into the air and Lanka shook as if with an earthquake like an arrow the vanara flew North over the waves flashing back to Bharatavarsha.

Cobras and lions tore out of their holes and caves in terror when Hanuman leapt into the sky. Trees rose with him and fell back in to earth and the waves their thinks floating like twigs on the surging foam. Before he arrowed into the outer blue, he seemed to hang in the air for a moment. His body lit by the last rays of the sinking sun, he filled half the firmament like a thundercloud streaked with lightning.

Then, he flew effortlessly through the soft sky, along the way of wind joyful that he had accomplished what he had come for and, indeed much more. Some clouds reflected the ocean below and such a right it was. Hanuman flashing through them his hair fluorescent with the sun set, and flecked with sea green. At twice the speed at which he had flown to Lanka, the son of Vayu flew back to Rama with his news.

Once more Mainaka rose before him, a golden pyramid a vision out of the waves. Hanuman circled the mountain, crying out his success blessing Mainaka being blessed in return. He slotted the glassy sides of the mountain, in affection and folding his hands to that ancient one, flashed on. Soon he saw Mahendra looming before him and the sacred coast of Bharatavarsha. Hanuman roared his exultation to the darkening sky and the clouds in it. The ocean shook and the four quarters. The Vanaras on the four shore waiting so impatiently for him, pricked by their ears.

Their faces lighting up. Angada's monkeys had time scarcely turn to each other, with a whistle of airs and a quacking of earth. Hanuman landed on the summit of Mahendra. He stood for a moment on that height. He beat his chest, he cried out long and reigning triumph and thanked his ubiquitous father for being with him on his journey. Then Hanuman shrank back to his ordinary Vanara size and ran down the mountain, bursting with his news and the joy of it. He met Angada, Jambavan and the others halfway, for they too were agog to greet him and came running up as eagerly as he random.

THE RETURN OF HANUMAN

They ran hitter and titter in excitement and pulling out flowering branches from the trees nearby they waves them about in ecstasy. Hanuman could be heard approaching and they stood with their palms folded together

while he landed on the mountain Mahendra. The monkeys rushed to him and stood around him. They were greatly relieved to see him come back without any mishap. They tried to serve him with fruits and roots and asked him to refresh himself. Hanuman approached Jambavan and Angada and saluted them. They welcomed him with great affection and Hanuman said “In the pleasure garden of Ravana, in a garden named Ashokavana I saw her. She was surrounded by rakshasis who had been placed to watch on her. She was thinking duly of Rama and it was sad to see her covered with dust then because of her eternal fast, with her hair twisted into single stand and lying on her back like a dark serpent.

The monkeys as they heard the words : “Sita has been found jumped in the air and showed their happiness by various demonstrations. Angada said “In this entire world, there is no one like you. No one can equal you in valour and might. You have crossed the sea and you have come back safe after succeeding in your task. Your devotion to our master is great. Your achievement is indeed incomparable. The noble queen of Rama has been seen by you because of our great and good fortune. Rama will soon be rid of his sorrow.”

They all stood around looking at Hanuman eager to hear in detail about his journey to Lanka and about Sita. Mahendra mountain was looking glorious with Hanuman and Angada and all the others crowding on it.

Jambavan made them all sit down and he asked Hanuman. “Tell us how Sita was found by you ? How is she ? How does Ravana behave towards her ? We are all eager to know all everything relate to us the happiness in Lanka. We will listen to your and later we will decide as to what should be done. There may be some facts which can be told now, and some which have to be suppressed you are wise enough to know all about it. Tell us everything now. We are eager and impatient to know”.

Hanuman made obeisance to Sita by prostrating towards the south and then began his recital. He told them about the Mainaka hill and about Surasa. He told them how to outwit her and then he came to the incident of Sunihika whom he had to kill. Then followed his landing in Lanka and his encounter with Lankini, the guardian of the city. He spoke in detail about the Anahpura of Ravana in search of Sita. They listened as though they were spell bound and they suffered with him as he told them of his frustration which he met everywhere. He told them how he felt that he would never reach the end of the sea of sorrow. Then came the visit of Ashokavana which was the only place which he had not scrutinized.

“In the midst of that garden was Shimshupa tree” said Hanuman. I sat on the tree and looked all around me. The moon had come up in the heavens and I could see clearly. A short distance from there in a temple like shelter I saw her. I saw Sita. In the midst of rakhasis she was like a stricken deer surrounded by tigresses. She was seated on the ground the bare grounds and she was weeping all the time”. Hanuman here wiped his own eyes and continued his recited. He told them about his shrinking himself to the size of a kitten and hiding himself among the leaves of the tree; about the coming of Ravana and his words to Sita about his threats and his intimation Hanuman told them everything in great detail and the recital was thrilling to the listeners what had been abandoned as a hopeless task had been achieved and Hanuman had saved his lives.

He recounted to them the dream which Trijata had spoken of and about the despair of Sita. He then told them how he made himself known to Sita, about her initial distrust and about how he had convinced her that he was from Rama. He was happy when he described in detail the several words he spoke and which Sita had spoken and how she gave them the jewels to be given to Rama in returns for the ring.

He came to the destruction of Ashokavana. The monkeys who were listening were now greatly excited when they heard how Hanuman had killed the may chiefs of the army of Ravana and about the death of a son of the king. This was greatly to their liking and they jumped in air. Waved their tails and embraced each other Hanuman told them about getting bound by the Brahmastra and about his encounter with Ravana in his count. When they were told about the death sentence which had been pronounced on him they listened in silence and then with a slight smile on his face. Hanuman described graphically the burning of Lanka. The excitement of the monkeys was gratifying to him. Each one of them thought he had done himself and they laughed. They screeched and jumped in the air and kissed their tails again and again. They were astonished at the miracle which made him immune to the effects of the fire which was blazing at the top of his tail and about Sita being unharmed by the fire which destroyed the rest of Lanka.

Hanuman said, “I went and saw her again and took leave of her and I hurried to your presence. There is a mountain by name Arishta there and from the top of that mountain I leaped in to the air since I was impatient to meet all of you, to bring you the happy tidings that Sita is there in Lanka and to end your worries. I have come back and my service has been rendered to my king and to Rama. My mission has been fruitful of because of the grace of Rama because of the good wishes of all of you and because of the desire to please our king I

managed to succeed when I least expected to I have told you everything that happened in Lanka. Let us now decide in the future course of action.

He paused for a moment and said, “It is our good fortune that Sita has not been harmed in any way by that sinful rakshasa Rama’s sorrows will soon be at an end and our king will be released from the solemn promise he made”.

“When I think of the immensity of Ravana’s crime I am surprised that he is still alive. I then realized the tapas he has performed which is what is protecting him. He is a great man he has performed intense tapas and pleased Lord Mahadeva. Himself with his devotion and what is grounding him or lese touching fire is not as terrible as touching Sita, the wife of the Lord. She is sitting patient by there under the tree by name Shimshupa, the picture of woe and despair. Like a moon hidden by a bank of clouds she is there, hiding her glory. She does not consider Ravana as anyone important enough to talk to. As I told you, she placed a blade of glass broken her and Ravana as she spoke to him making realize that she has as much respect for him as she has for that blade of grass. Her mind is ever set on Rama and she has no longer thought in her mind. She is a pathetic figure and we must hasten to her rescue Rama will find it very easy to kill Ravana and rescue her. Rama will find it very easy to kill. She could have killed Ravana with the fire of her Pativratiya but she respects Rama so much that she wants him to rescue her.

After listening to the thrilling narrative of Hanuman, Angada the prince said “We should try our utmost to do the needful. Under the leadership of Jambavan we can strive to achieve our good. I can, single handed accost Ravana and his army. Is there any doubt of our destroying him and his entire host if we go all together ? I can kill him, his kinsmen and his sons. I am familiar with the astras like Brahma, Aindra, Vayavya and many others. I can tackle the astra warfare of Indrajit. Give me permission to go and I will come back crowned with glory I will rain storms on their army and it will be crushed beyond any recognition. Hanuman is enough to work havoc in their ranks. If all of his Panasu, Neela aided by Drividha and Mainda who have been granted boons attack the army of Ravana, we can destroy it completely. Let us go back to Rama with Sita who will be rescued by us. If we go back and say “Sita has been found but we have not brought her with us” it will not be pleasing to the ears of our king and those of Rama. We are a powerful army and all the world knows of our valour. It is of such a high order. Hanuman will single hand do the needful and we can go to our Kishkindha with Sita Devi who has been captive all these many months. Our king will be pleased with what we have done.

Jambavan listened with our “intelligent the words of young prince who was very dear to him to decide on the future course of action which should be adopted by us. Sita herself. I gather from Hanuman’s words wants Rama to go to Lanka, punish the miscreant and take her back with him. Let us go back to Kishkindha and relate the entire happenings to Rama and to our king we will leave future in their hands”.

Angada and Hanuman with the rest of the group accepted the advice of Jambavan, since they considered him to be the intelligence all and with great joy in their hearts the entire host of monkeys began its march towards Kishkindha.

THE KING’S VINEYARD

Early the next morning, after traveling all night by jungle path small way Angada’s army arrived at the outskirts of Kishkindha on the fringes of the hidden city within the green valley in which it was built lay Sugriva’s jealously grounded Madhuvana his private vineyard. His uncle Dadhimukha tended to it and here he made and stored the choicest wines for the king’s cellar.

The monkey’s who had come from the south were already in high spirits when they reached the Madhuvana. Some one cried “We bring joyful news for our king. He will not be angry if we taste his wine today”. ‘What about the guards of Madhuvana’. But Hanuman himself said, “Leave the guards to me. Today our can drink to your hearts’ content”.

Angada’s army stormed into the king’s vineyard where his wine was stored in great vats. Like an invasion they came, and not in bore goblets, or from the wooden bottles, did they drink. They tripped the vats over and swilled straight out of them. Dadhimukha’s protest fell on deaf ears when he tried to threaten them they dragged him through the Madhuvana, pulled his beard and ripped his clothes.

The honeyed wine went potently to their heads and in no time every Vanara was drink some sang, others laughed and wept, others leapt high into the air and turned somersaults and cartwheels. Most of them could not walk anymore though they danced all right. They swarmed into the trees and played riotous games in the brambles swinging from tree to tree. Leaping down and chasing each other shouting at the top of their voices.

Hanuman cried to the any “Drink you full. Today is a day for celebrating’. The vanaras needed no encouragement. They drank Sugriva’s

finest wines in vatfulls. Dadhimukha tried again to stop them because they were now doing finer damage among the delicate vines. They laughed and began to pick the sharp fruit. Crying that the grape in the vine was headier than the wine in the vats.

Now Angada cried “Let them drink. They came with joyful news for the king”.

The desperate Dadhimukha ordered the guards of the Madhuvan to stop the drunken monkeys. But they were no match for the fighting vanaras of the kings army roaring, Hanuman himself joined the fray and the guards bet a hasty retreat. The drinking and the revelry continued. Dadhimukha withdrew and said to the monkeys. Let us go and tell the king. “He is on Prasravana”.

Through the nimble three ways, Dadhimukha and his monkeys flew to Sugriva. The Vanara king sat with Rama, whom he now visited everyday to comfort him and also because he himself found deep solace in the company of blue prince, which surpassed the pleasure the pleasure he had in his queer’s arms. Nephew’s feet and lay there obviously distraight. Sugriva asked sharply “What is the matter Dadhimukha”?

Tears in his eyes, that solemn and elegant monkey told him “How Angadas, Vanaras had stormed his Madhuvana and were drunk in Sugriva’s favourite sanctuary. He sobbed “Hanuman and Angada attacked us when we tried to stop the others”.

Lakshmana was standing nearby. He asked “Why does Dadhimuka come here with tears in his eyes”?

Sugriva turned to Lakshmana and a smile stirred on his lips. “He wants me to punish Angada’s army for ruining my Madhuvana and drinking all my best wines.”

And’

Sugriva said “I won’t punish them. They wouldn’t drink my wine unless they have come with good news”. Dadhimukha looked downcast. Sugriva went on blithely. “I am certain that Hanuman has found Sita. Sugriva turned to Dadhimukha’ uncle they must have found Sita or they wouldn’t dare to drink my wine. Tell Angada, Jambavan and Hanuman that I am impatient to hear their news.”

A little dazed pool Dadhimukha went back to the Madhuvana. But Sugriva was elated he could keep his promise to Rama that, be she anywhere at all his Vanaras would find Sita. He was pleased that at least in some measure

he could repay his debt to the prince. Most of all, he was happy that at least a ray of hope shone into the human friends' misery.

THE NARRATION OF HANUMAN

Dadhimukha went back to Madhuvana and he found the monkeys just getting over their intoxication. Some of them were sober and others were just awake. He went to the presence of Angada the prince and standing with his palms folded he said, "My dear prince child please forgive me and the guards for trying to stop you from enjoying yourself please do not be incensed by my foolishness you are the prince and master of this garden and it was wrong may highly impertinent in my part to have behaved as I did. I seek your forgiveness. In my foolish anger I left you all and rushed to the presence of the king and told him about the happenings here. He was extremely happy when he heard about it and I was amazed. He was happy that all of you had come back. He sent me to you with the message. Ask them to come and see me soon. Rama, Lakshmana and I are willing for the news brought by them and we are impatient "I was asked to give you this message."

Angada after hearing the words of Dadhimukha said, "Evidently Rama knows about our tarrying here. Let us not spend any more time here but let us go to our king". He addressed the monkeys and said, "You have been allowed to me your bill of the Madhu which is precious to my uncle. Let us hasten to the presence of the king". The army rose up as one man and hurried on the last lap of their journey. Some blew in the air and some leaped from tree to tree and soon they were in the presence of Sugriva.

Sugriva in the meantime was talking to Rama about the news which they were sure to hear. He said, "Be of good cheer, my friend, Sita has been discovered. I am sure of it. The time I had stipulated had been overstepped and they would never have had the courage to come back to me without their task being completed. Prince Angada, who led the army would never have come back to me. I am certain of that. He would have been brightened about the punishment I would have meted out to him and his troupe which might have failed in the mission. Angada would not have the courage to grant permission to the any to drink the honey. His great enthusiasm and his assurance that I will not be angry with any of them prove to me that they are bringing as good tidings about Sita. And I am sure it was Hanuman who had dared to enter the enemy's country and discovered her whereabouts. Forget your misery Rama. The time has come when sorrow should be shed since it will soon be forgotten".

The monkey host arrived with a tremendous noise each one of the monkeys walked as though he had managed to achieve the impossible and they strutted with pride. Sugriva heard the noise and he was happy. He waited for a while and Hanuman with Angada led them to his presence. Their faces were beaming with joy as they prostrated before their king. Rama and Lakshmana. Hanuman prostrated again before Rama and said, "Sit has been seen".

It was heavenly for them to hear the words of Hanuman and he told them briefly about his finding Sita unharmed by Ravana, but very unhappy because of her captivity, her separation from her Lord and because of the hopelessness of her condition Sugriva was very proud of his men who had helped him to keep his prone Lakshmana looked with affection at Hanuman and Rama's eyes rested with love and grace on Hanuman who stood humbly before him after telling him about Sita, after giving him a new lease on life.

Hanuman wanted for an opportunity to tell Rama in detail about the many happenings in Lanka and the monkeys vied with each other to tell Rama about the captivity of Sita and about the cruelties she had to face. From the graphic manner in which they spoke it would seem as though it was these monkeys and not Hanuman who had seen all these.

Rama asked again, "I am glad to know that Sita is unharmed and still alive only tell me where is she ? What does she think of me ? Tell me all about Sita".

The monkeys with rightly as harmed faces, went to Hanuman and stood by his side silently looking at him as if to say "It is up to you to take up where we let off". Rama was looking on with a smile and Lakshmana hid a broad smile which was dawning on his lips Sugriva was too happy to see anything comical in the situation.

Hanuman came near to Rama. Solemnly he made a namaskara in the direction where Sita was and then said, "My Lord, Rama, with a desire to see Sita Devi. I leaped across the sea which was a hundred yojanas wide. On the southern shore of the city is a city by name Lanka which Ravana rules. In the Anantapura of Ravana, I saw Sita the purest of women. With her thoughts and hopes central on you, she is managing to keep alive. She is a captive in a garden which is the pleasure garden of Ravana. When I first saw her, she was surrounded by rakshasas all of whom were trying to fully her into accepting the unholy love of Ravana. This noble lady who has been born to be an heiress to nothing but happiness is today, the most unhappy of women. I saw her hair which was matted due to neglect and which was lying in a single stand, twisted into a rough plait and hanging in her back like a deadly snake. She was half

reclining and half sitting on the bare ground. She is imprisoned in that garden and several fearful rakshasas guard her. Like a lotus drenched in dew she is looking wilted and sad. There is no way for her to escape from Ravana. She had made up her mind to give up her life and I saw her then. Her thoughts are bent on you Rama and she is thinking only of you.

Hanuman told Rama about his sitting on top of tree and reciting the strong of the pumps of Ishvakus race and about how he won the confidence of Sita. He related to him the conversation with Sita and about everything in great detail. He said, “She has sent you the following message Rama I will stay alive for a month more. I will not be allowed to live longer than that by Ravana save me before the expiry of the month”. When she was given your ring. ‘She was happy and though she had seen you in person. She has sent you the jewel which she would wear in her hair in the days when she had been with you. She had kept it very carefully and she gave it to me and asked me to give it to you. She asked me to remind you about the incident of the crow and also about the intake made by the dust of the stone manasile she said that only she knew about it and you and she wanted you to remember them.’”

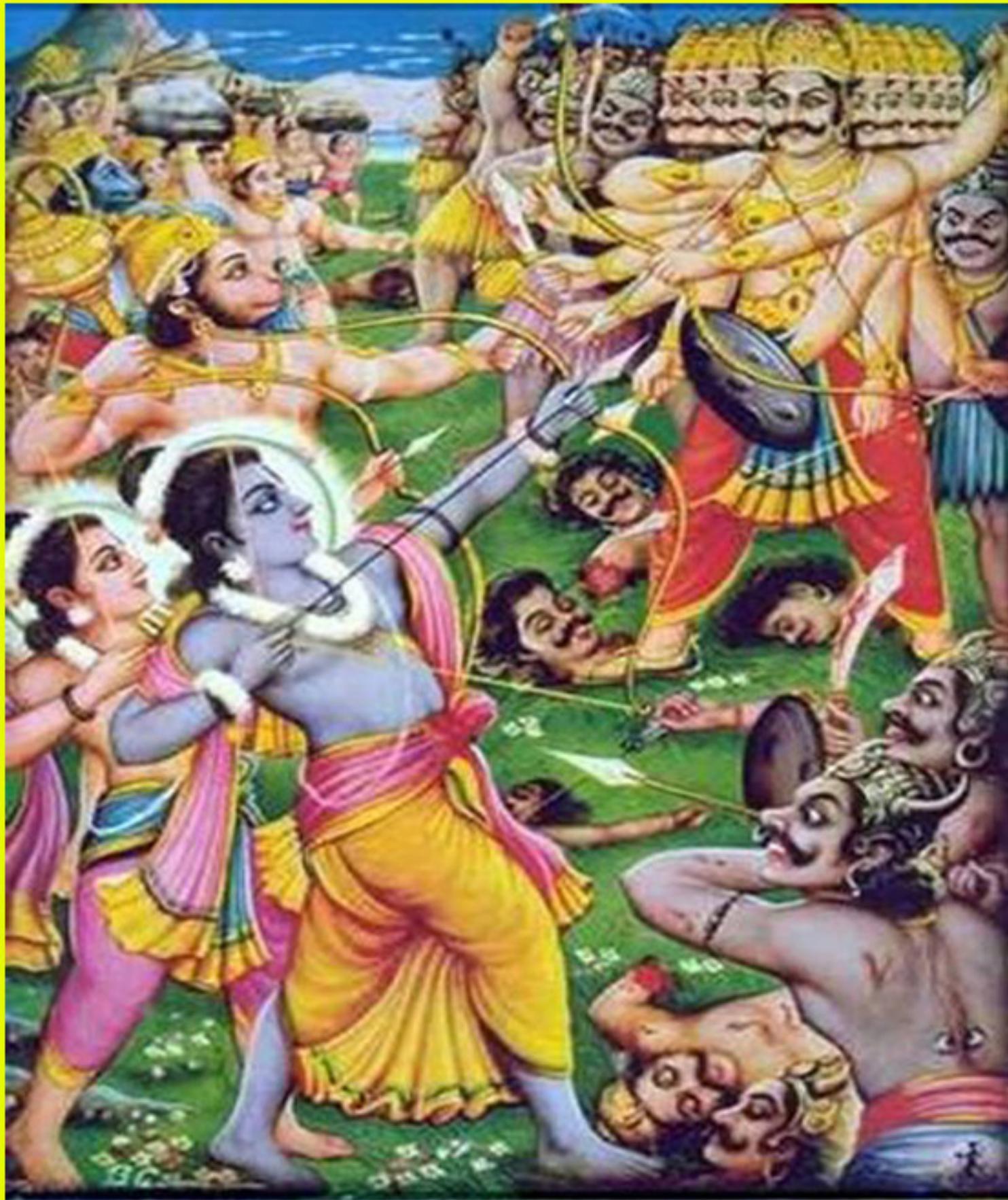
Rama took the jewel in his hands and tears sprang to her eyes as he clasped it to his bosom with his voice faltering because of emotion he told Sugriva. “Seeing this jewel my mind is solely distressed as a mother cow’s will, when it thinks of her calf. This was given to Sita by her beautiful when this jewel adorned her hair. This has been given by Indra to Janaka when he was pleased with the king. This jewel brings to my mind my father. Sita and her father, I feel that Sita is here by my side when I see this.

He was silent for a while and said, “Lakshmana, I am seeing this jewel and not Sita who was always wearing it can anything be more pathetic than this I”. He turned to Hanuman and asked him. “Tell me all about the words that Sita spoke. It will be like water to the parched lips of a thirsty man. If she stays she will stay alive for a month more then her life will be longer than mine. I cannot live for a moment more without Sita. Take me to her my dear Hanuman, take me to Sita where she is after knowing where Sita is I cannot tarry for a moment more. How is my beloved able to bear to cruel words of the rakshasas who surrounded her ? Her face must be without its natural luster and will be like the moon during the season shrouded when clouds obscure its beauty. Hanuman tell me once again about her. I am eager to know”.

Hanuman spoke humbly and in great detail he related all that happened in the Ashokavana and about how he spoke to Sita.

Hanuman began right from the beginning and told Rama about their meeting Sampathi and about the certainty with which he had told them that Sita was in the anthahpura of Ravana and about how he could see her. Then came their problem as to how the sea was to be crossed playing down his own prowess as much as he could. Hanuman told them about the many adventures he had when he had come back from the city of Lanka he had told his comrades about the happenings at Lanka with great gusto. But here, it was different. He spoke about the incidents which Sita as the central figure and he went on to relate the conversations with Sita in great detail. Hanuman spoke very humbly and related everything which had happened in Lanka. He repeated in manner in which Sita had narrated the episode of Kakasura and her lament that Rama, who could be so angry with a mere crow was silent now that she was abducted by a rakshasa. The words of comfort spoken by himself were also repeated to Rama. He did not leave a single word spoken by her and all the while Rama listened with tears run my unheeded down his face. Hanuman concluded “My Lord, I have assured her that you will soon be in Lanka accompanied by Vanara’s king and slightly assuaged by my words of encouragement and assurance and Devi is bravely counting the days which will have to pass before she can be reunited with you. She is eagerly waiting for the day when Ravana will be killed by you and when is assured of the deliverance from the hands of the wicked Rakshasa king.

Yuddha Kanda



YUDDHA KANDA

ON PRASRAVANA

Rama's eyes shone when he heard Hanuman's adventure in Lanka. Hugging the Vanara the blue prince cried. "Before today I had heard of Garuda and Vayu crossing the ocean. Now Hanuman the Vanara had leapt across the waves out of his love. He has ravaged impregnable Lanka and returned alive to bring us his news. Matchless are it saddens me that poor as I am today I can repay you only with an embrace.

Tears running down his face, he embraced Hanuman again Rama controlled himself and said quietly "It is true we have found Sita yet though Hanuman leapt the ocean as if it were a puddle of rain water, how will the rest of the us cross the yawning sea"?

The vanaras nodded their heads and murmured their agreement. Gloom settled on the company.

Then Sugriva cried 'Rama is not right that you fear these trifles as another man may. In Dharma this is noting. Can just a sea stand between Rama and his love ? Can death, who is the widest of seas ? I say no. We will cross the ocean, all of us. Look at the faces of my monkeys. Rama look carefully and tell me if a single vanara who would not gladly leapt into fire for you ? No there is no one here who does not love you better than his life. Then how can you doubt the ocean shall be crossed ?

He paused and saw Rama smiled. The vanaras cheered their king deafeningly. Sugriva said, "To my mind, it seems a bridge must be built across Varuna's kingdom of waves before one army cross into Lanka. I say to you once the bridge is built, you will see my Vanara's valour. You will see Ravana's corpse lie upon the earth. Only do not succumb to doubt. Don't grief be your master. Rather harass your rage fiercely in your heart and let it be your weapon. We will surely kill Ravana and rescue Sita. You must believe this Rama".

The vanaras cheered again. But though what Sugriva said gave some heart to Rama, he was still somber until he shrugged off his despondency and drawing himself erect said 'you are right my friend. We will find a way to cross the ocean because we must. If we cannot build a bridge to take us over the waves I will drain the sea with my astras and we will walk to Lanka on dry land to confront Ravana'.

Rama turned to Hanuman “Tell me all there is to know about Ravana’s city. Tell me every detail you saw, when you decided to look over it in your wisdom. Omit nothing, my friend. Paint a picture for us so that Lanka rises before our very eyes and we see turrets sparking in the sun.

Hanuman described the Rakshasa’s city, leaving out no sight he had seen, however trivial. He did not be little Ravana’s rakshasa guard. He praised them. But he said the vanaras. Who could go vast or tiny at will, and who were all fearless fighters, would be more than a match for that any of darkness. The vanaras with Dharma in their side and Rama of Ayodhya to lead them.

‘Angada, Dwividha, Marinda and the rest of us will not fail your Rama. All you have to think of now is an auspicious time for us to set in once more, the vanaras leapt into the air, and cried out their king’s name and those of Rama Hanuman and Angada and the names of all their children are after another.

Rama and Lakshmana imprinted Hanuman’s description of Lanka on their hearts as if their lives depended on remembering each detail.

THE MARCH SOUTHWARDS

Rama listened to the words of Hanuman with great attention and said “I assure you I will destroy Lanka. As it happens the sun reached the zenith and the time of the day is called Vijaya. It is sure to forebode victory to us if we begin our march now. Sugriva, we can arrange to leave immediately I have followed your advice and anger has now filled my heart. How can this rakshasa hope to be left alive after he has dared to steal my queen ? And where can he go to escape my wrath ? When she hears about my arrival in Lanka, Sita will once again want to live and like a dying man who has been fed with poison will find hope sprouting in his heart when sights Amritha. She will long to live and abandon all thoughts of death. Today the star is Uttara and tomorrow it will be Hasta. Let us begin our journey I can see good omens which you spoke about and I am certain that I will kill Ravana and rescue Sita. My right eye is throbbing and it means success in our endeavour. “Rama sat for a moment thinking of the future and he added”. Let Neela, with a section of the army go in advance, and lead it through a path which has trees with fruits in them and which are shady and cool. Neela be on guard all the time. The rakshasas will come to know the purpose of our journey and it is quite likely they may poison the fruits and the water ponds which are in your path. Be very careful.

‘You should look around all the time and find out if the army of the enemy is stationed anywhere. Gaja, Ganga and Gavakha should lead some portion of the any. Rishabha should be the leader of another section. Hanuman will carry me and Angada my brother Lakshmana. We will be like Indra on Airavatha and Kubera on the elephant by name Sarvabhoma. Let the army be divided into sections and let each be led by one mighty. Warrior and let us all proceed towards the sea’. Sugriva was happy to obey Rama and the any left the slopes of Prastavana with great shouts and demonstrations of their excitement. They jumped about leaped from tree to tree and from rock. And so the entire army proceeded towards Rama and Lakshmana looked like the sun and moon together. There was joy in minds of everyone and specially the brothers from Kosala.

It was now evening and the sun has set. Lakshmana said, “Rama soon you will kill Ravana bring Sita back from her prison. You will return to Ayodhya with a happy heart. I can see which prophesy nothing but good and success to us. The breeze is blowing softly and with a caress. The birds are happy and with the beasts are making pleasing noises. The sky is clear in all directions and the sun is glowing with great splendor. The planet Sukra is behind you. The seven rishis who are stationed around the star Druva can be seen may clearly and Dhruva too. In the south the world of Viswamitra, the heaven created for Trisanku by our guru can be seen clearly too and I can see the royal safe supporting too. The star Visakha is shining brightly and that is the star sacred to the house of Ishvakus. The waters in the lakes and the books are sweet and clear and the trees are full of fruits. The fragrance of the flowers is overpowering. Look around you, my beloved brother and take heart. We will be seeing the end of our misfortune”.

The Vanara army proceeded with joy passing many hills, forests, gardens, streams and rivers, with ease, it reached the shores of the sea. They reached the foot of the mountain. Mahendra and Rama ascended the peak of the mountain.

He stood there looking around and he saw the broad expanse of the sea which lay unfurled at his feet. He then descended and with Sugriva and his brother Lakshmana he entered the small forest at the foot of the mountain.

Rama said, “Sugriva we have arrived at the southern shore of this great sea. I am again tormented with the diffidence which visited me before. This lord of the rivers has his other shore too far away from here. It is not possible to cross the sea unless we hit upon a method soon. Let the army call a halt here now. Let us sit and think up methods of crossing this wide ocean.

Now that we have heard the city of the enemy let the warriors be doubly cautious and alert.

The army was made to spread out on the many hill tops and broad expanses of land and the entire earth seemed to be covered with monkeys and more monkeys. It was a glorious sight and it was frightening as well. It was like another sea. It was indeed formidable and they stood staring at the fearful waves and the roar of the sea was maddening.

