

Chapter 3. The Wily Villain

The thoughts of Ravana and Vibhishana

Listening to Surpanakha, Ravana's lusty passion was aroused, and he became the bondsman of ruinous foolishness; he wriggled out of the feeling of hatred toward Rama and Lakshmana and started planning stratagems to get Sita away from them. He sank in thought and was plunged in anxiety and restlessness, without any effort to quench hunger or thirst. Such was the fatal fascination that haunted him.

While Surpanakha was describing the beauty and splendour of Rama and Lakshmana, there was one person in the audience hall, Vibhishana, who listened to the story with joy in his heart and tears in his eyes. He installed those divinely charming figures in the temple of his heart and yearned deeply for the chance of being in their presence and falling at their feet. "Will they receive me? Can I be saved? Do I deserve to be blessed by them?" he asked himself. He told himself: "They are divine, for certain. They have appeared on earth in human form in order to destroy the wicked brood of demons (*rakshasas*)." He offered in his mind all that he had and was; he began living in the constant meditation of their glory from that very moment.

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

Meanwhile, since his body and mind had grown out of demonic urges and developed with the help of demonic sustenance, he ignored the divine in him, which was calling for merger in the divine Rama. He relied on his demonic nature and awakened its sinister possibilities and powers. The divine and the demonic facets of his personality rose and sank alternately, moment after moment. So, he convinced himself at last that the two brothers were royal princes and no more. He resolved that he would kill them both and bring away the lady of whom he was so enamoured. He promised his sister that he would avenge the injury inflicted on her in that manner.

Ravana enlists Maricha's help

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

Maricha said that he had already borne the brunt of the might of both Rama and Lakshmana. He told Ravana that they were not of the common run of princes and advised him against such wild enterprises. He argued long and lovingly with Ravana, to dissuade him.

But passion had made Ravana blind to the dictates of duty and morality, and he threatened to punish Maricha

if he did not yield to his will. Maricha decided that it was better to die at Rama's hands than at the hands of the demon that Ravana was. He agreed to Ravana's proposal and got ready to play his part in the conspiracy.

Ravana went to the Dandaka forest, with Maricha following him closely. On the way, Ravana explained the strategy he had conceived. He told Maricha to transform himself, by means of his demonic powers, into a lovely golden deer. He wanted him to frisk about in that alluring form before Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana's hermitage. Maricha had to assent, since he had no way to escape from Ravana's ire. Ravana told him, "Rama will try to capture you and will follow you, and you should lead him far into the distance; from there, you must yell in painful agony, 'O Sita! O Lakshmana,' in a voice exactly like Rama's." Then, keeping the chariot afar, both moved toward the hermitage.

Rama and Sita discuss their plans

While this web was being woven, at Panchavati, Sita and Rama suddenly felt that the moment of fulfilment of their task had come. Rama sent Lakshmana to collect tubers and fruits for the day. Noting that the proper hour had come, he told Sita, "Companion! You know all. Both of us know why we have come on earth and what our task is. That task is now calling us; we have to enter upon it, in right earnest. Your nature and characteristics are noble and holy beyond measure.

Both of us assumed these human bodies through rites associated with the fire principle. My body arose from the offering brought out of the flames of the sacrificial fire by the god Agni himself. You rose from earth that was furrowed by the sacred plough in order to consecrate it for a fire-altar, where a rite (*vajna*) had to be performed. Our bodies are born in fire and are being sustained by the warmth of fire.

"Therefore, Sita, deposit all your divine attributes and splendour in fire and act as an ordinary human being hereafter. I will also move and act as an ordinary human being and exhibit sorrow and anxiety on your account — the pangs of separation and the pain of loneliness. The world would keep in mind only these modes of behaviour and take us as human. They will accept them as worldly conduct and natural reaction.

"Remember that our smallest act has to be an ideal for the householders of the world. We have to hold forth models in the relationship between husband and the wife; they have to be quite in consonance with the principles of truth and righteousness. Our activities have to be in conformity with the guidelines laid down in the spiritual texts (*sastras*). We have to shape our lives in an exemplary manner, so that common people can be inspired and prompted to follow the ideals elaborated therein.

"We must consummate the effect, namely, the destruction of Ravana and the demon (*rakshasa*) brood. But there can be no effect without a cause, so we must manipulate a cause to justify it or bring it about. Therefore, place your divine splendour in the keeping of the God of Fire, Agni, and move about as an ordinary woman caught in the coils of illusion (*maya*). Ravana has a basic fault in his structure, namely, his lustful passion. We have to highlight it before the world, so we have to so prepare a situation that it would appear that he kidnaped you in a fit of passion.

"The world has to realise that Ravana's 'dedication and devotion to God' are not of the highest order, for of what use is that sense of surrender if it is tarnished by craving for sensual pleasure and immoral yearnings? Activities and behaviour emanating from a consciousness that is not pure are tarnished; devotion to God that is polluted by lust is as foul as dirt —these truths have to be emphasised now, for the benefit of mankind.

