

PANCHAVATI

Rama wished to stay at Panchavati on the Godavari for some length of time. So, reclining under the cool shades of a spreading tree Rama called his brother near and said, “Lakshmana, brother, fix upon a beautiful and comfortable spot in this area and build thereon a nice little cottage, as charming as you wish.”

Lakshmana received this order as a dagger-thrust! He could not bear the agony. He fell at the feet of Rama, crying out in anguish: “Tell me what crime I committed to deserve this cruel command.” Sita and Rama were struck with amazement at this behaviour. Rama said, “Lakshmana, I cannot understand what makes you so sad. Have you heard any day a single cruel word from my tongue? Have I become so insane as to utter harsh, unpleasant words to you or anyone else? You attend to my needs and wishes and serve me as the very breath of life. How then can I speak in cruel

terms to you? Your grief is meaningless, mistaken. After all, what did I tell you now? I told you only this: Choose any spot you like and build thereon a hut for us to live in. Isn't it so?”

At this, Lakshmana closed his ears with the palms and protested sadly, “Rama! Rama! I cannot bear to hear these words.” Rama was surprised at this gesture of grief. But Lakshmana stood before him with folded hands, supplicating with the words: “Lord! There is no one in me to say “I.” My only treasure, my only possession is Sita and Rama. I have no wish of my own. I have no will of my own. My wish, my will, is Rama's wish, Rama's will, Rama's command. Obeying it is my wish, my will. I am the slave who cares for none else, nothing else. How then can I bear to listen to words which indicate that I have to choose according to my wishes a spot for the cottage? As if I have the capacity and inclination to choose! Had I preferences of my own, how can I be a fit servant of Rama? How can I deserve this privilege and pleasure? It would mean I am unfit to be alive on earth, and my life is but a burden and a shame.” Lakshmana stood, sobbing aloud, unable to stifle his grief.

Rama saw his plight. He consoled him with kind words. “Brother! Your heart is highly sanctified. I used those words in the ordinary worldly sense, but do not be under the impression that your brother is unaware of your innermost quality of dedication. Do not grieve.”

Rama showered His smiles on Lakshmana and continued, “Brother, I am delighted at the purity of your devotion and the genuineness of your service. Your intentions are innocent and elevating. I will not pain you by such words hereafter. I spoke to you the language of common usage, that is all. Do not take them so much to heart. Come! Let us go and choose!” Saying thus, He took Sita and Lakshmana with him. After traversing some distance, Rama stopped and said, “Well! Erect the *Parnasala* (cottage) here!”

When he heard those words, Lakshmana exclaimed in great joy. “Ah, I am blessed indeed. My duty is to carry out such commands not exercising my wish or will, to do anything on my own.” He fell at the feet of his elder brother. Rising happy and content, he entered on the task of collecting branches and twigs for the hut that was to be their home.

Sita and Rama realised that Lakshmana had a highly sensitive mind, a delicately subtle intellect. They derived great joy within themselves at the recollection of the depth of his faith and devotion. Sita confessed to Rama on many occasions that life for her in the forest was even more delightful than life at Ayodhya, for the reason that a brother like Lakshmana was accompanying and serving Rama.

When Sita and Rama saw the hermitage constructed by Lakshmana, they were charmed by its beauty, its captivating simplicity and comfort, and the inspiring setting

in which it shone. Sita entered the cottage, and was immediately struck by the skill and artistic taste of her brother-in-law. She praised him for finishing it so quickly and with useful adjuncts and parts.

The three of them spent their days happily in that cottage. News that Sri Rama had made the Panchavati his home and that he was residing there in a house of leafy thatch like their own, spread far and wide. So every day, groups of ascetics trekked thither in order to offer their homage. They brought with them their pupils too. They had their fill of Darshan and they had the great good fortune of speaking to Rama and being spoken to, by Him. Thereafter, they left most unwillingly, praising Rama all the way back to their own hermitages.

Many others came, with the intention of solving the doubts that pestered them, while trying to understand the scriptures, and while attempting to define and interpret the Codes of Morality or the texts on Rituals. Others prayed to Rama and sought to clarify from Him whether the ascetic practices they were following were correct and beneficial. Since Rama was master of all Dharmas and since He knew full well all the scriptures, they derived the fullest satisfaction from His answers and directives. Each one was filled with joyous contentment.