Rama was alone with Lakshmana and he said “Lakshmana, it has been said sorrow gets lessened with the passage of time; that time is a great healer. But believe me, it is not true. The sorrow in my heart born of the separation of my Sita seems to be growing day by day. I am not unhappy because of the distance that separates us nor by the fact that she has been abducted by a cruel rakshasa. I am worried greatly by the vital factor called time. It is the short time which has been left of her life. She has sent word through Hanuman that she will not be able to live longer than a month”, Rama gave away to his grief and said.

“O wind go where my beloved is and blow there. Touch her and then come back to me and caress me when her touch is still fresh on you. That will make me see her in my mind’s eye. She must have called out to me. ‘Rama my lord when he carried her away and the thoughts are eating into my heart like poison eats into the limbs and destroy them. I am tormented by the thought of her helplessness. This fire of separation is tormenting me burning me day and night. It is the thought that she is alive which is keeping me alive. All these days it was the hope that she may be alive somewhere which kept me hoping and now that I know where she is, I am impatient to see her. I long for her, her smile, her gentle looks, her caressing voice. Though she has me for a husband beautiful Sita is there far away, in the midst of those rakshasis and without anyone to rescue her from this fate. How can she sleep when she is surrounded by them. Like the crescent moon which shakes off the dense clouds and emerges in triumph when will Sita come out of her captivity ? She has always been slim and now, the fasting and sorrow caused by the separation from me must have made her thin and weak. I am waiting for the day when I can kill the rakshasa with my arrows and take her back to my heart. I want to cast off this sorrow like I cast off the soiled clothes.

When they were engaged in conversation the sun began to withdraw his rays and wheeled towards the west with a heavy heart Rama worshipped the setting sun on the shores of the southern sea.

The monkey army surged forward, rumbling like the ocean at high tide. They marched behind the sons of Dasaradha like trained horses controlled by their bits riding on the shoulders of monkeys. Rama and Lakshmana looked like the Sun and the Moon in conjunction with the planets. 'I see auspicious omens everywhere. I have no doubt you will kill Ravana and return to Ayodhya with all your goals accomplished' said Lakshmana!

The monkeys covered the earth as they marched forward as swift as the wind and the cloud of dust they raised darkened the Sun and hid the world from view. Eager to perform great deeds on the battle field for Rama's sake they boasted and bragged in their youthful enthusiasm about all the things they could do with their strength some raced ahead, others galloped. They talked and laughed, they gouged the earth with their feet and tail, they broke off rocks and uprooted trees with their mighty arms. They climbed to the tops of mountains yelling and shouting, with their powerful legs. They drew themselves up to their full height and played with tree tops.

Driven by the desire to see Sita the army marched day and night and did not stop for a single moment. Soon, they reached Mount Sahya covered with trees and frequented by deer and other animals. The monkeys ate sweet fruit and honey they found there and continued on their way. When they came to Mount Mahendra, Rama climbed to its summit and looked out over the roaring, swelling ocean that was filled with fish and turtles.

Rama, Lakshmana and Sugriva were the first to reach the pleasant forest on the shore. 'Here we are at the ocean, the abode of Vanaras' said Rama 'Now he must once again consider the matter that concerned us earlier, from here the ocean seems endless. We cannot hope to cross it without proper plan let us make camp here and consult the others about the best way for the monkeys to cross to the southern shore'.

Rama, still tormented with grief over the separation from Sita, gave order for the monkey army to make camp. The huge army of monkeys seemed like a second ocean of honey coloured water on the shore. They camped in the forest and watched the waves rise and fall with great delight. They looked out over the endless waters that teemed with fish and sea monsters and serpents with glittering bodies. The ocean was particularly terrifying at twilight and seemed to ebb and swell with the moon.

The ocean had submarine mountain ranges and its unplumbed depths were as dangerous as the realm of the Asuras. The waves rose and fell with the wind filled with fish and serpents that live in the waters. Drops of water gleamed like sparks from fire. The waters were like the sky and sky like

waters. You could not tell from the other. Sky and water mingled, the only difference being that one was filled with stars, the other with precious gems. Waves filled the sea as clouds fill the sky and the waves crushed against each other making a noise like drums in the water field. The monkeys watched in wonder as the waters were tossed by the wind and seemed to fill they sky.

THE KING'S BROTHER

Meanwhile Ravana had seen the terrible destruction Hanuman had wrought upon Lanka so devastating that only a being that was Indra's equally could have done it. Some what disturbed the king of the rakshasas said, "My impregnable and unassailable city was entered and attacked by a mere monkey. He even managed to see Sita. The monkey destroyed our buildings and killed a number of rakshasas and threw the entire city into a panic.

"What shall I do now" ? What is the appropriate course of action ? He asked his advisors. 'You must tell me what is the right thing to do as well as what we are capable of doing. Great men who are known for their courage have said that consultation and advice are the roots of victory. I would like to discuss this problem with you. I would like to discuss this problem with you. You are wise and decide what we should do. I will do exactly as you say. Rama will soon be here with an army of hundreds of millions of monkeys to lay siege to our city. He will find some way of crossing the ocean. Briefly, this is the situation we find ourselves in. Think about the welfare of our city and army.

The heroic rakshasas joined in the palms in respect and said "Our army is vast and has all kinds of weapons. What is there to worry about ? Kubera lived on Mount Kailasa surrounded by Lords of yakshas. You defeated them all and made them subordinate to you, even though Kubera had Siva for a friend and thought very highly of himself. He was a guardian of the quarters but in your anger you defeated him in combat. You wrought havoc among the Yakshas and stopped their advance from Kailasa you even got the wondrous Puspaka for yourself."

"The king of Danavas, Maya sought an alliance with you out of fear and gave you his daughter in marriage. You even brought the Danava madhu, renowned for strength and courage. Under your control you went to the underworld and conquered the Nagas. After a battle that lasted for a whole year you subdued many Danavas and learned to magic arts. You defeated Varunas' sons in battle even though they were backed by a massive four disowned army."

“Long ago, the earth was full of Kshatriyas who rivaled Indra in their heroism. They were as numerous as trees and you killed them all even though they were invincible to others. Rama has neither their skills nor their courage in battle. Do not be disturbed by this challenge from such mediocre beings you are bound to kill Rama.”

Various mighty rakshasa warriors leapt from their seats and began to shout – “we shall kill Rama and Lakshmana and Sugriva today. And that wretched Hanuman who caused so much trouble in Lanka.”

They grabbed their weapons, ready to fight, but Vibhishana made them all sit again. He placed his palms together and said, ‘Wise men say that was should have been tried and failed. My child force will succeed if it is used correctly after proper deliberation according to the rules, or if the enemy is destined to die, or if he is engaged with other enemies, or if her is unaware, how can you think of attacking who is vigilant, who is supported by a huge army, who is determined to win, who has conquered his temper and is invincible’.

Who would have ever imagined that Hanuman would be able to leap who a cross the ocean and do what he did ? Do not underestimate the enemy! They are brave and have limitless forces. Besides tha what has Rama ever done to Ravana that would justify the abduction of Sita from janastana ? It was Kharas behaviour that made Rama kill him in combat. All being’s are entitled to defend their lives.

‘Sita should be given back. What do we gain by incurring their enemy ? It is not right to unnecessarily incur the wrath of a righteous man who holds to Dharma. Let us give Sita back! If we do not volunteer to return Rama’s beloved wife this lovely city and these brave rakshasas will definitely be destroyed. I beg you as a brother, listen to me’. Do as I say. My advice is based on righteousness and it is for your good. Return Sita. ‘Give her back before Rama shoots you dead and with an endless stream of arrows that string like the rays of the sun and never miss their mark’. Renounce this anger which destroys happiness and virtue follow the path of righteousness that leads to fame and joy. Have pity on us. Let us live in peace with out children and our families. Give Sita back to Rama.

Ravana listened to his brother’s well intention words, but impelled by his fate, he replied harshly “One can live with a rival or with a poisonous snake but one cannot live with some one who claims friendship and then severs the interests of the enemy. I know how family members feel – they rejoice in the misfortunes of their kin. If a person is the best in the family, if he is capable. Learned and righteous they do not respect him. Instead they try to

bring him down. Of all the dangers in the world the danger from your family is the worst. We know that cows yield with abundance, that Brahmins exercise self control and that women are fickle. So too, it is evident that one's family is dangerous. The fact that I am respected by the world does not sit well with you ? Neither does my power and majesty. If anyone else had spoken to me like this Vibhishana, he would be dead. Damn you are a disgrace to the family.”

Honourable Vibhishana leapt up from his seat, holding his mace, along with four other rakshasas. Enraged he stepped into the air and said to his brother. ‘You are my brother, great king. You can say whatever you like. But I will not forgive you for these and words and for your unrighteousness. Those who are doomed to die do not listen to good advice from their well wishers. It is easy to find companions who will tell you what you want to hear. It is hard to find those who will speak the unpleasant truth. It is harder to find those who will listen to it.

“I cannot stand by and watch you place your head in death's noose any more than I can stand and watch a house on fire. I do not want to see you killed by golden arrows that are like tongues of flame. Even men who are strong and brave and who have performed great feats in battle crumble like walls of sand when they are in death's grasp. Protect this city and all the rakshasa. I wish you well. I am now leaving. I hope you will be happy without me.”

Vibhishana left almost immediately to find Rama and Lakshmana. The monkeys who were on the ground with Sugriva saw Vibhishana coming through the air. He was as large as Mount Meru and he shone like lightning. Sugriva thought for a moment and then said to Hanuman and the others ‘Look at this rakshasa fully armed’ I have no doubt he has come here with his comparisons to kill us.

The monkeys armed themselves with trees and rocks and said, “give the word, king and we shall kill them and drop them to ground in an instant!”

As they were talking amongst themselves Vibhishana reached the northern shore of the ocean and stood there calmly. He noticed Sugriva and the others and addressed them in a loud voice. ‘I am Vibhishana, the younger brother of Ravana, the wicked king of rakshasas! He is the one who abducted Sita from Janastana and killed Jatayu. Sita is constantly guarded by rakshasis and she is helpless and miserable. I have argued with Ravana again and again and given him many reasons why he should return Sita to Rama. But he is trapped by his fate and refuses to take my advice as a man who wants to die

refuses medication. He has insulted me and treated me like a slave. So I have renounced my wife and children and have come to Rama for refuge. Rama is the refuge of all creatures in the world. Tell him that Vibhishana has come to see him!’

Sugriva went hurriedly to Rama greatly agitated and in front of Lakshmana he said, Ravana’s brother Vibhishana has come here with four other rakshasas to take refuge with you. I am sure he has been sent hereby Ravana as a spy. We must imprison him. He will gain our confidence and then he will kill you Rama. “I think we should be ruthless with Vibhishana and his companions. Remember he is vile Ravana’s brother!”

Rama understood what Sugriva was trying to tell him and after he had finished speaking Rama addressed Hanuman and the other monkey leaders who were standing nearby. “You have heard what the king of the monkeys has to say about Ravana’s brother. He has spoken clearly and to the point. When a problem like this has to be resolved all one’s intelligent and capable companions should express their opinions.” “They all spoke eagerly but courteously. Angada was the first to speak and suggested that Vibhishana’s loyalty be tested. Vibhishana is an enemy. It is appropriate that we be suspicious of him first. We cannot put assume that he is worthy of our trust. Deceitful people hide their intentions and move amongst the enemy and then they strike when the tune is right. That would be a disaster for us. Let us test him before we take him into our confidence. If he proves to be virtuous, we shall take him and if not, we drop him.”

Sarabha, who was very practical said, “Let us put a spy on him as soon as possible once he has been watched and investigated by some one with a keen intelligence, we can decide what to do next.”

Jambavan was learned in the traditional text of kingship and he considered the matter in that context. “Vibhishana comes from our sworn enemy, the wicked king of the rakshasis. He has not acted accordingly and we must be suspicious of him because of that.”

Marinade, who knew the difference between right and wrong and who was eloquent said ‘Let us question Vibhishana gently and without hostility about Ravana’s plans. We will be able to assess his real intentions and decide whether he is good or evil’.

Then Hanuman, who was the finest of all the councilors, rich in learning and wisdom and familiar with the rules of conduct, said “The strategies suggested by the others, that we assess Vibhishana’s merits, seem flawed to me.

I cannot see how such a scheme would work. It would be alright if we could conceive of some huge test for him. At the same time, we cannot simply take a stranger into our midst like this.”

“The suggestion that we have him spied upon is also faulty. The circumstances are not suitable for something like that. The idea that Vibhishana has come to us at the wrong time and in the wrong place is also incorrect. In fact, I feel it is just the opposite I think he has come to the right place at the right time. He saw how wicked Ravana is. He made the right choice by deciding to come here.”

“The idea that we should question him is based on faulty logic. Any intelligent person who is questioned like this would become suspicious and we run the risk of alienating some one who has approached us in genuine friendship one can never get to the real intentions of another by questioning him.”

‘He never showed any indications of deceit or his when he was speaking. His face and manner were open and friendly. I am sure he is sincere. There is no hint of unrighteousness in anything he has said. He has observed your actions and seen Ravana’s deeds. He has heard about the killing of Vali and Sugriva’s coronation. I think he has come here because he wants a kingdom keeping all this in mind, I think it will be alright to take him as an ally.

Rama listened with interest and delight to Hanuman’s intelligent response. “I, too have something to say on the subject of Vibhishana’, he said. Listen to it, for you have my interests at heart. You should never turn away anyone who comes to you in friendship even if he has evil intentions. A good person would never do that.”

Sugriva was moved by what Rama said and his love and respect swelled. ‘There is nothing surprising in this! You are the lord of the world and you are honourable you know Dharma and you say the right thing all the time. I know in my heart that Vibhishana is a good man. That is the only conclusion anyone would come to the to if they observed him carefully. Let Vibhishana be made equal with all of us. Take him as an ally.

“What difference does it make if this rakhasa is good or wicked’ said Rama. ‘No body can hurt me in the slightest way. I could destroy all the pisacas and the danava, the Yakhshas and the rakshasas in the world with my little finger if I wanted to! Even at the cost of his own life, righteous man must pretext of fugitive from the enemy no matter if he be arrogant or in abject

misery. I give my protection whether it is Vibhishana or Ravana himself. Bring him here, monkeys.”

Vibhishana was received that Rama had accepted him and fell at his feet along with his companions. ‘I am Ravana’s brother, but he has dismissed me and so I have come to you, the refuge of all creatures’ he said, ‘I have renounced Lanka, my friends and all my wealth. Now my hopes for a kingdom, life and happiness lie with you. I will do all I can to help you destroy the rakshasas conquer Lanka. I will even infiltrate enemy army’. Rama embraced Vibhishana and told Lakshmana to fetch water from the ocean. ‘Use this water to consecrate Vibhishana, king of the rakshasis so that he knows how pleased I am with him, he said, Lakshmana did as he was told and Vibhishana was crowned in the presence of all the monkeys who shouted, will done’. Excellent! At the sign of favour from Rama.

CROSSING THE SEA / RAMA AND OCEAN

Then Sugriva asked Vibhishana “How shall we cross this boundless ocean”? We cannot think of a way to get across with the entire monkey army”.

‘Rama should ask the ocean for help’, replied Vibhishana. ‘This ocean was dug up by Sagara and he will use all his resources to help Rama’.

Vibhishana plan was simple and practical and it appealed to Rama, ‘I like this idea, Lakshmana said Rama’. ‘Tell me, do you and Sugriva approve? You are both experienced advisors. Consider the plan and tell me what you think.’

Sugriva and Lakshmana replied together “How could Vibhishana idea not appeal to us? It is timely and practical. We cannot cross the immense ocean without building a bridge. Even any of the gods and Asuras led by Indra could not reach Lanka any other way.’ Let us put Vibhishana’s plan into action immediately. We have wasted enough time already?”

Rama sat down on a bed of Kusa grass on the ocean shore blazing like the sacrificial fire. He sat there besides the ocean for three days and three nights in constant vigil, adhering strictly to his rules. But the ocean, the lord of the rivers did not appear before Rama who was doing this to propitiate him Rama’s eyes turned red with anger and he said to Lakshmana who stood beside him. ‘Lakshmana! The ocean does not present himself despite the honour I do him’. He is so arrogant that he will not show himself.”

The virtues of good men, like calmness, patience, honesty and sweet speech bear no results. They are seen as signs of weakness. The world respects only those men who are wicked and cunning, who dole out punishment in all directions and who constantly praise themselves. One cannot achieve fame and success in the world without violence, just as one cannot achieve victory in battle without it.

‘Today you shall watch as the ocean overflows with fish pierced by my arrows, Lakshmana’. You shall see the carcasses of sea creatures shredded by my arrows! Today I shall declare war on this mighty ocean, filled with shells and fish and I shall dry up his waters! The ocean thinks I am weak because I have been patient. What is the use of patience with someone like this? Bring me my bow, Lakshmana and my arrows which are like poisonous snakes. I am going to agitate this calm ocean. Even though it never transgresses its bounds, I shall cause such huge waves that the ocean will overflow. His eyes dilated with anger, Rama grabbed his bow and he blazed like the doomsday fire. He held his mighty bow in the middle and made the earth tremble as he released a storm of arrows as Indra would release his thunderbolt. The arrows shone with splendour and they forced themselves into the ocean causing great among the sea creatures. A huge wind arose and mighty waves crashed to the shore, carrying fish and sea serpents with them. The ocean was terribly agitated and threw up vast quantities of shells and filled the air with spray from its swiftly receding waters. The serpents and danavas who lived in submarine worlds were terrified and their eyes blazed like fire. Thousand of waves as high as mountains rose from the ocean and the waters were filled with floating fish and other creatures.

Then the ocean himself rose from the middle of the waters, like the sun rising over the peaks of Mount Meru. He made himself manifest. Surrounded by sea serpents with flaming jaws. He was as smooth as emerald and was adorned with gold. He wore red clothes and a garland of red flowers and his eyes were like lotus petals.

He joined his palms in respect and said to Rama who was still holding his arrows. ‘Rama, the earth, the wind, sky, water and fire are all bound by their essential nature. I too have my own nature which makes me impossible to cross and impossible to swim. It would be completely unnatural for me to let you cross over. There is nothing, not desire, not greed or fear, that can make these waters still. The only thing I can grant you is something that I, too, can endure and that is that the sea monsters will not prey on you until the army has crossed the waters.

NALASETHU

“Nala, the son of Viswakarma, stands right herewith you. He has been given many boons by his father as a result of which, they are exactly alike. He can build a bridge across me and I will hold it up said the ocean” and vanished.

What the ocean said is true! Said the monkey Nala. “I am exactly like my father I can build a bridge across the ocean. My father, Viswakarma gave my mother a boon on Mount Mandara. He said that the son born of him would be his equal. I did not mention my talents because I was not asked. But today let the monkeys build the bridge!”

Under Rama’s instructions, hundreds of thousands of monkeys ran over the forest to collect wood for the bridge. They uprooted trees and carried them to the water as if they were carrying Indra’s banners. They broke off mountain peaks and threw them into the ocean filling up the waters. Nala built a bridge that was ten yojanas wide and one hundred yojanas long in the middle of the ocean the lord of the rivers and it shone like the stars in the sky. The gods and Gandharvas the Siddhas and the great sages gathered in the air to look at the wondrous bridge. The monkeys jumped in and out of the water as they yelled and screamed with delight at the miraculous bridge. Millions of monkeys used the bridge to cross the ocean like a parting in the hair.

Once they had crossed the ocean, Vibhishana stood ready to ward off any enemy attacks with his mace. Rama, Lakshmana and Sugriva stood at the head of the army some of the monkeys walked in the seas, others jumped in and out of the water, others strayed off the path and still others flew around in the air like birds. The huge din made by enormous monkeys army as it crossed the bridge drowned out the mumbling of the ocean. As the Gods, Siddhas and Coronas watched the wondrous feat that has been achieved for Rama the monkey army reached the other side and camped on the shore which abounded in roots, fruits and water.

SPECULATIONS

The sun had set and the moon had just risen. Rama had now arranged the army properly and they were resting on the groves, which were to be found on the shores of the sea. The earth could not bear the weight of the Vanara army and they could feel her trembling. The vanaras heard the music made by the bugles and drums and they were thrilled at the thought that they had come so near Lanka. The sounds from the city came floating to them in the

air and they listened with excitement. They roared with sheer joy. The noise was heard by the rakshasas who were in Lanka.

Rama was lost in a reverie. He looked at the wonderful city with its flags and banners and turrets made of gold and he thought of her, his beloved Sita, who was imprisoned in this city. He thought : “Sita whose eyes would always resemble those of a frightened deer is now a captive of Ravana in this beautiful city. She is like Rohini eclipsed by the planet Angaraka”. Rama signed with pain and he turned to Lakshmana and said : “Look at the city! Look at Lanka ? Stationed on top of hill it seems to touch the very skies. It was built. I hear by Viswakarma for Ravana. The city with its beautiful mansions appears like the sky coered by white clouds. The fragrance of the flowers in the gardens, the music of the many instruments, the noise of the birds all make me think of the garden Chitra which belongs to Kubera”.

Rama stood gazing at Lanka for a long time. He roused himself and turned his thoughts towards the immediate task which had to be completed. He said “Let the brave prince Angada with Neela latte his army and station himself at the heart of the great army. Let Rishabha protect the right wing. Let Gnadhamadana the invincible be in change of the left wing. Lakshmana and myself will be at the head. Jambavana and Sushena should guard the van of the army. This, then should be our plan of attack”.

The arrangements were made as per the wishes of Rama and Rama told Sugriva. “The army has been arranged well. It is time to release Suka”. The captive rakshasa was released since Rama had asked him to be set fire. With a greatful sigh the unfortunate rakshasa rushed to the presence of Ravana. The king had one look at him and laughter took hold of him, Ravana laughed at Suka and asked him, “Why have your two wings been tied up ? They also seem to be wounded. You look distressed too. I hope you did not fall into the hands of that fickle crowd”.

Suka was still trembling. He had not quite forgotten the treatment meted out to him by the vanaras. He said “I went to the northern side of the sea as you had commanded. I went to Sugriva and spoke the words which you had asked me to say. The monkeys were furious with me and they caught hold of me. They beat me up and tortured me. The vanaras are by nature prove to be angered easily and they are quite ruthless. They are not willing to listen to any one. It is not possible to reason with them or to talk to them calmly. I saw Rama who had killed Virodha, Kabamdha, Khara and others. I saw him with Sugriva, the king of vanaras. He has found out the hiding place of Sita. The sea which has never been crossed by anyone was not a problem to him at all. He has had a bridge built across our sea and the sea has been crossed by the entire

vanara host. They have landed on the southern shore. The land is covered by the monkeys. The army is advancing fast and before it reaches the walls of our city you should decide on the course of action to be adopted by you. Either return Sita to Rama or prepare yourself for a dreadful war to be fought”.

Ravana was incensed by the words of Suka. He shouted “Let the entire world and the other worlds too come and challenge me to fight. Let the Devas and asuras and all the heavenly host come here to fight with me. I will face all of them but I will not return Sita. I am ready to fight. I am eager to see Rama covered with my around like a flower laden tree is covered with bees. I will burn him with my scorching arrows like the sun absorbs the light of the lesser luminaries. I will take his strength away from him. My valour limitless is like the sea. My speed is like that of the winds. Rama is not aware of my greatness and so he has dared to oppose me. He does not know that the arrows in my quiver are like poisonous serpents which will drink life. He has never seen me before. Not Indra, nor Varuna, nor Yama, the god of death nor Kubera can face me in the battle field”.

Ravana was silent for a long moment. He then addressed Suka and Sarana and said “The army of Rama has reached our shores. It has achieved what I thought would be impossible. Rama has caused a bridge to be built across the sea. I would not have believed that such a thing was possible and the monkeys have shown that it is possible I want both of you to go there enter the camp of the monkeys without being found out and try to learn about the arrangement of the army and the weapons used by them. Bring me the information as early as possible. It is necessary for us to know the strength of the enemy before engaging in warfare”.

Suka and Sarana assumed the forms of monkeys and entered the army of Rama. It was not possible for them to gauge the beginning and the end of the army. While they were engaged in the task assigned to them. Vibhishana saw them and knew at once they were Ravana’s spies. He grabbed them and took them to the presence of Rama scared out of their wits they fell at the feet of Rama and said, “What he says is true we have been sent by our king to spy out your secrets. Please do not kill us” Rama was quite amused by their fear and he smiled at them and said, “If you have completed your task, you are welcome to go back armed with your information. If there is anything which you have not studied yet, you can learn that also before going back, if you desire, Vibhishana will take you round and tell you all our secrets. Do not be afraid that you will be put to death by me. You are scared to death. You have no weapons and you are messengers who have been captured. You will not be killed by Vibhishana, release these two pathetic creatures. As for you both go back to Lanka and repeat my message to your king “Depending on your strength you have dared to

take my Sita from me. The time has come when you should display that strength to me. Let me see you surrounded by your army and your kinsmen and let me see if they will stand you in good stead. Tomorrow when the sun brightens the world you will have an opportunity to see your Lanka destroyed by my arrows. Assemble your army from now since I will be at your doorways tomorrow and like Indra with Vajra fought with the asuras I will show you how angry I can be and how unbearable my wrath can be”.

The rakshasas blessed him and hurried back to Lanka. They went straight to Ravana and said, “My Lord, we went there as per your command. We assumed the guise of monkeys and mixed with the vanaras there. But Vibhishana saw through disguise and he took us to Rama. But that noble prince released us. Four great warriors are arranged there against you. Rama, Lakshmana, Sugriva and Vibhishana. They do not even need an army to accomplish their desire. Rama is very handsome and extremely valiant. His weapons are formidable and, single handed, he is able to destroy you, your city and entire army. Their army is well – high invincible.

“There is great excitement in the army and they are all waiting impatiently for the dawn when Rama plans to begin the war. We feel that this enmity with Rama is unwise. Please return to him his wife and life us all rest on peace”.

They repeated the message of the Rama to their king. Ravana was furious with them and he went up to the terrace of his palace to see the any of Rama. Sarana and Suka went with him. Ravana’s eyes tensed over the vast expanse of land covered by the any of Rama. After looking for a while he asked the spies about their details, as to who was the leader who was valiant, who was guarding the army, and similar questions and they told him each one of the valiant monkeys was pointed out to him and the name and valour of each was recounted to Ravana. Sarana and Suka said, “They are all valiant and you should decide how to tackle this stupendous army made up of heroes”.

Ravana had been listening to the spies carefully and as each vanara was mentioned and indicated he looked at them. Nala, Neela, Angada, Hanuman and many others. His eyes rested on his brother who was standing by the side of Rama, Lakshmana was on the other side of Rama and from him his eyes passed to Sugriva. Hanuman, Jambavan, Sushena and the many powerful guards who protected the army : Gaja, Garaksha, Garaja, Mainda, Dvididha and many others. For a moment there was a twinge of misgivings in the mind of Ravana, but it was soon lost even as it was formed and he trained his angry eyes once more on his spies and spoke and he spoke harshly. Ravana said, “It is not meant that people like you who depend on a king are displeasing to his ears. I

can make you or break you and you done to speak words in praise of my enemy in my presence your words are out of place and do you think it is correct to talk in such growing terms of the enemy host to your king against whom they are arrayed ? You do not know even the rudiments of behaviour. It is fortunate that I am king in spite of being surrounded by folks like you. I am the one to command you and you insult me by saying things which displease me. Are you not afraid of death ? A tree in the forest may escape the conflagration which is destroying the entire forest but no man who wrongs his king can have hopes of living you have been loyal to me all these days and that, to a large extent, has softened my anger or else, I would have executed you. Go away from my presence before I change my mind. You should be ashamed of yourselves for your disloyalty”.

They saluted him with the words “May you be victorious” and disappeared from his presence”.

Ravana had his minister Mahodara with him. He asked him to get hold of two efficient spies. Where they came, Ravana sent them to the enemy camp with instruction similar to the ones given to the previous ones. They went to the army of Rama and disguising themselves they went to the top of the hill Suvela and viewed the army. They saw Rama with Sugriva, Lakshmana and Vibhishana. The sight of the army filled them with dread and as they were hesitating as to what they should do, the wishes of their king Vibhishana, spied them out.

The spies one of whom was Shardula, were captured and the same scenes were repeated. The vanaras beat them up as much as they could before Rama intervened and they returned to Ravana in chastened frame of mind. They went back to their king.

A MAYIC HEAD

Ravana called a council in his Sabha, he said to his ministers. “The enemy is at our gates let our fighting rakshasas be armed”.

His mood was strange : he was full of thought, he was full of anger. The rakshasa was somber, like a man who has incurred a heavier debt than he could ever discharge. The ministers hurried away to carry out his command. Ravana returned to his private chambers. He dismissed his servants and summoned Vidyudhvija, his sorcerer.

Vidyudhvija was a demon with occult powers not least among them a gift for maya the sorcerer of creating illusions. Ravana said to him, “Make me a bloodied head just like the prince of Ayodhya’s. Make me a bow and a quiver that resemble his in every details.”

This was not hard for Vidyudhvija, who had stared long, and in some fear, at the Kshatriya below. Within the hour, the head and the weapons were ready for the king. Ravana came to Ashokavana. That garden which Hanuman had ravaged, had been cleaned by a contingent of rakshasas. It had been planted again and again with saplings from the other parts of the island Sita sat forlorn and bewitching under the lane Shimshupa.

Far away from her surroundings borne on a day dream of her love, sat Sita. Her head was bowed and her eyes were teary, when Ravana stalked up to her. The moment he saw her his heart was on familiar fire. She was so quiet in her grief so entirely regal and lovely. Hers was the beauty of one whose spirit had survived its severest trial; in her loneliness, she was as deep as the Ganga. She was calm, as if the Rama in her dreaming mind was as real as the one who was missing from her life.