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

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

“I have to inform you of another secret, too. You have to perform your part in the destruction of the demons. Though you might apparently be under Rama’s surveillance, since your power is immanent in fire, you will have to burn Lanka to ashes, emerging from the fire where your Self is dormant from now on. Lanka has to be turned to ashes not by fire but by you as fire. And Rama has to kill Ravana; that is the divine will. This truth has to be proclaimed.

“This mystery is to be kept from Lakshmana. He is our instrument in this endeavour. When this task is accomplished and we have to re-enter Ayodhya, I will accept you again from the fire where you reside. That act too I will transform into a lesson for the world. The drama starts now,” Rama said. Both Sita and Rama decided on their plan of action and awaited the unfoldment of Ravana’s strategy.

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

The deer entices the brothers

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

Not far from them, Ravana and Maricha were arguing how best to enter the hermitage to execute their nefarious design. Maricha was disgusted at Ravana’s passion and perversity, but he didn’t have the courage to deny him his own complicity. He had no inclination to die at the hands of such a wicked person, so he accepted the role Ravana granted him and agreed to do as he wanted.

Maricha changed his form into a fascinating golden deer, a form that was certain to attract the admiration of Sita and Rama. He thought within himself; “Ah, what an auspicious day this is! I am about to be blessed with the vision of the three most charming individuals on earth! On me will fall the looks of Sita. Then, Rama will follow me with bow and arrow in hand. Ah! How fortunate I am! I am the servant, who has to tread on Rama’s footsteps.

But my Master will follow me now.

“Of course, I know that I’m engaged in a most heinous action, but I’m forced into it; I don’t act according to my will. Since I’m being forced into it, I’m free from sin. Whatever sin I have perpetrated, when Rama’s arrow shot by Rama’s hand strikes me, this artificial form will disappear; that will be my happy destiny. Can all aspire for such an end. Can all people achieve it? And I will have another piece of good fortune. When I draw my last breath, my eyes will be fixed on Rama! That divine beauty will be in front of me; the sweet name will be on my tongue! Ah! How fruitful my life has become! No one is luckier than I am.”

Maricha dwelled on these sweet thoughts as he walked slowly toward the hermitage. The all-knowing Rama and the all-knowing Sita awaited his appearance. The deer approached the precincts of the cottage hesitatingly and with evident trepidation. It fixed its looks on Sita and Rama and stood for a while; then, it frisked and skipped a few paces. Peering into a bush of creepers, it entered it out of sheer curiosity, only to come out of it in a trice.

Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana noticed its antics and admired its appearance. Seeing its golden skin, they decided that it was a strange species of deer. They noted its special characteristics and were fascinated by its charm. Sita said, “If only I could have this deer with me, I could spend time happily in its company. When you two are engaged in things concerning you alone, I could be happy playing with this unique pet. Please catch this bright little animal for me. Can you fulfil this tiny wish, so that I can entertain myself when alone, fondling it and watching it play about?” Sita appealed to them, exhibiting great attachment to the mysterious deer.

Lakshmana rose from his seat, saying, “Mother! I shall get it for you.”

Rama stopped him. He knew that ‘it will fall only into his own hands.’ Lakshmana didn’t know the drama that was being enacted, with this as the prologue. Rama said, “Lakshmana! It has to be caught without inflicting any wound or injury. So I have to pursue it and catch it myself. I have to fulfil Sita’s wish myself.” Lakshmana was silenced, and he sat down, as directed by Rama.

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

Rama stalks and kills the deer

Stalking the strange deer, Rama went out of sight. The deer ran fast with its head bent backward, its eyes cast on Rama, the pursuer! Seeing this behaviour, Rama was delighted. Rama knew that the deer was Maricha, his great devotee who had experienced and realised the Rama Principle and the Rama Power. So Rama fixed his eyes on the deer and followed its gait with great interest. The deer came within reach one moment but sprang away with a leap, to attract Rama further from the hut. Rama seemed to be enjoying this tantalising pursuit. But after some time, Rama fitted an arrow on his bow, aimed it at the deer, and released it straight on target.

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

Caught between two loyalties

Even before the sound reached them, Sita said, “Lakshmana? Did you hear? That’s your brother’s voice. He’s calling you for help. Go, go immediately; don’t delay. These demons (*rakshasas*) are experts in magical transformations and tricks. They cause profuse calamities, changing their shapes and natures.” She wanted Lakshmana to go in haste to the spot from which the cry had come.

Lakshmana was an intelligent person, used to discriminating and arriving at right conclusions. He was also a loyal adherent of the directions of his brother; he revered those orders, as precious as his own breath. So he said, “Mother! No calamity can ever happen to Rama. No demon, however crafty, can harm Rama. You have seen, haven’t you, how he destroyed in a trice thousands of them? Don’t be anxious; muster courage and be calm. Rama will soon return hale and hearty.”

