

Chapter 6. Lanka on Fire

Hanuman knew that it was wrong to spend any more time in Lanka. He felt that the sooner he communicated to Rama the welcome news about Sita, the better for all concerned. He prayed for permission to leave.

She said, “Go. Go safe and soon. Tell Rama to come soon and take me with Him.” She shed tears of hope and sorrow.

Hanuman was moved by the pathos of the scene. Sadness overwhelmed his brave heart. He consoled her and said, “Very soon, Mother, Rama will lay siege to Lanka. With his monkey (*vanara*) hordes, he will destroy these demon (*rakshasa*) forces, rescue you, and restore you to Ayodhya.”

But Sita was inconsolable. She had her doubts. “Hanuman! What are you saying! Can monkey hordes fight and destroy these demons, who have mastered so many mysterious stratagems and subterfuges and who are themselves much stronger? How can Rama and Lakshmana stand up against these demons and win? Victory over the demons is an impossible dream. This can end only in my death. Rather than cause the death of so many of you on the battlefield, I would fain breathe my last and save all your lives.”

Hanuman interrupted her and said, “Mother! Don’t weep. We of the monkey hordes are Rama’s bondslaves. All of us believe that Rama is our strength and courage. We take in the name Rama as our very breath. We have no other source of life. Therefore, even if each of these demons increased a thousandfold in deviltry, we monkeys could easily destroy them. We can win victory over them in spite of their wiles and wickedness. You doubt the extent of our strength and skills because we appear in our wonted forms. Let me show the form I can assume in battle.” Hanuman rose sky-high, and stood before Sita—a mountain peak of shining gold.

Sita was astonished, “Hanuman! Stop! Enough! Contain yourself. If the demons see you, you may not be able to return so soon to Rama.” Sita protested and pleaded with him to assume his old form.

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

Hanuman is captured!

While returning from the place where Sita was, he saw an orchard, and, plucking some tasty fruits, he ate his fill. He cast aside the unripe ones and the extra ones he had plucked. Seeing this, a demon guard wanted to frighten him away, but Hanuman gave him a blow, felling him to the ground. The demon got up and ran to the head of the gang of guards, who fled in terror to his superior, who in turn approached his master. Thus, the news of a monkey rioting in the garden reached the imperial ears of Ravana himself.

It struck Ravana as an evil omen. He couldn’t restrain his anger at the mischief and insult. The flames of his ire rose to the skies. He ordered a few hundred demons to overwhelm and catch the audacious animal. When they didn’t succeed, he sent a few thousand trained and heavily armed soldier-demons into the garden where Hanuman was awaiting their onslaught. Even that formidable force couldn’t harm the monkey or persuade him to move off! Hanuman broke a dry twig from the tree on which he sat, and with that tiny weapon, which he waved around to the recital of Ram, Ram, he warded off every missile that was directed at him.

Seeing this, the demons (*rakshasa*) wondered who he was. Was he an emissary of the Gods? Or was he the harbinger of the destruction of Lanka? The defeated heroes returned to camp, burdened with premonitions of disaster. They had no courage left to report their discomfiture to their ruler, Ravana.

“You sent countless demons on this expedition, but we couldn’t achieve the object. When the monkey roared once, hundreds of our men died for sheer fear. The earth shook under our feet. That roar echoed and re-echoed from every mansion in the city. Seeing our plight, our leaders decided to come to you and report that this is no ordinary foe, that this presages some evil calamity.” This was what they told Ravana. He was told the plain fact, without any reservation: If the monkey was allowed to roam about, danger was certain to envelop the land.

At this, Ravana sent his own dear son, Akshayakumara, at the head of thousands of seasoned warrior-demons. But Hanuman slaughtered this host in a trice, and Ravana had to mourn the death of his beloved son. The entire land shivered in fear at the news of the prince’s death and the decimation of his army. People whispered in fear that this was no ordinary monkey, that it must be a divine phenomenon, and that it was the terrible avenger for the sin of bringing Sita to Lanka. Many prayed to Sita in their heart of hearts to deliver Lanka from the monkey, for they feared it was her vengeance that had taken shape as that strange beast.