Standing above her, Ravana said tenderly “Sita”. She was startled out of her reverie, like a sleeping doe awakened by a tiger. She branched to see her captor, her breast heaved weak at the sight of her face, Ravana said “Don’t waste your dreams on your Rama any more. How often you extolled his valour and said he would easily kill me in battle. But you did not know Ravana when you spoke. You did not know who I am”?

He paused to watch fear start in her eyes. But he saw nothing there. It was as if she had passed beyond the pale of fear by her long ordeal. Disappointed, but undaunted, Ravana went on ‘your hermit prince, who killed my cousin Khara is dead. Forget him now, he is gone forever. Turn your thoughts away from the past and to where it belongs to where destiny has brought you. Turn you love to me, Sita. Look into my heart and see the flame that burns for you. Touch me and feel yourself loved as that boy could never had loved for you’.

“Arise precious Sita, come to my Anthahpura with me. I am your hope, your sanctuary. The prince of Ayodhya is dead. If you had not been so stubborn and resisted me for so long. You might have saved his life. But that is over now. All your Punya and your Vratas could not protect your Rama. Now prepare yourself to be a queen, the greatest queen on earth. Ravana’s queen in Lanka”.

She stared at him mutely. He went as “Listen to me foolish woman just as you prayed he would, Rama came to Lanka. He landed on the northern shore with an army of vanaras. But the monkeys were tired after their passage across the sea, and they fell asleep. When my spies reported this to me. I sent my rakshasas under Prahasta and he killed the apes while they slept.

“Your Rama was so tired after us journey he slept on even when the monkeys died around him. Prahastha crept up to him. With a clear stroke of his sword, he cut off your husbands head and brought it to me. The traitor Vibhishana has been captured. Lakshmana and the vanaras who escaped death have fled our shores. Sugriva’s neck was broken and Hanuman’s saw before he was impaled on my warriors dances. So much, Sita for your last hope.

“The sands of one northern beaches are no longer pale, but dark with the blood of monkeys.”

Ravana paused he smiled fiendishly. The evil one said, “I see from your smile that you do not believe me. I had thought as much and I have brought something for your to see”.

Ravana snapped his fingers at one of the attendant rakshasas. “Tell Vidyudhvija to fetch the trophy from battle field”.

Vidyudhvija emerged from the shadows with a sack. Ravana nodded to him ‘Show it to her’.

The sorcerer opened the mouth of the sack and drew out the head he had created with Maya ‘Sita’s eyes stared in shock. Vidyudhvija set the bloody head down before her. Ravana drew a bow out of his sorcerer’s bag a replica of the radiant Kodanda, and said, ‘Even if you don’t recognize your husband’s head for what Prahastha’s bead has done to it, you will know this bow of which so much was made. Until the bowman came to grief on Lanka’.

Sita gazed at the bloody head, its eyes shut, its neck horribly severed and she began to scream. Are you satisfied now Kaikeyi ? The light of the house of Raghu is put out forever what did my gentle name ever do that he came to such an end ?

She fainted and fell a cross the grisly head for a long time, as Ravana watched her in satisfaction she did not stir. Then she awoke and began to wail loudly calling hearted she stroked and kissed the Mayic head.

She whispered “They say that only the husband of a loose woman dries like this. But not for day, for a moment have I sinned in deed or thought.

Not once I have missed my vratas for Rama. Yet his head lies before me hewn brutally from his precious body, and I have to see this sight with my yes. I am cursed! “Oh, Rama, how will your mother Kausalya bear this ? How did a common rakshasa do this to you who were lord of the earth ? I should have allowed Hanuman to carry me out of this accursed place, and this would never have happened. I am the most unfortunate woman ever born. Just when I thought the end of our ordeal was in sight, a rakshasa has ended all very dreams.

“I will not live a day longer : Rama and Lakshmana will be left alone in the world. His eyes streaming with a grief that will last the rest of his life his heart full of guilt and dark confusion, he will go back alone to Ayodhya; to bring news of Rama’s death to our mothers and our people”.

Ravana stood watching her triumphantly, lust and hope stirring powerfully in his heart. Sita cradled the bloody head and sobbed. Then a messenger arrived in haste from Prahastha. He came running and breathless and stood with palms folded before the king at his diabolical game.

Ravana glanced at him in annoyance. He was enjoying Sita’s grief. He thought the moment had come when her spirit would break and she would turn to him for comfort and his hardest battle would be him. But the messenger, who stood quaking before his master, obviously, brought urgent news, Ravana snapped at him ‘speak’

“Prahastha has arrived at the palace my Lord. He wishes to be announced immediately. His news is grave.”

With a snarl Ravana turned away from Sita who had not once raised her eyes up to him as he dearly hoped she would. Ravana strode out of the Ashokavana. At once Rama’s head made of Vidyudvija’s illusion vanished out of Sita’s hands and the bow and the quiver beside her she gave a cry and fainted again.

A kindly young rakshasi among the others watched day and night over Sita. Her name was Sarama. She had heard how Vidyudvija had created Ramas head with sorcery. As soon ravana stormed away to the palace, Sarama ran to Sita who lay motionless on the ground shaking her, the young rakshasi cried, ‘Didn’t you see how the head and weapons vanished ? They were made of maya Rama lives!

At the magic words ‘Rama lives’ Sita roused herself. They heard drummers and town criers out in the streets of Lanka, summoning the rakhasas to arms. The army of Vanaras was at their gates. Sita looked at Sarama in

desperate hopes. The rakshasi stroked at Sita's cheek and said, 'Not a vanara is slain. Let alone, Rama your rescue is at hand, lovely one. Pray to Suryadeva that your Rama kills and all the earth will rejoice wish you'. Sarama went off again to the palace to glean the latest news from the servants there she returned shortly, shaking her head. She said, "Yama comes for Ravana's life and the end of Lanka is near. His mother and his older ministers begged the king to give you back to Rama : but he would not listen to them. Like a man who had lost his reason he cried that he would rather die than give you up Ah. Sita you have come here to be the death of him'.

IN THE COUNCIL HALL AGAIN

Rama's army was approaching the city and they could hear the noise made by the conchs and drums which the vanaras were sounding. Ravana heard it and was immersed in thought for a while. He looked at his ministers as though he sought their opinions. No one said anything and Ravana laughed at them. He said, "I have heard enough and more about the valour of Rama and about the strength of his army made up of monkeys and bears. All of you are great warriors and yet I see that you are all pale and frightened because of some rumour that Rama is invincible. I am amazed at this fear in all of you. I am at the same time surprised.

As he said this, Malyavan, one of the veterans in the court of the king, spoke. He said, "Child, when a king is righteous and learned, he will rule the kingdom for a long time. He will subdue all his enemies. He should use his discretion in deciding when to fight and when to make peace with the enemy. He should always have the welfare of his men in mind. Ravana my child, you should never underestimate the enemy. If you are sure of your superiority then you can fight. If, on the contrary the enemy is equal to you or is slightly better than you, it is wise to make peace with him and to avert a war. I advise you to make peace with Rama.

"The cause of all this hatred and ill-feeling is Sita. I suggest that you give her back to Rama. The gods and all the celestials are wishing him success and it is wiser to be friendly with him than to fight with him. Do you remember the boon granted to you by Brahma. You have been assured that you need not fear death at the hands of the gods, the Devas, Danavas, Gandharvas, Kinnaras, Pisachas and all the many dwellers in the heavens. You did not mention human beings and the monkeys and the army preparing to fight with us is made up of monkeys and it is led by a man, a human being. I think it does not bode any good for you or yours. The omens are pointing to a dire calamity in store for us. Make peace with Rama and save all of us and yourself also,

Ravana. I have been told that Rama is Lord Narayana. Himself who has assumed the guest of a human being at the request of gods. Consider the bridge which has been built by them across the sea. Is it the achievement of an ordinary being ? No one has thought of such a thing before.

“Think of the destruction at Janastana, single handed Rama killed all of them. You should think of all these and pause before you plunge warfare with him. Sita will certainly be the ruin of you be the ruin of you. Forget her and give her back to Rama. We can live happily ever after”.

Ravana paid no heed to his wise words. He spoke harshly to Malyavan and made him feel small. Ravana said, “Evidently you are one of those who praise enemy and his valour. Your words have fallen on deaf ears. This Rama, this hero, according to you is a mere man, abandoned by his father, shorn of his wealth, lone and helpless. And he has now collected a crowd of monkeys, if your please, and has dared to accost me in war. What makes you consider him to be all that brave ? You must know me and you know the fear in the minds of the Devas and the heavenly host when they think of me. How can you compare me with Rama and how can you dare suggest that he is superior ?

“Either you are jealous of me or you are extremely fond of him enemies or else you would not have spoken thus, perhaps you have been instigated by them. Or else no wise man will talk such foolish words in my presence.”

“I have taken so much trouble to bring Sita to Lanka na dod you think. I will give her talk to Rama on your advice ? She is like Lakshmi who has left the lotus and straged to the earth I will never think of giving her up. Wiat and see my vaolour soon you will see Rama and his army with Sugriva and Lakshmana routed by me and you will regret your hastily spoken words can anyone think of Ravana adopting the will course and making peace with a mere man since he is considered to be more powerful than me by some fools ? Are the words of a few dotards to be believed ? I may break in two, but I will never bend my head to anyone. This is my nature and no one can change one’s nature. By sure good fortune the bridge has been built for him across the sea. That does not frighten me. Believe me Rama is not going to return by way of that bridge with the army of monkeys. I promise you that. Not one of them will be left alive”.

Malyavan realized that the king was too angry and he spoke nothing in reply. He spoke the conventional words of blessings and went back to him home.

Ravana hastened to guard the city and he appointed strong men who would be his faithful servants. The eastern gateway was guarded by Prahastha. The western gateway was in charge of Indrajit, his favourite son. The northern section was under the aegis of Suka and Sarama and Ravana told his ministers that he would remain there too. Virupaksha was guarding the heart of the city and the completely protected and Rama could do nothing against his formidable army.

BETWEEN TWO HILLS

Beyond Ravana's citygates the vanara chieftains had gathered around Rama and Lakshmana. Sugrivas said, "Rama, the walls of Lanka are lofty and smooth, and the rakshasas who guard her gates are fierce. Our war will not be an easy one".

Vibhishana said, "Our spies have returned, the friendly birds with whom the monkeys palavered. They say Prahastha guards the east, Mahparshva and Mahodara the south, Indrajit the west and Ravana himself the Northern gates of Lanka. Virupaksha and his guards guard the fortress at the heart of the city".

Vibhishana described the might of the rakshasa army, in detail. The was little he did not know, whether of the characters of the demon generals themselves or of the warriors each they commanded. He recounted the battle against Kubera : how each legion fought, which rakshasas were the bravest and most to be feared. He described once again how Indrajit brought Indra to Lanka bound in his livid astra.

Finally he said, "Don't underestimate my brother's army, or his courage and ability. But Rama, my heart knows, you can win this war. It will be hard, but is not beyond you. Ravana has never been tested by an enemy to whose arrows he is vulnerable. Brahma's boon doesn't protect him either from you or your vanaras. Let us see how he fights a battle in which he knows he can be killed".

Silence fell on the chieftains of Rama's jungle army. The time for the assault on Lanka was not far. Unlike the rakshasas within the walls, Rama instructed his soldieries calmly and gently. 'Good Neela you attack Prahastha at the eastern gate. Brave Angada, take your army south to confront not one but two great rakshasas. Let Hanuman go to the western gate against Indrajit. Lakshmana and I will assail the North. While Sugriva Jambavan and

Vibhishana remain at the heart of our army, guiding us with their experience and wisdom’.

“No Vanara should assume the guise of a man when we fight, or he may be mistaken for the enemy by our soldiers.”

He grew quiet and Rama’s was a resonant quietness. He said softly, “For too long, this evil one has been a curse upon the earth. Too long, his rakshasas have drunk the blood of the rishis of peace. Whose tapasya supports dharma in the world. His time has come; not for nothing was Sita abducted; not for nothing did Sugriva and I met on Rishyamooka. The hand of fate is always up on us and everything that happens in this world is by fate”.

“My friends, Ravana’s time to die is here, and the earth will be rid of a great burden when he dies”.

The sun was sinking into the sea again and evening settled around them. Rama said, “let us climb Suvela and spend our last night before the war on it.”

Rama, Lakshmana, Sugriva and Vibhishana climbed that hill. Below them Lanka lay like another galaxy, its lights twinkling like stars in its streets and homes as night fell. Rama said, “It is so peaceful here, and how beautiful Lanka looks. But when I think that Sita is a prisoner within those walls I can hardly contain my anger. I wonder how a king who has as little Dharma as Ravana has ruled for so long. He is a blot on the name of the noble family into which he was born. You, Vibhishana are his brother you have left his side at this critical time for what he has sunk to.”

“I feel sad that all rakshasas of Lanka must pay with their lives for their king’s sin.”

By the last light of day, Lanka seemed to float again in the air; a dream city. Then night was upon land and from east majestically, there arose a golden man. A sea breeze full of solemn news plucked at the faces of those who had climbed the hill. Soft excitement gripped Rama as he sat silently on a rock Lakshmana stood beside his brother. Perfectly calm on the eve of battle.

Thus they sat, the human princes and the monkeys of the forest, staring out at Lanka and beyond to the silver and gold waves of the moon – drenched ocean. The rhythm and swell of the tide reached across the night, and lulled them. They and their army below them, slept deeply and no dreams disturbed their nest.

The next morning they saw Lanka below them like a vision in vivid colours. The dawn breeze carried the scents of its garden across to the vanara army. They saw, in wonder that flowers that bloomed only in other seasons else where in the world were all a blossom here, the dark roses of winter and the bright poppies of summer, at once wafted with the scents of flowers came the mellow songs of koels in the branches of Lanka's trees and the lively noises of water – birds that had flown here across continents to swim in Ravana's sparkling lakes.

Tirkuta rose steeply from the rest of the island and Lanka seemed to be built into the wispy clouds of the early morning a fantasy. Reverberant banks of many kinds of flowers decked the slopes of that hill. Rama and his vanaras stared out raptly at the spectacle shimmering before their eyes. Ramas gaze wandered over that city among cities and rested on a palace that towered above every other edifice, as if it was a kailasa among the Himalayas. Rama knew that it was Ravana's palace.

A powerful intuition stirred in Rama when he saw that singular palace. He strained his eyes, and then on an open terrace he saw a white parasol unfurled. Suddenly, a sublimed current more potent than anything he had ever known before snaked out across the valley between the two hills. It took Rama's heart in a voice.

Rama felt a pang of panic and he saw Ravana across the Vista that separated them. The demons were flowing white silk. He stood there, tall and sinister, staring out hypnotically as if to destroy the human prince with his look. Rama felt the Rakshasas hatred reach for him to stuff life from him and he shivered in that regard. But the prince of light did not run away as his flesh cried out to, he stood firm. The two of them, one of evil and the other of grace locked stares like swords across the valley.

The tension between the two hills was a potent thing and the vanara army fell hushed, Breathlessly they watched the silent contest of wills between their Rama and the terrible are in Lanka. For a while, it seemed the very air might ignite, but at last it was the Lord of Lanka who looked away first and abruptly turned his back. Rama stood as if he had been turned to stone by contention. Then a cheer went up from the vanaras and a smile touched his face.

SUGRIVA'S IMPULSIVENESS

Rama turned aside to say something and he found that Sugriva not by his side. Sugriva had jumped into the air and was flying towards Lanka. A sudden spent of anger against vanara made him act impulsively. He was very angry and in that mood he rushed towards the terrace where Ravana was.

Sugriva went very near the rakshasa a monarch and said, “I am the servant of the noble Rama who is the Lord of the world. Your days are numbered. You will not be able to escape the wrath of Rama”.

Before Ravana could recover from the surprise of his visit, Sugriva sprang at him. He pulled his crown down and threw it on the ground. Ravana guessed who he was and said, “Your name is Sugriva and very soon you will lose the beautiful neck which has earned that name for you. “He grasped Sugriva in his mighty hands and pushed him out of the ground. Sugriva was not bothered. He caught hold of Ravana and threw him as though he were a ball made of flowers. The two heroes were locked in a close wrestling match and soon they were wounding each other. The first fight went on for a while when he saw that he vanara was not to be subdued easily, Ravana adopted his maya tacticts and began to fight that way.

Sugriva knew his limitations and guessing the intentions of the rakshasa, he jumped into the air and deceived Ravana by flying back to the Suvela hill. He landed beside Rama. The many monkeys who were watching this encounter of their master with Ravana were thrilled with Sugriva and there were cries of joy form them. Rama embraced him and said, “What a thoughtless act was this of yours my friend! Why did you not ask me permission before you ventured on this dangerous mission kings should not give in to dictates of impulse like this. I want you promise that you will not do like this anymore. If you had been killed what would I have done after that that ? When once my friend is gone, there is nothing left for me in this world. Not Sita, nor Lakshmana or Bharatha or Shatrughna nor my very life will have any meaning once you are lost to me I am fully aware of your strength, that you are like Varuna, and yet, my mind was sunk in the depths of despair when you went off like that to fight with Ravana. I had at once made up my mind to fight with him and then after crowning Vibhishana as the monarch, I had decided to kill myself I promise you these were the thoughts in my mind when I found that you were not there by my side”.

Sugriva stood with a shame faced look on his face and said, “Rama when I saw Ravana who had stolen your wife, who has caused you untold misery, my anger knew no bounds and how could I hold back ?” Rama smiled and turning to Lakshmana said, “Let us make our preparations, Lakshmana.

The omens indicate that it will be a great war which is to be fought between us and the rakshasas. Let us make haste and enter the city of Lanka”.

Rama descended from the top of the Suvala hill. Preparations were brisk in the army of Rama and, after studying the time and the position of the sun in the heavens. Rama chose the proper moment and began his march towards Lanka.

Vibhishana, Sugriva, Hanuman, Jambavan, Nala, Neela and Lakshmana went with him. The vanaras armed themselves with stones rocks and trees and proceeded with great excitement. Very soon they reached the neighbourhood of Lanka. They took up the positions which had been assigned to them by Rama. Rama went towards the northern gate where Ravana was said to have stationed himself. It was protected by an army of rakshasas. Rama glanced at their weapons and their armours. The trees and gardens were slowly covered by the army made up of the vanaras. The rakshasas found that the army was indeed formidable and not small and insignificant as they thought it would be.

ANGADA’S MISSION

The sea of Vanaras strained at its shores to begin battle. The monkey’s roaring shook the ramparts of Lanka. They were eager for the Dharma Yuddha, the righteous war. But Rama restrained them for, by the code of kings and by Dharma itself a last effort should be made to strike peace; a messenger must be sent to Ravana, suing for it. After consulting Sugriva, Vibhishana, Hanuman and Lakshmana, Rama decided to send Angada.

Rama called Vali’s son to him and said, “Angada, we must make a final attempt to find a peaceful solution. Take a message to the rakshasa from me say to him”.

“Your glory and your kingdom will soon be lost and your life as well. You are the worst kind of thief there is, and you have abandoned the path of wisdom. For countless years, you have sinned against the rishis on earth. You have tormented the devas and darkened the elements of nature. But now the hour of retribution has come”.

“Remember, Rakshasa, no boon Brahma protects you against me. You were so brave when you abducted Sita because she was alone; let us see how brave you are when you face me in battle”.

“I will give you a last chance to make peace. Return Sita to me, ask my pardon, and I will give it to you freely and your life will be transformed. The gods themselves send you this chance to mend yourself and rule for another age. If you do not take it, Ravana, you will die. The choice is yours. There is the short, savage way of bloodshed and death and the long, under way of repentance and Dharma. Choose whether you want to remain a king or if I must kill you and set Vibhishana on your throne.”

“If you choose the way of violence, Rakshasa, gaze deeply at your precious Lanka before you came out to fight. It will be the last you see of her before you die”. “Take him my message Angada and tell me what he says”.

With a cry Angada rose to the air. He was clad in crimson and shone in the sky. The rakshasa gasped to see him as the vanara prince flashed over them and flew straight to Ravana’s palace. Ravana stood in his sabha, putting his armour and issuing final commands to his generals before battle was joined. Silence fell on that Sabha when Angada blazed in through the wind. He flew down in their midst and the golden bracelet around his wrist was like a band of fire. Vali’s son himself was a tongue of fire in Ravana’s court.

Ravana had no time to speak, before Angada declared himself, “I am Rama Ayodhya’s messenger”.

Without pausing, he delivered Rama’s message exactly as Rama given it to him. A growl grew in Ravana’s throat as he listened. Time and again his nine macabre heads appeared and vanished around his central face. They glowered at the vanara out of many malevolent eyes. When Angada had finished, Ravana roared so the walls shook around them and the floor under their feet.

“Seize him” hissed the Lord of rakshasas. The demons, nearest Angada leapt forward and grasped his anklets. Angada offered no struggle, but allowed himself to be held. Ravana screeched “Torture him! That he dares come here with such a message”.

The rakshasas fetched ropes and made to bind Angada. Where he also gave a tremendous roar. He rose into air with the form of a warrior who had seized him and leapt out of the window through which he had come. Angada leapt on to a ledge and still roaring shrugged off the demons who clung to him for their lives. He cast them down to their deaths, onto the rocks far below like a brittle twig from a dead tree. He broke a turret from Ravana’s

palace roof and smashed it to dust on the terrace. And roaring still, he flew back.

On both sides of Lanka's gates, the opposing armies stood seizing each other up. At first the rakshasas were staggered by the sheer number of monkeys. But then, their commanders cried, "They are only monkey's armed with sticks and stones. Shall Ravana's army that conquered the Devas fear a nuisance of Vanaras"?

Ravana came out on to his terrace once more, to survey his own forces and the enemy's. He also cried to his troops, below, saying how could the fighting rakshasas of Lanka fear a rabble of apes ? He glowered out again at Rama and his wild legions.

Rama gazed into Lanka and the horde of demons within, who clashed their gleaming swords and shields together in the midday sun. He paused for only a moment after Angada returned with Ravana's reaction to his offer of peace. Then Sita's face her eyes brimming tears, rose like a vision in his mind.

Rama raised the jeweled Kodanda above his head silence fell on both armies gracefully, the Prince of Angada brought his arm drum. The roar of the vanaras was deafening as they slugged forward, each monkey anxious to be the first one across the walls of Lanka.

THE NAGAPASA

Ramas army rushed towards Lanka. They began to attack the gateways and to destroy them. The vanaras shouted and occupied the high wall surrounding the city and their shouts were echoed from the surrounding hills. The wall was broken and the Eastern gate was also broken. Very soon the south was also attacked and also the west. The vanaras occupied the spots which had been indicated by their commanders and Rama with Lakshmana, went towards the Northern gate and attacked it. Nothing could be seen except the many vanaras leaping from place to place and the destruction following in the wake of their progress Ravana hastened to send his army to oppose the on rush of vanaras.

With the noise of trumpets and drums the army of Ravana came out of the city to defend it. They were ready to fight with the vanara army led by Rama. They were like the waves of the ocean and they kept on advancing towards the monkeys. The earth trembled at the steps of the Rakshasas as they

marched towards the vanaras. The encounter between the two armies was terrible and it was like that between the Devas and the Asuras in the olden days when they fought for the Amrita on the other side of the ocean of milk. The river of blood began to flow and soon the field presented a glory sight. Several duels were fought.

Indrajit the son of Ravana, fought with Angada and it was a glorious fight to watch Hanuman encountered Jambumali. Neela fought with Mukunda, Lakshmana with Virupaksha and Rama fought with four at the same time. Indrajit hit powerfully Angada with his gada and in return, the Prince of Kishkinda broke his charioteer. All the chariots. By and large the army of Gandhi brings the same weather his horses, as well as his charioteer. By and large the army of Rama. Virupaksha was killed by Lakshmana. All the chariots were crushed by the vanaras to powder and the fights were really intense and interesting to watch. The field of battle was covered by the many weapons of rakshasas, with the trees and rocks used by the vanaras and the setting sun was welcome to all of them. Even as they were fighting, the sun had set in and looked swiftly.

But they did not pay any attention to it. The fight continued and dwelling night, when they could not see each other properly the incensed rakshasas and the vanaras fought with fury. The rakshasas found their strength increasing with the advent of the night and they made full use of it. The vanaras, however were undaunted. And so the fight went on all through the night.

Rama and Lakshmana were fighting with their bows and each arrow was claiming a life. The noise was that of seven seas during that of deluge of at the end of yuga. Ravana's army could not withstand the arrows of Rama and Lakshmana and they fled from their presence.

Indrajit vanished from there and fought with his maya tactics. Indrajit had been treated very roughly by Angada and he was furious with him. Rama said "I want you all to assemble in one place. This son of Ravana has been blessed with boons by Brahma and he is bent on harassing the three worlds. It is the prodding of Yama which has made him come to us and fight with us. Please do not be worried about him. I will fight with him".

In the meantime, Indrajit disappeared into the sky and from there he showered arrows on Rama and Lakshmana. He wounded them with several arrows. Unseen by them he managed to send arrow after arrow and finally with his arrows he found the two brothers. The Vanaras were watching and they

found the noble brothers tied up by the poisonous bonds which went by the name 'Nagapasa'.

The valiant Indrajit, had adopted his maya tactics and while unseen by them he had managed to send the dread astra and they were caught in its coils. While fighting he said, "Indra, the Lord of the heavens has not been able to withstand my valour. He is afraid to come near me. How dare to accost me in battle"?

Rama and Lakshmana were bound by the Nagapasa and it was not possible for them to open their eyes. They were also wounded by the arrows of Indrajit and they were like twin palasa trees crimson with flowers. Rama dropped to the ground in a faint and soon his brother lay behind him. The glorious bow slipped from his hand and lay by his side.

Panic set in the army. Sugriva Hanuman and the others were helpless and they did not know what they should do faced with this calamity. Vibhishana knew the potency of the bonds which held the princes in its grip and he could do nothing. The vanaras looked hard at the sky but they could not see Indrajit. Vibhishana was the only one who could see through his eyes and discern him.

The prince Indrajit said, "Look on this great hero who was the death of Khara and Dhushana! He and his valiant brother are now lying on the ground, caught by in the coils of serpents. Not all the rishis nor all the Devatas can release them. My dear father will now be rid of the one thorn which was hunting him. All the noise made by this army and its leaders is like the noise made by the clouds in the season Sharad when there is no rain but just noise".

He went on with his work of destruction and there was not one chief among the vanaras who had not been hunt by him. He was now certain that the Kosala brothers were dead and followed by a jubilant crowd he entered Lanka in triumph.

Sugriva was extremely worried for Rama and Lakshmana, Vibhishana said, "Do not weep, Sugriva, I can see that they have fainted and they are dead. If we have ever performed any good acts at any time they will wake up from this faint and let us comfort each other with hopes of seeing them get up.

Truth and righteousness will have to win in the end. "Vibhishana recited some verses and sprinkled water on the eyes of Sugriva. He then said, "This is not the time of despair. The any is panic stricken and it is up to you to

bring a semblance of order in the ranks. Your excessive affection for your friends will be enough to weaken you. Do not give into weakness rouse up your sleeping valour and try to act. We will have to guard these two very carefully and when they regain consciousness, they will bring joy to our heart. I can see that they are not dead. Their faces have not lost their which is sure to leave them once life abandons the body. I assure you there is nothing to worry. No harm befall them. You must take care of your army or else it will be wiped out completely. Can you not see the terror in the eyes of Vanaras ? You should comfort them and tell them that nothing untoward has happened and they should be of good cheer”.

Together, Vibhishana and Sugriva undertook the task of reassuring the army and making them shed the excessive fear which had gripped their hearts.

A RAY OF HOPE

Indrajit’s march back to Ravana’s was jubilant one. Couches blasted his victory; singing and dancing broke out and Ravana waited for his sons news. Indrajit leapt down from the shoulders of the ecstatic rakshasas who had carried him from battle. His severe, arrogant face wreathed in a smile, he bowed before his father.

Ravana asked his son, ‘Tell me heroic child, what have you done that makes the rakshasas shout for joy and even you smile “?’

Indrajit replied “Rama Lakshmana are dead. Killed them from the sky with Narapasa’.

With a roar, Ravana jumped up from his throne. He ran to Indrajit and embraced him repeatedly. Even if he did not admit it, the Rakshasa had always been anxious about this first battle with an enemy against whom no boon protected him. Dark delight swept his heart at what his prince had done.

The vanaras stood around fallen Rama and Lakshmana in an anxious crowd. Silence ruled them and any leaf that stirred in the midnight breeze made them start for fear; so terrified were they of Indrajit. Hushed, the jungle army waited for Rama and Lakshmana to open their eyes.

Ravana sent word to the rakshasis of Ashokavana. When they came to him and Trijata was among them, he said “Tell Sita that Indrajit has killed Rama and Lakshmana. She will not believe you. So take her aloft in the

Pushpaka Vimana and show her the bodies from the sky. Let her know it is time she forgot her prince, and came to my bed. Now, she will come”.

His eyes shone with absolute obsession. Trijata and her rakshasis forced a protesting Sita into the Vimana and flew up with her. By the light of the moon and the torches of the two armies. Sita saw the havoc of the marauding vanaras had wreaked and she smiled. But when they flew nearer the earth, she saw how excited the rakshasis of Lanka were and how stricken the monkeys she saw Sugriva and Hanuman below; she saw they mourned. Lower still flew the Vimana and in a clearing at the heart of the vanara army. Sita saw the sight that froze her blood. For the first time that Ravana had abducted her, she saw Rama and Lakshmana. They lay very still on the ground. Whenever Indrajit’s arrows had pierced them, their bodies had blossomed in flowers of blood.

Heartbroken in a moment, Sita waited. ‘The rishis who said that I would be a Sumangali were wrong. Look where my husband lies cut down by Indrajit’s arrow. They said Rama would perform the Aswamedha Yagna and be king of all world. But he has died without even crowned in Ayodhya. The great Vasistha’s prophecies were false; and my feet marked with the auspicious Padmarekha they also tried fate is all powerful stronger than Yama even Oh, Rama’!