Just then, the cry came again across the distance: “Ah! Sita! Ah! Lakshmana!”

Sita was even more agitated and confused. She said, “Lakshmana! Why are behaving so heartlessly? I don’t understand your intentions. Go quickly, and put an end to the danger into which your brother has fallen. Help him, go.” She demonstrated her fear and anxiety in many ways and tried her best to persuade Lakshmana to leave her.

Of course, Sita knew quite well that Rama could never be touched by trouble. But things have to happen as foundations for future events. She acted like an ignorant person affected by the cries.

Lakshmana spoke assuringly in various ways; he pleaded piteously that he would not disobey his brother. Seeing her cast aside all his arguments and appeals, Lakshmana said at last, “Mother, Rama’s command is my very life; I consider it as precious as my breath. Didn’t you hear Rama order me never to leave you unguarded, but always to protect you? I won’t move one step away from here, whatever might happen.”

Sita wanted Lakshmana be sent afar, for Ravana had to approach the hermitage; that was Rama’s plan to effect the destruction of Ravana and the demons. She had to fulfil Rama’s will. So she too held on to her words and made them sharper and more hurting, so that Lakshmana would yield.

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

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

Lakshmana was endowed with all the virtues, but he was caught between loyalties to two divergent commands. He couldn’t disobey either, so he was overcome with anguish. He had perforce to act counter to Rama’s commands, for he had to leave Sita alone and unprotected. Fear shook his heart. He walked off, in spite of his legs failing him; he turned back toward the hermitage with every forward step.

Sita is kidnapped!

At that very moment, Ravana was transforming him-self in appearance and apparel, for he was awaiting just this chance. He became in outer form a sage (*rishi*), but his intention, in spite of his innate power to terrify both gods and demons by his very name, was to steal like a sly dog. Looking all around him, he entered the hermitage, surreptitiously, with a trembling heart. When he attempted to enter by the front door, the mystic lines that Lakshmana had drawn seemed to raise tongues of fire at him. He feared that his plan might fail and that something even worse might happen to him. So he stood beyond the lines and shouted, “Mistress of the house! Give me some alms.”

Sita heard the cry and knew that it was Ravana. She brought tubers and fruits in her palms, came through the door, and stood outside. But Ravana dared not go near her to receive them. He said, “I won’t come close to any hermitage; this is my vow.” He wanted Sita to offer the alms into his hand.

Sita replied, “No. I cannot cross the line that was drawn by my brother-in-law. Come, revered guest! Receive it from me here.”

The mendicant, who was really an impersonation, urged, “Lady! I will not cross the line and come beyond it. Nor can I accept alms given from beyond a line. It is not proper for ascetics like me. Come. Give it to me, I am hungry; I am very hungry.” He acted the part so well, with many a gasp and gesture, that Sita decided to give him the alms she had in her hand, crossing the line and getting near him.

All this happened in a trice. No sooner did she cross the line than Ravana drew her by the hand and lifted her into a waiting chariot. He paid no heed to her lamentations, but drove the chariot away with terrible speed. Sita screamed out, “O Rama! Lakshmana! Come and save me from this wicked monster.”

The anchorites and forest-dwellers around Panchavati heard Sita’s cry but could not save her. The entire forest faded green to brown when the voice of agony passed through it. “O Rama! O Master! Save me; O Save me! Save me from this monster!” The cry reverberated in the forest and made all things sorrow-stricken that move and do not move.

Inside the chariot, she admonished him. “Ravana! You are building a royal road for your own destruction. You are effacing your empire, your subjects, your dynasty, completely, without trace. You are perpetrating this vileness with a laugh on your face, but the day will come when you will pay for it with tears in your eyes. Mean wretch! This vicious act is unbecoming of a person who has practised austerities like you.” She gave him many a piece of advice and warning; she also called upon Rama and Lakshmana to rescue her.

Jatayu tries to save Sita

The monarch of eagles, Jatayu, heard the plaintive cries that rose from that moving chariot. He recognised Sita’s voice and realised that she was in Ravana’s chariot. He grieved over his age, which made him too weak to fight Ravana, the villain who was taking her away. He felt that it would be wrong not to hinder him. He knew that no act of service can be nobler than rescuing a woman from the clutches of a fellow kidnaping her from her lord and master. He resolved to sacrifice his life, if need be, for the holy act of saving Sita from the demonic grasp.

Using all his energy and skill for that act of service, he circled overhead, Jatayu shouting, “O Sita! Have no fear, I’ll destroy this cruel villain and release you. I shall place you in Rama’s presence.” He flew across the chariot’s path and hit Ravana many times with his sharp beak, causing him to bleed profusely; he beat the chariot

with his wings and tried to stop it by creating a terrific wind that would retard its speed.