Ravana sent for Meghanada and commissioned him to destroy this new invader. He placed at his disposal a huge army of several thousands. Meghanada ascended his chariot and led the army in great pomp. As they marched along, the earth and sky were astounded at their might and their angry tread. Their war cry rent the heavens. All who witnessed that pageantry and panoply were struck with wonder and admiration.

Hanuman watched their march and heard their trumpetings with absolute unconcern; he sat unmoved, on a little branch of the spreading tree, and enjoyed the antics of the demons until they drew near. The soldiers rained arrows on Hanuman from all sides. With an ear-splitting roar, Hanuman jumped down, plucked a giant tree by its roots, and waved it around, beating off the rain of arrows that tried to reach him. The arrows were swept off so fast that they were hit back to the demons who shot them, killing them in such large numbers that very few were left to carry on the fight.

Meghanada was felled by a blow. He rolled, spouting blood. He resolved to resort to the sacred arrow of Brahma that he had with him. He knew that Brahma, the first of the Trinity, had told Ravana that he would meet his death at the hands of man and monkey. He decided to prevent that calamity. The sacred arrow was released with appropriate ritual formulae. Hanuman had great reverence for the weapon that was sanctified by such *mantras* and dedicated to Brahma. So instead of counteracting it; he reverentially prostrated before it. So, it was easy for Meghanada to bind him with a serpent rope.

Hanuman and Ravana talk

The happy news was immediately carried to Ravana by the exultant demons. Hundreds of thousands of eager faces crowded the streets to see the bound monkey. Hanuman was unaffected by fear or anxiety; he moved calmly and collectedly, watching the crowds with an amused smile. At last, they reached Ravana’s audience hall. The courtiers and ministers assembled there were aghast at Hanuman’s insulting indifference to the display of power and luxury that the hall contained.

Ravana laughed aloud at the absurd figure of the monkey; but the next moment, he was overcome by fear of impending death. However, anger was his overriding emotion at that time. He asked, “Hey, you monkey! Who are

you really? Whose might you have been exhibiting and using? Why did you destroy this orchard and this park? Though bound, you have no sense of shame; you look around with your head high up. Come. Give me the right answers.”

Hanuman laughed heartily at his interrogator. In his reply, he used a style of speech and a vocabulary that were beyond the understanding of the people who stood around him. But Ravana, who was an expert in rhetoric and grammar, understood him quite well, and the dialogue between them appeared to the listeners like a disputation between two intellectual giants. Ravana demonstrated before Hanuman several magic feats in order to impress him with his invincibility. He manifested many powers and feats.

But Hanuman remained unmoved. “Ravana! I know your prowess. I have heard that you fight with a thousand arms. I am also aware of your famous fight with Vali. But what wrong did I do? I was hungry; I plucked a few trees by their roots; it is my nature. I was in my element, my natural habitat, the tree top.

“Of course, each one has the desire and the determination to safeguard his own life, to protect his own body. Your soldiers are awfully wicked. They hurt me, so I hurt them, and unable to bear the hurt, they died. I fought them in order to save myself. Your son’s arrow forced me to enter into his bondage. But I am not trying to deceive you in return. My only desire is to carry out the orders of my Master. Listen to me carefully.

“Give up all sense of personal pride and reputation. Reflect on the grandeur of your clan, the family to which you belong. Remember, you are the great grandson of Brahma, the grandson of the great Pulastya, and the son of Vishravas. Give up this delusion of accumulating pomp and power; adore in your heart the Destroyer of fear from the hearts of those devoted to Him, the crown jewel of the Ikshvaku dynasty, the precious gem of the Raghu dynasty, Rama! Surrender to Him, take refuge in Him. Even time shivers in fear before Him. It is not good for you to harbour enmity toward Him.

“Listen to me. Place Sita at Rama’s lotus feet and meditate on the grace that flows from those feet. Strengthened by that grace, rule over the state of Lanka for ever and ever. Make the glory of your grandfather, Pulastya, reach the far corners of the world, without blemish, as long as the sun and moon illumine the sky.