She sobbed so piteously that the hardest rakshasi was moved. But Trijata stroked her face, and said, “hush Sita hush. It is the Pushpaka Vimana you are flying in. This chariot never carry you into the sky unless you are a Sumangali.”

‘Indrajit’s weapons are full of maya. They have plunged Rama and Lakshmana into a trance. Look now the vanaras strain to see when they will wake up. They are not dead only asleep. Look at Rama and Lakshmana’s faces. Dead faces do not glow like theirs and I have seen many. Trijata may be a rakshasi. Sita, but she has never told a lie in her life and she does not lie to you now. The princes are not dead only asleep. They were not born to die at Indrajit hands great destiny has yet to be fulfilled through them’.

Sita stared down more closely. She saw that indeed, there was sacred life. Left in Rama and Lakshmana. Their chests rose and fell with Prana and there was colour on their cheeks. She wiped her tears. She folded her hands to the princes and hugged Trijata. With its own will the Pushpaka Vimana flew back to the palace of the Lord of evil.

THE RECOVERY OF THE PRINCES

The heads of the vanara army stood around Rama and the brave Lakshmana and they were feeling afraid lest they should die without regaining consciousness. While they were watching Rama moved slowly and it could be seen that slowly his consciousness was coming back to him. He looked at once at his brother and he thought that he was dead. He saw his brother lying, there wounded. With blood covering his beautiful body and Rama was inconsolable. He lamented the death of Lakshmana. He wailed "I have seen my beloved brother dead and what is the purpose of my living anymore ? What is Sita to me when Lakshmana is gone ? What should I live for once he is dead. If one looks diligently enough in this world there can easily be found a woman like Sita but I will ever find a brother like Lakshmana can there be another warrior like him ? I am going to kill myself since I have lost my brother ? How I can face Kausalya Devi and Sumitra when I go back to Ayodhya alone ? How can I comfort them who will weep like mother deer who have been parted from their young ? What will Bharatha think of me and what about Shatrughna his twin ?

"He came to the forest with me and his mother Sumitra asked him to think of me as his father. It is like a father that I have taken care of him. I have been the cause of his death. I have no desire to live any longer. I am a sinner and I deserve to die. Lakshmana, when I was unhappy, you were the one to comfort me and now you are dead and I have no one to comfort me. I will follow him to the city of Yama and be with him. He followed me when I left Ayodhya and it is but meet that I should go with him now. We can never be parted. Never once had he spoken harshly to me and he has ever followed the path of Dharma. He was easily roused but never once against me.

"Sugriva, go back to Kishkindha with what is left of your army. Now that we will both be dead Ravana will harass you and I do not want that to happen. Cross the sea and go back as quickly as you can you did your best for my sake and I will never forget the love you have for me. But the time has come when you return to Kishkindha".

Rama fainted again. The vanaras stood with tears in their eyes Vibhishana who had been busy trying to bring order in the scattered ranks came there with his gada in his hand and the army fled from him thinking that he was a rakshas from the enemy camp. After a while Jambavan assured them that it was Vibhishana and they came back and abandoned their fear. Vibhishana sat and mourned the death of Kosala brothers. And so they sat hopelessly.

Sushena, the physician came near them and said, "Once drumming the war between the Devas and asuras several of the Devas were floored even

thus and they appeared to be dead Brihaspathi, the Divine preceptor asked for some herbs to be brought from the ocean of milk and he revived them. Let some of the vanaras bring two herbs by name Sanjivakarani and Vishalyakarani. In the ocean of milk are found the hills Drona and Chandra. They are located in the spot where the Amrita was churned from. These two herbs can be found there. The Devas had placed them on in these hills. Let Hanuman the son of Vayu, go there and bring them”.

Even as he was speaking, there was a strong breeze flouing from the sea. The sea was in tumult and the mountains were shaking because of the strong wind. Wings seemed to beat in the air and trees were uprooted by the force of wings. The serpents which formed the bounds and which were choking Rama and Lakshmana were now trembling in fear and the vanaras looked up to see the great eagle Garuda approaching the fallen princes. When he came near the serpents fled from the bodies of Rama and Lakshmana. Garuda strolled the faces of Rama and Lakshmana with his two hands and their wounds vanished as though by the touch of a magic hand. They were again as glorious as ever and their limbs lost their weakness. They woke up from their stupor. Garuda embraced them and have both been saved form the danger caused by Indrajit. We feel strong and our fatigue is vanished. I feel that I have been caressed by my father when your hands touched me. You are so handsome and you are wearing garlands which are said to be used by the celestials you are wearing beautiful ornaments, I do not know who you are”.

Garuda said, “Rama, I am Garuthman or Garuda and I am your constant companion. I am your very life which has a separate form and which is wandering about. I came here to aid you. No one, not any Deva or Gardharva nor Danava or anyone for that matter is able to loosen the knots formed by the snakes which from the Nagapasa. These serpents are all the sons of Kadruva and they had taken up the guise of arrows and they have wound themselves around you. I am their ancient enemy and they are afraid of me Rama you are righteous and you are a true hero. You and your brother are destined to destroy all your enemies, and you have been released from the Nagapasa. When I heard about this incident, I came here with all speed to release you.

“Your Dharma is your strength and you will be victorious even though the rakshasa fight with treachery in their hearts. Give me leave to go back to where I came from. Do not be curious as to how I call myself your friend and how our alter ego. When you have achieved what you have to, you will understand my words. Soon you will kill Rama and Sita will come a back to you. Taking leave of the brothers Garuda flew into the sky”.

THE JUNGLE WARRIORS

When Rama and Lakshmana were healed. Earth, sea and sky resounded with the vanara's repute. Lanka echoed with the monkey's cheering, their wild horns conches and drums. Sugriva's people leapt into the air. They turned somersaults and kissed their tails. Their hand clapping was like a tempest and once more they rushed the gates of Lanka, eager for battle confident of victory.

In his palace Ravana heard the monkeys roaring. He raised his hands to stop the revelry around him. Then all the rakshasas heard it; the joy of all the vanaras, a tide risen to drown the demon's celebrations. Ravana said "Go and see what they are so pleased about".

The guards came back to the king and reported in low voices. "The human princes have been healed by a miracle. The Nagapasa does not find them any more. The hundred wounds Indrajit gave them have vanished from their bodies. No trace remains that they were wounded".

As if to himself Ravana said, "No one has ever escaped from the coils of the Nagapasa before. Not Indra could undo the bonds of darkness". He paused, seething tormented. Then he cried 'Dhruvakra go forth with your army. Kill the Kosala brothers, brave rakshasa, you have never failed me before'.

Roaring in great self assurance, Dhruvakra arrived on the battle field beyond Lanka's gates, with his fearsome legion behind him. But he saw evil omens in the sky and Hanuman beyond waiting with his indomitable monkeys around him. Dhruvakra was one of Ravana's fiercest commanders and his rakshasas were some of the bravest in all Lanka. A pitched battle broke out between Hanuman and Dhruvakra the monkeys and the Demons. And by night the rakshasas were more powerful.

The vanaras fought with fang and nail. They fought with rocks and young trees they flung like lances at the enemy. At first, in the sheer joy of the resurrection of Rama and Lakshmana. Hanuman's monkeys killed thousands of demons. But the rakshasas came on and on at them, in wave after wave fearless by night ready to die. Sword, dagger and arrow flashed under the moon and hundreds of vanaras also fell. Slowly they had to give away to the Rakshasas so many were they and so savage.

At the heart of the fighting, surrounded by a ground of his best men was the seasoned Dhrumraksha himself. He fought from his chariot flitting everywhere to strength them to break through. His arrows were like silver haul and his battle axe was a thing of absolute fear, glowing crimson in moonlight. Hanuman saw the demon at the heart of his men was the key to his encounter. He saw his monkeys forced back from the Lankan gate and he could not reach the rakhasa on the ground. He picked up a rock and flung in the air at Dhrumraksha. The great stone flew down, whistling from the bronze sky, just in time, Dhrumraksha leapt out of his chariot and saved his life. But the chariot was smashed and half the ring of fighting rakshasas around him was crushed. As he leapt away, Dhrumraksha himself tripped and fell. Before he could get on his feet again. Hanuman was upon him snarling with another rock, the son of the wind crushed the demon's head like an egg shell.

Ravana howled, long and loud, when he heard Dhrumraksha was dead. He called for another rakshasa as ferocious "Vajra Damshttra cried Ravana to his lean, scarred demon. "Go to war, take maya with you".

Vajradamshttra took the field with sorcery. He went everywhere unseen, and his sword and arrows spilled Vanara blood copiously. He fought with cunning, but fate was ranged against him. Seeing the head of a monkey near him lopped off by an invincible enemy Angada flailed out friedly with a bow like thunder. He knocked the invisible Vajradamstha senseless. When the demon fell his maya dissolved and monkeys saw their tormentor clearly. They fell on him with cries of revenge for he had killed may of them. Shortly just a bloody mesh of flesh and bone remained where that diamond fanged rakshasa had lain moments ago.

Feeling his hand being forced more quickly than he liked, Ravana sent Akampana, Maharadhika bane of Lanka's enemies and one of her boldest commanders. With his chariot guard, Akampana came like a storm to the western gate, where Hanuman waited after killing Dhrumaraksha. Now Hanuman know exactly how to face to chariot mounted enemy. Before Akampana could even begin to fight, he was crushed by a boulder that whistled down from the sky. May of his rakshasas were crushed as well under a barrage of rocks and tree trunks the monkeys hurled at them. The rest fled back to their king.

Ravana received the news grimly. He showed just his main face knows the rest were hidden. Forked serpent tongues darted in and out of their mouths and not even his generals and ministers could bear that sight. Lifting his grave central face at last, Ravana said, "It is almost dawn. I will inspect the garrisons now!.

He went around the city speaking words of encouragement to his rakshas brave words, he hardly felt himself. He saw his dead warriors lying in heaps. He saw that, so far, the battle belonged to Rama's vanaras. Stalking back into his face, Ravana called Prahastha his Senapati.

“Dhrumraksha, Vajradamsta and Akampana are slain, and our men are near panic. It is time one of our very finest went into battle. I would go myself, or send Kumbhakarna, Indrajit or Nikumba. But turning the tide of a war is your special talent. How will these chattering tree dwellers who scratch themselves as they fights contain prahasta the master”.

“Perhaps the others could not see well enough in the dark. But now lay down, go my friend make a river, a sea of monkey's blood for your king”.

Ravana embraced his general. Prahastha said emotionally ‘Ravana, I owe everything I am to you. My life is yours, my lord, and I will not fail to you’.

He bowed to his king. Ravana embraced him again and Prahastha turned and walked out of the Sabha. His commanders announced his coming to his army waiting anxiously to sweep into battle. Prahastha went into Northern gate where Rama himself was. Seeing him come at the head of his glittering, legions, Rama turned to Vibhishana, who is this rakshasa that takes the fold against us. Surely he is a Maharadhika.

Vibhishana said quietly “I have not expected him so soon. It is Ravana's Senapathi Prahasta. He is a master of astras and he fought against the Devas at Ravana's side”.

In a blaze of war, which set the sky alight, came Prahastha with his legions. He was an awesome rakhasa and his astras lit up the down. They fell flaming among the vanaras and each one made ashes of a thousand monkeys. The vanara limbs began to melt at his inexorable advance. Worry sat on Rama's face. Then he heard a roar from the trees above. Sugriva's Senapathi Neela had silently watched Prahasta's advent. Now he leapt down to the ground to face the rakshasa general in his chariot of beater gold.

Prahasta's horses reared in alarm at the stupendous vanara who loomed before them. With five lightening blows of the young tree in his hands, Neela felled those beasts with another stroke, he pulverized the chariot. Roaring as deafeningly as the as the vanara. Prahastha leapt down to the

ground. They fought hand to hand sword against tree trunk. That duel shook the earth it seemed the vanara and the rakshasa fought with the elements as their weapons. Thunder, lightning and tempest seemed to be in their palms and they struck each other with these, roaring so loudly that the rest of the war was silenced. Monkeys and demons gathered round their Senapathi's and watched them in awe.

Prahastha struck Neela down twice. The demons roared so loudly as their general. But Neela sprang up from the ground with a flat slab of rock in his hands. He leapt fifty hands into the air, and with all these force of this descent, smashed the rock down squarely on Prahastha's head. The rakshasas skull was shattered and he lay twitching on the ground, his brain drifting out.

The roar of victory of Neela, the son of Agni, echoed through Lanka. When they saw Prahastha felled, the rakshasas fled back to Ravana with fear pursuing them like a flash flood. The vanaras jumped in joy. They lifted Neela on their shoulders and carried him back to Rama in a wave. Rama embraced the hero of the moment.

In his palace Ravana heard Prahastha killed tears scalded his eyes, and he cried, "How can it be ? Prahastha ravaged Indra's army when he fought in Devaloka. And now just a monkey has killed him ? He was the most loyal friend I had; he was my finest warrior. I will come to battle myself. The vanaras will wish they had never followed their human prince to Lanka. They think that they have victory in sight; when they feel my astras, they will know who Ravana is, Prahastha is dead, but I swear the monkeys shall rue his death more than we.

RAVANA ON THE FIELD OF BATTLE

Ravana called for his chariot and soon it was at his door. He ascended the chariot which was like fire and set out for the field of battle. Surrounded by his rakshasas he looked like Lord Mahadeva surrounded by his Pramadha games. He went fast towards the field of battle and he saw the army made up of monkeys. He smiled in derision.

Rama saw the huge army advancing and he turned to Vibhishana and asked him, "Who is the hero leading this mighty army ? Everyone seems to be enthusiastic about fighting and the chariot which gleams golden has their chief. I can see his bow and it seems to be a mighty bow. I am intrigued as to who is".

Vibhishana looked at the army and the chariot and said :

“On the elephant which is like Airavatha is seated a great fighter by name Akampana. His chariot with the banner decorated with a lion holds Indrajit. The other warrior who is making the earthquake with fear by the noise of his bow string is Atikaya. He has by his side another of the favourite warriors of Ravana and his name Mahodara. Along with him can be seen Kumbha whose banner is serpent. Nikumbha is the leader of this army I can see Narantaka who is famed for his valour against the Devas when he fought with them along with Ravana.

“You can see approaching you a white umbrella which is whiter than the moon. Under that umbrella is seated Ravana the Lord of the rakshasas. He looks like Lord Mahadeva surrounded by his Bhoothaganas. Look at his golden earrings and his crown. He is like the Vindhya and the Himavan in his magnificent physique. He has subdued Indra and Yama in the days of old when he fought with the Devas. He glows like the Monday Sun”.

Rama looked at him for a long moment. He said ‘The Lord of the Rakshasa is indeed glorious to look at what radiance. He seems like the sun which cannot be seen with the naked eyes, so full of splendour is this Ravana. I am certain that he is the home of all that is mighty and valiant. What valour! What courage ? What mighty ? What splendour ? This lord of the rakshasas is endowed with all the qualities the sight of him. No Deva or Asura can equal him in might, I am sure. His warriors are all brave and valiant and they seem to be excellent fighters. In the midst of these Ravana looks like Yama the god of destruction with his Kinkaras”. Rama’s lotus eyes turned crimson and he said “And when I think of my Sita who has been stolen by him I am reminded that he is a sinner fortunately he has come within my sight. I will vent my anger on him, anger born of the heinousness of his action.”

Rama fixed a sharp arrow to his bow and stood waiting.

Ravana in the meantime, arranged his army in such a way that they could guard the city gates as well as aid him in the fight with Rama. He then plunged into the sea of Vanaras even as the shank enters the sea. Sugriva was the first to encounter him. He hurled rocks at Ravana which were splintered by the arrows from the golden bow of Ravana. Ravana took up an arrow which was like a snake and he dispatched it towards Sugriva. It was like Indra’s Vajra and it hit Sugriva. He fell down in a faint and the sight was pleasing to the rakshasas. Several of the vanara’s chiefs tried to accost Ravana but in vain. They could not face the arrows from his bow. He soon filled the field of battle

with his arrows and nothing could be seen. Everyone rushed to Rama and he saw their distress.

Rama took up his bow and Laskhmana said, “It is not necessary for you to strain yourself. I am capable of killing this wicked sinner permit me Rama”.

Rama looked kindly and said, “Lakshmana, if you are so eager, then you can go and fight with Ravana. Be very careful. He is no mean fighter and valour like his has not been seen by anyone anywhere before. He is highly incensed and no one in the three worlds can subdue him. I am certain about that make a note of his weakness and remember your weakness also. Be calm and unruffled and protest yourself with effort. With your alertness and with the help of your bow you will be able to face Ravana”.

Lakshmana touched the feet of his brother and placing the dust of his feet on his head he went to fight with the monarch of the rakshasas. Lakshmana then looked at Ravana who had caused such fear in the minds of the vanaras.

Hanuman in the meantime rushed towards Ravana with a rock in his hands. He shielded himself from the rain of arrows emerging from Ravana’s bow. He went very near the chariot of Ravana. He said, “You have been granted a boon that you cannot be killed by Devas, danavas or any of the celestials or yakshas and rakshasas. But remember, there is always danger for you at the hands of monkeys alone! This my right hand will teach you a lesson”. Ravana was furious with Hanuman and said, “Let me see you try and hit me. Do it once and you will win lasting fame. I will kill you after that”.

Hanuman said, “Remember your son Aksha who was killed by me”. Ravana was reminded of his son and his anger grew tenfold and he hit Hanuman on the chest. Hanuman reeled under the blow and for a few moments he stood as though he have been stunned. He fretted under the insult and spurred by anger and humiliation he beat Ravana with the palm of his hand. It was now Ravana’s turn to reel under the blow. He recovered from the shock and said, “Well done! I admire your strength and valour you are equal to me in both. You deserve praise for this”.

Hanuman said, “Find on my strength and which finds you still alive after my blow. Once more and my fist will send you to the abode of Yama”.

Ravana doubled his fist and hit Hanuman on the chest and again Hanuman was staggering under the blow. Before he could resume his fight

Ravana went away from there and led his chariot towards Neela. A fierce encounter followed and Neela was teasing Ravana to the utmost. Neela had made himself very small and he jumped on to the banner of Ravana's chariot. Aggravated by this, the rakshasa took up the astra Agneya and sent it towards Neela, the commander of the army of Rama. Neela fell on the ground hit by the arrow. He did not die however since he was the son of Agni.

Ravana went to where Lakshmana was and he twanged the string of his bow to announce that he was ready to fight.

Lakshmana challenged him to fight and Ravana heard his words as well as the twang of Lakshmana's bow string. He was furious. He said : foolishly you have come before me and you have the audacity to challenge me to fight with you. Fortunately you have come within sight of me. I will dispatch you to Yama's city whose doors are kept open for you and the likes of you".

"You bring too much" said Lakshmana "Let me see some action and let me see if you can follow up your words with arrows which are equally sharp. I have heard of your valour and you do not have to take about yourself. I am herewith my bow and show me how you can answer me".

There ensued a memorable battle between Ravana and Lakshmana. Ravana could not bear the valour of Lakshmana who was cutting up every arrow of his into pieces and they fell on the ground like snakes with their bodies severed. He was a true fighter and he admired the glorious fighting of Lakshmana. He now took up an astra presided over by Brahma and with it he hurt Lakshmana on his forehead. Though he was taken aback for a moment Lakshmana did not lose his senses and he broke Ravana's bow into splinters. Arrow followed arrow and it was Ravana's turn to be hurt by his antagonist. He took up the Shakti which had been given to him by Brahma. It was hurled at Lakshmana and splitting fire and smoke it traveled towards Lakshmana. Lakshmana tried in vain to stop its progress with his arrows. The Shakti went straight at the chest of Lakshmana and piercing it the Shakti came to a stop. Lakshmana became unconscious and fell down.

With a smile Ravana came near him and tried to lift him up. But he was not able to do so. He was once able to lift up the mountain Kailasa with his hands but he was not able to lift up the brother of Rama. Ravana was amazed at it. Lakshmana had been hit by the Shakti but he was not killed. Lakshmana was the amsha of Narayana himself and the Shakti could not kill him.

Hanuman came there and again he began to fight with Ravana using his fists. Ravana was unable to bear the impact of it and fell on the terrace of his chariot. Blood spurted from his mouth. Hanuman quickly lifted up Lakshmana and carried him to the presence of Rama. The Shakti left the chest of Lakshmana and went back to Ravana. Lakshmana was his old self once again and there was not a trace of the wound made by the Shakti.

Ravana had recovered and was bent on fighting with fury. The vanara army was suffering and they rushed once again to Rama in despair. Rama quickly took up his bow and looked at Ravana who was at some distance. He went near him with the intention of offering him fight. Hanuman said, "My Lord, he is in a chariot and it is not right that you should stand on the ground and fight. Please sit on my shoulder and I will carry you".

Rama was touched by the offer of Hanuman and he agreed to be seated on the back of Hanuman.

The king of men accosted the king of rakshasas. The twang of his bow was loud and it was frightening. He spoke to Ravana : "You are too sure of your valour. You consider yourself to be a great hero. You have offended me in a manner which cannot be forgotten. Be prepared to accept punishment for it at my hands. You are now in front of me and we are going to fight. Let me tell you that neither Indra nor Yama and Surya nor even Brahma, Agni or Lord Mahadeva will be able to save you from my wrath. You may try to hide yourself in the four quarters or anywhere else and yet, you will not be able to escape from me and my anger. My brother whom you hunt with your Shakti will prove to be the death of you and your wives and your sons. Perhaps you have been told about It or you may not. I destroy the entire place by name Janastana and not one of your men could escape the arrows from my bow. I will show you how I have achieved it".

Ravana could not brook the words of Rama. He took up his bow and his arrows were aimed at Hanuman who was carrying Rama. But contrary to his expectations the glory of Hanuman did but increase with the onslaught. Rama was terribly angry with the behavior of Ravana. He broke his chariot and the horses were killed and the charioteer was hit with the sharp and feathered arrows he dispatched. Another arrow, powerful like Vajra was aimed at the chest of Ravana and he, who had stood unruffled in the presence of Indra and his Vajra now staggered under the impact of Rama's arrow and his bow slipped from his hand. Rama saw him reeling and quickly he drew another arrow and which had a crescent shaped head and with it he hit the golden crown of Ravana which fell down broken. Rama looked at the king of Rakshasas who was

without his bow, who had lost his splendor, who had been insulted because of the broken crown, who had suffered indignities at the hands of Rama.

Rama said, “You acted in an unforgivable manner and you have hunt many of my warriors. And yet, since you are extremely tired. I have refrained from killing you with my arrows. I have allowed you to line. Go home, rest your tired limbs and come back with another bow and chariot. The fight has exhausted you. O king ? Go back to Lanka with my leave. When you come back after your rest, refreshed and ready to fight. I will then show you what I am capable of”.

Ravana’s bow was broken, his chariot, and his horses with the chariot, and his horses with the charioteer had been destroyed; his famed crown had been splintered by a single arrow of Rama’s. He had been hurt abominably by the many arrows and his pride had been humbled. His enthusiasm had all give and he returned crestfallen to Lanka. The celestials who had been watching from the skies were pleased with Rama.

A MONSTER IS ROUSED

Ravana sat trembling on his crystal throne. Again and again he saw Rama’s arrows fly at him shafts of time. He saw his chariot shattered his horses cut down and his crown broken. He saw Rama’s dark, brilliant face above him and heard the beautiful voice that mocked him before both armies “I could kill you now, but it would be too easy, you are tired. Go home Ravana come back with a new chariot and another bow”.

Ravana sat trembling with the humiliation. Grimly he spoke to his rakshasas. ‘You saw how a mere man shamed me on the field. It seems all my tapasya is worth nothing when he gave me his boon against the Devas and Asuras, Brahma said to me, “Beware of man”. But I did not listen, I thought, which man done stand against me in battle ?

He sighed that matches rakshasa humbled, slowly he went on. ‘May are those who have cursed me. A yuga ago I ravished a chaste woman called Vedavathi and she cursed me. Perhaps Sita is Vedavathi born again to be my death. When I look at her face. I feel I know her from another time. For long ages I have ruled the world. Once an Ikshvaku king called Anaraya foretold that a prince born in the house of the sun would kill me. I paid him no mind then but now I fear it is Dasaradha’s son Rama he meant.’

‘Yes, many have cursed me, among them the mighty and the sublime. Parvathi cursed me once, and Nandisvara. Varunas’ deaughter cursed me when I forced myself on her. My friends, today I have learnt that the curse of the pure always come to pass’.

The nine heads around his face were not to be seen; as if they hid themselves for shame. Confessing his anxiety, sharing it, appeared to allay its intensity Ravana said, “All this talk is of no use. Lanka is threatened as it has never been since I became king. I can think of only one solution. Kumbhakarna must be awoken; let us see how Rama faced my brother in battle’.

Ravana ordered the guard at Lanka’s gate to be doubled and sent his messengers to Kumbhakarna’s palace. Just nine days ago his titan brother had sat in the people’s Sabha and sworn to support his king in the event of a war. Eight days ago, the tremendous are had gone back to sleep.

Kumbhakarna slept deeply and the messengers Ravana sent to awaken were experts at their task. What they had to do was not easy especially when it was just a week since he had fallen back into his slumber which would last six months if he was not disturbed. Hillocks of food were heaped on great salves carried by a small army of rakshasas. Among the dishes were young elephants, roasted whole. There was wine by the barrel and cartloads of garlands and incense with these and a train of motile women, Ravana’s servants came to rouse the king’s brother. When Kumbhakarna awoke all his appetites must be satisfied at once and all of them were enormous.

As they unlocked the door to his chamber with the golden key Ravana gave them, the gigantic rakshasa’s snoring blasted in their ears. His breath billowed like a small typhoon around the cavernous room, whose ceiling was tall enough for the monster to stand under. Kumbhakarna lay halted his chest heaving like an ocean, dreams flitting across his sensual face. Gently the women began to rub sandalwood paste into his smooth skin. His mountainous body was hairless.

The rakshasa did not stir at the women’s giggling ministrations, though there were ten of them, each one chosen just for him. They were tall, beautiful rakshasa’s and rare, they alone in Lanka could bear his manhood. Quickly they covered his massive body with the fragrant paste. They lifted this great head, four of them together and the others draped the garlands around his neck. The food and the wine barrels had already been set down beside the bed, so there would be no delay when he awoke.

The servants brought conches, horns and drums with them. The knew from the experience of years. What an effort it was to rouse Kumbhakarna. When their talking loudly had no effect. They began to shout in the hope that he might stir. But he slept on when the anointing with sandalwood paste did not so much as break the rhythm of his snores, the servants began to blow. On their conches, beat their drums and blast on their horns, Kumbhakarna slap on.

Gingerly they began to prod him and to shake his colossal form with their hands. He did not move. They tried to lift him from the bed, but could not. Then they began to slap his body in earnest. Not that they were pleased to do this; they feared that Ravana would have their heads if his brother did not wake up. They slapped him roughly and blew their conches into his jug like years. They pulled the thick hairs in his nostrils and suddenly with a deep sigh, he rolled on to his side whatever dream he was smiling from left him and his eyelids long lashed as a woman's fluttered open.

With a roar that they had dared interrupts his dreaming Kumbhakarna sat bolt up right, red eyed and hunger growling horribly at them. Already raged in his hot body and other lusts flamed. Through him as well. The servants leapt back same paces. They pointed to the heaped vessels of food and the barrels of wine. First his hungers must be fed; then they would tell him why they had come.

Tittering the women cam forward to feed Kumbhakarna. The men servants left them to their task when half the food had been gorged, greedily and three barrels of wine swilled down, Kumbhakarna began to fondle the women, who had disrobed for his desire did not take very long, though he took four of the ten women, one after the other and then cries echoed down the long passages of the palaces.

Kumbhakarna bathed and the women dressed him and touched his body fragrant with the unguents and perfumes they had brought to which he was so partial. Now the men were called back into the chamber. In his chasmal voice Kumbhakarna said, "You have woken me when I had barely fallen asleep. Tell me, who threatens Lanka ? Is it Yama or Agni, Vayu or Indra?"

Just then a minister, Yupaksha, whom Ravana had sent after the others, came in. He said, "It is not Devaloka that threatens us. A human prince had laid seize to Lanka with an army of monkeys".

Kumbhakarna's expression was incredulous. "Ravana really needs me to fight a man and some monkey's". Yupaksha said, "Prahastha is slain and this man Rama vanquished our king in battle".

Kumbhakarna growled in surprise. The women had almost finished dressing him. He brushed them aside and stood up a mountain of a rakshasa, towering over, the others.

Yupaksha said quietly, "Rama spared Ravana's life. He told him to come back to fight with a new chariot and a new bow".

Kumbhakarna roared softly, then he laughed. 'What but this has never happened to my brother before. No Deva or Danava Ravana. Surely no ordinary man has done this to him'.

'Ravana dare not go out to face Rama again. He wants you to Kill the Kosala princes'.

Drawing himself erect, Kumbhakarna said, "I will tell Ravana that before the sunsets he will see the humans lying dead in the bloody sludge of the field. I will drag their bodies through the streets to his palace, that they dared attack Lanka.

But Mahodara, who had come with Yupaksha said, "Perhaps you should meet the king before you go out to fight. He is distraught; seeing you will restore his spirits".

Slowly Kumbhakarna nodded. He loved his brother. He thought the world of him and hated to hear that Ravana had been humiliated. Mahodara and Yupaksha hurried back to their master Ravana sat alone and downcast his Sabha. They ran into him, crying, Kumbhakarna is awake my Lord. He wants to know when you will see him.

Ravana said dully "I will see him at once if he is ready to see me".

The earth shuddered where Kumbhakarna set foot, on his way to meet his brother clad in white silks, his body embellished with glittering ornaments, heavy golden ear rings in his ears, Kumbhakarna went to meet Ravana as Indra may go to Brahma. When he came out into the sun, the vanaras perched on the smooth walls of Lanka, gazing in at what went on. Within the city, fled in fear. They had never seen anyone like him; he was full of raw splendour. His massive body blazed like a piece of the sun and it was hard to look directly at the Leviathan.