Even while on his wings, he gave Ravana excellent advice to correct himself, before it was too late. “Ravana! This step will bring you no good. Release Sita and go safely home. Or else, like moths that fall into fire, you and your brood will be burned in the fire of Rama’s anger. Your pride will cause your total ruin. To kidnap another’s wife is a heinous sin. Only a sinful heart will yearn for another’s wife and wander in search of her. Only base brutes, worse than dogs or foxes, will descend to such depths. You are acting like one who is so mad that he can’t pay heed to what is in store for him.

“Consider, is there a more barbarous crime than this? O! What sin have your parents done to claim you as their son? Your head has turned because you reckon on your physical strength, your riches, and the peoples under your control. But listen, all these will go up in flames and be reduced to ashes. Even the powers you have achieved through your austerities will be destroyed in a trice. Would you remain calm and inactive when your wives are carried away or coveted by other demons? In fact, those who respect women, both those who are their wives and those who are not, would never invite this dread misfortune on their heads.”

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

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

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

Meanwhile, Ravana had placed Sita back in the chariot. He started off in great haste and with much commotion. Jatayu saw him moving past and heard Sita crying out for help. Jatayu was sunk in anguish that he could not offer further resistance; he lay in a pool of his own tears, his heart yearning for Rama and his tongue whispering His name. “When death draws near, when calamity is a few steps off, nature behaves in an unexpected manner to warn and teach. Things behave topsy-turvy. This Ravana is also behaving in this manner, since his end is near and his kith and kin are about to be wiped off the face of the earth.” Jatayu realised this truth and lay there, keeping himself alive by his own will, awaiting the approach of Rama.

The brothers lament Sita’s disappearance

Rama returned to Panchavati from the depths of the jungle, after killing the “impersonation” called the golden deer. He thought that the plot of his story would have by now worked out at the hermitage, as directed by

His will. He said to himself, “Though this is but the blossoming of my plan, people should not understand so soon that it is of divine design. I have to behave hereafter as an ordinary human being.”

When he was halfway back, he saw Lakshmana coming and decided that he must be kept unaware of the secret purpose behind the seeming tragedy. So he asked, as if he was perturbed, “Lakshmana! Brother! You disobeyed me and brushed my word aside. You came away, leaving Sita alone in the hermitage. How could you? You have come so far, leaving her helpless! Alas! Every day, you see the demonic wickedness of the ogre brood; how could you desert Sita so? Alas! What has happened to her? I am afraid some calamity has happened! I feel that Sita isn’t there, in the hermitage. Alas! What will we do now? What is to be our future?”

Lakshmana fell at his brother’s feet and said, “Brother! You know me as the workings of your mind. Whatever the occasion, I am ever ready to offer myself, my very breath, at your feet. Would I ever go counter to your command? However this time it happened. The force that compelled me to disobey is the prompting of my destiny. What can I do? The outburst, ‘Ah, Sita, ah, Lakshmana’ that arose from the throat of that false deer reached the hermitage. As soon as Sita heard it, she urged me in various ways to run to your side. I know the tricks of these demons, so I fell at her feet and prayed for pardon. I told her, ‘Rama can’t be harmed in the least. No danger can approach him. The cries we heard are only the false stratagems of the demons.’

“A second time, those cries struck our ears. Then she lost all courage. They were exact reproductions of your voice. She ignored her own reality; she ignored the mores of kinship and family; she used words that shouldn’t be spoken or heard; I couldn’t suffer any more. So I directed her to take every precaution; I did all I could to keep her safe, and then I came away from the hermitage. I will gladly accept whatever punishment you award me, whatever measure you take to expiate for the wrong I have done.” With these words, Lakshmana fell flat at Rama’s feet.

Rama said, “Lakshmana! You ought not to have left her all alone, whatever the reason. I feel that Sita will not be at the hermitage when we get there. How can we pride ourselves as heroic men when, having come into this forest, we are not able to guard Sita from being carried away by the demons? Can you tolerate it when people talk tomorrow that Rama was unable to save his wife from the calamity of being kidnapped? Can you remain calm, listening to such talk? Alas! How am I to bear this tragedy?” Rama moaned and groaned in great mental pain, just like an ignorant man, and ran to the hermitage to find out whether his fears were true.

As Rama had indicated, Sita wasn’t there. In seemingly unbearable anguish, Rama lamented her disappearance. Lakshmana fell even as he stood, unable to bear the grief. Aware that he had caused this catastrophe, he felt like giving up his life, but he realised that Rama, already deprived of Sita, would be put to further anxiety and tangles if he departed from this world, taking his own life. He felt that if he died, Rama would wander alone, in sorrow, through the forest glades; he would have none to give him food and drink. He couldn’t bear Rama’s anguish at the loss of Sita. He couldn’t find his tongue or frame words to console Rama and pacify him.

Lakshmana realizes the truth

Lakshmana ruminated on all that had happened that day. He soon came to the conclusion that it was the result of Rama’s own will. He realised that this brother of his was not an ordinary man; he knew now that what was happening was part of the drama that was destined to bring about progress and prosperity for all mankind. For Rama, who would gladly wipe the tears from all eyes, who was the guardian of the world, who had not evinced an inkling of sorrow so far, was now lamenting and weeping like any ordinary human at separation from his wife!