While on the subject of questions and answers, it is best that the four grades of questions be clearly understood. Questions are generally classified into four groups: (1)

Trivial, (2) Low, (3) Passable and (4) Praiseworthy. Questions that are raised in order to drag another into a controversy and later, to inflict a humiliating defeat on him, are trivial. Questions that are put in order to demonstrate one's own cleverness and skill are "low." Questions which announce the intellectual equipment and reasoning faculty of the questioner are "passable," and belong to the third class. Questions that are asked with the sincere desire to remove one's doubts are "praiseworthy" and belong to the highest class. It needs no mention that the sages, monks and ascetics came to Rama with the fourth type of questions only.

Rama and Lakshmana were filled with delight when they saw the ascetics. Many among them were overcome with admiration and gratitude when they listened to the ideals propounded by Rama, so simple, so easy to grasp and realise, so truly conforming to the dictates laid down in the Sastras and Scriptures, and so free from complexity. They burst into paeans of praise and adoration. "Oh Master Supreme!" they exclaimed, "Oh, Omniscient One, who knows the past, present and future! Who else can be our Lord and Liberator? You reside in the hearts of Sages. We have secured you in our midst as a result of the austerities we have gone through. Oh, How fortunate are we! How have our wishes been fulfilled!" They departed from the Presence, most unwillingly, with tears of joy mingled with tears of grief streaming down their cheeks.

A few of them laid themselves under the shady trees a little distance from the cottage where Rama was, and were determined not to return to their hermitages. They gathered fruits and tubers from around the spot, and watched out for Rama, eager for additional chances of Darsan. When sometimes Rama came out of the cottage and walked around, they filled their eyes with the unforgettable picture, from behind some tree or bush. Thus they spent the days in full contentment.

Rama stole the hearts of all who came into His Presence. They became mad in their single-pointed devotion to Him. They felt that contemplation of His Face and repetition of His Name were all the austerity that they had to practise thereafter. He discoursed on Dharma and spiritual disciplines during both day and night, to those who gathered around Him.

Often, He called Lakshmana to His side and told him, "Brother, having come for this holy task, how can I stay on at Ayodhya? How can I enact the further chapters of the *Ramayana* from there? This is the purpose for which I have come. The fostering and protection of the good and the godly, the destruction of the wrong and evil that threaten the peace and welfare of the world, the promotion of righteous behaviour and activities—these will proceed from now on." Thus, He informed his brother about what he had resolved upon and about the intent and meaning of His Incarnation as Man on earth.

Off and on, he raised Lakshmana to the role of a vehicle for spreading his teachings, intended for the uplift of humanity and instructed him on the ideals of morality and progress. “Lakshmana,” he said once, “Affection for the body, attachment towards possessions of any kind, egoism that breeds the conflict of ‘You’ and ‘I,’ the bonds that grow between the individual and his wife, children and property—all these are the consequences of the Primal Illusion, Maya. That Illusion is basic, mysterious, and wondrous. Maya establishes her domain over all beings and things, all species of living creatures. The ten *indriyas* (five senses of perception and five senses of action) have each its presiding deity and Maya perceives the objective world and derives pleasure therefrom, through their instrumentality. Every item and particle of such pleasure is Maya-produced and therefore illusory, evanescent and superficial.

“Maya has two forms: One type is called *Vidyamaya* and the other *Avidyamaya*. The Maya named *Avidya* is very vicious. She causes boundless misery. Those drawn by it will sink into the depths of flux, the eternal tangle of joy and grief. The Maya known as *Vidya* has created the Cosmos, under the prompting of the Lord. For, she has no innate force of her own. Only while in the Presence of the Lord can she create the three-stranded Cosmos (*Prapancha*). (The three strands are *Sathwa*, *Rajas* and *Thamas*, each of which separately or in some kind of combination is characteristic of beings: Sathwa meaning

the equal balanced temper. *Rajas* the sanguinary or the emotional, active temper, and *Thamas*, the dull, inert temper).

“The truly wise, the *Jnani*, who has realised the Reality, is the person who has given up the rights and obligations of caste and society, of age and status and lives in the constant awareness that all is Brahman. He has understood that there is no manifoldness or diversity here. It is all One. (*Sarvam khalu idam Brahma; Na iha naanaa asthi kinchana*). He knows that the entire Cosmos is constituted of the same Brahman, that there can be no second entity apart from Brahman.