When Kumbhakarna entered the sabha, he saw at a glance the damage Rama had done to Ravana's spirit. The haughty, regal bearing which had set that king apart had vanished. Instead a forlorn rakshasa sat on Lanka's throne, gaunt with defeat. When he saw Kumbhakarna. Ravana sprang up with a cry. He rushed to him brother and embraced him. He led him to the out sized throne beside his own which was always kept there and was Kumbhakarna's place.

Kumbhakarna's eyes blazed as he said, "Why did you have woken up king ? Tell me who it is you fear and he shall be a corpse today "? Ravana saw his brother's eyes rolling and knew that he was in a mighty rage. 'It has been a long time since you fell asleep' said Ravana fortunately for you, you know nothing of the troubles Rama created. Along with Sugriva, Dasaradha's son is destroying us. The monkeys built a bridge and crossed over the ocean to Lanka with no trouble at all. Now they run amok in its woods and forests. I do not see any monkeys being killed, but they have killed the best of Rakshasa's in battle."

'My resources are dwindling. You must come to the aid of Lanka which is the refuge of old people and children Mighty one, for the sake of the love we share as brother, help me! I have confidence in you. I have never begged anyone like this before.'

Kumbhakarna embraced his brother and after bowing to him, he prepared to go out into battle Ravana invoked blessings upon his head as he left. Drums boomed and conches blared as Kumbhakarna went both followed by fully armed warriors on horses and elephants and in chariots. Intoxicated with alcohol and the smell of blood the mighty Kumbhakarna strode out armed with a spear. He was showered with flowers and a canopy was held over his head.

An immense band of soldiers fierce soldiers with baleful eyes and prodigious strength, followed him into battle. Their huge bodies were as dark as mountains of collyrium and they made a great din as they marched along with their weapons raised. Mighty Kumbhakarna seemed to have taken a newer and more immense body which was so terrifying that it caused the monkeys hair to stand on end. He was six hundred bow lengths tall and one hundred bow lengths wide, his eyes were like cart wheels and he glowed like a mountain.

Kumbhakarna ignored the evil omens which appeared as he left the city. He crossed the ramparts and gazed at the army of monkeys that was as huge as a bank of clouds. And when the monkeys saw that giant who was the size of a mountain they scattered like clouds in the wind. Kumbhakarna laughed aloud when he saw the monkeys running in all directions and caused many monkeys to fall down in a swoon.

Angada and the other monkey leaders tried to stop the fleeing monkeys. “Have you forgotten your powers and noble lineage. How can you run away in fright like common cowards ? They shouted – ‘Give back friends! How can you care for your own lives ? This thing that terrifies you is not real. It is an illusion crated by the rakshasas and we can destroy it with our strength”.

Some what reassured the monkeys regrouped and armed themselves with trees and rocks. They turned around and attacked Kumbhakarna in fury but he remained unmoved despite their repeated assaults. The rocks shattered and the trees snapped against his huge body. Meanwhile he ploughed through the apes, crushing them and tossing them about. Sure trembled into the sea others fled into the sky, some ran down the bridge they had fruit.

Angada exhorted them to return ‘Stand and fight’. “He screamed. ‘Women laugh at warriors who bring down their weapons and run away from the battlefield. Surely that is worse than death’. Remember your ancestry and stop behaving like common creatures ? Our life on earth is short in any case. If we die in battle, we shall go to Brahma’s realm. We shall earn fame and renown if we kill the enemy; like a moth rushing into a fire, Kumbhakarna will not live once Rama has set his eyes on him. If we run from Kumbhakarna we shall be branded cowards and will never achieve fame.”

KUMBHAKARNA’S FIGHT

Encouraged Angada’s words, the monkeys rallied and with renewed vigour they prepared to meet Kumbhakarna again. They attacked him with trees and rocks but Kumbhakarna flung them about. Seven and eight hundred at a time, and they fell to the earth, their limbs smashed. He gathered and eighteen monkeys into his arms and threw them into his mouth devouring them the way Garuda would snakes. Unable to have any effect on the giant the monkey leaders set about destroying his forces by crushing them with mountain peaks.

Hanuman rained rocks and stones upon Kumbhakarna from the sky but Kumbhakarna shattered them all with his spear. Hanuman placed himself in Kumbhakarna’s path and hurled a mountain peak at him with all his energy. Kumbhakarna whirled his shining spear above his head and struck Hanuman with it in the middle of his chest. Dazed and bewildered Hanuman vomited blood and let out a terrible scream while the rakshasas rejoiced to see him injured.

Thousands of monkeys rushed upon Kumbhakarna. They climbed up his body as they would climb a hill, they fit him and scratched him and pounded him with their fists and feet. But Kumbhakarna ignored their blows and shoveled them into his mouth. He consumed the monkeys the way fire consumes a forest making the earth slippery with blood and gore.

Sugriva, the heroic king of monkeys rose and rushed towards Kumbhakarna brandishing a mountain peak. He threw an immense rock at Kumbhakarna with all his energy so that it struck him with the force of a thunderbolt. But the rock shattered into pieces against the giants' massive chest. Gauged Kumbhakarna hurled spear at Sugriva but Hanuman rose up and caught the iron spear adorned with gold break it in two across his knee Kumbhakarna seized a peak and brought it down on Sugriva's head knocking him out cold.

Kumbhakarna lifted Sugriva in his arms and carried him into the air looking like Mount Meru with a cloud. The rakshasas on the battlefield rejoiced but the army of monkeys scattered in all directions. Hanuman felt sure that he could rescue Sugriva but decided against it. Since Sugrivas was capable of freeing himself, it would not be the right thing to do so. So he set about rallying the monkey army that was in retreat.

Kumbhakarna entered the city of Lanka with the twitching Sugriva in his arms. He was greeted with a rain of flowers from the people who crowded the towers and mansions. Refreshed by the cool water and the breeze that blew along the road, Sugriva regained consciousness and found that he was in the arms of his every who was much stronger than himself. Quickly he tone off Kumbhakarnas ears, with his nails, bit off his nose digging into his sides with his feet. Bleeding profusely, Kumbhakarna howled in pain and hurled Sugriva into the ground. Rakshasa ttacked Sugriva in a group but he sprang into the air and returned to Rama.

Without his nose and ears Kumbhakarna looked like a mountain drenched in cascades of blood. Relying in his phenomenal strength, he decided to go back into battle. He realized that he had lost his weapon and he armed himself with a mighty iron club. Hungry and hankering for flesh and blood he devoured the monkeys and rakshasas indiscriminately, shoving them into his mouth twenty and thirty at a time.

Rama invoked Siva's weapon and pierced Kumbhakarna's heart with many sharp arrows sparks and smoke emerged from Kumbhakarna's cavernous mouth and his huge mace fell to the ground as the peacock –

feathered arrows lodged in his chest. Kumbhakarna found that he was unarmed and lashed out with his feet and fists. Weak and disoriented from loss of blood he ran around in circles attacking monkeys and rakshasas.

Rama picked up his great bow and bore down upon Kumbhakarna followed by Lakshmana. The sight of Rama with his magnificent bow and quiver full of deadly arrows reassured the monkey army. Rama saw Kumbhakarna his gleaming crown upon his head covered in blood devouring everything in sight. His eyes bloodshot, he licked the blood that poured from his face and trampled upon the monkey army like death at the end of time.

Rama twanged his bow and the sound drove Kumbhakarna into frenzy. He charged towards Rama who shouted "Come I am ready for you, armed with my bow, know that this is Rama who speaks to you. You shall be dead within the hour!" Kumbhakarna laughed hideously and the monkey's hearts leapt into their mouths. "This is not Viradha or Khara or Kabandha, Vali or Maricha. I am Kumbhakarna! Look at my massive iron club with which I have destroyed gods and Danavas in the past ! Do not look at me and think that I have neither nose nor ears I feel no pain from those injuries. Show me your strength, tiger among men and then I shall eat you up".

Rama loosed his splendid arrows against Kumbhakarna to no effect. The same arrows that had pierced the Sala trees and killed Vali made not the slightest impression upon Kumbhakarna. Rama invoked Vayu's weapon and severed Kumbhakarna's right arm which was wielding the enormous club. The club fell to the ground, killing hundred of monkeys. The ones that survived retired to a safe distance, trembling and watched the terrible battle from there. Then Rama invoked Indra's weapon and cut off Kumbhakarna's other arm which brandished a tress. That arm crushed trees and mountains and monkeys and rakshasas as it fell. But still, Kumbhakarna lumbered towards Rama, roaring as he came. Rama cut off his legs with two crescent headed arrows Kumbhakarna opened his mouth wide and came forward. Rama filled his terrifying man with sharp golden arrows. And then Rama picked his most formidable arrow powered by Indra himself. It blazed like the sun and was invincible as death.

He loosed it against the rakshasa and it sped through the air with the force of Indra's thunderbolt, lighting up the ten directions. It severed Kumbhakarna's mountainous head with its bared teeth and dangling golden earrings. The head smashed towers and Sampathi as it fell and his massive body collapsed into the ocean, crushing fish and mighty serpents as it buried itself in the seabed.

When Kumbhakarna, the enemy of gods and the Brahmins was killed, the earth shook and all the heavenly beings rejoiced. The monkeys broke

into shouts of joy and honoured Rama for his incredible feat. The surviving rakshasas ran to tell Ravana that Kumbhakarna had been slain. The king of the rakshasas was overwhelmed by grief and fell into a swoon. After a while he regained consciousness and began to lament the loss of his brother.

‘Ah, heroic and mighty Kumbhakarna! Conqueror of the enemy! Why have you left me and gone ? I am as good as dead now that you, my right arm, upon whom I depended and did not fear the gods or the asuras have fallen. How could a hero like thus, who has smashed the pride of the gods and the Danavas, who is like the doomsday fire how could he have been killed in battle by Rama ?

I am sure the rejoicing monkeys will seize this opportunity and swarm over the walls of Lanka. What use is the Kingdom to me now ? or Sita ? I have no interest in life now that Kumbhakarna is dead I would rather die than live this worthless life if I do not kill Rama my brother’s killer in battle! I shall follow my brother to the abode of death today! I cannot live for a moment without him! I am reaping the fruits of insulting noble Vibhishana and ignoring his words. Ravana mourned the loss of his brother and overcome with grief, swooned again.

Ravana’s sons and nephews saw him grieving and they spoke words of encouragement begging to be allowed to join in the battle. All his sons were equal to Indra in valour. They could fly in the air, they were masters of the magical arts, they were invincible in battle and could humble the gods. Skilled in the use of all kinds of weapons, they were famous warriors and had all won mighty boon for themselves.

Ravana called blessings upon his sons and embraced them and decorated them with jewels and ornaments before he sent them out. The rakshasa princes rubbed themselves with medicinal herbs and sweet perfumes before they set out, impelled by fate. Bright like the sun they wore glittering crowns and with their gleaming weapons they shone like planets in the sky. Determined to vanquish the enemy, they thundered and roared and snatched arrows from their quivers. The earth trembled under their feet and the sky was pierced by their battle cries.

The monkey army saw them coming and roared with delight eager to show off their strength and skills. And the rakshasas not to be outdone, yelled back as they prepared to attack. The monkeys greeted them with a hail of stones and rocks and trees. They crushed smashed and pulverized the rakshasas through their armour, even if they were riding in chariots or on horses or elephants. The rakshasas fought back with arrows and other deadly weapons,

tearing the monkeys' bodies apart. They even snatched rocks and trees from the monkeys and pounded them with their own weapons.

Riding on a horse that was as swift as the wind, Ravana's son Narantaka cut through the monkey army with his spear like an enormous fish slicing through the waters. He killed seven hundred monkeys with a single blow leaving bloody corpses in his wake. He was everywhere, trampling the monkeys and attacking them before they could run to safety.

Sugriva told Angada to confront Narantaka and Vali's splendid son emerged from the mass of monkeys like the sun emerging from the clouds. He had no weapons apart from his nails and teeth but he stood in front of Narantaka and taunted him. Narantaka whirled his spear above his head and attacked Angada, but the deadly spear shattered against the monkey's chest. Angada pounded Narantaka's horse with his open palm and it collapsed in a heap its eyes popping out of its head. Narantaka attacked Angada with his fists and Angada retaliated by punching Narantaka in the chest. It was a deadly blow swift as a thunderbolt and with the weight of a mountain and the rakshasa's chest broke open, blood spurting from it like tongues of flame.

Ravana's other sons cried out when Narantaka was killed and Devantaka Trisuras and Mahodara attacked Angada together. Angada rained sharp arrows, Angada showed no signs of fatigue or pain. He slapped Mahodara's great elephant and it fell to the ground. Then he grabbed its tusk and struck Devantaka with it. Devantaka dealt Angada a mighty blow with his club while Trisura pierced the monkey's head with arrows.

Hanuman and Nile came to Angada's rescue and the rakshasas were delighted with the prospect of new enemies to fight. Devantaka rushed at Hanuman with his iron club raised but Hanuman killed him with a single blow to the head with his fist. Devantaka fell to the ground, his head smashed to pulp his teeth and eyes knocked out his tongue lolling.

This time Mahodara attacked Neela with a shower of arrows and Neela succumbed. But he recovered very quickly and uprooting an entire hill he brought it down on Mahodara's head killing him in an instant. Trisuras turned his attention to Hanuman sending his magnificent spear through an arch towards the monkey. Hanuman caught it as it flew like a firebrand and roaring fiercely he snapped it in two. Trisuras then came at Hanuman with his sword but Hanuman felled him with a blow to the chest, snatching the sword that fell from his nerveless hand. Then he severed the rakshasas' three heads with their crowns and golden earrings. The blazing heads fell to the ground like planets dislodged burn their orbits.

The monkeys shouted for joy and the earth trembled as the rakshasas fled in all directions leaving their weapons behind as they ran in terror of their lives.

Mountainous Atikaya who was strong and powerful was enraged when he saw his brothers being killed. He had been given a boon by Brahma and had humbled gods and Danavas in battle. He blazed like a thousand suns in his chariot and his crowns and earrings shone with splendour. He roared like a lion, declaring his name and his exploits and twanged his bow. The monkeys were terrified at the sight of his immense body and fled in all directions seeking refuge with Rama.

Atikaya plunged forward into the monkey army with his chariot, twanging his bow and roaring. The monkey leaders attacked him with trees and rocks but he splintered them with a shower of arrows. The monkeys could not retaliate and withdraw. "I am seated in a chariot and armed with a bow and arrows" he shouted arrogantly as he approached Rama. "I will not fight with just anyone'. Let whoever dares come and confront me".

Lakshmana drew his bow in anger and the sound filled the earth, the mountains, the sky and the ocean. Atikaya shot an arrow at Lakshmana and it sailed through the air hissing like a serpent. Lakshmana shredded and chose another gleaming razor sharp arrow from his quiver. It struck Atikaya from the impact. Atikaya produced a rain of arrows but Lakshmana cut them to bits with his own weapons. Lakshmana loosed an arrow powered by the fire god. Atikaya retaliated with one powered by the sun god. Their tips blazing, the arrows met in the air like hissing serpents. They burnt each other out and were reduced to astras.

The two mighty warriors assailed each other with all the celestial weapons at their command but they who perfectly matched and neither could get the better of the other. Finally the wind god came to Lakshmana and whispered 'Atikaya was granted a boon by Brahma and he is protected by celestial armour. Use Brahma's weapon there is no to her way to kill him'.

Lakshmana picked an arrow that would not miss its mark and called upon Brahma to direct it. The universe shuddered in fear as Lakshmana fitted it into his bow and loosed it against Atikaya. Atikaya saw it blazing through the air with its golden shaft and though he tried to counter it with its own arrows and all his other weapons, it descended on him with the speed of Garuda. It severed his head which crashed to the ground like a Himalayan peak.

INDRAJIT VALOUR

Those rakshasas that still lived weary and wretched from being routed by the enemy wailed aloud when Atikaya fell. They fled back to Lanka having lost all their leaders. But the monkeys rejoiced and praised Lakshmana who had triumphed over a formidable enemy.

Ravana was beside himself with grief over the death of his sons and he mourned and lamented. His eyes filled with tears and he swooned in sorrow. And as he sat there grieving his son Indrajit, the best of all the chariot warriors came to him and said “Father, do not succumb to confusion and despair. I, Indrajit am still alive. I am the enemy of Indra and no one can escape my arrows! Today you will see Rama and Lakshmana lifeless on the battlefield, then broken bodies covered with my arrows”.

He went out of the city in his splendid chariot, surrounded by fully armed warriors who were eager to fight. The sound of conches filled the air and with the white canopy held over his head, Indrajit seemed like the moon rising into the sky, when Indrajit reached the battlefield, he placed warriors all around his chariot and propitiated fire with oblations and mantras. He offered flowers and perfumes and the head of a black goat as he surrounded the fire with his weapons. The fire god himself appeared, dressed in red and enveloped by flames to receive the offerings. Indrajit invoked Brahma’s powers and muttered mantras over his chariot and over his bow and other weapons. He made himself invisible in the sky with all the powers he gathered through the ritual.

The rakshasa army marched forward and slaughtered the monkeys with their arrows. Indrajit killed seven and eight monkeys at a time with a single arrow and they ran helter-skelter their bodies streaming with blood, fear lodged in their hearts. Determined to make a stand for Rama’s sake. They turned and showered Indrajit with trees and boulders but the mighty warrior warded them off and deluged the monkeys with arrows.

Indrajit inflicted terrible wounds in the leading monkey warriors with his various weapons and they fell to the ground. Indrajit then attacked Rama and Lakshmana with showers of arrows that were as bright as the rays of the sun. They did not affect Rama who turned to Lakshmana and said “The mighty rakshasa is using Brahmas power for his weapons. Now that he was felled the monkey leaders he has turned his arrows upon us. He has a born from Brahma. How can we kill him when we cannot see him ? Let us pretend to be struck by the arrows and fall to the ground as if we were unconscious. He will definitely return to the city thinking that he was won the first round of battle”.

Rama and Lakshmana fell to the ground and Indrajit shouted with joy at having created trouble for the monkey army as well as for Rama and Laskhmana and returned Ravana's city.

The monkeys were perplexed and troubled but there was nothing Sugriva, Nila, Angada or Jambavana could do. Vibhishana saw how disheartened the army was reassured the monkey leaders'. Do not be afraid. This is not the time for grief. It is true the princes have fallen but it is only because they respect Brahma's power that they have succumbed to Indrajit's arrows. How can this be an occasion for grief"?

"Even though much of the monkey army has been destroyed, let us console those that are still alive" said Hanuman. Along with Vibhishana, the best of rakshasas, Hanuman walked through the battlefield at night, lighting the way with touches. They saw the earth covered with tails, arms, torsos, legs, fingers and scattered limbs. Blood flowed from the bodies of fallen monkeys who were the size of mountains and abandoned weapons glowed in the dark. Hanuman and Vibhishana saw Sugriva, Angada, Nila, Saraba, Gandhamadana, Jambavan, Susena and Vegadarasi, Marida Dvividha, Nala, Jyothimukha and Panasa all injured in the battle. Seventy six millions of monkeys had been slain on he fifty day of battle by Brahma's weapon.

Hanuman and Vibhishana looked among the bloodshed bodies which resembled the ocean at high tide, for Jambavan. They found the old bear pierced by hundreds of arrows shinning like a fire that was about to be extinguished, "can it be noble one, that you are still alive after being pierced by all these arrows" ?

Jambhavan replied slowly and painfully 'King of rakshasas, I recognize your voice but the pain from my wounds dims my eyes and I cannot see you. Tell me, is Hanuman the son of Vayu, still alive'.

'You ignore the princes and ask about Hanuman ? Cried Vibhishana'. Not for king Sugriva nor Angada not even for Rama do you display the kind of affection that you do for Hanuman".

'Listen rakshasa and I will tell you why I ask about Hanuman' said Jambhavan "If Hanuman is alive, then even though the army has been slaughtered, they are not dead. If Hanuman lives we shall all alive even though we tie here dead. My child, Hanuman's powers are equal to his father's and his courage rivals that of Agni, so was have hope for life".

Hanuman came up to Jambavan, touched his feet and greeted him with respect. Jambavan senses were flickering but he felt as if he had been reborn when he heard Hanuman's voice 'come here tiger among monkey'! he said "you can save us all, you are the monkey's best friend and you are the only one who has the power to save them. This is the time do display your prowess. I can see no other who can do what you can. Heal injured Rama and Lakshmana and bring happiness to the army of monkeys and fears.

'Hanuman fly over the ocean and go to Himavan, the best of mountains. You will see the golden peaks of Kailasa which are difficult to scale. Between these two mountains lies the herb mountain where all the medicinal herbs shine with unmatched splendour. There you will find four herbs the Mrutha Sanjeevani, Visalaykarma, Sauvarnakami, and Samdhani. They shine so brightly that they illuminate the directions. Collect all four and bring them back here as soon as you can. Son of the wind, put heart into the monkeys by reviving them'.

Hanuman expanded with strength as the wind swells the waters of the ocean when he heard Jambavan's words. He went to the top of a mountain and crushed under his feet, the mountain sank into the earth. Hanuman shattered its peaks and its trees caught fire as they fell the monkeys could no longer stand on that mountain which had been shaken to its roots. Lanka seemed to dance in the night as its doors windows and gateways were smashed and as agitated people ran here and there.

Hanuman was like a mountain himself as he made the earth and ocean tremble. He roared as he prepared to leap and the rakshasas were petrified Hanuman honoured Rama and steeled himself to perform another great deed for Rama's safe. He raised his tail which looked like a serpent, he crouched and flattered his ears against his head. He opened his mouth which blazed like the submarine fire and leapt into the sky. He carried off rocks and trees and natural monkeys but they fell into the ocean because of the speed with which Hanuman flew.

He stretched out his arms and flew in the direction of Mount Meru. He traveled over the ocean, garlanded with waves and filled with moving and unmoving creations as we he went onwards like a discus released from the hands of Vishnu. Flying as quickly as his father he crossed mountains and forests lakes and rivers, ponds, cities and flourishing people. He took the path of the sun and soon he saw Himavat, its peaks like white clouds covered with streams and waterfalls, caves and the settlements of pious sages. He saw Brahmhaloka and the navel of the earth and golden peaked Kailasa.

Between Himavat and Kailasa, he saw the herb mountain shining like fire because of the plants that grew on it. He was wonderstruck as he gazed at it, but he quickly alighted and began to gather herbs. He wandered all over the rocky mountain, but the herbs saw him coming and knowing his purpose, they made themselves invisible. Hanuman became impatient and roared loudly.

‘Why are you not sympathetic to Rama’s cause’. He cried to the mountain. ‘I can crush you in an instant with my strong arms. He grabbed the mountain by its peaks and uprooted it along with its trees, elephants, minerals and plateaux. He leapt into the sky with the shining mountain and the sky dwellers praised and honoured him as he flew along the path of the sun with the shining mountain. He passed close to the sun as he blazed along, shining in the sky like the thousand spoked discus released by Vishnu.

The monkeys saw him returning and roared with joy. Hanuman roared back and Lanka’s mansions echoed and resounded. He came down from the sky in the middle of the monkey army, bowed to monkey leaders and embraced Vibhishana. The human Princes inhaled the sweet smelling medicinal herbs and were instantly revived their wounds healed. The other monkeys were also restored to health and vitality. Hanuman took the herb mountain back to its place. Near Himavat and quickly to Rama.

Sugriva told Hanuman what had to be done next. ‘Since Kumbhakarna and the rakshasas princes are dead, Ravana cannot order another attack. Let the strongest monkeys jump over the ramparts into Lanka with burning firebrands.

When night fell and a deep darkness covered everything a band of monkeys crept towards Lanka with firebrands in their hands. The rakshasas deserted their guard posts when they saw the monkeys approaching and the monkeys gleefully set fire to the towers gates and lofty mansion.

Thousands of buildings began to burn as the homes of rakshasa householders were destroyed some of the rakshasas were wearing golden armour and were adorned with garlands and wonderful garments. Their eyes rolled back and they reeled from all the liquor they had drunk. Some of them left their clothes in the hands of their wives others raved and ranted against the enemy ‘Some were armed with clubs and spears, others were eating and drinking some were asleep with their women. On fire conches, some ran as fast as they could, trying to get away with their children.

The fire devoured them all in the thousands and burned ever more brightly. It consumed their beautiful spacious homes which were decorated with all kinds of gems and jewels and had been filled with the sweet songs of birds. Enveloped by flames the gates shone like clouds touched by lighting in the summer sky. Women who had been sleeping in their homes screamed as they burned, their bodies now bereft of all ornaments. From afar the burning mansions looked like the peaks of the Himalayas lit up medicinal herbs.

Elephants and horses who had been bared ran around in confusion and made Lanka seem like the ocean boiling over at the end of time. Torched by the monkeys in a single hour, Lanka had become like the universe blazing with the dooms day fire. Women suffocated by smoke and burned by the flames could be heard wailing ten yojanas away. When the burning rakshasas ran out of the city, they were attacked by the monkeys who were waiting for a fight.

Rama and Lakshmana were perfectly recovered and healed. Rama twanged the string of his great bow and the sound put fear into the hearts of the rakshasas. Lanka's towering gateway which was as high as Mount Kailasa came crushing down under his arrows. The rakshasas who were still in their homes prepared themselves for battle and struggled into their armour. Sugriva ordered his leaders to man the gates and fight with any creature that dared to pass.

When Ravana saw the monkeys at the city gates with torches in their hands, he flew into an uncontrollable rage. He summoned Kumbha and Nikumbha, the sons of Kumbhakarna and sent them out against the enemy with a huge force of rakshasas urging them to shout their battle cries and spurring them on to a victory.

The warriors emerged from Lanka their fight weapons gleaming their elephants and horses and chariots raising a terrible din, their colourful flags waving in the wind. The monkey army surged forward to meet them and rakshasas changed on like moths to a flame. A terrible battle ensued with the monkeys and the rakshasas clashing weapon against weapon and body against body. The rakshasas demolished the monkeys seven and ten at a time and the monkeys did the same. But when the rakshasas tried to flee their hair disheveled, their clothes and armor and battle banners in shreds the monkeys surrounded them.

Many great warriors lost their lives in the terrible battle. Angada smashed the rakshasa Prajangha's head, Sonitaska and Yupaksha were killed by Mainda and Dvidida and Sugriva himself killed Kumbha who has injured a

number of monkey leaders. Enraged that Sugriva had killed his brother. Nikumbha jumped into the fray with renewed vigour. After a frightful battle Hanuman took the rakshasa's life by twisting off his neck.

Then Ravana sent Khara's son Maharaksha on to the battle field with specific instructions to kill Rama and Lakshmana. Maharaksha was motivated by the idea of avenging his father's death and though he was a skilled and brave warrior, he was no match for Rama. Rama eventually killed him with a magnificent arrow powered by the fire god and once again, the other rakshasas ran back to Lanka in terror.

Meanwhile, Indrajit grew angrier and angrier as he thought about the innumerable heroic rakshasas who had been killed in battle. Mighty, Indrajit, thorn in the side of the gods and a descendant of Pulastya, rode forth from the western gate surrounded by rakshasas. When he saw that Rama and Lakshmana were still full of energy and enthusiasm for battle he felt he had to resort to sorcery. He had to surround himself with a large band of rakshasas create a phantom Sita and kill her in front of all the monkeys in order to crush their spirit.

MAYA SITA SLAIN

To think was to act and Indrajit emerged from the gates of the city with Sita in his chariot. He was seen by the vanaras and they armed themselves with the usual boulders and stood preponed for his coming. Hanuman was leading the army and Indrajit saw him. The rakshasa prince went straight towards Hanuman and in his chariot was seen Sita she was wearing the soiled yellow silk which Hanuman had seen before and she was beautiful like the moon under eclipse. She was sitting forlorn as though she did not care about what was happening around her. Her long hair was twisted in a single plait and it hung like a black serpent on her back. Her face was tired and she had been fasting continuously and there were not many jewels on her. Hanuman knew her only too well and he stood spellbound when he saw her in the chariot of Indrajit. He looked again and again and seeing the tear stained face of the Devi, Hanuman was full of sadness. He saw that she was now a captive of Indrajit and he thought. "What are his plans what is to happen now?"

Hanuman went towards the chariot of Indrajit and bean to assault him. Indrajit looked very angry and he took his sword out of his scabbard. He caught hold of Sita by her hair and she wailed. "Rama, Rama" in a piteous voice. Even as they were watching Indrajit began to beat her up. Hanuman saw her caught by hair and his grief and anger were unbearable. Tears flowed form

his eyes and he said, “You are a sinner born in the race of Brahma. You seem to have inherited any gentleness from you’re ancestor. You have grabbed the hair of Devi, and remember it is our end is near or else you would not have dared to do so. You are fit for the worst kind of punishment, cruel, sinful small and proud of your sinfulness. This act of yours is against all codes of Dharma. You have a heart of stone and there is not even a visage of pity in your cruel heart. She was expelled from her palace and then she was without a kingdom. She was parted from Rama and now you wanted to kill her. Why do you do it ? How has she offended you ? After killing Sita you will not live very long. You are now in my power and you will meet your death at my hands, I will dispatch you to the world meant for sinners of the worst type ?

Hanuman rushed towards Indrajit surrounded by his army. The rakshasas were prepared for his onslaught and Indrajit began his task of destructor. He saw that Hanuman was very happy and said, “Sita was the reason why your king Sugriva you and Rama with his brother came to Lanka. While you are looking on, I will this moment kill her. After killing her, I will kill all the others Rama, Lakshmana, Sugriva, that low minded Vibhishana and finally, you. You seem to be fond of teaching Dharma to others; that women should not be killed. I am telling you that anything done with a desire to hunt the enemy is right”. Indrajit laughed loudly and with a sharp sword he slashed at the weeping Sita. She fell on the terrace of the chariot and she was cut into two across the chest. Indrajit said, “Monkey look at the wife of your master who has been killed by the Sita is dead and all your efforts have gone waste”. Indrajit was roaring with triumph.