“The fair name of your line should not be tarnished by you in the least. Give up your pride and your delusion. O, Emperor! Rivers taking birth on mountain ranges get flooded in the rainy season and roll furiously along, but within weeks, they run dry with just a trickle of water. Your power and wealth will soon dry up and vanish. Adore Rama as the source of power and wealth; then, they will never get dry, for He is the inexhaustible spring of peace and prosperity. He is ever full. He won’t lose, but you will benefit from Him.

“O Ravana! I am telling you with nothing held back, with an open mind. No one can rescue the unfortunate person who is blinded by hatred toward Him. Accept my advice.”

Hanuman’s words were soft and salutary; they were full of wisdom and morality. But Ravana was not prepared to benefit by the counsel. He said, “Fool! Dare you advise me what to do? Fie on you, fie! Death has drawn near you or else you wouldn’t have the courage to lecture so long in my presence. Enough of your prating, keep your mouth shut!”

Hanuman did not obey. He retorted “Ravana! Your words spell your doom. Alas! You have become insane. You will know the truth of my diagnosis as time passes. In a few days, you can know to whom death is drawing near, to you or to me!”

When Hanuman spoke thus, in utter fearlessness, with no bounds or limits, Ravana was enraged beyond control. He rose. Spouting fire and slapping his thighs in challenge, he roared an order to his henchmen to kill the impertinent monkey. Everyone rushed to where Hanuman sat bound in snake ropes.

Just at that moment, Vibhishana, Ravana's brother, entered the hall, followed by his retinue. He prostrated before his elder brother and said protestingly, "Master! It is not right to kill an emissary. A king's code of conduct (*raja-dharma*) will not approve the deed. Punish him in some way, but don't pronounce the death sentence."

Ravana's ministers supported this stand, declaring his suggestion to be the noblest truth. Ravana laughed in scorn at their absurd ideas of right and wrong. Still, he climbed down and said, "Well. Mutilate him and send him off."

Hanuman breaks free and sets Lanka afire

The ministers gathered to decide on the mutilation. They came to the conclusion that monkeys are proud of their tails and would keep them intact, long and strong. Someone suggested that the best punishment would be to wind sheets of cloth on the tail, pour oil until it soaked and dripped, and then set fire to it. This plan got unanimous acceptance! They exulted among themselves at the brilliance of the idea. "The tailless monkey will return to its master and bring him here to avenge the loss. Then, we can witness the manliness of his master and his might." There was a spate of whispers in the hall.

Hanuman watched their movements, listening to their confabulations and laughing within himself all the while. When they had finished, he burst into a thunderbolt of laughter! The demons were enraged at his display of insulting behaviour. They got cloth and oil and started the process of winding and soaking. But the more they wound and soaked, the longer the tail grew! Miles of cloth and tanks of oil had to be ordered.

News of the wonder spread all over the city, and crowds of men, women, and children ran toward the hall to witness the miracle. Bands of musicians led the procession. The crowds began clapping hands. Hanuman was led along the streets with oil-soaked cloth wound along the whole length of his tail. At last, the central square of the city of Lanka was reached. There, before a huge crowd of eager citizens, a burning flame was applied to the tip of Hanuman's tail.

Suddenly, Hanuman assumed his subtle form, so the ropes that had bound him became too loose and fell off. He could now assume his natural size and jump about. He rose in one jump onto the top of a golden mansion; he shouted "Rama, Rama". The demons shuddered in fear, for a strong wind rose from nowhere and blew with great speed.

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

The demons fled desperately with their wives and children, forsaking their burning homes, eager to save their lives. To add to the confusion, cattle, horses, mules, and elephants broke away from their sheds and ran helter-skelter in panic and pain. The entire city was enveloped in a shroud of wails, cries, roars and trumpeting. "Oh! Save us." "Oh! Take us to safety." Agonising appeals like these rose from the throats of women and children and echoed from the sky.

Queen Mandodari heard the wail. She summoned the soldiers guarding the palace and ordered them to give refuge therein to women and children. She confessed her fears and poured out her grief. “Alas! Ravana’s foolish obstinacy is causing the extinction of the demon clan. This blow will end only with the holocaust. Brother-in-law Vibhishana and I advised him so much. We prayed with folded arms. He refused to pay heed. We lamented that it would end in the destruction of every single demon. But as they say, ‘When extermination is near, discrimination flees far.’ Bad times are approaching him, so he behaves in these nefarious ways.”