“Oh Lakshmana! You must know that the Trinity (Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra) are but the reflections of the one Brahman in each of the three strands or attributes—*Sathwa*, *Rajas* and *Thamas*. The *Rajas* attribute is personified as Brahma, the *Sathwa* aspect as Vishnu and the *Thamas* aspect is known as Rudra or Siva or Iswara. The entire Cosmos, including the world is the manifestation of the One Brahman through one or other, or some combination or other of these three attributes. So, the wise man will go beyond and beneath these three strands and seek the Origin in the One. He alone deserves the name, monk or *Vairagi*—for he has no *raga* or likes and dislikes.”

Sometimes, Rama had Sita and Lakshmana near Him and explained to them that so long as the Individual *Jivi* does not understand aright the affinities it has to Maya and

to the Supreme Brahman, it can never liberate itself and merge in the Supreme. It has to remain a particularised Individual only, bound by the coils of illusion to the limits of the name and form. But Rama said, the instant the Individual discovers and knows that It is but the image of the Supreme, and that the distinction between the Supreme and Itself has no basis in Truth, Maya will disappear, like fog before the risen sun. This is the genuine *Atmajnana*, for the Supreme is *Paramatma* and the Individual is the same *Paramatma* seen as an Image in the Body-with-name-and-form, the *Upadhi*.

“Act in accordance with the rules of conduct laid down for the status you have risen to and the call that has come to you (*swadharm*-one’s natural duties). You derive detachment thereby. Practise *Yoga* or the Search for Union with the Supreme. You derive *Jnana* thereby. This *Jnana* is the very last step in spiritual progress. It leads to Consummation. Adoring the Supreme with the greatest possible Love is called *Bhakthi*, Devotion. I shower Grace on such a one. *Bhakthi* will grant him full prosperity. *Bhakthi* emanates from the heart, spontaneously. It does not depend on extraneous things or persons. *Bhakthi* can confer *Jnana* too on the person who has dedicated Himself to the Supreme. The joy that *Bhakthi* endows on a man is unique and immeasurable. How does a person first decide to walk on the path of *Bhakthi*? It all begins with the compassion of some one good and godly sage or realised soul. This path leads men quickly to Me.” Listening to such

discourses, Sita and Lakshmana forgot where they were and under what conditions. Rama too seemed unaware of all that happened in the enthusiasm with which He dilated on the attractions of the spiritual path. They spent long periods in introspection and exploration of inner delight.

One day, Lakshmana was ruminating on these deep Truths and precious directives while he was keeping watch around the cottage. His eyes fell on a tiny sapling of lime, struggling upwards under the shade of a huge tree. He desired to plant it nearer the cottage and help it grow vigorously under his care. So, he was digging it up by the roots with intense love and attention, when the wicked and vicious sister of Ravana, Surpanakha by name, rushed into the scene!

As soon as her eyes fell on Lakshmana, she was allured by the halo of goodness and the splendour that illumined his body. She was struck dumb at the unexpected vision. She suddenly transformed herself into a charmingly pretty damsel and approached Lakshmana with amorous gestures. But Lakshmana paid no heed. He continued his task, unaffected by the apparition. Surpanakha could not bear inattention any longer. She came close to him and with a pathetic voice, she appealed, “Lord! Why are you plunging me into despair? Cool my unbearable ardour. Cast on me your loving happiness-conferring eye.” Lakshmana did not react to her call. He heard her words, but he only smiled within himself at her audacity. He continued with his attempt to pluck the plant safely from the shade. Surpanakha lost

patience. She prepared to draw him to herself. But Lakshmana drew back, saying, “Mother! I am the bondslave of Sri Rama. I am not a free man. Whatever I do, however small a job it may be, is done only as He commands,” as a prelude to the advice he planned to give her. Hearing his words and curious to know with whom he was talking, Sita and Rama came out of the cottage into the garden. Rama noticed Surpanakha and recognised that she had changed into the damsel before him. He prepared himself for all eventualities. Meanwhile, Surpanakha pelted harsh abusive words at Lakshmana like, ‘coward,’ and ‘villain’ and laughed loudly in scorn at his irresponsible behaviour. She had not noticed Rama, all her attention and anger were fixed on Lakshmana alone. She pleaded before him, “Oh Most Charming! Wed me and be happy. I can delight you and serve you most loyally.” Lakshmana tried to ward her off by saying, “Pretty woman! I am a slave. If I wed you, you will have to live as a slave,” and continuing the jocular retort, he said in fun. “Well, there is my master, Rama. If you wed him, I will be your slave.” Surpanakha took him at his word. She believed that it was good strategy. She turned to the cottage which Lakshmana had pointed to her; and there, standing near the door, laughing together at her, she found a very beautiful woman and beside her, the embodiment of masculine charm!