Watching these happenings, Lakshmana could easily infer that it was all the unrolling of a play directed by Rama! Lakshmana knew very well that Sita was incomparably virtuous. That such a uniquely pure woman should have met with this calamity was inexplicable, except as a scene in a play or a part of a divine plot devised by Rama. No one anywhere can execute even the slightest deed without orders from Rama!

However, Rama had come down as man, resolved to guide man by his example along the path of justice, integrity, detachment, devotion, virtue, veracity, morality, and humility. Lakshmana realised that this was the meaning of the play that Rama and Sita were enacting. He recognised himself as but an actor, whose whole duty was to act the role assigned to him as well as he could.

Deriving strength from these thoughts, Lakshmana fell at Rama's feet. He said, "Brother! you are, I know, the Director of the drama that is the cosmos. There is nothing you cannot do, nothing you do not know. Everything that happens follows your will only. These events could not happen unknown to you. I will not take a denial. I believe that firmly. By these incidents, I believe you are designing to promote the peace of the world and destroy the demon race. My mind is whispering this to me and asking me to be firm in that faith. This must be the truth behind this play. Pray tell me the truth and give me peace of mind."

Rama assents

Rama replied with a smile, "Lakshmana! You are a limb of my person, so what can I keep away from you? You have hit upon the truth. I incarnated in order to uphold and foster righteousness (*dharma*). To do so, I have to enact many scenes of righteous and unrighteous conduct.

"A baby that wails has to be comforted into quiet joy by means of prattle and play, toys and jingles, songs and swings. The mother has to devise many stratagems on the spot in order to persuade the baby to drink the milk it needs. Consider how useful these means are —the songs and swings, the toys and talks, the tricks and tickles. They help the quenching of hunger and the stoppage of wailing. That is their reason, too. You have to add them all up in order to discover how the hunger was quenched and the grief ended.

"Similarly, dear brother, I, who am the Mother of the universe, have to act in these manifold ways to reestablish righteousness and demolish unrighteousness. These incidents have been designed to secure the twin aims of the removal of grief and the winning of bliss; they are not just meaningless exercises.

"Ordinary folk base their conduct on the ideals presented to them, so, as master and leader, I have to practise what I intend to place before them as ideal conduct. Unless I practise what I hold forth as the ideal, I cannot claim to be master and leader. When masters and leaders who do not deserve the positions appear and exercise authority, righteousness declines and unrighteousness runs wild. Therefore, brother, remember that those in authority as masters or leaders must prove their advice right in actual practice; they must help realise the ideals they preach by their own genuine effort. This is the way for them to earn the grace of God and the gratitude of people.

"Sita knows the role she is playing. These two bodies —mine and Sita's— evince the joys and pangs of union and separation only as bodies! The pain and pleasure, the weeping and wailing are all illusory and unreal. They follow the needs and compulsions of the incarnation I have taken upon myself, along with other limitations.

I am taking you into confidence regarding my reality; take note that you too act in conformity with time, deed and cause, space, occasion and recipient, as the story unfolds. This divine mystery is beyond the intelligence of others. So you must also keep quiet on this and play according to the rules. We have to concentrate on the mission

on which we have come.”

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

Study the Ramayana closely!

The drama enacted by the two parties held forth for every householder and every individual the highest ideal of righteous conduct. It placed before the fathers, mothers, wives, husbands, brothers, and friends the best lines of behaviour expected of them and how each of them had to keep their promises and tend their virtues.

Why dilate further? The *Ramayana* lays down ideals for all relationships in life and for the realisation of the highest aim of human life. Nowhere else can be seen such a variety and quantity of moral dicta and their practical applications. The one text, *Ramayana*, has soaked in its pages directions for correct conduct in all situations and under all conditions; it teaches how to justify human birth, how to carry on the government of a kingdom, how to regulate the reactions of the people, and how to design laws that can control and consummate the wishes of the people. If only the *Ramayana* were studied closely and observed in daily practice, mankind could attain peace and prosperity in all fields.

Jatayu tells them what he knows

In order to discover some clue about why, how, and when Sita had left, Rama and Lakshmana forsook the hermitage, armed with weapons; they examined every tank and looked over every hill in the region. They could not find any sign. While proceeding thus, they saw lying across the track before them branches of trees that had been pulled asunder. There were other evidences of a combat that had taken place, like broken arrows and patches of blood. Rama drew his brother's attention to these. "A fight seems to have taken place here," he said. He looked around for signs about who had engaged whom. He found an eagle of truly regal mien lying on the ground, gasping for breath, but still repeating reverentially with eyes closed the name it adored, "Rama, Rama."