The vanara army was filled up with pain and they did not have the enthusiasm to fight with Indrajit. They ran in all directions unable to withstand the valour of many rakshasas. Hanuman tried to make them come back and fight. He led them and tried to continue the fight. With anger born of sorrow. Hanuman fought with great vigour and Indrajit. Seeing the confusion in his army caused by Hanuman came near and began to harass them.

Hanuman was despondent and said “come let us go back. There is no use in fighting any longer. To please Rama we have been fighting and Sita, sole cause of this war, has been killed. We will hasten to the presence of our king and Rama and tell them about what happened. We will wait for their instructions and proceed accordingly”. Hanuman the fearless walked slowly and with halting steps towards the presence of Rama and seeing him go away from his presence Indrajit left the field of battle.

THE YAGNA NIKUMBHILA

Indrajit believed in the power of yagnas as much he did in his own valour. He went to a tapovana called Nikumbhila. In that sacred grove, he kindled another fire. He sat before it his body bare and his demons around him. He fed the fire with ghee that had been purified with mantras. Like a fierce priest he was absorbed in his sacrifice, a flame himself and his ritual precise and flawless. He offered havis and the Agnibegan to blaze like a fragment of the sun.

Meanwhile back on the battlefield Rama heard the outcry from Hanuman's warriors. He sent Jambavan and another force of monkeys to the son of the wind. The battle around the western gate had been abandoned and Hanuman had just turned back. When Jambavan came lumbering up to him. Jambavan saw tears streamed down the vanara's face. Barely passing to greet the rakshasa, Hanuman said, "I must see Rama".

The last rakshasa had fled into the city and the massive gates clanged shut behind them. Hanuman came with Jambavan to where Rama and Sugriva sat. Bracing himself the vanara wiped his eyes and said as bravely as he could. 'There is terrible news my lord'.

Then he looked into Rama's face and could not go on. Sugriva cried "What is it? What is your news Hanuman?"

Choking, Hanuman said, 'Indrajit brought Sita to the field in his chariot. Before my eyes he killed her with his sword'.

Rama collapsed as if he had been cut down with an axe. The vanaras rushed to him. They sprinkled water on his face while Lakshmana held his brother's head in his lap. The dazed Lakshmana whispered "Dharma is of no use in this world. My brother has been a saviour to the munis of the forest. He killed thousands of rakshasas, so the holy ones live in peace. But his Dharma has not saved him from evil.

'And that monster Ravana still lives in his forest palace'.

Lakshmana's handsome features twists her in a dark rictus. He cried, 'Gentleness and Dharma are of no use in this world. But I swear Ravana will not live another day and his city will be ashes when I have finished with it. Rama, rouse yourself, the hour of revenge is upon us. Sita may be dead, but Ravana will not escape with his life'.

Rama lay unmoving. Then Vibhishana came up to them and when he saw Rama unconscious, wanted to know what had happened. Lakshmana sobbed, 'Indrajit murdered Sita on the battlefield'.

Vibhishana looked doubtful and asked 'Who brought this news'?

'Hanuman'

Still the good rakshasa was unperturbed "I know how much Ravana loves Sita. He would never let her to be killed. But then he grew thoughtful. The vanaras and Lakshmana hung on his every word and now, his silence. Suddenly, Vibhishana gave a cry Rouse yourselves, monkeys we must fly to Nikumbhila. Indrajit created a Maya Sita and killed her on the field to shock you. As you grieve over a death that has never been my spies have brought word that Indrajit has lit a fire at Nikumbhila. At this moment he sits at a Yagna that will make him invincible we must stop him, or the war is lost."

Rama's eyes fluttered open; He asked for water. He sat up and sobbed when he remembered Hanuman's news. But Vibhishana said, "Sita is not dead. Indrajit made a Maya Sita and killed her, so he could gain time for his Yagna. Ravana loves Sita so much to let a hair of her head be harmed. Indrajit would die if he dared touched her".

Rama smiled wanly, Vibhishana hurried on. "There is not a moment to lose. Indrajit already has Brahma astra and the horses the Pitamaha gave him. If he completes the Yagna at Nikumbhila, he will have invincibility as well. Then not you Rama or Lakshmana will be able to kill him and everything will be lost. Give me an army of Vanaras, Lakshmana come with me. Indrajit is the key to this war. Only he stands between us and victory. He must die and my heart insists that Lakshmana will be the one to kill him.

Rama said quietly 'Lakshmana go with Vibhishana. Kill Indrajit and bring us victory. MY brother this is the battle you have prepared for all your life. But be careful. Remember your enemy is a master of Maya. Go with my blessing sweet prince, your triumph at Nikumbhila will end this war for us'.

LAKSHMANA ACCOSTS INDRAJIT

Lakshmana took up his bow in his hand. He put on his armour and he prostrated, before his brother with reverence. He said, "Rama my god my arrows will leave my bow and rush towards Indrajit. They will pierce his chest and drink his blood." "Taking leave of Rama Lakshmana went meagerly

towards the place by name Nikumbhila where the yaga was being performed by Indrajit Vibhishana went with Lakshmana. He was joined by Jambavan and his army made of bears. Soon they reached Nikumbhila and he saw the army of rakshasas surrounding the place. Bow in hand Lakshmana went with resolute steps and his mind was bent on killing Indrajit.

Vibhishana said, ‘Let our army assail’ this army of rakshasa with their weapons made of trees and rocks. Let them concentrate on the destruction of any. When his army is in trouble. Indrajit will come out and his task will be incomplete you must begin to fight with him and do so before his yagna is completed. He is wicked and an adharmi. He has been harassing all the three worlds and you should be the one to kill him’.

Lakshmana took the advice of Vibhishana. The army of Indrajit was attacked fiercely attacked by the vanaras and soon they were at the mercy of the vanaras. Indrajit heard the commotion and he had to come out before he could complete the Yagna.

With his breathe coming in gasps, the angry prince emerged from the solitary spot Nikumbhila and ascended the chariot which was waiting for him. He took his bow in hand and with anger in his brow he looked like the God of death who has come to kill everyone who came within sight of him. Vibhishana ‘Indrajit is so angry that he looks like he is ready to kill everyone’.

The rakshasa army rushed to Indrajit and he saw Hanuman rushing towards them with a huge tree in his uplifted hand. Alone he was handling a small army and not one of them was left alive once he hit them with the tree. Indrajit went towards Hanuman and began to fight with him Vibhishana told Lakshmana. Indrajit is bent on killing Hanuman. Now is the time for you to accost the son of Ravana.

Vibhishana went with Lakshmana to where Indrajit was. He entered the forest where the yaga was being performed in secrete and Vibhishana showed it all to Lakshmana. He displayed the Vyagrodha tree and said, “Indrajit performs the sacrifices here and begins the fight after that every time. He becomes invincible to everyone before the beginning of the fight and he attacks the evening from a place of hiding whether it is from above the earth or from behind a bank of clouds. Now it is the time for you to display your valour and kill him.”

Lakshmana twanged the string of his bow as if to say “Yes” Indrajit came to the presence of Lakshmana and he was well equipped with all the arrangements for a fight.

Lakshmana called out to him and said “I am challenging you to fight with me. I am waiting for you”.

Indrajit has no option but to accept the challenge. He could not complete the yaga at Nikumbhila. His eyes were crimson with wrath and they were fixed in Vibhishana and he said, “You were born here in Lanka and you have eaten the saita of Lanka. You are the brother of the king, my father you happen to be my uncle and you have dared to betray me to the enemy. How could you do it ? You are a killer of Dharma. You are evil minded. You have no sense of loyalty you have no goodness in you and your king fold mean nothing to you. Your brother is not dear to you foolish as you are, you have abandoned your people and you have found refuge in the enemy’s camp. You have become the bonded slave of the enemy. I fell story for you since you have won the censure of the world of men. People in aftertimes will condemn you for your action.”

‘Being true to one’s clan is one thing and to be friendly with a small minded stranger is quite another. You are not just friendly with them. Your shattered mind does not seem to grasp the difference between the two. The enemy may be superior and one’s our people may be in the wrong. But loyalty to one’s kith and kin is far better than being faithful to the enemy. One who abandon’s one’s our people and adopt the other as his, will certainly be destroyed once the enemy is victorious.

“My dear uncle you are a blot on the name of our house listen to me that Rama is pretending to be friendly with you since it serves his purpose to do so. He wants to know all the secrets of our army and conquer us if he can. If he manages to do so, he will then kill you are the brother of Ravana and it follows that you will be considered to be his enemy by Rama. This heartlessness. Which I find in you is possible only for you. It is cruel and it is part of you I can say nothing more.”

Vibhishana spoke back. “You are the wicked son of a king who is wicked. You do not know anything about me and about my behaviour you think you are wiser and rant at will shed this arrogance I grant that I have been born in the home of rakshasaas. But my instincts have never been in conformity with those of a rakshasa. They are more all in to those of a human being. I am never pleased with violence and adharama has never attracted me. My brother behaved in a sinful manner and why did he send me away from him ? A righteous man should avoid one who is an adharmi even as one fling away a serpent which has collided coiled itself around one’s wrist. Violence stealing

the wise of another, stealing what belong to another, lusting after other women are all be shunned like one runs away from a house on fire. The wise have said so. These sins are but the fore runner of one's destruction.

“All these many years my brother has revelled in sin. He has enjoyed in killing rishis and he has fought with the Devas. His anger and his arrogance are proverbial. He has never followed the path of Dharma. I abandoned my brother, your father, for the simple reason that I could not live with his unrighteousness. You revel in performing wicked deeds and the noose of death is on your neck already. Say what you wish to me, I am unconcerned.”

Danger has approached you and you will never reach the vicinity of the Nyagrodha tree. You will not escape death at the hands of Lakshmana come fight with him and if you are killed you will reach the heavens meant for heroes who die on the battlefield. Once the arrow of Lakshmana is aimed at you not all of your army will be able to save you from certain death. You are not going back to the city alive. I am certain of that.

THE END OF INDRAJIT

Hissing like an angry cobra. Indrajit mounted his chariot. Hanuman appeared at Lakshmana's side and lightly lifted the Kshatriya onto his shoulders. The horses Brahma had given Indrajit shone like silver in the mid morning sun. The rakshasa cried 'foolish mortal, have you forgotten how you and your brother twice lay in a sworn of death ? No one can save you from me three times'.

But Lakshmana was calm how this moment of fate was upon him. He said quietly "Brave words and deeds are not the same thing". "Besides each time you came to battle you came invincibly only cowards fight like that, because they are afraid of their enemy and afraid to die. Let me see your valour now that we are face to face."

Before he had finished speaking. Indrajit shot a clutch of searing arrows at him. They covered his fair body in a blossoming of blood. With a cry Lakshmana looked fire narachas at the rakshasas. They stung Indrajit and he roared, but they did not wound him gravely.

On they fought, the prince of Lanka and the Prince of Ayodhya. Both were quick as light both were masters of archery. Like two lions for the

lordship of a jungle, they battled. Soon astras flared from their bows and lit up the hillside as if other suns had risen in the sky.

Arrows stuck in each one's body and blood flowed richly from their wounds. They fought on unmindful upon the edge of death. The forest was hushed at the sound of their bowstrings and all the rakshasas, vanaras and reekhas around them grew still as if they realized how pointless their lesser contention were. They stood gazing at the mythic duel. And it seemed primeval phalanxes fought from the two prince's bodies; timeless legions of darkness and light.

A herd of subtle shafts from Lakshmana's magic quiver clipped the joints of Indrajits like a snakes skin the light silver mail fell away from the demon's Prince's body. Crouching bared, Indrajit shot twenty arrows in a blur, at not only Lakshmana, but how, at Vibhishana as well. Taken unawares, Vibhishana was struck down. He bore no arms 'against his friend. He bore no arms against his nephew. But he recovered quickly and plucked second the barbs from him. Yet his cry of pain distracted Lakshmana for a moment. In a flash Indrajit shot his armour away, also and he was as unprotected as his adversary.

By now Vibhishana had joined the fray. He killed a hundred rakshasas but not an arrow did he shoot at his brother's son. Blind and deaf to everything around them, save each other and their missiles. Lakshmana and Indrajit fought on war was their art, they were masters, absorbed in their arcane crafts. Both were so far above any other warrior there, that only the Princes themselves, one of the grace and the other of evil fathomed the diminutions of their dual. This was a trial of superior wells; a contention of two great spirits to the death of one.

The wind did not stir when Indrajit and Lakshmana dwelled at Nikumbhila the birds and beasts of the forest were hushed. Slowly an unnatural twilight fell on that place because the very sky was veiled with arrows. They loosed their shafts with the swiftness of inspiration and both warriors were hardly visible for their speed. Indrajit fought from the air and the ground and when he flew up Hanuman rose with him. Until the demon saw that fighting from the sky was no advantage to him; the son of the wind was quicker through the air than his magic horses.

Not merely that forest on island, but all the earth held its breath when those Princes fought. In the deepest jungles and on the most exalted faraway mountains fires of sacrifice flickered and died down, when Indrajit and Lakshmana dwelled on Lanka.

Then as if with strength and will he had saved for this moment Lakshmana struck Indrajits' horses with eight scorching arrows; so they whinnied in agony and blood spurted from their flanks. As those fire steeds faltered from a moment Lakshmana killed Indrajit's charioteer with another shaft through his heart with a curse. Indrajit leapt on to the charioteer head. Thrusting his dead Saradhy out of the way he seized the fallen reigns and drove the silver horses himself, while in the same hand that had the reigns, he held his bow and covered Lakshmana with fire.

But now, Ravana's sons prowess was circumscribed and the vanaras jumped on to his horse's backs. Indrajit could not hold them off while he fought Lakshmana and drove the chariot at once, With fangs, nails, mighty sinews and rocks, the monkeys killed Indrajit's horses.

Night fell on the jungle. No one saw here Indrajit melted into it, and vanished back to the city of Lanka. Lakshmana killed a thousand rakshasas. While his eyes always sought their prince. His lie was risen now; Indrajit and he had battled at the ends of their genius. It was a tide in him, the spirit of that elegant and mortal duel and Lakshmana could hardly contain it.

Fortunately for his rakshasas Indrajit traveled on a wizard's feet to Lanka. He did not tarry there for even a moment; no one saw him come or go. He mounted another chariot fleet as the one the monkeys had destroyed. It was yoked to horses as marvelous as those were that had died; Brahma had given him a whole stable of them.

Like, Yama's wrath the rakshasa flew back into battle. In fury at what they had done to his horses he fell wildly on the monkeys. He killed countless vanaras, before Lakshmana stood before him again and drew his fire fortune smiled on Lakshmana for an instant and he broke Indrajit's bow in his hands.

But quick as fear, Indrajit picked up another bow and loosed a sizzle of arrows at Vibhishana and Hanuman. Having exhausted the lesser astras having gauged one another the two archers now summoned more powerful weapons Indrajit invoked a pale of shaft of death, a yamastra and shot it at Lakshmana. But Lakshmana cut it down with a febrile weapon of the mountain Yakshas; great Kuberas astra, joined in momentous flames, the two Ayudhas plunged into the sea to be extinguished in the deep, after hours.

Lakshmana invoked the Varunastra of cold and watery death. But Indrajit met it with a fiery Roudra; screaming in the sky the put each other out

and fellow great ashes to the earth. Lakshmana looked the Agneyastra of a thousand flames but his enemy's called Suryastra erupted against it. Fire consumed fire on high and both subsided.

Indrajit fitted an asurastra to his bowstring a demoniacal weapon and close to his heart; it was the astra of his race. But Lakshmana met it with a Maheswarastra as it came keening at him and smashed it into shards of darkness. It was each other's knowledge as much as each other's strength and quickness the two warriors plumbed; their Gyana of the Devastras for every Suryastra would not put out every Agneyastra not would all Maheswarastra's cut down any Asurastra, Agneyastra. Myriad were the astras and infinite their variety. Only the greatest archers, who had instructed in their lore by the most knowing gurus could match one another missile for missile as Lakshmana and Indrajit did. Only those blessed by the guardians of the occult weapons could survive a dual like this one for as long as these princes did.

Unseen in the ethereal Akasa, the fifth element, the rishis and the Pitras gathered in the sky and poured down their blessings in subtle waves over Lakshmana, who fought like a lion before them. He heard a voice in his heart whispering urgently to him, "The moment of his death has come. Summon the astra of the king of the Devas; kill him with Indras weapon".

Lakshmana invoked the Indrastra, reluctant ayudha. He whispered a fierce prayer "If it is true Rama has never strayed from Dharma let this arrow have Indrajit life in my brother's name".

Clearing the darkness, lighting the faces of the ancestors and the sages with unearthly luster, the astra fared from Lakshmana's bow. And Indrajit had no answer to it. It took his lean head from his neck in a scarlet flash and his scream echoed through the shocked forest. When the light of the astra faded the severed head lay on the red earth of Lanka like a golden lotus sprouted from the soil.

The vanaras triumphant roaring shok. Ravana's palace and fell on Rama's ears across the mountain. Like the sun fallen to earth's Indrajit's head lay glowing in death a star burned down. His pale body lay apart, like the moon cursed by Daksha to wane forever. Wailing the rakshasas fled back to Ravana on his lonely throne, to tell him his last hope had been dashed.

Once Mandodari's brilliant son had brought Indra himself, bound in hoops of fire to Lanka. He had paraded the Lord of the Devas through Lanka. Today Indrajit lay dead his head plucked from his body by Indra's astra.

RAMA'S JOY

Vibhishana and Hanuman with Jambavan were thrilled with the achievement of Lakshmana. It was no mean task he had performed and the heavens were raining flowers on him. He stood his body covered by blood and the string of his bow was still vibrating after the arrow had left it. The entire army stood around him and there were shouts of joy from everywhere. The heavens were filled up with all the celestials and they knew that the task of Rama had been almost accomplished Ravan was the only one left and Rama would soon kill him. This was the feeling in the mind of every one of those in the heavens and a feeling of relief was to be found everywhere.

Drenched with blood Lakshmana stood in the field of battle and Hanuman with Vibhishana and Jambavan stood beside him. There was a look of triumph on the face of each one of them. And thus they went to the presence of Rama and the entire army went with them Hanuman led Lakshmana holding his hand and they went to Rama. Lakshmana fell at the feet of Rama and stood by his side even as Indra would beside Bruhaspathi. His breath was coming in gasps and he told Rama about the killing of Indrajit, Vibhishana went to Rama and he told Rama their Indrajit was dead.

Rama's joy knew no bounds. He was thrilled that his beloved Lakshmana had achieved what had seemed to be an impossible task. He embraced his brother and said, "Child, Lakshmana, what you have done today is the greatest thing that could ever be achieved by anyone in battle. I am pleased with you. With the death of Indrajit victory which was somewhere in the dim future had come suddenly within easy reach of us". The noble minded Rama took Lakshmana on his lap and embraced him much to his embarrassment. He treated him as he would a young child which had done exceedingly clever. He looked again and again at the body of his brother and stroked him with his lovely hands. He shed tears at the sight of many wounds on the body of Lakshmana and he was greatly affected by it, "brother, Ravana when he hears about the death of his son will be as good as dead. I have already tasted victory because of your valour. To Ravana to death of Indrajit will be losing his right arm. He was Ravana's greatest strength. Hanuman and Vibhishana have done so much for you and helped you to be successful in your endeavour.

"Three days and three nights have been spent in opposing this Indrajit. He was so powerful it was unbelievable. Ravana is at the moment getting ready to come out to fight with me, I think".

"He will come out to the field of battle. He will be heart broken at the death of his son. Ravana is a powerful opponent. I know that. But his

sprint is gone along with Indrajit and he will be easily killed by one. Sita will come back to me soon and I will again Lord of the world”.

Rama was greatly excited and his words spoken of gladness and his unusual expressions of joy. He sent for Sushena, the physician and told him, “Sushena, my beloved brother Lakshmana, as you can see has been wounded. Use your physic and help him to be rid of the discomfort and pain arising from his many wounds. Vibhishana has also been hurt and so is Hanuman. Several of our any have to be attended to”.

Sushena used herbs to assuage the pain which was Lakshmana suffering and the pain very soon disappeared and Lakshmana was his usual self.

Rama breathed a sign of relief after seeing Lakshmana will and full of his usual enthusiasm and they spoke in detail about his manner of fighting. Rama embraced him again and again.

WRATH

Ravana’s ministers did not know how to break the news to their king. When they stood wordlessly before him, he fixed them in a grace and said, “Speak! What have you come to say”?

“Lord Indrajit fought Rama’s brother at Nikumbhila. He made the human’s body a home for his arrows. Lakshmana was covered in his own blood”.

‘Your son fought Hanuman and Vibhishana’. A slow smile appeared on Ravana’s face. ‘How did Lakshmana die’?

But the ministers made no reply. Ravana cried “Did Rama’s brother escape with life, that your stand so silent ? Tell me”.

They said in a whisper. “The dual was fierce and even, Lord but at last Lakshmana killed your son Indrajit has been gathered too his fathers”.

For a moment, was there such silence in that court you could hear the heartbeats of those who stood in it. Then a long wail burst from Ravana. Again and again he uttered his son’s name as if to call him back from the dead;

until compassionate nature intervened and Ravana slumped from his throat in a faint. They let him lie for a while before they dared fetch water and sprinkle his face with it. Crying his son's name, the rakshasa awoke from oblivion into a night mare, the ruin that was his life.

He recovered consciousness after a long time and overcome with grief he mourned the death of his son. 'Ah my son! Best of all the chariot warriors! Finest of the rakshasas you even defeated Indra, how could have you fallen to Lakshmana ? When you were angry you could pierce the peaks of Mount Mandara vanquish even time and death! What was Lakshmana compared to that! The man who dries in the service of his king goes straight to heaven. This is the path taken by great warriors even among the gods.

'Now that Indrajit has been killed the gods, immortals and the guardians of the earth shall sleep without fear! But the three world and the earth with all its forests seem empty to me without Indrajit! I shall hear rakshasa women in the inner apartments weeping piteously over his death. Where have you gone my son leaving your mother me, and your wife ? Why have you left us when Rama, Lakshmana and Sugriva are still alive when the thorn in my side remains.'

Ravana's grief turned into a bitter, all consuming rage as he mourned. His face already fearsome, became truly terrifying and he seemed unapproachable as Siva. Angry tears fell from his eyes like scalding oil from burning lamps. He ground his teeth and the sound filled the air like thunder. He blazed like the doomsday fire and as he looked around, rakshasas ran from him in terror. No one dared come near him as he stood there looking like death.

Hoping to inspire the rakshasas to fight again Ravana roared "I have practiced fierce austerities for thousands of tears and I have propitiated Brahma! And because he was pleased with me ? I have never had to fear the gods for the asuras, Brahma gave, me armor that shines like 'the sun, which cannot be pierced by the weapons of gods I stand here in my chariot who would dare oppose me now ? Brahma also gave me a magnificent bow and arrows to use in the wars with gods. Bring them to me and I shall use them to kill Rama and Lakshmana".

Thousand and thousands of rakshasas with their horses and chariots blazed like fine and decorated with colourful banners had been destroyed. Heroic rakshasas who could change their shapes at will had been killed by Rama's arrows which were swift and sharp and adorned with gold.

Utterly demoralized the surviving rakshasas gathered along with the widows and wives, mothers, sisters and children of those that have been killed. Overcome with grief, they came together to mourn weeping and wailing “Why did that ugly Surpanakha that pot bellied hag, attach herself to Rama in the forest ? He is as beautiful as the god of live young and string and intent on the welfare of all creatures. How could that deformed creature with no virtues at all throw herself at that honourable and handsome man”.

“Unfortunately, her actions led to the killing of the raksha as well as Khara and Dhushana which led to the deadly enmity with Ravana. He abducted Sita and that will be the cause of his death. Sita will never accept Ravana! Now he has an invincible foe in Rama. We need no further displays of Rama’s strength and valour”.

“It is Siva, Vishnu or Indra perhaps death itself that has come to claim us in the form of Rama! Rama has killed all our mighty warriors and we have lost all hopes of living! We see no end to our fears and so we wail together.”

‘Ravana has been given boons in the battle and he remains oblivious to the threat that Rama poses. Not the gods, nor the Gandharvas nor the Pisachas nor the rakshasas can save a man whom Rama has targeted portents of doom have appeared in battle after battle and they surely mean that Rama will kill Ravana! Brahma gave Ravana immunity from gods. Danavas and rakshasas but he is not protected from mortals. The end for Ravana and the rakshasa has arrived in the form of a man.

“When the gods were harassed by the rakshas, they appealed to Brahma and he promised them that a woman would be born to destroy all rakshasas. Urged by the gods, Sita is bound to cause the annihilation of the rakshasas. Ravana’s terrible deeds and unrighteous behaviour have brought this catastrophe upon us. Where can we take refuge ? No one can protect us from Rama just as there is no protection from the deluge at the end of time.”

The rakshasas clung together and wept their hearts filled with fear. Ravana could hear the sad sounds of rakshasis wailing and weeping from all over Lanka. He sighed heavily and remained lost in thought for a while but then his anger returned and he was terrifying to behold. He bit his lips and his eyes blazed red. He seemed like the doomsday fire and even the rakshasas were afraid of to look at him. “Tell Mahaparsva, Mahodara and Virupaksha to get the forces ready for battle immediately” he roared.

When those rakshasas came Ravana had controlled himself. He said to them softly but with intense purpose. "I am going to with. I will cover the sun and the moon, the sky and the earth with arrows. Let those who will, that remain alive cane with me. I do not command it. I Ravana ask it. I am going to avenge Kumbhakarna and Prahastha, Atikaya and Indrajit with my own hands. I will wipe the tears of every woman in Lanka who weeps. I will avenge every rakshasa who has died for me. Tell them not a vanara shall live, nor Rama or his brother, not Vibhishana, Hanuman or Sugriva or any of the others. Those of you who will march gladly with me came!"

He strapped on his armour, light as mist. He strode out from his Sabha and into the sun, where his chariot waited for him, with piles of bows and arrows laid in it. Not a living rakshasa stayed behind in Lanka, when Ravana went to battle. Every demon went with his king; even the wounded went back to fight for long ages he had brought them glory and they would share death with him before they betrayed his trust.

As soon as he came out into the sun, his anxiety and sorrow fell away like shreds of night. This was the hour of reckoning and the rakshasas was a great warrior. He did not fear battle. He loved it only the waiting had been unendurable.

Awesome Ravana stood up tall in his radha to wave his last army. In one voice the rakshasas roared his name "Jaya, they thundered, Jaya, Ravana".

RAVANA SETS OUT TO THE FIELD OF BATTLE

Ravana approached the chariot which was drawn by eight horses. It was a very fast moving chariot and it was gleaming like a thousand suns. It was like fire which was lit in the sacrifice and Ravana ascended the Radha. Surrounded by the large army Ravana set out to fight with Rama. Mahodara Mahaparsva and Virupaksha also took their chariots and went with him. Ravana's anger was like that of Yama at the time of the great Pralaya and he went fast towards the battlefield. He emerged out of the city and the sun lost all his brilliance. Evil omens were seen. There was a sudden darkness enveloping the four quarters. The birds were all screaming discordantly and the earth quaked clouds were raining drops of blood and the horses tripped and fell. An eagle flew out of nowhere and sat on the banner of Ravana's chariot entirely hiding the Veena which was etched on it. Jackals were howling. Ravana's left hand and left eye throbbed. His face did not have its customary glow and his

voice was suddenly hoarse. All the omens were indications of death in the battlefield. He was unconcerned and he proceeded fast.

The vanara army knew that another army had arrived because of the sound made by its chariots and by the clash of weapons. The fight began in no time. Ravana was fighting like one inspired. His arrows were emerging from his bow like rays from the sun and they were scorching the vanaras. No one was able to face his fury and valour. The vanaras ran away from him like elephants from a forest which caught fire. He has like strong wind which scattered clouds. Soon he was facing Rama.

Sugriva was assisted by Sushena in rearranging army and he was engaged in fighting with the army. The rakshasa army was made to realize the prowess of Sugriva. Virupaksha came to the aid of his men. A dual was fought between him and Sugriva. They fought for a longtime and both were great fighters. But finally with a blow from his open palms, Sugriva killed Virupaksha.

Like the waters of a lake become less and less with the advance of summer even so, as time went on the army on both sides was getting diminished in number.

Slowly Ravana began to realize that fate was siding with Rama; that the gods were favoring him. Or else, how could this all have happened ? He saw the great warrior Virupaksha killed by a blow from the palm of that monkey Sugriva. This was a thing which had seen to be believed. He called Mahodara and asked him to take over where Virupaksha had left.

Like a moth rushing towards a flame Mahodara went towards the army of monkeys with a desire to annihilate it. Sugriva was the one who faced him when he saw the harm which Mahodara was causing his men. They fought for a long time and finally Sugriva caught hold of a sword. Holding it in his powerful hand he cut off the head of Mahodara and it fell on the ground like a ripe fruit which can no longer stay on the tree. Rama heard the triumphant cry and pleased with the prowess of his friend. Mahaparsva tried to win where his companion was lost. A portion of vanara army was attacked by him and armed as they were with but trees and rocks, they could not brook the arrows and Javelins and other dreadful weapons used by him and associates.

He was a great archer and his valour was great. They could not bear it. They were being killed in large numbers.

Angada came to the rescue of his men. Jambavan joined him and he broke the chariot of Mahaparsva. Angada fought valiantly for long time and so did the rakshasas. Finally Angada killed him with a powerful hit from his fist. Panic set in the army of Ravana and within a moment he realized with the happy cry of the vanaras whose king and Prince had dispatched three of commanders to the abode of Yama.

Ravana hurried towards Rama in his chariot. He had seen the death of his three warriors who had come with him and he was furious. He spoke to his charioteer "I will end the misery in my Lanka by killing these brothers who have been wreaking such havoc in my army. Take me soon to where they are".

Ravana was once again in the front of Rama. He did not want to remember the previous encounter when he had fared so badly. It was like a bad dream to him, to be forgotten as soon as possible. Ravana dispatched an astra which was enough to frighten the vanaras. It had been given to him by Brahma and the army was being burnt with it. Rama came to where Ravana was. Ravana saw him with his brother and to him he looked Narayana with Indra by his side.