Surpanakha was smitten with passionate love. She ran forward to Rama and weeping out her distress, she prayed, “God of Love! God of Beauty! Accept me as yours.” Rama

too decided to treat her to a homily and derive some fun out of the ludicrous situation before him. He said with a chuckle. “Oh Beauteous Woman! I cannot wed you, for I am under the vow of monogamy. I have my wife here. My brother, Lakshmana there, has a wife, but she is not here. So, wed him and derive fulfilment. He is the proper person for you, approach him.” At this, the woman hastened to where Lakshmana was and started her appeals once again. She said, “Your brother has agreed to the wedding. So, do not delay, accept me.” Her attitude now was very humble and gentle. Lakshmana grasped the absurdity of her plight and wanted to heighten the fun. He sent her to Rama and Rama sent her back to Lakshmana several times, until she grew so desperate, and blinded by passion, she relapsed into her demonic nature! Her crooked intelligence told her that it was Sita that stood in the way of her success in this adventure of lust. Rama could not wed her, since Sita was by His side. If she were removed, Rama would certainly yield to her solicitations. So, she fell upon Sita in order to kill her and swallow her; for, she was a demon to the core. At this, Lakshmana stood ready, watching the face of Rama for orders. Rama realised that the woman was far gone and she had to be stopped. Feeling that an axe need not be used when the nails are enough. He raised his hand up, and counted four on his fingers, looking at Lakshmana.

Lakshmana immediately grasped the meaning of that command! By counting four, Rama indicated the Four Vedas, which are collectively called Sruthi, that is to say,

“The Heard,” which means the Ear. Lakshmana had a sharp vigilant intellect and so, he could rightly interpret the slightest gesture of Rama. Rama had held his hand up, towards the sky. The sky or *Akasa* is the fifth elemental force, characterised by Sound. Sound is the symbol for Brahman, known as *Sabda* Brahman, or God. God resides in heaven, and heaven is also indicated by the raised pointing hand. Heaven is known as ‘*naaka*’ in Sanskrit. It has also another meaning, ‘Nose!’ No sooner did Rama make those two gestures, Lakshmana rushed towards the demonic woman with his sword drawn. He dragged her down to the ground; and shouting that her effrontery must be punished, he slashed off her ears and nose! Surpanakha raised such a loud wail that the forest quaked and quivered. She assumed her real shape as an ogress and yelled, “Is this just? How can you deform, so cruelly, a woman who has come to you? I shall bring my brother Ravana here and inflict retribution for this cruel act.” With this, she disappeared quickly into the forest.

She went straight to the demon chieftains, Khara and Dushana in the Dandaka forest and wailed, “How can you bear silently this insult and injury dealt to your sister? For what purpose have you stored so much of valour and might? It is better you burn them into ashes. Are you masculine? Can you call yourselves so? Shame on you and your boast of heroism.” They could not understand what had happened to her, and who had deformed her so piteously. They asked her, “Sister! Who inflicted this injury? Tell us. We shall wreak vengeance with all our might.”

At this, Surpanakha started retelling her story. She began with an elaborate description of the charm and captivating beauty of Rama and Lakshmana. Hearing this, the brothers got wild and inquired why she was wasting her time and theirs with that superfluous prologue, “Tell us, who injured you? Who defaced you?” Then, she informed them all what had happened in the forest.

Khara and Dushana were highly incensed at the plight of their sister whose ears and nose had been slit. They collected an army of fourteen thousand ogres and marched in hot haste towards Rama and Lakshmana, the brothers who had punished her in that manner. The ogre warriors were so indomitable that they could not be defeated even in dreams. They knew no retreat or defeat. They were invincible in battle. Like winged mountains, they moved fast along the valleys in terror-striking groups, while the earth shook under their feet. Each of them was armed to the teeth with a variety of deadly weapons.