The brothers walked straight to the bird and lovingly stroked its head and body. When Rama's hand blessed it with the tender touch, the bird recovered a little strength. It opened its eyes and looked around. It saw the beautiful form of Rama, which could captivate all the worlds. Suddenly it was overpowered by a flood of both joy and sorrow. The incapacitated bird could not move its limbs, nor could it turn on its side, so it crawled forward a little and, raising its head, placed it at Rama's feet. Rama placed the head on his lap and gently fondled it into awareness and activity.

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

"I heard the wail but didn't know who raised the sad cry. I flew near and discovered to my great surprise and sorrow that mother Sita was in distress! I couldn't remain quiet. Though old and decrepit, I pronounced your name

and derived strength thereby and courage to give him battle. I pecked at him so furiously that his body streamed with blood all over. He put Sita in the shade of a tree and then fought ferociously. He drew his wheel-weapon and slashed my wings into shambles. I could not do anything to stop his onward journey with Sita, so I lay here, weeping over my defeat and waiting for your arrival. I am most unlucky, for though I saw mother being taken away by that ruffian, I couldn't save her." Jatayu shed tears of despair as he spoke those words.

Rama displayed great interest and anxiety. "O chief of birds! I shall never forget your help. The good deed you have performed will give you bliss in the next world. Do not feel sad." Thus saying, Rama dusted its wings with his own matted hair, while Lakshmana hurried to bring some water to slake its thirst and refresh it. Rama poured the water drop by drop into the bird's mouth.

Jatayu was delighted at his good fortune, and his face glowed with ecstasy. Jatayu said, "Rama! I am luckier than even your father, for he didn't have this chance to drink water from your hands when he left this world. I got my last sip from your golden hand! I rested on your lap. I drank nectar from your fingers. And, while drawing my last breath, I filled my eyes with the picture of your charming lotus face. I am certain I will be merging in you. O, I am indeed blessed."

Jatayu spoke further, in feeble tones. "Rama! That vicious demon went south. Most probably, he reached Lanka. Therefore, go straight to Lanka, destroy that wicked fellow, and bring the mother to your presence."

Jatayu could speak no more. He cried "Rama" just once and drew his last breath. Rama allowed the vital breath of Jatayu to merge in Him. He performed the obsequies to the body of the bird and took the valedictory bath. After these rituals, he walked south, picturing in his mind the regions of the south and Sita's ordeals.

Ajamukhi loses her limbs

On the way, a demoness called Ajamukhi espied them and was entranced by their personal beauty. She said to herself, "Ah! What loveliness of body! What loveliness of body! What a feast to the eye! I must wed them and win happiness." So resolving, she clasped Lakshmana's hands and drew him toward herself.

Lakshmana inferred that she too was stricken with the malady of Surpanakha, and he treated her with the same contempt. He cut off her limbs and taught her a severe lesson.

Rama kills Kabanda

The forest through which they passed was as terrible as the demons they found there. It was infested with wild animals that roared, howled, and growled most fearfully. Even the roughest heart would quake in fear at the scene and the noises.

While the brothers were trekking, a demon called Kabanda, a mass of distortion and disfiguration, appeared before them. He opposed their advance, shaking the forest with his unearthly guffaw. He tried to snatch Rama and Lakshmana, but Rama slew him before he could succeed. He was a monster with no head; his arms were inordinately long, and his mouth was in the centre of his stomach! He was a terror in that forest, devouring whatever he could get in the sweep of his arms. By killing him, Rama saved the forest-dwellers from a dreaded foe.

On the point of death, Kabanda realised who his enemy was; he recognised Rama. He said, "Master! This day, you liberated me from the shackles of a curse that had reduced me to this ludicrous and cruel role. My sins

have been exonerated by the vision I have of you.” Falling at Rama’s feet, Kabanda said, “Your mission will succeed, without delay or obstacles. You will certainly triumph over the forces of wickedness.”

Sabari tells her story

Rama, the large-hearted lover of all, moved on, walking on foot, with his brother as sole companion. They soon came across an old woman. She stooped; her head could not be held erect; her eyesight had become dull; her hands were quivering. She was coming toward them with a basket of fruits on her head! She saw the charming figures of the brothers and inferred that they were the two who were described with excitement and delight by the sages (*rishis*) of the forest! Placing the basket on the ground, she stood on the track, whispering “Rama, Rama” in reverence and thankfulness.

Lakshmana guessed that this too was an impersonation by some wily demon to harm them. But Rama knew better. He proposed sitting under a nearby tree, which was adjacent to the very hermitage where the old woman was residing. Sabari, the old woman, noticed the lotus-petal-like eyes, the ringlets of hair on their foreheads, the long arms that reached down to the knees, and Rama’s dark-blue complexion. She could contain her ecstasy no longer; she could not suppress her adoration. She ran forward and fell at their feet. She asked, “Where do you come from? What are your names?”

Rama replied, smilingly and coolly, “Mother! We come from Ayodhya, and we reside in the forest. I am Rama, and my brother is known as Lakshmana.”