Wherever she turned her eyes, ferocious tongues of flame glared at her, and Hanuman was also very much before her eyes, jumping about in the midst of the flames. From every household rose the cry, “Hanuman! Save us.” “Spare this house.” With folded palms, they prayed, “Take pity on our children.” The wife of Kumbhakarna, Ravana’s younger brother, ran forward with her prayer. “O, messenger of Rama! My husband is submerged in deep sleep. Don’t set fire to our home. Save my husband from being burned to death.”

Lanka was caught in the throes of total destruction. Ravana came to know of the calamity pretty soon. He ordered that the monkey be surrounded by soldiers with weapons and mortars. Those who went toward Hanuman scattered in panic when his burning tail flailed them mercilessly. Many were killed by that flaming tail. Women clamoured and called on the clouds to shower rain and stop the fire from spreading. Malyavantha saw their plight and said within himself, “No, this fire cannot be put out by rain! This is the unbearable grief of Sita.” Others said, “This is the flame of anger against Ravana; it is the fiery form of the curse he has to go through. It will burn this city to ashes.”

The huge flame hopped from rooftop to rooftop, without any sign of exhaustion. Sometimes, Hanuman made himself small, sometimes gigantic, but the pace of destruction was the same, whatever size he assumed. The crackle of the flames and the incessant thud of falling walls could be heard from all sides.

Sita heard the news; she raised her head and had one long look at the smoke and sparkle surrounding the garden. The sky was darkened by smoke! The garden had also become uncomfortably hot. Sita called upon the God of Fire without delay, praying for him to save Hanuman, the genuine devotee of Rama. Since she prayed out of a compassionate heart, it became suddenly cool and comfortable for Hanuman.

Ravana suffered loss and dishonour for discarding the advice given by elders and for indulging in vulgar talk when he was shown the proper road. In just under a wink, the capital city of his empire was wiped out by fire. The house where Kumbhakarna was asleep and the house of that supermost among devotees, Vibhishana, were the only two that were not erased by the fire.

Hanuman visits Sita

Hanuman leaped into the sea and dipped his tail in the waters to put out the flame. Then, he assumed the form of a miniature monkey and went to Sita. He prostrated before her and said, “Mother! I shall tell Rama all that you have asked me to. Give me something so that I could prove that I have met you.”

Sita thought for a while. Then, she took a gemset jewel from her head and placed it in Hanuman’s hand. Hanuman pressed it over his eye reverently and fell at Sita’s feet again, overcome with joy.

Sita blessed him and said, “Hanuman! You saw with your own eyes the torture Ravana is inflicting on me, so there is no need for me to dilate on that. Tell the Lord that he must grant me the fortune of his sight (*darshan*). Tell him that I prayed for it again and again. Tell him that he and Lakshmana must lay siege to Lanka within a month.

“Hanuman! These three days I spent happily, speaking to you of Rama. My heart has become calm and cool. I can’t imagine how I will spend both night and day when you are gone. I shall be a fish in a dry pond. Of course, the omniscient Lord is ever watching over me; but when, oh when will I feast my eyes on those lotus-eyes of His?”

Hanuman tried to infuse faith and courage in her mind by his assurances and assertions; he prayed, pleaded, and prostrated again and again; at last he turned toward his path.

Back to Rama’s camp

Before leaving the *Ashoka* Park, Hanuman bellowed a farewell roar, which shook the earth and made the men, women, and children of the island shiver in terror. Without any more delay, Hanuman reached the shore of the sea; he filled his mind with the thought of Rama and his eyes with His charm. Even while meditating on that name and form, he leaped over the sea and reached the other shore in a trice.

That day was the full moon of the month *Karthika* (October-November). The cool moonlight was a balm to the heart; Rama’s name implanted strength and joy. Hanuman had won. The monkey groups who had espied Hanuman from a distance coming through the horizon were elated beyond words. They were filled with joy; their faces blossomed. They shone with a new splendour as they saw him come nearer and nearer. They exulted that they had fulfilled the mission on which Rama has sent them.