The earless, noseless widow, Surpanakha, with her bleeding face walked in front of the entire force, eager to take revenge. She was leading them to the patch of green where she had met the brothers.

But she spelt an inauspicious beginning for the campaign. Hers was the bad omen for the expedition. A bleeding face, a widow, a defective—these are considered bad omens. Surpanakha was all these. The Rakshasas were not aware of the pros and cons of the signs and omens for starting on a march towards the battlefield. They relied on

their physical and material might, and their nefarious stratagems. It is for this very reason that they are always unable to stand before the might of Divine and *Dharmic* forces.

For, who can withstand the power generated by the observance of *Dharma* and the Grace of God? They never paid attention to Righteousness or Divinity. They concentrated all their energies and skills on equipping themselves with physical might. Proud of their weapons, their muscles and their wickedness they strode forward into the forest, blowing their trumpets, roaring like lions, bellowing like wild elephants, yelling about their exploits and gyrating wildly in their wild dances. They never realised that their onslaught was comparable only to the onslaught of a sparrow on an eagle!

From a distance, Surpanakha pointed out to her brothers the hermitage where Rama was. To arouse the ogres into a final frenzy the army shouted, in unison. “Kill, catch, murder,” and ran forward. When they approached the hermitage, the brothers challenged Rama, crying out at the top of their voices, “Oh Most Wicked, Oh Most Unfortunate! You dared deform our sister, did you? Now, try if you can, to save your life from extinction!”

Rama was already aware of their approach. He directed Lakshmana to keep Sita away, in a cave, and be on guard. “Do not worry about me in the least! Nothing ill can ever happen to me,” Rama said. Lakshmana knew the might of

Rama and so, he obeyed implicitly. He had no doubt at all about Rama’s victory, He led Sita into the cave and stayed there itself, with his bow and arrow ready for any emergency.

Rama stood before the hermitage, a smile lighting up his face and his Kodanda bow, well stringed, ready for the fray. Rama passed his hands gently over the matted hair on his head. At this, the ogres saw billions of blinding flashes emanating from the crown of hair. His arms appeared to their eyes as huge multi-hooded serpents. As a lion glares at an elephant, and bares its teeth relishing the victory that was already assured, Rama, the Lion, stood defiant and terrible before the pack of frightened elephants. The cries, “Here is the person who deformed her,” “Hold him,” “Catch him,” “Kill him,” rose over the tumult. But no one dared come forward to put that cry into action. However much they were prodded and encouraged, not one of them could muster enough courage to approach Rama.

The curses and cries of the ogres filled the forest, and wild animals in panic ran helter-skelter seeking shelter. A few ran into the cave where Sita was. Lakshmana sympathised with their agony, and allowed them in, so that they might rid themselves of fear and anxiety. He gave them refuge and welcomed them in. For, he knew that they were in dire distress.

The ogres who surrounded Rama were so overcome by his beauty and charm that they did nothing but stare at

the glory and the splendour. Many revelled in descriptions of his grace. Many were lost in admiration and appreciation. All were bound to Rama through love and reverence. Not one of them could or did raise a weapon against him or cast an angry look!

Surpanakha too joined in the praise. She said to Khara and Dushana, who were standing wonder-struck near her, “Brothers! What incomparable beauty is standing before us! I have never seen till now such charm, such grace, such pure harmony, such melodious physique. Do not kill him, but catch him just as he is and present him to me.”

The brothers too were similarly entranced. They replied, “Sister! We too have never set eyes on such an embodiment of beauty. The nearer we approach him, the faster he binds himself to us, the more we are fascinated by his charm. We do not have even an iota of anger or hatred towards him. The longer we look upon him the more profuse the joy that wells up within us. Perhaps, it is this feeling that is called *Ananda* by the sages living here.”

Khara did not like to converse with Rama, himself. So he sent a messenger to him, to find out from him who he was, what his name was, where he came from, why he entered the forest and took residence therein, etc.