Rama was leaning against his glorious bow. He seemed to be towering up to the skies so powerful was the effect of his stance. His lotus eyes were trained on Ravana and his magnificent arms were strong and powerful. The anger on the brow of Ravana was seen by Rama and he grasped his brow firmly in his hand. The valiant Rama whose fame was known to all the three worlds was seeing the havoc caused by the astra of Ravana. He saw too that Ravana had come him straight with a desire to challenge him. Rama was very happy that the encounter was sought by Ravana.

Rama strung his bow and he began to send his sharp arrows towards him. The twanging of his bow was heard by all. Ravana replied with his arrows and soon there ensued a serious fight between the two. Ravana was not willing to be disturbed by Lakshmana. He passed him by and went to Rama. Rama was only too happy to meet him. They fought for a long while and the sight was pleasing to those who were watching them. The brightness of the arrows and the speed were like flashes of lightning streaking across the sky during the raining season. The sky was hidden by clouds; so dense was the rain of arrows from their bows. Both were great archers both were well versed in the art of fighting. Both were proficient in the knowledge of astras and the fight was glorious.

Rama invoked the mantra and sent the astra by name Rudra and it could not penetrate the armour of Ravana. Again Rama tried another astra and that again proved futile. They were countered by Ravana and they entered the earth. Ravana now dispatched the astra by name Asura and his arrows assumed the forms of wild and dangerous animals and began to harass Rama. Rama sent the Agneyastra which was enough to burn them all up.

The vanaras had all assembled and they stood watching the dual cheering whenever the astras of Ravana proved over by Maya was sent by Ravana and this was rendered useless by Rama. The dual went on and neither was able to gain ascendancy over the other Gaandharvas was used by Rama and this was bought by Ravana sending the Suryastra. The sky and earth were glowing with the many circlets of light emerging from the bow of Ravana. Each was like a miniature sun and the entire army looked at them in wonder.

Lakshmana was impatient to fight with Ravana and he came with his bow. He sent several arrows with a desire to wound Ravana and the fight began now between Lakshmana and Ravana. Lakshmana was able to fell the banner of Ravana's chariot and charioteer too. He broke the bow of Ravana Vibhishana rushed up and killed the horses of the chariot. Ravana's anger against his brother was unbearable. He jumped down from his chariot and took up a Shakthi and hurled it at Vibhishana. Lakshmana stopped it halfway. Ravana now took up a Shakthi which was endowed with divine powers. It was more powerful than yawn. He twirled it in his mighty arms and Lakshmana rushed towards Vibhishana and stood shielding him from Ravana's Sakthi, which he had flung in wrath against his brother. Lakshmana bought with his bow and arrows and Ravana decided that he should put an end to Lakshmana's and his prowess. He said, "Vibhishana, no doubt been saved by you. But you will not be able to escape the fury of my Sakthi. I have now hurled it at you. It will this moment suck the life out of you after splitting your chest". Ravana roared with anger and hurled at Lakshmana. It had been made by Maya and it had never failed to claim a victim. It came towards Lakshmana and it was fearsome like a thunderbolt. Rama said, "May the Sakthi lose its potency. May it leave my brother unhunt".

The Sakthi entered the chest of Lakshmana and it was like a dread serpent entering the hole which is its home. Lakshmana was wounded in the chest by it and he fell down senseless. Rama was watching him fall and he was greatly upset by the fall of Lakshmana. Tears sprang to his eyes and he was wild with anger. He knew that it was not the time to be angry and he fought with Ravana and at the same time minded his brother whom he loved with a deep intense love. His mind was in turmoil and he saw blood gushing from the wound in the chest of Lakshmana. The Shakthi had pierced Lakshmana and had

afterward entered the earth. Rama could not contain himself. He went and tried to pull out the Shakthi out and when he pulled it with his hands Ravana was all the while sending arrows at Rama and they hurt him.

Rama was unconcerned about his own pain but he embraced Lakshmana and taking in his arms, he said, “Hanuman, Sugriva come here and protect my brother. This wicked Ravana who seems to be the personification of evil has to be killed. Like the chataka bird which has been aching for rain during the arid months, it thrilled at the sight of the rain cloud darkening the sky, my heart leaps up at the sight of this man who will be the cause for the display of my valour. I assure of a truth this world will have either Rama or the Ravana. Two of us cannot live in the same world. Two swords cannot be placed in the same scabbard with the death of Ravana all my sorrows will be forgotten. The loss of my kingdom the life in the forest the wandering in the Dandaka, the separation from Sita the opposition of the rakshasa and how this great sorrow, this pain like torture in hells will all vanish once Rama is killed. This vanara army was collected for the sore aim of killing him. Vali was killed and Sugriva was installed on the throne for the sole purpose of killing Ravana. It is for the killing of this sinner that the bridge was built across the sea. Now that he is here before me and now he has come within my sight he can never hope to escape from me. I ask you are to assemble on the top of the hill and from there you can watch the fight between me and my dearest enemy; the Devas and the Gandharvas and all the celestials will see what it is that mauls Rama a hew. Till the worlds stand, till the earth stands above the sea, so long as the living things in habit the earth and the three worlds the war between me and Ravana will be talked about. I will complete my task successfully.

Rama began to fight with renewed vigour. The encounter was as fierce as it was before and the spectators heard only the twanging of their bowstrings and the swish of their arrows as they hissed in the air. Ravana was tired and he was tortured by the many arrows which had tips of gold and which hunt like living bore.

Ravana left the field and there was great rejoicing at his discomfiture. Rama was in a way, relieved that Ravana went away from there since he could devote all his attention to Lakshmana who was still unconscious. He asked Sushena, “Sushena, as you saw, Lakshmana has been hunt by Ravana’s Sakthi. He is dear to me and my heart is not in the fight when my brother is suffering. I have neither will nor the desire to devote all my time an attention on Ravana. If this brother of mine should die what will be the use of my living after that ? I have no wish to live nor do I desire any happiness if he should die. My valour has gone to sleep and the bow slips from my nerveless hands. My arrows are scattered all over the place and I cannot even aim

properly. Tears dim my eyes and my limbs are beyond control like those of a man still wandering in the world of dreams. My concern is great since Lakshmana has not been able to wake up from his faint. I have made up my mind to kill myself”.

SANJIVINI

Rama sat sighing helplessly beside his unconscious brother. He sobbed Lakshmana’s name, crying where would he find another brother like him. It seemed Ravana had won his war when he struck Lakshmana down.

But Sushena said, “Lakshmana is not dead. Here feel his hands, Rama; there is life in them, buried in a deep slumber. Besides his is not the face of one who has a short life on earth. Lakshmana has the face surely as you and I are”.

Sushena looked up. Among the vanara chieftains thronging around stood Hanuman. He was calm, ready to be of service. Sushena said to him, “only Vaishalya karani can heal the wound and bring Lakshmana back to us. Hurry, Hanuman, bring the Oashadhi or bring the mountain again”.

The son of the wind grew vast the more and sacred continent, the vanara he came and landed for the second time upon the little mountain, also called Sanjivani. It was daylight now and he could see the plants of healing, some shaped like tiny men, others like little stars. He breathed their scents and felt his body begin to glow with new strength and hope like magic in his blood. But not by daylight could Hanuman be sure which of the glowing plants was Vaisalyakarani.

Once more, bracing himself and growing big as the half of the sky Hanuman picked up the mountain by its roots and flew through the air with it. Some day Sanjivani mountain allowed him to pick up so easily because in its primeval heart it remembered the younger days of the earth, when all mountains had wings and flew through the air; the days before Indra severed their wings with Vajra of a thousand joints.

Hanuman flew back to Lanka with the mountain in his hands. Lanka rocked when he set the Sanjivani down in her shores Sushena ran up those cold slopes with Hanuman and his knowing eyes soon picked out the Vaishalyakarani. Sushena crushed the man shaped herbs between his fingers and held them under Lakshmana’s nose, where breath still came and went

faintly. The monkeys saw the yawning wound in Lakshmana's chest close like a flower at dusk. They saw its every trace vanish from his skin.

Lakshmana stirred; his eyes flew open. He jumped to his feet and reached for his bow as if he was still in the thick of battle.

With a cry Rama hugged his brother. "I thought you were gone! What would I have done? What Kingdom or victory not having Sita back and would have meant anything to me. I would have killed myself if you had died".

Lakshmana frowned to hear him. He said, "You should not yield to grief like an ordinary man. Your mission in this world is not an ordinary man's".

As long as his brother lived, Rama was prepared to listen to anything from him. He hugged Lakshmana again, laughing in great joy, humoring him as one does a sweet and solemn child. But Lakshmana said gravely 'Listen Rama, in my swoon, I saw many wonderful dreams and omens challenge Ravana today. You must kill him before the day is over. Tomorrow is Amavasya when the moon's face is hidden by the shadow of the earth. Tomorrow is the day of the rakshasa's great strength.'

Meanwhile Hanuman lifted the mountain out of the sea again and flew with it to the Himalayas. But before he went, ten thousand monkeys, killed in battle today rose from the dead and were ready again for the Dharma Yuddha the war of the truth. Their shouts of Rama, Sugriva, Jaa, Jaya filled the air.

A great ocean conch booming drowned the monkeys shouting. The gates of Lanka flew open. Clad in dark blue silk, with a new saradhy holding his horses reins, Ravana rode into battle again, as if in response to Lakshmana's wish.

THE FINAL ENCOUNTER

Ravana was facing Rama and the words of Lakshmana were still ringing in the ears of Rama. He took up his bow from the string poured forth a stream of deadly arrows fearful enough to search the world. Ravana had taken another chariot and he was as glorious as the sun in his chariot yoked with the seven horses and steered by Aruna. Ravana's arrows were equally deadly and each was like the Vajra of Indra. Rama's arrows tripped with gold were flowing in a continuous stream and the fight was a glorious for sight to watch. The skies

were filled with the celestials who had assembled to see for the fight for which they had been waiting ever since Narayana had promised them deliverance. They exclaimed “This is an unequal fight Ravana was riding in a chariot while Rama is standing on the ground. Rama should have a chariot too”.

Indra agreed and summoned Matali, his charioteer. He asked him to take his chariot to the earth and ask him to take his chariot to the earth and ask Rama to ascend it. All as a sudden the divine chariot was found on the field of battle. It was a chariot wrought with gold. Several bells tinkled at the edge of the roof. Gems of translucent luster glistened on the pillars of the chariot. There was a profusion of charanas and the famed green horses were yoked it, horses which were decorated with garlands of gold.

Matali approached Rama and said “Rama, Indra the lord of the heavens, has sent this chariot to be of use to you. It will help you win the war. This bow also been sent to you along with there arrows which are like the rays of the sun. Indra has sent you his Shakthi. Valiant one I will steer the horses as you wish and help you to conquer this Ravana even as Indra did the asuras.”

Rama looked at the chariot and then at Lakshmana. They both smiled years back when they were paying a visit to Sharabhanga. And again Agastya had told them that Indra would send his chariot to Rama when the need arose. Both the brothers remembered this and to them it was a good omen since the gods were favouring them in their struggle with Ravana.

Rama, who made the entire world glow with his radiance, went towards the chariot and after making a Pradakshina to it, he ascended it with great humility.

Both the chariots stood facing each other and the sight thrilled those who were looking in. The fight was to begin.

Ravana took up the Gandharvastra and dispatched it and Rama took the same astra to counteract its effect. Devastra was used against Devastra. Ravana felt angry and he sent the astra Rakshasa. The arrows as soon as they left the bow, became poisonous serpents and hissed at Rama. Their faces were like flames and they were spitting poison. They were like Vasuki and their hoods were gleaming and all the quarters were filled with myriads of snakes Rama leaped with excitement and with a faint smile on his lips, he invoke Garuda and sent the astra towards the Rakshasa’s astra. The gold tipped arrows from Rama’s bow became each a Garuda and they sought out the serpent and destroyed them. Ravana now shot several sheap arrows at Rama and with some he hurt Matali. The banner of Indra’s chariot was felled with a single arrow of

Ravana's and he aimed some mere of them at the horses. The celestials were unhappy at the turn of events and they could not but admire the valour of Ravana Rama was also hurt because of some of the arrows of Ravana and this caused consternation and sorrow in the minds of Vibhishana and others. The heavenly rishis were also unhappy. The sea became turbulent and the waves which rose up from the were so high that they seemed to be trying to reach the sky's. The sun lost his glow and he seemed oppressed by Dhumakatu. He looked fierce. The planet Mars tried to touch the star Visakha which was presided over by Indra and Agni which was the family star of the kings' of the Ishvaku to. He was furious at his own frustration and with his brows knit in anger and his eyes red he glared at Ravana as though he would burn him with his eyes. The world trembles at the sight of Rama in his anger. The mountain were shaking in anger and the lions and tigers in them were frightened to.

The birds and beats wandered around in fear. The sky was filled with evil omens and the sight of them and the form in Rama's face made Ravana pause for a while in uncertainty. The gods were watching the encounter with eager faces and the asuras blessed Ravana while the Devas were accompanied by the Divine rishis when they said, "May you be victorious to Rama."

Ravana in the meantime decided to put an end to the life of Rama. He took up a trident in his hand. It was strong as Vajra. It was a great weapon. Capable of any enemy of Ravana. It was fearful to look with sharp points and smoke was emerging from it. It was like the personification of the god of fire. No one could to near it and even Yama could not withstand it. The world trembled at the sight of it. Ravana took it and held it firmly in his hand. He roared with excitement and the sound was echoed from everywhere.

The trident left Ravana's hand and went fast towards Rama. Like lightning it streaked across the air and the noise was like thunder. Rama bent his bow and sent arrows to break the trident which was speeding towards him. At the end of the yuga when the great Pralaya occupies the world a great fire will be seen and a great deluge will ocean too. Even so, Ravana's trident which was full of fire was met by a main of arrows from the bow of Rama. The arrows were all burnt by the trident. Rama saw his arrows turning to ashes and the sight incensed by him. He took the Shakthi which Indra had sent him with Matali and grasping it firmly in his right hand he hurled it in the air. The skies glowed with the brilliance of the Shakthi. The trident and the Shakthi met in mid-air. The trident was broken by the Shakthi and it fell on the ground, its fire quenched. There was joy in the hearts of the vanaras in the army.

Rama then armed his arrows at the horses of Ravana's chariot and he hurt Ravana in the forehead with three arrows. His body was covered with blood and he stood undaunted looking like Ashoka tree in full bloom. He was very much hurt by Rama's arrows and his hanger mounted. Again there were arrows from their bows aimed at each other and the fight went on.

After some time Rama spoke. He said, 'You are a blot on the Rama of the noble house in which you are born. My wife, when she was alone in Janastana was stolen by you. Such a thief can never be classed under the list of heroes. How can you call yourself a hero? You have no code of honour. No shame and you do not know what decorum is. You are arrogant and you defy fate and actually. You are country death. You have achieved many things in the days of yore. Now you are steeped in sin since you have stopped to an ignoble act and you will reap the reward for it. Soon you will meet your henchman Khara. Now that you are facing me there is no escape for you. I will send you to the abode of Yama. After a long time. I will be able to get my heart's desire my anger will finally be appeased'.

Rama continued to send arrows towards Ravana. His valour was undimmed by the length of time which had been spent in the fight. His eagerness, his enthusiasm, his quickness were the same as they were when the fight began. All the astras were at his command. Ravana was not able to dispatch his arrows as quickly as before. His charioteer saw the condition of his master and quietly he steered the chariot away from the presence of Rama.

When he recovered from his faint Ravana who was spurred by death looked at his charioteer and asked him why he had brought him away from the front. He said, "What have you done? You have caused me to be ridiculed by the world. They will consider that I am lacking in valour. They will consider me as a coward. All the name and fame which I had earned through the years have been lost in a single thoughtless moment. Take me back to where I was before".

The charioteer spoke calmly "I am not afraid my Lord. I have not tried to make you a coward. I only tried to protect you. In my affection to you, I did your what you did not relish. I saw that you are very much fatigued our horses were also tired because of the excessive heat of sun's rays. And I again I was seeing evil omens around me. I acted only in accordance to the rules which guide such as me. You must command me and I will obey".

Ravana was so touched by the concern of his charioteer that he took off the bracelet he was wearing and gave it to him as a mark of his appreciation.

Agastya was one of those who was watching the fight from the heavens. He had seen Ravana who was fatigued and he saw the chariot being memo erred away from Rama Agastya now approached Rama and said, “Child name, I suggest that you recite the great mantra by name “Adityahridaya” which will grant you victory over your enemy. It is in praise of your original ancestor, the sun. The recital of your Mantra. It is a mantra will assure man of victory over all enemies. It is the holiest of holy mantras. Worship Surya my child and you will destroy your enemy worship sun god, my child, you will destroy your enemy.

Rama touched water three times, and purifying himself, he took up his bow and repeated Aidtya Hridaya.

AT THE TWILIGHT HOUR

Ravana’s black horses frothed. As he stormed back into battle. Rama said to Matali “Look, he comes the in auspicious way of apardiskshana. He ignores all the omens and gives into his deepest desire to die”.

Matali urged his horses forward; he came from the right, the way of Pradakshina. The dust from Rama’s wheels covered Ravana’s chariot. Flying up, the rakshasa shot a cloud of arrows at Rama. Now Rama put down his weapon and picked up Indra’s golden bow.

The sky was full of Devas and Gandharvas, Kinnaras and Maharshis gathered in he ethereal zone, breathlessly, to watch Ravana die more omens appeared in the sky; they all favoured Rama. The way the wind flew was for him Ravana’s chariot was covered in a red sheen, as if it was painted in blood kites and vultures wheeled armed it as though it already flew with the dead. The rakshasas of Lanka saw these omens and were terrified. Rama sensed victory.

Spell bound, the rakshasas and vanaras stood motionless like figures in a moral of frozen time. None of them fought any more their battle would be decided by the duel that raged between the two flitting chariots. But as if fate petrified his gifts, Ravana’s prowess had deserted him cursing the unaccountable scupor, he aimed repeatedly at Rama’s horses and his sarathy. But his shafts were wayward and great weakness was upon him. It seemed that, at last, all the debts of Kama he owed had overtaken Ravana at once.

He hands trembled and his body; Rama had drained his will. Even the effort of drawing back his bowstring was almost more than the rakshasa could manage. He felt his vast age intensely; the deaths of all his brothers and sons had breached his soul. He gritted his teeth and roared to embolden himself. Though he knew his time had come he was determined to die a hermic death. All his ten heads plain, chattering and screeching around the central are Ravana fought on.

They battled in the sky and on the ground and at times the chariots flew out some leagues over the sea. Air and earth, water fire and ether were hushed, when Ravana and Rama dwelled. Primordial forces of light and darkness, dharma and adharma battled through the two warriors, yet again, in endless time. The wind did not blow anymore. The sun was dim as if, he too held his being breath.

The Devas grew anxious that despite all the portents, the duel lasted so long. They began to wonder if Rama could kill Ravana actually finish him for didn't all of them tasted defeat form the demon ? Always serene and aware of the deeper purposes of fate the rishis of Devaloka began to chant timeless mantras to bless creation.

‘May darkness and evil be overcome and men live without fear in the world. May danger leave the earth today; may Rama kill Ravana’.

A Gandharva whispered to the apsara beside him. “The sea is just its own metaphor, and the sky, also. And this duel between a man and a monster can only be compared to itself”.

One of Rama's arrows whistled perilous near Ravana's heads, in a flash the cluster of mine faces vanished. Just then antoher golden shaft from the avatara's bow struck Ravana's scream rang through the sky. But he did not fall. As Rama watched in shock another devilish head sprouted form the Rakshasa's gaping throat like a hideous flower from its stem.

This grotesque queen face grimaced, three eyed at Rama. A forked serpents tongue flickered across its lips. Its eyes were lidless, yellow and utterly malignant Ravana raised his bow again. Now he fought with fresh vigour, as if the beheading had renewed him.

Rama loosed another silver shaft at his enemy and took the second head off in a scarlet burst. Ravana's roar echoed down among the monkeys and demons; the sea rose in crested waves. The rakshasa staggered in his chariot, he almost fell. But then once more, like a wind plant thrusting both its horrible

fruit, another grisly head pushed its way out of Ravana's neck. Now it was a less demonic visage that roared at Rama in the sky; it was a head more like the first one.

So these were not the heads of the sinister cone. It was not to be that Rama severed ten heads and victory would be his for the first time doubt gripped the prince. With each fresh head that sprouted on the rakshasas neck, he seemed rejuvenated after the second fought as if he had just come in to battle. The shafts from his bow were a virile stream between the chariots. Ravana's face his hands and his skin were unwrinkled are young again.

Still wrapped in a pall of dread, the sun began to sink into the western sea. Twilight fell. Now the chariots were luminous their houses of glowed and the warriors were illumined by the light of the arrows. Once more, Rama struck off Ravana's head. Again the rakshasa sprouted a fresh one in its place and fought on chortling in mirth.

Matali turned to Rama, and cried "This is Ravana you are fighting and it is the new moon to night. As night grows, his strength will be ten times what it is now. If you do not kill him quickly Rama, you yourself will die".

Rama looked at Matali with a silent question in his eyes. The sage said 'only the Brahmastra'.

Rama saw Agastya's austere face before his eyes again and the rishi seemed to smile endorsing what Matali said, Rama invoked the astra that Brahma had once created for the king of the Devas.

He murmured its hermitic mantra, and that ultimate weapon, which could extinguish a world, appeared before him brilliant as an arrow in the twilight Vayu was its wings. Agni its head; Akasa was its shaft and it was as heavy as golden Meru.

With a prayer Rama stretched out his hands to receive the astra. At once it lay as a golden arrow in his palms. He set it to his bowstring and the sky shook as if its end had come all the elements feared that astra. But Rama did not pause now; the shaft was as heavy as time in his hands. He clenched his teeth and though his heart pounded out of control, drew his bowstring to his ear in a fluid fur with Sita's face before his eyes, Rama shot the Brahmastra at Ravana.

A crack of thunder rent the air and for a moment wrenched the earth out of its orbit. Briefly it was day again as if the sun had leapt back into

the sky after setting the sea. But the other sun the legendary ayudha blazed into Ravana's chest. With the demon's terrible scream as it struck him, night fell on the world.

The Brahmastra tore open Ravana's armour with fire. It ripped through his chest in an eruption of blood. Then it blew his heart to shreds. It bored on, through him flashed down into earth and pierced deep into her. It flamed on down, through rock and lava, to the core of the world and not the earth's molten heart could contain that weapon. It rose again through all the layers of the earth, and flew back into the sky and Rama's quiver. There it grew, still.

The two charioteers brought their chariots down to the ground. In one Rama stood triumphant and in the other name lay dying. Blood gushed from the wound in his chest but his body still shone like a star. But as he died Ravana's eyes gazed at the blue one, standing so calm in Indra's chariot. Rama so merciful in victory.

Visrava's son, Pulastya's grandson, the great grandson of Brahma the sovereign of the three worlds for a long time, lay dying from Rama's arrow. The rakshasas and vanaras saw his lips move repeatedly they tried to form a single word a name of she who had become his death. Her perfect face filled the Rakshasas's last moment. Life had left Ramana.

Even in death his body glowed for hours like a dark flame in Lanka. Rama stood radiant among the vanaras. He had fulfilled the mission of his life, the reason he was born. All the Vanara Veeras gathered round him. Slowly they walked to where Ravana lay. Even in death the Rakshasa was absolutely majestic when Vibhishana saw his brother, he began to cry.

Rama laid a hand on his shoulder and said "He was fearless to the last not at the very end, when all his sons his brothers and his commanders were dead, did he try to bargain for his life. Kings like him are never mourned not since the beginning".

Vibhishana said "he was more than a merely a great king. He was a master of the Vedas. More learned than most Brahma's with your leave Rama I will offer my brothers sprit tarpana".

Rama said, "With death enmity ends. Now Ravana is as much my kinsman as your. By all means offer him tarpana. And all sobbed inconsolably."

MANDODARI

As the rakshasi women wept for Ravana, Mandodari his senior wife and most beloved queens gazed sadly at her dead husband the mighty rakshasa whose feats surpassed the imagination who had been killed by Rama.

‘Ah, my heroic husband, even Indra could not face you when you were angry. The rishis the gandharvas fled from you in terror. How could you let a mere mortal. Kill you in a battle! You were covered in glory and had conquered three worlds with your prowess, how could this man who wanders in the forest kill you ? You could take any from you liked, went where you pleased how could you have fallen to the mortal Rama you were fully armed and fighting at the head of an enormous army. I cannot believe that Rama was able to do this’.

When your brother was killed in Janastana along with the other rakshasas I knew this was no ordinary man. And when Hanuman entered Lanka, the city that is impregnable even to the gods, were all very worried. You would not listen to when I told you not to seek enmity with Rama. Now you reap its consequences.

You did wrong when you abducted Sita who is more steadfast than Arundhati and Rohini! In your delusion, you did not see that Sita was not superior to me, nor equal to me in birth, in beauty and in skills. Death comes to everyone through sure agent, or the other your death come through Sita.

Sita will now be happy with Rama. But I shall be alone, plunged into an ocean of grief! I have wandered through the pleasant woods of Kailasa, Meru, Mandara and the gardens of the gods with you. Now I am bereft of all these pleasures. What Vibhishana foretold had come true you have reaped the fruits of your good and bad deeds and you have give your run way. I weep for myself now for I am nothing without you.

“Send the women away said Rama to Vibhishana” and perform the last rites for your brother.

RAMA SENDS HANUMAN TO SITA

Hanuman entered the city of Lanka and was honoured by all the rakshasas. He went to Ravana’s palace and saw Sita pale and uncomfortable, like Rohini without the moon. He bowed to her humbly and gently began to tell her all that had been happened.

“Rama, the hero of Ishvakus, sends you his greetings and asks your welfare I have good news for you. Rama says to tell you that “It is our good fortune that you are alive and I have won the war Ravana has been killed and Lanka is in my power. It is now all right for you to be in Ravana’s palace for Vibhishana has been made king of Lanka.”

Sita rose in confusion overwhelm with joy she could not say a word “What are you thinking? Asked Hanuman gently. Sita said, “The news of my husband’s victory left me speechless for a moment. I cannot see anything to give you as a reward by the good news you have by night me”.

Gentle lady, your sweet words are worth more to me than a heap of jewels and the kingdom of gods.

“Now command me to return to Rama,” Sita said.

“I want to see my husband”

“You will soon see Rama whose face is like the full moon as well as his friends and well wishes! Cried Hanuman and returned to Rama.

“You must see Sita, It was for her that we undertook this enterprise which has ended in success. She rejoiced when she heard about your victory. She trusted me and said, “I want to see my husband who has achieved his ends and Lakshmana as well”.

RAMA AND SITA

Vibhishana went into the inner apartments and told the women to help Sita and to tell her that her husband wished to see her after she had bathed and adorned herself. But Sita insisted that she wanted to see her husband before she bathed. Vibhishana replied that she should do what her husband told. She obeyed him she bathed and the women adorned her with fine clothes and rare jewels. She was taken in a palanquin.

With great delight he honoured Rama and announced Sita’s arrival. Rama seemed preoccupied and deep in thought even though he knew that Sita, who had spent so many months in the home of the rakshasa had come joy depression and anger flooded over him.

Vibhishana tried to organize and control the singing crowds that had gathered there. Men in turbans and coats, their hands rough from wielding whips moved among the people getting them to disperse. Monkeys, bears and

rakshasas were driven away and they retreated to a safe distance. Rama saw that they are disappointed. He said in anger to Vibhishana “Stop it immediately. These are my people. A woman’s behaviour is what protects her modesty not a none, nor fine clothes, nor high walls or honours such as these”. A war has been fought on Sita’s accounts. She faces a crisis in her life. There is nothing wrong if she is seen in public, especially in my presence. Bring Sita here, Vibhishana! Let her see me surrounded by all my friends.

All were shocked to hear Rama’s sharp words, manly, Sugriva, Hanuman, Vibhishana and others.

Sita approached her husband. She was deeply embarrassed and shrinking into herself. She gazed at her beloved husband who was like a god to her and her face lit up with love, pleasure and wonder. Her weariness and sorrow fell away the moment saw her husband’s moon bright face which she had not seen for long. Rama looked at Sita and said, “I have killed the enemy, my dear, and I have won you back. I have avenged the insult and it no longer bothers me. I have displayed the prowess and achieved my goals. Now I am fare.

“You were carried off by a restless rakhasa while you alone with no one. To protect you, I mere mortal have, redressed that wrong decreed by fate. If a man cannot avenge the insults heaped upon him he is a weakling and of no use to anyone. Hanuman’s spectacular feats of leaping over the ocean and causing havoc in Lanka have not been in vain. Sugriva’s excellent advice and the efforts of his army in battle have all borne fruit Vibhishana who abandoned a worthless brother and chose to attach himself to me, has also achieved his ends.

Sita’s doe like eyes filled with tears as Rama spoke. But the more he looked at her the angrier Rama became. He frowned and glared at Sita, speaking to her cruelly in front of all the rakshasas and monkeys.

“I have terrible suspicions about your character and conduct. The sight of you is as painful to me as a lamp to a man with diseased eyes”. You are free to go wherever you want. The world is open for you. How can a man born into a noble family lovingly take back a woman who has lived in the house of a strange man. How can I take back when Ravana has touched you and when you have lived under his lustful gaze. I have required my reputation. That was the sole motivation for rescuing you! I do not want your anymore you can go wherever you like”.

Sita could not believe the cruel words her husband had spoken after their long separation. She began to weep like a under vine crushed by an elephant. She hunger head in down her face and said choking “How could you say such things to me, the kind of things a low, common man would say to a woman ? I am not what you think. I am hero! I swear this on my virtue. You judge all women by the conduct of a few you should know better than to reject me like this.”

If my body was touched by another man, it was not because I wanted it. Destiny must bear the responsibility for that what hope can there be if you do not know me even now, after we have lived together so intimating for so many years.