Three full days they had waited for his return, and their hearts had gone dry with despair; now, they clothed themselves in leaves and flowers. They ranged themselves along the shore, pressing forward to clasp Hanuman to their bosoms as he landed. They immediately asked him what had happened in Lanka, about Sita and her welfare, and the circumstances and conditions of Lanka. Hanuman told them all they wanted, with high enthusiasm, and left for where Rama was.

In a short while, they entered the honey forest (*Madhuvana*) and gorged themselves with the fruits that grew thereon, for Sugriva had promised them all a free run of the garden when they had discovered Sita’s whereabouts. The guards posted there tried to prevent the entry of the horde but they streamed in nevertheless. So the guards ran to their master and reported that they were helpless to prevent the loot.

When Sugriva heard them, he exclaimed, “O, they have won; they have fulfilled the task set for them by Rama!” He was exceedingly happy. Sugriva told the guards, “This is a celebration; this is a festival of bliss (*ananda*). Go, don’t worry!”

Meanwhile, groups of monkeys arrived and fell at the feet of their king and master. Sugriva smiled at them and said, “Well, I learned that you attained the fruit of your expedition.”

They replied, “Lord! Through your grace and good wishes we succeeded in our endeavour. It was a great hero who won the victory. He gave us new life. If we are standing before you alive and talking to you, he alone is the cause.” Then they gave him details of the situation in Lanka and the plight of Sita there.

At this, Sugriva rose suddenly, declaring, “We won’t delay a minute longer,” and hastened to Rama. Realising that the monkeys were coming toward him with the news of a successful mission, Rama and Lakshmana seated themselves on a huge boulder and watched the group hurrying forward. They advanced in leaps and bounds, quite excited, and fell at Rama’s feet.

An interview with Rama

First, Rama inquired about their health and welfare. Then, Jambavan, the senior-most among them, rose and said, “Those who have earned your compassion are indeed blessed. It endows them with all virtues. Such a one’s renown will encompass the three worlds.” He praised Hanuman in various ways.

Hanuman rose and prostrated before Rama. He described in detail the island of Lanka; he told Him of Sita’s plight, with tears of joy and commiseration flowing from his eyes, and he placed in Rama’s hands the crest-jewel that he had brought with extreme care and caution.

Rama clasped Hanuman to his bosom. He said, “Oh son of the wind god! Tell me more of Sita, her plight and her feelings.”

Hanuman said, “O Lord of my life. It is impossible to describe. Sita is reduced to bones, for she doesn’t eat or sleep. She counts every minute, praying for your sight (*darshan*). She has no other thought than the recitation of your name. She wanted me to inform you of her countless prostrations. She remembered Lakshmana often and shed profuse tears. I have heard with my own ears the sharp verbal dagger-thrusts that Ravana administers every morning and evening when he comes and speaks to her. Mother doesn’t listen to his prattle in the least; she is ever melting away in the agony of separation and in thoughts centred on you.”

“Save Sita this very moment!” cried Hanuman, falling at Rama’s feet.

Hearing these words, Lakshmana rose in vengeful anger and wept at Sita’s condition. The picture of Sita in Lanka burned his inner being. He said at last, “Brother! Don’t delay. Save my sister-in-law!”

Rama replied with a smile, “Lakshmana! Do not hurry. Bide your time. There is a time when each step has to be taken. Don’t be dejected when grief invades or exults when joy flows in.” Rama consoled him with soft and soothing words.

Rama invited Hanuman to sit close to him. He seated him near his feet. He asked him, “Hanuman! What is the nature of the rule that Ravana has established in Lanka? How did you set Lanka on fire?”

Hanuman said, “Lord! There is nothing you don’t know. What shall I say of the strength of monkeys! We are only animals that jump about from branch to branch. How can we jump from one shore of the sea to the other? How can we overpower the demons? How can we destroy the city of Lanka through fire? All these were due solely to your grace and glory. The strength and courage that your name confers helped us to achieve those things. I am absolutely unable by myself to do anything.

“The ring of yours that I had with me guarded me and guided me aright. Lord! Seeing the ring and holding it in her hand, how happy Sita was! ‘Is this a dream? Did Rama really send it to me?’ She wondered thus, doubted thus, and finally became firm in faith. Lord, her grief, her extreme anguish, set fire to Lanka and destroyed it, not I. You chose me as an instrument and you achieved these great tasks with me as a tool. All this is a blessing bestowed on me, since you have great affection toward devotees. Lord! Nothing is impossible for one who has won your grace.”