At this, Sabari exclaimed, “Father! My long cherished desire has been fulfilled, I have been waiting for your arrival day and night, looking for you into the distance until my eyes have become dull and insensitive. I have achieved success. My longing has had its result. My vigil and fasts have borne fruit. Ah! I have been rewarded! This is the result of my guru’s grace. This is the mysterious working of God.” She brought the basket near Rama.

Meanwhile, Rama asked her, “Mother! You speak of a *guru*; who is he, this *guru* of yours?”

She said, “His name is Mathanga Rishi. But, since women are not taken as pupils in this hermitage, I listened to his lessons while hiding behind bushes and trees. I served my *guru* and other sages (*rishis*), removing the thorns from the tracks that led to the rivers where they take their bath, mostly by rolling over the ground, for I had to do it pretty early, before dawn. I also removed the pebbles and stones that might hurt their feet. I lived on fruits and tubers as the other pupils did. I served my masters unseen, and I spent my days in the recesses of the jungle.

“Mathanga, the great one (*mahatma*), who knew the yearnings of my mind, told me one day, ‘Mother! Your body has reached a ripe old age. If you strain so much, you will soon be exhausted. So come, reside in the hermitage and take good rest.’

“While I was spending my days thus in the service of this hermitage, the sage desired to quit the body and called me beside him. He said, ‘Sabari! The task on which I have come is over. I have resolved to leave this body now. You shall remain in residence at this hermitage. Within a short time, Rama will come into the forest. Invite him into this hermitage and offer what little service you can to him. Let this hermitage be sanctified by the touch of his feet.’

“I protested a great deal; I told him how I could never be happy in the hermitage without him. I prayed to him to take me too, through death, to where he was proceeding. My *guru* was not in a mood to accede to my wishes.

He said that I had to be here for Rama's arrival and that I could not avoid that responsibility or lose that joy.

From that day, I have existed here, with my arms out-stretched to welcome you, with eyes watching the horizon, and carrying about with me this decrepit body so that I might live to see you and serve you. O Rama! O Lord! O compassionate of the afflicted! O dweller in the hearts of sages (*rishis*)! My *guru*'s wish has been fulfilled. The hermitage is just a few feet off; please sanctify it by entering it." Sabari fell at Rama's feet and entreated him to accede to her *guru*'s last request.

Rama was naturally happy at the dedication and devotion of the old woman. He was the very embodiment of spontaneous surging love. So he rose and walked toward the hermitage with his brother and entered it.

O! Sabari was overcome by a flood of joy, which broke all limits and expressed itself in ecstatic thrill and speech. Until that moment, that gem among women was too weak to tread a few paces. Now, she found herself endowed with the strength of a thousand elephants! She marched buoyantly to the river and brought, in quick time, cool limpid water that was eminently sweet. She tasted the fruits she chose from the basket and offered those she found sweet and ripe to the brothers. While they ate, she looked on happily and with gratitude at their charming faces, and when they had finished, she washed their feet and placed the drops of water sanctified by the contact on her head.

"Lord!" she said. "I have no more desire. Why should I live on? I survived until now for that one piece of good fortune: the sight (*darshan*) of Rama. I have had that sight. Now, save me by merging this life, this breath, in thy lotus feet. I have heard your glory extensively from the sages and saints. Today, I witnessed it; I am full of gratitude and joy."

Rama relished the fruits she offered with so much devotion. While eating them he said, "Mother! These fruits are as sweet as your own heart. Really, these are not fruits that grow on trees. Why, the wild fruits that grow in jungles are not so sweet at all. They can never be. These are fruits that have grown on the holy tree of life, on the branches of the pure mind, in the sunshine of love." Rama ate the fruits, extolling their taste all the time.

Seeing Rama in this mood, Lakshmana was happy beyond words, for Rama hadn't eaten fruit with such joy for a long time. All these days, Lakshmana had to persuade him to taste a few, with a good deal of pleading and praying, even after the fruits were peeled, cut, and placed before him. Rama was so afflicted by the separation from Sita. In spite of Lakshmana's efforts, Rama would eat only half a fruit or so, and Lakshmana was never satisfied with the quantity that his brother ate.

Rama admires devotion

Today, Sabari gave him the fruits that had dropped ripe from the trees. She used to dust them and clean them and keep them for him every day, and when Rama did not arrive, she ate them herself as sacramental food, given to her by Rama himself! Day after day, she roamed the forest in search of sweet ones to be placed before Rama. Thus, daily the fruits were saturated with her love and devotion and the fruits became doubly desirable. Lakshmana noticed that this was why Rama was eating them with joy. He was filled with delight, and he admired Sabari's devotion, which was so richly rewarded. He appreciated the divine joy with which she had filled herself as a result of her long years of spiritual study and practice.