AGNI PRAVESA

Sita continued “When you sent Hanuman to Lanka to find me, why didn’t you tell me that you are not going to take me back ? If you had told me then that you have abandoned me, I would have killed myself at that very moment, before the eyes of Hanuman. Then you would not have had to make this tremendous effort risking your life and causing hardship to your friends”?

But you acted like a common man and you have treated me like a low vulgar women you have not considered that I am the daughter of Janaka, I was born from earth.

Weeping Sita turned to Lakshmana who stood there “Build a funeral pyre for me Lakshmana. That is the only solution I see to this terrible calamity that has befallen me. I cannot bear to live under these false accusations. Despite my virtues, my husband has respected me in front of all these people. He holds the past against me and I cannot indicate myself in his eyes. The only thing I can do now is walk into fire.

Lakshmana looked over at Rama with pain in his eyes. He understood what Rama wanted. Lakshmana lit the pyre. She honoured her husband with a bowed head and approached the flames. She honoured the gods and Brahmins and stood in front of the fire with her palms together she said, “If my heart has never strayed from Rama, let the god of fire eternal witness to all that happens in the world. Protect me”. She walked around the fire and then her mind calm and serene, she stopped into it.

Suddenly Kubera, Yama, Indra, Varuna, Siva and Brahma creator of the worlds and the knower of Vedas, arrived in Lanka in their chariots. They

raised their strong arms and addressed Rama who stood in front of him with his palms joined.

‘You are the creator of the worlds and the foremost of the wise! How could you let Sita walk into the fire? Don’t you know that you are the greatest among the gods?’

‘Long ago, you were Rtadhama, the best of the vasus. Then you were the self-born Prajapati, the creator of the three worlds. You were the eighth rudra and the fifth pancama. The asvins are your ears, the sun and the moon are your eyes. You are visible in the time between the end and the beginning of the worlds. And yet, you have humiliated Sita as if you were an ordinary man!’

Rama, the lord of the worlds, the best among those who practice dharma, said, ‘I always thought I was human, that I was Rama, the son of Dasaratha. Tell me who I am ? Where did I come from ? Why am I here?’

‘You are Narayana, the wielder of the discus’, replied wise Brahma. ‘You are the single-tusked Varaha, victorious over past and future enemies! You are the eternal Brahman, the truth, the middle and end. You are the supreme dharma, the four-armed commander of the world’s forces. You are the holder of the Sarnga bow. As Purusa, you are the first of men. You have conquered your senses, you are mighty and undefeated. You are Krisna and Vishnu. You are the leader of the celestial army. You are restrained and self-controlled. The worlds arise from you and are absorbed into you. You killed the asura Madhu as Indra’s younger brother. You are death in battle. Celestial sages come to you for protection because you are the refuge of the oppressed. You are the hundred-fold Veda and its thousand recensions emerge from you. You are the sacrifice, the mantra and the sacred syllable. Your origins and end are unknown. No one knows who you are. Wise men see you in everything: in Brahmins, in cows, in the directions, in the sky, the mountains and the forests. You have a thousand feet, a thousand eyes and a thousand heads. You are the upholder of the worlds, of the mountains and of all creatures. Rama at the dissolution of the worlds, you are visible lying on the waters like a huge serpent and holding the worlds, the gods, Gandharvas and Danavas within you. I am your heart, Rama and Sarasvati is your tongue. The gods are as inseparable from you, Brahman, as the hairs on the body. The night is the blink of your eye, the day is your eye unblinking. The Vedas are your rules for the world. Nothing can exist without you. The world is your body, you are the endurance of the earth. Fire is your anger, your grace is the moon. You carry the mark of Vishnu. Long ago, you covered the worlds with your three strides. You made

Indra king after you had captured the asura Bali. Sita is Lakshmi, you are Vishnu, the dark one, the creator.

‘You took human form for the destruction of Ravana. You are the best among those that uphold dharma. You have done what was necessary. Ravana has been killed. Now return to heaven! Your strength and heroism are infallible and the man who is devoted to you shall always be successful. Those who are firm in their devotion to you, those who recite your glorious deeds shall always be successful.

The fire god rose, carrying Sita in his arms. Sita shone like the morning sun. She wore ornaments of beaten gold and red clothes. Her hair was dark and curly and her garlands were unwithered. Seated in fire’s lap, she was exactly as she had been before. The fire handed her over to Rama. ‘Here is your Sita, Rama’, said the eternal witness. ‘She is pure. She never wavered in her loyalty to you, not in word or thought or even by looking at someone else. She was abducted from the forest by mighty Ravana when she was alone and unprotected. She was imprisoned in his palace and was guarded by fierce rakshasis. But she was always faithful to you. She was threatened and humiliated and tempted with all kinds of things. But she never gave Ravana a single thought because her heart was with you. She is pure and chaste, Rama! Take her back! I will not tolerate any criticism of her!’

Effulgent and resolute, Rama, the greatest among the upholders of dharma, said to the great gods, ‘Sita had to be vindicated in the eyes of the world because this lovely woman had lived inside Ravana’s palace for such a long time. If I had not subjected her to this test, good people would have said that Rama, the son of Dasaradha, is blinded by his love for a woman.

‘I know Sita, the daughter of Janaka, loves me dearly. She is devoted to me and lives by my wishes. I take refuge in the truth and so I had to remain detached as she entered the fire. I wanted everyone in the three worlds to believe in her. Wide-eyed Sita is protected by the power of her own chastity. Ravana could no more have violated her than the ocean can exceed its bounds. She is as unapproachable as the blazing fire. He could not possibly have touched her. She would never had enjoyed Ravana’s opulence and splendour because she is as integral to me as the rays are to the sun. Sita has now been proved innocent in front of the three worlds. She is as inseparable from me as fame is from a renowned man.

‘Besides that, I must respect the advice you have given me for my welfare, for you are honoured and loved by all the worlds!’

The gods praised Rama for his words because they understood the significance of what he had said. Rama was reunited with his beloved and was happy, as he deserved to be.

Siva now said something that was truly worthy. Mighty Rama, lotus-eyed, broad-chested enemy burner, best of all warriors, you have done a great thing! You have dispelled the darkness that covered the worlds by killing Ravana who terrified all creatures!

Comfort Bharatha and virtuous Kausalya. Go and see Kaikeyi and Sumitra. Reclaim the kingship of Ayodhya and make your friends and well-wishers happy. Have children and establish the line of the Ikshvaku in the world. Earn the highest honour by performing the horse sacrifice. Give generous gifts to the Brahmins and then come back to heaven.

‘Here is your father Dasaratha in this celestial chariot. In the world of men, this great man was your teacher and mentor. Because of all that you did, Dasaratha went to Indra’s realm after he died. Now you and Lakshmana must honour him!’

Rama and Lakshmana honoured their father who was standing in his chariot. He wore dazzling clothes and shone with his own splendour and majesty. When Dasaratha, the king of the earth, saw his son who was dearer to him than his own life, he was filled with joy. He lifted him onto his lap, embraced him and said, “All the pleasures of heaven and the respect of the gods were nothing to me without you, Rama! I swear this is the truth! Kaikeyi’s words which caused your exile still rankle in my heart. But now that I see you and Lakshmana well and happy, now that I have embraced you, my sorrow has lifted, like a mist dissolves in the sun. Your deeds saved me, my child. Only now have I learned that all this was planned by the gods for the killing of Ravana.

‘Kausalya shall have her heart’s desire fulfilled! She shall rejoice when you return from the forest. And those who see you anointed king, dripping with water as you return from your ritual bath, they shall also have their wishes fulfilled. I wish I could see you reunited with righteous Bharatha. He is strong and pure and has always been devoted to you.’

‘You have lived in the forest with Sita and wise Lakshmana for fourteen long years! You fulfilled your vow and you made the gods happy by killing Ravana! You have performed incredible deeds and won fame and affection. Establish your kingdom firmly along with your brothers. I wish you a long and happy life!’

‘Forgive Kaikeyi and Bharatha, righteous king!’ said Rama with his palms joined. ‘You declared that you had renounced Kaikeyi and her son! Take those words back!’

‘It shall be so!’ said Dasaradha. He embraced Lakshmana and said to him, ‘You have been devoted to Rama and Sita and you have made me very happy. You have been righteous. If Rama is pleased with you, you shall earn the fruits of righteousness here on earth as well as in heaven and glory in the afterlife. Serve Rama well for he is devoted to the welfare of all creatures in the world. You have seen that Indra and the three worlds, the siddhas, caranas, the great souls and the rishis honour Rama as the best of men. They have declared he is the eternal Brahman and the essence of all gods. You shall earn limitless fame when you serve Rama and Sita.’

‘It shall be so!’ said Lakshmana as the righteous king turned to Sita. ‘Do not be angry with Rama because he renounced you’, Dasaradha said to her. ‘He did this in your best interests and so that you would be purified. You need no instruction in devotion to your husband. But it is my duty to tell you that he should be like a god to you’.

Shining with splendour, Dasaratha returned to heaven in his celestial chariot after he had given this advice to his sons and daughter-in-law.

Indra was very pleased and said to Rama who stood in front of him with his palms joined, ‘Your encounter with us should not be fruitless, Rama! We are very pleased with you. Tell us what you want’.

‘If you really are pleased with me, king of the gods,’ replied Rama, ‘then be gracious and grant what I ask. Let all the monkeys who fought so bravely and died for my sake be brought back to life! I would like to see all the heroic monkeys and bears alive again, restored to full health, strength and vigour! May there be an abundance of fresh water, roots and fruits in all seasons wherever they choose to live!’

‘This is no small thing you ask, Rama!’ said Indra affectionately. ‘Let the dead rise as if they were waking from a long, deep sleep! Let them happily be reunited with their families and their own people! Trees shall give them fruit and flowers all year round and their rivers shall always be full!’

All the monkeys whose bodies had been covered with wounds rose up, their injuries healed. ‘What can this be?’ they said to each other in amazement.

Now that all Rama's wishes had been fulfilled, the gods praised him, for he was worthy of praise. 'Dismiss the monkeys and return to Ayodhya!' they said to Rama and Lakshmana. 'Console Sita and cherish her. She loves you and has been devoted to you. God and see your brother who has been firm in his vows. Crown yourself king and bring joy to your citizens!' They bade the princes farewell and returned to heaven in their celestial chariots which shone like the sun.

Rama and Lakshmana honoured the gods and then Rama gave instructions for everyone to return to their camps. The army, now that it had won fame, was filled with joy and shone like the night lit up by the moon.

Rama spent the night pleasantly. When he woke in the morning, Vibhishana greeted him as a conquering hero with his palms joined above his head. 'Your bath water is ready and so are fine new clothes, unguents sandal paste, jewels and garlands,' he said. 'These lovely women are waiting to help you bathe and adorn yourself'.

'Call Sugriva and the other monkey leaders to bathe', said Rama.

'Bharatha, that brave and righteous prince who takes refuge in truth and who deserves all happiness and comfort, he suffers because of me. I cannot bathe and adorn myself unless I am with Bharatha! I want to return as soon as I can to Ayodhya. The journey is long and arduous and I shall take the path along which I came'.

'I will send you back to Ayodhya in a single day' said Vibhishana. 'I have the wondrous chariot Pushpaka that shines like the sun. It used to belong to Kubera but my brother Ravana took it away from him by force. Pushpaka is as large as a cloud. It will take you to Ayodhya. There is nothing to worry about.

'But if you have any regard for my virtues, if you consider me a friend and if I am at all worthy of you, stay here for a while with your wife and your brother. Let me honour you and give you all that your hearts desire! Give me the pleasure of accepting my hospitality out of friendship and affection but I cannot demand that you comply with my wishes!

In front of all the monkeys and the rakshasa, Rama replied, 'I am honoured Vibhishana and I am grateful for all that you have done, your good advice, your deeds and your friendship. It is not as if I do not want to do as you have suggested, but I long for my brother Bharatha. He followed me to Chitrakuta and with his head bowed, he begged me to return. But I could not do

as he asked. I long to see virtuous Kausalya, Sumitra, Kaikeyi and all the elders, my teachers, all the citizens and their children.

‘King of the rakshasas, send for your magical chariot quickly. My work is done, there is no reason for me to linger here. Let me go, dear friend! You have honoured me enough. Do not be angry with me, let me leave as soon as possible!’

Vibhishana announced the arrival of the Pushpaka adorned with flowers. It could move as swiftly as thought and could not be restrained by anything. He stood beside it, waiting for Rama.

With his palms joined, he said humbly, ‘What shall I do now?’

Rama thought for a moment and said, ‘Vibhishana the monkeys have made a heroic effort. Honour them all with gifts and jewels and ornaments. Unconquerable Lanka was taken with their help. They all fought with enthusiasm, ready to sacrifice their lives in battle. We must be grateful to these mighty monkeys. Honour them well! Give them gifts that will make them happy!’ Vibhishana honoured them all and gave them gifts according to their rank and status.

Rama and Lakshmana climbed into the wondrous vehicle. Rama placed Sita on his lap and she blushed with embarrassment. Rama addressed Sugriva, Vibhishana and all the monkeys.

You have all done great things because of your affection for me. You have my permission to leave you. Go wherever you please. Sugriva you have proved that you are a friend and a well wisher and that you will not tolerate unrighteousness. Return to Kishikindha with your army! Vibhishana, you shall stay in Lanka and rule the kingdom I have given you. Even the gods led by Indra will not dare attack you!

‘Let me say goodbye. With your permission, I shall return to Ayodhya, my father’s capital city.’

The great monkeys and the rakshasa Vibhishana joined their palms and said, ‘We want to go to Ayodhya! Take us with you! We shall watch as you are crowned king, pay our respects to Kausalya and return to our homes soon after that!’

‘I would be delighted to return to Ayodhya with all of you, my beloved friends’ said Rama. ‘Come and enjoy all that Ayodhya has to offer.’

Come! Sugriva climb quickly into Pushpaka with your army. Come Vibhishana with all your ministers!’

They all climbed into the wondrous vehicle and with Rama’s permission, Pushpaka rose into the sky.

SEVAGRAMA

Rama’s glance fell upon Hanuman, the best of all monkeys, who was so dear to him. ‘Go ahead to Ayodhya and find out if all is well with the people in the royal palace!’ he said to him. ‘Go to Srngavera and give my good wishes to my friend Guha, the king of the Nisadas. He will be glad to know that I am well and he will show you the road that leads to Ayodhya and Bharata.

‘Ask after Bharata’s welfare on my behalf. Tell him about my success and about Sita’s abduction by Ravana and my alliance with Sugriva and the killing of Vali in battle. Tell him about the search for Sita and how you found her when you leapt over the boundless ocean. Tell him how we built the bridge and how Ravana was killed. Tell him how we saw our father again because of the grace of the great gods.

‘Tell him, “Mighty Rama has achieved his goals. He has killed his enemy and earned fame. Now he is coming here with his friends.” When Bharata hears all this, he will reveal his emotions through his gestures. Observe them carefully, especially any sign that indicates he is not favourably disposed towards me. Note everything he says and does. Whose mind would not turn towards the kingdom of his forefathers which is filled with elephants and horses and chariots? Monkey, find out Bharata’s state of mind and his intentions and return to us before we have gone too far!’

Hanuman took the form of a man and went quickly towards Ayodhya. He leapt into the sky and took the path of his father the wind. He flew over the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna and arrived in Srngaverapura. He gave Guha the news of Rama’s success and his imminent arrival and swiftly flew onwards to Nandigrama.

When he was about one yojana away from Ayodhya, he saw Bharata, pale and emaciated, wearing the skin of the black antelope and living the life of an ascetic. Bharata was tormented over his brother’s misfortune. His hair was matted and his body was covered with dust. He lived righteously, performing severe penance and eating only roots and fruits. He had restrained his senses and shone like a great rishi.

Hanuman went up to him and with his palms joined, he spoke to him respectfully. ‘Rama, the one you mourn, the man who lived in the Dandaka forest with his hair matted, asks after your welfare. I bring you good news! Renounce your grief, for soon you will be reunited with Rama. He has killed Ravana and rescued Sita. He has accomplished his mission and is coming here with all his friends. And so are Lakshmana and Sita!’

Bharata swooned with joy, but after a moment, he rose and took a deep breath. He embraced the monkey and anointed him with tears of happiness. ‘I don’t know if you are a man or a god that has come here out of compassion for me. But I would like to give you something valuable for the good news you have brought. Hundreds and thousands of cows or a hundred villages, or sixteen virtuous virgins with curly hair, golden skins, firm thighs and faces like the moon, wealthy and well-born!’

‘After all these many years in the forest, I finally have some good news about Rama!’ continued Bharata. ‘The old saying, that happiness comes to a man even if after a hundred years, is true! Tell me everything! How did Rama come to make an alliance with the monkeys? Where did it happen and for what purpose?’

Hanuman sat down and began to tell Bharata all that had happened to Rama in the forest ‘Rama was banished by the boons given to your mother and then, King Dasaratha died of grief for his son. You were brought back quickly from Rajagaha but you did not want the kingdom. You went to Chitrakuta and, acting righteously you invited our brother back. He renounced the kingdom but you did also and returned with his sandals. You know all this already, mighty one! Now let me tell you all that happened after you left Chitrakuta.

‘Rama, Lakshmana and Sita went deeper into the desolate forest after you left. Viradha appeared in front of them, roaring loudly. But they killed him and threw him into a pit. Then they arrived in Janasthana and Rama killed the fourteen thousand wicked rakshasa who lived there. Then Surpanakha arrived and instructed by Rama, Lakshmana grabbed a sword and cut off her nose and ears. Tormented, she went to Ravana. Then, one of Ravana’s people, a rakshasa named Maricha became a jeweled deer and excited Sita’s greed. She wanted to have it and Rama went after the deer, killing it with an arrow in its back.

‘Lakshmana, too, had left the settlement and Ravana came there, the way a malignant planet approaches Rohini in the sky, and quickly took Sita.

Ravana killed the vulture Jatayu who tried to stop him from taking Sita away. A group of wondrous monkeys, large as elephants, stood on top of a mountain and watched in amazement as they saw Ravana, the king of the rakshasa, carrying Sita away. He took her to Lanka and tried to win her over with sweet words.

‘Then, Rama returned and when he saw the dying bird who was his father’s friends, he was very distressed. As he wandered in the region of the Godavari, he came to a forest full of flowers. The brothers were approached by Kabandha. On his advice, they went to Rishyamooka where Rama made an alliance with Sugriva. Rama killed the mighty Vali in battle and gave Sugriva a kingdom of his own. Sugriva promised Rama that he and the other monkeys would search for the princess.

‘Sugriva sent thousands of millions of monkeys in all directions. A long time passed and we were all depressed and overcome with grief in the Vindhyas. Sampati, Jatayu’s brother, told us that Sita was in Lanka, in Ravana’s palace. I resorted to my innate strength and leapt one hundred yojanas over the ocean. I found Sita alone and miserable in the Ashoka grove. She was wearing a single soiled garment and though she was very unhappy, she had remained firm in her vows.

‘She gave me a token of recognition and I returned to Rama. Once he heard that Sita was alive, Rama felt better and renewed his interest in life. He decided to destroy Ravana and called up all his resources. When we reached the ocean, Nala built a bridge that allowed the army of monkeys to cross over to Lanka. Rama killed Kumbhakarna and Nila killed Prahastha and Lakshmana killed Ravana’s son. Then Rama himself killed Ravana.

‘Rama received many boons from Indra, Yama, Varuna and from the other gods and sages. He was very happy and along with the monkeys, he is coming back in the magical chariot Pushpaka. He has reached the Ganga and is spending the night there with the sages. Tomorrow during the auspicious hour of Pusa, you will see Rama again!’

Bharata was delighted. He joined his palms and said, ‘At last! My dearest wish has been fulfilled!’ He went over to Satrugna and said, ‘Let all the people who have purified themselves honour the gods in all the temples. Decorate the public places in the city with flowers and let music fill the air! Let the countries and bards and commanders of the army get ready to welcome moon-faced Rama!’

Satrughna sent out labour forces by the thousands to level the roads between Nandigram and the city. They filled the holes, moved away the rocks and stones and made the roads smooth and firm. ‘Sprinkle the area with cold water and let the road be strewn with flowers and puffed rice. Hoist flags and banners on the highways and make sure that the city’s mansions have been decorated before sunrise! Adorn them with wraths and garlands and cover the main thoroughfare with hundreds of flowers!’

Chariot warriors went out in their magnificent chariots and rutting elephants adorned with gold were led out of the city. Dasaratha’s women climbed into lovely vehicles and went out behind Kausalya. The earth shook with the sound of horses and mules neighing, chariots rumbling, drums beating and conches blaring as the entire city moved to Nandigram.

Bharata went out to meet Rama along with prominent Brahmins, the leaders of the trade guilds and his ministers who were carrying flowers and water. They were accompanied by the music of drums and conches. Righteous Bharata carried his brother’s sandals on his head. He also took with him the white umbrella of state that was adorned with white flowers as well as fly whisks decorated with gold that were worthy of a king. Bharata was thin from fasting and he still wore the skin of the black antelope, but now he was filled with joy at the prospect of his brother’s return.

He scanned the directions and looked all around. ‘Are you sure you were not indulging in the fickleness of your monkey nature?’ he asked Hanuman. ‘I do not see Rama anywhere!’

‘I am sure the monkeys are enjoying the perennial fruit and flowers and the plentiful honey at Bharadvaja’s hermitage,’ replied Hanuman. ‘This was the boon Indra gave the monkeys and Bharadvaja has been able to entertain them and offer them hospitality. I can hear the huge din the monkeys are making. From that, I can conclude that they must be crossing the Gomathi.’

‘Look at that cloud of dust! The monkeys must be playing with the trees in the sala forest. And look! There in the distance you can see the wondrous Pushpaka that was created for Brahma, bright as the moon! It travels faster than thought and in it are your heroic brothers and Sita, splendid Sugriva and Vibhishana, the King of the Rakshasas!’

A roar of delight that seemed to pierce the sky rose from the crowds of women, children and old people gathered there. ‘Rama is here!’ they shouted. The men dismounted from their chariots, horses and elephants and

watched Rama approaching as the moon rises? In the sky. Bharatha stood with his palms joined, ready to welcome his brother and to honour him.

Rama shone like Indra as he stood in that fabulous chariot. He looked like the sun on Mount Meru and Bharatha prostrated himself on the ground. The vehicle landed and Bharatha went and threw himself at Rama's feet. Rama raised his brother whom he had not seen for so long and embraced him joyfully. Bharatha greeted Lakshmana and Sith with delight. All the great monkeys appeared in human form, for they could change their shapes at will, and they asked after Bharatha's welfare as he embraced them all. 'It was only because of your help that they were able to accomplish this marvellous deed!' said Bharatha sweetly to Vibhishana. Satrughna greeted Rama and Lakshmana and humbly touched Sita's feet.

Rama went up to his mother who had been so full of sorrow. He touched her feet, making her heart overflow with happiness. Then he greeted Sumitra and Kaikeyi, all his other mothers and the family priest who had come with them. 'Welcome back, son of Kausalya!' said the citizens with their palms joined in respect. Rama gazed at those thousands of joined palms that were like lotuses about to bloom.

Bharatha took the sandals and placed them on his brother's feet himself. 'With these, I return to you the kingdom I have looked after for so long!' he said with his palms joined. 'Now that you are back in Ayodhya as king, my life and all my wishes have been fulfilled. Inspect the treasury, the granary and the army. By the authority you gave me, I have been able to multiply everything ten-fold'.

The monkeys and Vibhishana wept then they saw the love and devotion Bharatha had for his brother. Rama drew Bharatha into Pushpaka and they all went together with the army to Bharatha's settlement. Pushpaka permission to depart. The vehicle rose into the air and went back to Kubera.

Rama fell at the feet of the family priest who had been his teacher and whom he loved as much as he loved his own life. They sat down next to each other, like Indra and Brhaspati.

Bharatha joined his palms above his head and said to Rama. The kingdom was given to me to please my mother. And just as it was given to me, I now give it to you! I can no longer carry the burden of the kingdom any more than a calf can bear a load that a mighty ox struggles with. Just as you cannot control a flood until you dam the river, so, too, a kingdom can only be held

together by a strong ruler. I can no more step into your shoes than a donkey can imitate a horse, or a crow a swan.

‘If a man were to plant a tree that grew tall and strong with many branches difficult to climb, and if it produced only flowers and no fruit, all the hopes the man had for the tree would be in vain. We would be in a similar position if you, the best of men, were not to rule over us. Let the world see you crowned king today, blazing like the midday sun. Let yourself be woken every morning to the sweet sounds of music and the tinkling of anklets and bells. As long as the planets move in their orbits and the earth exists, so long shall you be our lord!’

Rama acquiesced to Bharatha’s request and sat upon a magnificent seat. On Satrughna’s instructions, hair dressers with swift and gentle hands attended to Rama. After Bharatha, Lakshmana, mighty Sugriva and the king of the rakshasas had bathed, Rama took his ritual bath. He cut off his matted locks and anointed himself with sweet ointments. Blazing with glory, he put on garlands and fine clothes. Meanwhile, Dasaratha’s women lovingly prepared Sita for the necessary rituals.

THE CORONATION

Sumantra brought a dazzling chariot yoked with magnificent horses and Rama, always devoted to the truth, climbed into it. Dasaratha’s ministers, led by the family priest, had made all the arrangements for the coronation in Ayodhya. Rama approached the city in his shining chariot like Indra. Bharatha held the reins, Satrughna held the royal umbrella and Lakshmana waved the plumed whisk over Rama’s head. Sugriva, king of the monkeys, and Vibhishana, king of the rakshasas, held the other whisks. The sweet sounds of the rishis and the gods praising Rama could be heard from the sky. The monkeys took human form and resplendent in their jewels, rode upon nine thousand elephants.

The city with all its beautiful mansions was alerted by the beating of drums and the blaring of conches. The citizens watched as Rama came closer, his body shining with splendour. They praised him and honoured him and received his thanks as they followed behind him. With his ministers, Brahmins and the common people around him, Rama seemed like the moon surrounded by stars. Musicians and singers made sweet music and sang auspicious songs as they walked in front with young women, cows and Brahmins carrying saffron rice. Rama told his ministers all about the alliance with Sugriva, about Hanuman’s skills and powers and the wonderful exploits of

the monkeys. The citizens listened to all these tales with amazement. Surrounded by the monkeys as he told these stories, Rama entered Ayodhya which was teeming with happy, prosperous people. The citizens had placed flags on every house and Rama went past them on his way to his father's palace.

Rama entered the palace and was greeted by his mothers. He turned to Bharatha and said these righteous words. 'Take Sugriva to my own palace which is decorated with gold and lapis and has a beautiful pleasure garden'. Bharatha took the king of the monkeys there himself and retainers hurried in with oil lamps and fine fabrics for the couches and seats.

Satrughna asked Sugriva to send out his people to make the necessary arrangements for the coronation. Immediately, Sugriva gave four golden posts studded with jewels to four monkeys saying, 'Come back before dawn tomorrow with water from four oceans!' At once, the monkeys leapt into the sky with the speed of Garuda. Jambavan, Hanuman, Vegadarshi and Rishabha came back with water from the four oceans while the others collected water from five hundred rivers. Satrughna and the ministers courteously told the family priest that everything was ready for the ceremonies.

Vasistha and the Brahmins seated Rama and Sita upon a jeweled couch and began the rituals. The Brahmins joyfully anointed Rama with cool, fragrant water and then the ministers, young women, the warriors and merchants did the same. The gods and the guardians of the four quarters sprinkled Rama with the essences of medicinal and celestial herbs. Satrughna held the royal umbrella over his head, Sugriva held one whisk and Vibhishana the other, which was as bright as the moon. Indra instructed Vayu to give Rama a brilliant necklace made of one hundred golden lotuses and a string of pearls that contained all kinds of other gems and jewels as well.

The gods and the Gandharvas sang and the apsaras danced at Rama's coronation since he fully deserved that honour. The earth yielded her bounty, trees produced fruits and flowers released their perfumes for Rama. Rama distributed one hundred horses, bulls and cows with calves to Brahmins along with gold and jewels and clothes. He gave Sugriva a golden garland studded with jewels that shone like the sun, lapis armbands studded with diamonds to resolute Angada and a necklace of incomparable pearls as white as the moon to Sita. Sita watched as Rama gave clothes and jewels to Hanuman. She unhooked the pearl necklace and said softly to her husband. 'Give this to Hanuman for all he did to make you happy. He is brave and strong and intelligent at all times!' Sita gave the pearls to the son of the wind and with them around his neck, he shone like a white cloud on top of a mountain when it is lit up by the rays of the moon. All the other monkeys received gifts that were

worthy of them. They were all thrilled and they honoured Rama before they returned to the place from where they had come.

Righteous Rama, who was known for his generosity, began to rule his kingdom now that he had defeated his enemies and won fame. ‘Stay by me to rule this kingdom that was established by the strength of our forefathers, honourable Lakshmana!’ he said. ‘You are my equal in every way. You must rule along with me as my regent!’ Even though Rama asked him again and again, Lakshmana refused and finally, Rama had to consecrate Bharatha his heir.

Thus, Rama reclaimed his incomparable kingdom along with his ministers, friends and family. He propitiated the gods with many magnificent sacrifices. He ruled for ten thousand years and performed one hundred horse sacrifices with the finest horses and extravagant gifts.

Under Rama’s rule, no one ever heard the wailing of windows, nor was there any fear of disease or poisonous snakes. There was no cruelty or injustice and the old never had to do the work of the young. There was happiness everywhere and dharma flourished. People, took their example from Rama and were never violent towards each other. Everybody lived for a thousand years and had a thousand sons. They knew neither disease nor unhappiness. Trees yielded fruit and flowers all year, the rains always came at the right time and the touch of the wind was always pleasant. Everybody did their own work and happily lived the lives prescribed for them. Everyone abided by dharma and there was no unrighteousness. Rama rules his honourable and prosperous people for ten thousand years.



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