When Rama heard these words, steeped in sincerity and humility, he was very pleased. He turned to Lakshmana. “Brother! Prepare for the campaign, without delay.” And, watching the earthshaking forces that were gathered and the preparations made by Jambavan and Sugriva, quite soon, the gods themselves were astounded and gratified.

The monkey warriors touched Rama's feet and raised a triumphal roar. Rama blessed them all by his glance of compassion and benediction. Each warrior became a mountain peak that had grown wings! They marched forward with exultation at every step. Auspicious omens greeted them as soon as they stepped forward. Sita also, at *ashoka* garden, sensed auspiciousness that very moment. And Ravana was beset by ominous forebodings indicated by inauspicious happenings.

Jambavan and others plucked huge trees and waved them as arms; they raised such war cries on their way that the earth shook under their feet and the skies rumbled all around. Off and on, they cheered, "Victory to Lord *Ramachandra*."

Mandodari tries to dissuade Ravana

In Lanka, every demon (*rakshasa*) was struck with anxiety about what was in store for them in days to come. They were afraid of the imminent disaster; they were convinced they could not escape the calamity. They communicated their fears to each other only in whispers, since they were mortally afraid of Ravana.

Wherever groups of demons collected in Lanka, the talk centred round the calamitous damage inflicted by Rama's messenger. They wondered, "When the servant is capable of such tremendous heroism, what is the measure of the onslaught the master can inflict?" They pictured Rama as capable of immeasurable attack.

Their fears were communicated by her maids to Mandodari, Ravana's queen. Her mind was filled with apprehension and anxiety. She realised that the fear was based on a correct estimate of the happenings. She waited for a propitious moment when Ravana would be in a receptive mood and could be spoken to while alone.

Getting such a chance, she said, "Lord! Don't develop enmity toward the Omniscient One. You yourself said that Rama was not an ordinary person.

"Your army could not wreak vengeance when sister Surpanakha was disfigured; it could not harm him or move him to repentance. Now, he has millions of redoubtable monkey heroes with him. What can our demon warriors achieve against him now? They could not even bind and punish the messenger who got into this kingdom. That is the extent of the misfortune that has beset us. When one servant caused such horror and despair, how much worse would be the calamities that millions like him could bring about?"

"Please listen to my appeal. Send Sita back to Rama, in the care of brother Vibhishana or with your ministers. Sita is no ordinary woman. She is exemplarily chaste, the very embodiment of spiritual energy that results from a righteous nature. Causing grief to such a person can bring you no good. Accede to my pleading. Return Sita to Rama. When that is done, all will be good for you and for the demon race. Or else, as the serpent swallows frogs, Rama's arrows will swallow the demon hordes. Give up stubbornness and pride. Offer Sita at Rama's feet." She fell at Ravana's feet with this pitiable importunity.

Ravana, the conceited ignoramus, looked at Mandodari, and replied with a loud peal of laughter. "Fie on you! Tender women are scared soon; that is their very nature. Their words, rising from fear, will turn even fortune into misfortune. When the monkeys arrive at our doors, the demons will certainly gobble them up. The gods shudder in mortal terror when my name is uttered within hearing, so why are you afraid of these tree-dwelling brutes? Fie on your fears! Get out of here." And he proudly moved into the hall, appearing like personified audacity.

As soon as he left, Mandodari bewailed to herself, "Alas! Destiny is devising a mighty tragedy. What has it

decided for me? It is terrible even to guess what it is.” Burdened with grief and at a loss to plan what else to do, she returned to her rooms and rolled on her bed, agitated by a multitude of thoughts.

Ravana converses with his ministers

At the audience hall, Ravana called the ministers together and invited them to express their estimate of the situation. “You are aware of the calamities that were inflicted by Rama’s messenger. What preparations are necessary? What are your suggestions for the future? Tell me quite frankly, without the slightest fear.”