Sabari stood with folded hands before Rama and said, "Lord! I am of low caste; I am of untutored intellect, dull and stupid. I am not learned in any sacred art or text. I am lower than the lowest. How can I extol you

or describe your glory? I have no skill in the use of words. I haven't cultivated my reason. Nor have I practised austerities prescribed to gain insight into divinity. I am on the lowest step in spiritual exercises. My only strength is my love for God. I have no other support or sustenance." She spoke of Rama's compassion, in accepting her offering. "Your grace is boundless." she said.

Rama listened to her words intensely. He lifted her chin and looked right into her eyes. "Mother! Devotion is the thing I need; the rest are subsidiary. Other things like scholarship, intelligence, status, social prestige, caste—I don't pay any attention to them. They are of no value in my eyes. More than all the powers gained by spiritual disciplines and austerities, I relish the sweetness of devotion saturated with love. I seek only that. A man who has no love in him is as barren as a cloud with no moisture, a tree with no fruits, or a cow yielding no milk; he is ever far from God and can never earn grace.

"Sabari! Of the nine ways of evincing and cultivating devotion, I desire only that any one be followed consistently by a person. But I find you have followed all nine ways to the very end. So I do not see anyone higher than you in spiritual attainment. I am indeed elated in all manner of ways, for you have offered me devotion that is pure, steady, and selfless and that is love springing from the heart and surging from it in all directions, toward all directions and toward all beings. You have not cast aspersions on anyone, even while dreaming! That is what makes your mind so pure. Your mind doesn't blossom when 'good' comes and doesn't wither when 'bad' comes. You are blessed in all ways."

Sabari drank in these words of counsel. She said, "Rama! There is no path for the devotee other than doing one's best to please the Divine, is there? I don't crave anything else. This day, my father, my God, the Lord of my life, the Lord of all the worlds, the Lord of all creation has appeared before me! How can I measure my good luck, O Lord of Janaki, of Sita, the daughter of Janaka?"

Sabari tells what she knows

At this she remembered Sita, and the brothers also suddenly realised their plight. Rama told her, "Alas, Sabari, all this while, you kept us happy, rid of anxiety, floating in joy, but now you have plunged us in grief." Sabari was struck with remorse; she raised her head in consternation and pleaded, "Lord! What is this you say? Pardon my indiscretion," and she fell at Rama's feet.

Rama asked her, "Sabari! Do you know anything about Sita? Have you heard anything about her?"

Sabari replied, "Don't I know! Don't I know about Sita? No woman who knows the Rama principle will be ignorant of the Sita principle, that gem of womankind, that crown of virtue, that light of femininity! O, what great good fortune is hers! She is the very shadow of my Rama! Rama! I must tell you what my *guru*, Sage Mathanga, taught me about the Sita principle. Of course, there is nothing you do not know. But, since you asked me now whether I knew anything about Sita, I will tell you what I know.

"My *guru* said, 'Rama deluded the minds of Manthara and Kaika in order to fulfil his mission of destroying the demon (*rakshasa*) brood. As a result, Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana have entered the forest as exiles.' He said that they would visit hermitages and bless the ascetics and that Rama would kill the demons who obstruct their rituals and disciplines. He said that Rama would devise a plan by which Ravana, who is knit strongly with the demon clans, would be tempted to enact a role in a dream centering around the 'abduction' of Sita! He assured me that the Sita abducted by Ravana is only a pseudo-Sita, and not the real, genuine Mother.

“He also told me that Rama would come into this forest while searching for Sita, who had been abducted, and that I would be rewarded as never before by that visit.

“My *guru* also told me that Rama would cultivate an alliance with Sugriva, who had taken refuge in the Rishyamuka hills (adjacent to this hermitage) from the deadly depredation of his elder brother, Vali. Rama would accomplish the task of finding Sita through Sugriva.

“Rama! You are the designer and director of this cosmic drama. The incidents of your drama were known to my *guru*, and he has revealed them to me. Your stage is the entire cosmos. Your will decides the future of the universe; it ensures the stability and progress of the universe. All that happens is the unrolling into action of your will; without it, nothing great or small can ever happen.

“Lord! You are acting in this play as if you are unaware of your own plot. You are pretending to be grief-stricken at separation from Sita! Only those who are foolish, or who have no faith in the *Atmic* reality, or who are atheists can take it as true. Those who are aware of divinity and its mysteries, those who are devotees and spiritual aspirants (*sadhakas*) seeking to know God as their own reality, will not be led away into the belief that it is genuine. You are the doer of all that is done; no one, however powerful, can hinder or oppose your will. You will the reactions of people to all happenings as good or bad; they are not the authors thereof. The ignorant may assert that they are the executors of their deeds. Rama! Pardon my impertinence. I have spoken too much in your presence.”

Thus saying, Sabari fell at Rama’s feet. She developed the inner fire of *yoga*, and as a result, her body was reduced to ashes, while her breath merged in the Rama principle she adored. Thus, Rama and Lakshmana fulfilled the deep yearnings of Sabari and filled her departing soul with bliss.