The ministers looked at each other; they sneered in repressed laughter, but no one dared speak. Suddenly, Kumbhakarna, who was immersed in sleep for months and was therefore unaware of the conflagration during Hanuman’s visit, emerged from his sleep and rushed into the audience hall. He shouted at his elder brother, “Hello! You boasted that there is no hero equal to you in all the three worlds; you challenged the worlds and dared anyone to face you. Now, I hear a tiny little monkey entered the city and burned it to ashes! Shame! Shame on you! How did you allow it to escape alive?” With these words of jeer, he left the hall and hastened home.

At this point, minister Atikaya rose from his seat and addressed the emperor. “Master! We shall obey your commands. If only a gracious look from your eyes falls on us, we can destroy all men and monkeys and wipe them off the face of the earth. Why assert more?” He sat down with a grunt of satisfaction.

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

Kumbhakarna’s atheistic sons, the highly egotistic Kumbha and Nikumbha, also spoke in this strain. Akampana and other warriors added their verses to the same song. Off and on, the irrepressible Mahodara stood up and rapped his thighs as if he was proclaiming his eagerness to join the fray. Of course, every one of them was infected with an inner fear, though they did not exhibit it in their speech or countenances. The result was that Ravana was happy, and their aim to hearten him was realised.

Lastly, one demon rose and tried to catch attention. He said, “Emperor! I’ll dress myself as a *brahmin* and approach Rama and Lakshmana wherever they are. I’ll invite them for lunch and, when they come into my hermitage, I’ll bind them hand and foot. If you approve of this stratagem, I’ll attempt it.”

Vibhishana has his say

Ravana was very pleased with his ministers and others. Meanwhile, Vibhishana had entered the Hall. Ravana looked at him and asked him, “Brother! What is your opinion on this question, these men and monkeys?”

Vibhishana replied, “Most compassionate brother! I shall answer as best I can, without any frills or feints. I only pray that you listen patiently and carefully. Pardon me, O Sovereign Lord! If you desire a good status after death, an unsullied fame while alive, prosperity and happiness here and hereafter, you must desist from admiring the beauty of women who belong to others.

What can one single living being like you do to injure or obstruct the Ruler of the fourteen worlds? Can anyone survive after opposing Him? How can such a one prosper? Greed clouds all the virtues of a person. Lust and

anger are gateways to the regions of ruin. Rama is not an ordinary person. He is death to the god of death. He is the regulator of time. He cannot be affected by illness or want or weakness. He is unborn and thus immortal. Give up your hatred of such a divine person and pray to be accepted as His servant. Return his consort to Him and earn His grace. I am falling at your feet and pleading with you with all the force I command.”

Hearing him, Malyavantha, an old and revered minister, nodded in agreement and stood up. “Master! Your brother’s words are just and right. Accepting his suggestions will redound to your renown.”

But Ravana was greatly incensed at the advice given by them both. He reprimanded them hotly. “You are both fools! Do you know what you have been doing so long? You were extolling my enemy. You are not fit to be present in this hall while this subject is being considered.” He ordered them to be removed from the hall.

At this, Malyavantha got down from his chair and hurried home. Vibhishana also offered his prostrations to his elder brother and, with folded palms, he expostulated, “O King! The *Vedas* and scriptures (*sastras*) declare that the twin natures of goodness and wickedness reside in every person’s heart. When goodness predominates and is given full authority, the person will possess joy, peace, and prosperity of all types. When wickedness predominates and is given full authority, the person will be attacked by all types of adversity. Now, the vile nature is overwhelming your virtuous nature, so you condemn as enemies those who offer good advice and try to promote your good. Sita is like the night of destruction for the demons (*rakshasas*). You have no compassion toward her. That is the wicked trait in you. I am praying for this boon from you; please agree to my request. Return Sita to Rama. I am sure that will endow you with all happiness and auspiciousness.”

Ravana rose suddenly from his throne, exclaiming, “Fool! Death has drawn very near you. Only my grace has kept you alive till this moment. Now you are counting my enemies as your benefactors. I cannot understand why you have developed respect and loyalty to them. Is there on earth anyone living who cannot be subdued by the strength of my shoulders? Eating the food I give, living in the house provided by me, residing in my territory, how dare you extol my enemies? Thorny bushes grown to protect the fort have become harmful to the fort itself. You have spread too much to be useful. Go, go to some hermitage and teach your lessons on morality and goodness.” Thus saying, he kicked Vibhishana away from him.

However angrily he was kicked, Vibhishana persisted for a long time in praying to him, his hands holding the very feet that were kicking him. “King! Rama resolves on truth, and his resolution can never fail. Your time is running out; so too, the time of your followers. I am going to take refuge with Rama. I have done my best to save you. I have nothing to repent, for I haven’t done any wrong.” With these words, he left the hall.

Vibhishana joins Rama

Reciting “Rama” with every breath, and breathless with joy and excitement, Vibhishana crossed the sea and landed on the other shore. The monkeys (*vanaras*) who noticed him took him to be a messenger from Ravana and reported his arrival to their ruler, Sugriva. Vibhishana was prevented from entering the camp. His arrival was conveyed to the Lord, thus, “O Rama! Ravana’s brother has come to have your sight (*darshan*).”

Rama asked Sugriva, who had brought him the news, what he thought about the incident. Sugriva replied that it was difficult to understand the plans and purposes of demons (*rakshasas*) since they assume various forms as and when they like and so are inexplicable. We don’t know why he has come among us. I guess it is to open a wedge between me and Angada, Vali’s son. I believe it is advisable to bind him and keep him aside, without

delay.”

Rama replied, “Friend! Your words are correct. You spoke in accordance with the injunctions in the scriptures (*sastras*) about defections. But listen to my vow. It may be opposed to your advice. My vow is to protect all those who surrender to me. Even if the person surrendering is our enemy, to make an exception in his case is wrong. I shall not give up any being that surrenders to me, even if it involves the sin of slaying a billion *brahmins*.

Perhaps he was sent by Ravana to sow the seeds of dissension among us. Well, why should we be afraid of him even if this be true? Or he has come frightened by his brother. If he surrenders to me, I will guard him and foster him as my own life breath. So bring him in, quickly,” he ordered. Sugriva hastened to obey, and Hanuman brought Vibhishana and made him stand before Rama.

When Vibhishana’s eyes fell on Rama’s lotus face, he shed profuse tears of ecstasy. He could scarcely stand up. “Lord,” he gasped, and fell at Rama’s feet. “Save me, save me. I am your slave,” he prayed. “O Protector of the Gods! I took birth in the demon race; I am Ravana’s younger brother, who rules over the demons. My name is Vibhishana. My birth as a demon is the result of the vast quantity of sin I had accumulated. Dullness and ignorance have mastery over me. As the owl craves for night, I relish only darkness. You foster all those who surrender to you yearning for your love and grace. I have none else to whom I can run for rescue.”

Rama saw him pleading so humbly and earnestly to be taken into confidence and saved, and he was delighted. He drew him near and softly fondled him, patting his back in deep love. He spoke sweetly to him, “My dear Vibhishana! Don’t worry. The very sight you had of me has destroyed the demon nature in you. You are to me as close as Lakshmana and Sugriva.” These words wiped away all fear from Vibhishana’s heart.

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

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

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

Rama told him, “Go. Have a bath in the sacred waters of the sea, and come soon.” Accordingly, Vibhishana left for the seashore. Rama asked Hanuman to bring a pot of the sacred water from the sea. When Vibhishana returned after the bath and prostrated at Rama’s feet, Rama took a handful of water from the pot, sprinkled drops on Vibhishana’s head, and declared, “By this rite, I make you the ruler of the kingdom of Lanka.”

Vibhishana rose and said, “O Lord! Why do I need a kingdom? I am content just to secure a place by the side of these lotus feet.”

But Rama said, “No. You cannot escape this duty.”

Vibhishana replied, “I bow my head to the command I receive from you.” He folded his hands in prayerful humility. The monkeys stood all around, struck by the compassion and grace that Rama bestowed on the person who surrendered his all at Rama’s lotus feet. Their hearts were filled with bliss.

Rama saw the generals of the monkey hordes and spoke to them. “Leaders! Take Vibhishana with you. Do not consider him as someone apart; regard him as your comrade. He is my own.” These endearing words greatly heartened Vibhishana. Soon they moved toward the seashore.