The messenger neared Rama and asked him the questions he was directed to place before Rama. Rama smiled at this behaviour. He said, “Listen fellow! I am a *Kshatriya*, come into this forest to hunt wild animals like

your master. I am not afraid even of the God of Death. If you feel you have the capacity, come, give me battle and win. Or else, return home, every one of you, and save yourselves from destruction. I shall not kill those who run away from the field.” This statement was carried by him back to Khara and Dushana, and it was related to them correctly. At this, the brothers took up their arms, the spears, axes, pestles, bows and arrows, and yelled until the skies were booming with the echo. They showered their missiles upon Rama. Rama cut them into pieces with a single arrow from his bow. Other arrows flighted amongst them by Rama did as much havoc as fire or lightning could do. The ogres retreated before the onslaught, crying out in pain, “Oh Mother,” “Oh Father,” “Alas,” “Save us” and so on in sheer agony and despair.

Seeing them fleeing, Khara, Dushana and their youngest brother Thrisira, called out, “Rakshasas! Do not flee from the fight. Whoever is found running away will be killed on the spot, by our own soldiers.” At this, they planned within themselves, and said, “Well, it is far better to die at Rama’s hand, than at someone else’s or anywhere outside his Presence.”

So, they came back to their ranks and moved forward towards the place where Rama stood. But they were in no mood to give battle. They were so fascinated by the personal charm and splendour of Rama that they stood entranced gazing at the Divine Beauty.

Meanwhile, Rama let loose the arrow called Sammohana, which had the effect of deluding the enemy and confounding them. As a result, each soldier saw his neighbour as the person he had been deputed to destroy. Khara and Dushana had exhorted them to kill Rama, and so each one fell upon the other, shouting, “Rama is here,” “Here is Rama.” They killed each other in great glee. The entire place was cluttered up with the severed limbs of the ogres. Blood flowed in streams through the forest. Vultures and crows flocked around, eager to fill themselves with the carrion. Fourteen thousand ogres faced one person on that day in that field! The ogres died, every one of them, crying, “Rama,” “Rama” when they fell. Khara and Dushana too died, along with their loyal henchmen.

The ascetics and sages who witnessed this scene of terror realised the unique valour of Rama and felt happy that the end of Ravana too was certain at the hands of this redoubtable hero. They were confirmed in their belief that Rama was the Almighty Providence who had come to wipe out from the face of the earth the entire race of ogres or Rakshasas, and thereby ensure the peace and prosperity of mankind.

As soon as the fierce engagement ended, Sita and Lakshmana came near Rama and prostrated before him. Rama raised Lakshmana gently from the ground and described to him the fate of the fourteen thousands and their masters, during the battle that lasted barely half an hour. He detailed the incidents with evident joy and interspersed the narration with many a smile and chuckle.

Meanwhile, the eyes of Sita were roaming over the body of Rama in order to assure themselves that he was unhurt, and had not suffered even a scratch. The next day, groups of ascetics and sages with their disciples and pupils visited the Panchavati Ashram of Rama, for they had heard of the destruction of the ogre army, achieved single-handed by the Prince from Ayodhya. They extolled Rama for his bravery and bowmanship. Some among them who had acquired the power of forward vision approached Rama in all humility and said, “Oh Master! You have to be vigilant and alert in the coming days. The Rakshasas are opposed to all limitations and regulations that justice and uprightness impose. Their daily routine is to cause harm to all and sundry. Their highest goal is to fulfil their selfish desires. They do not care how they fulfil them and by what means. They have an elder brother named Ravana who possesses vastly greater powers. His army is many millions strong. This termagant will certainly go to him and bewail her fate. And he won’t desist from taking up her cause and trying to wreak vengeance on those who disfigured her.”

Thus they forewarned Rama and Lakshmana, giving them such information as they had with them. Rama listened to them with a smile playing on his face. He said, “Yes, yes, I am not unaware of this. I have come on this particular mission.” He nodded his head, as if he was eagerly looking forward to the happy event of the encounter with Ravana himself. But he did not speak more. He sat as if he was innocent of any knowledge of the future.

He turned his eyes on Lakshmana, and with a twinkle in the eye, he told him, “You heard it, didn’t you?” Turning to the sages, Rama said, “Please do not become anxious or worried. I am prepared to meet all situations.” They were consoled and comforted by that assurance and promise. Rama instilled faith and courage into them and allowed them to return to their hermitages, confident that they can continue their studies and practices in peace and tranquillity undisturbed by the Rakshasa hordes.

As the sages foretold, Surpanakha lost no time to appear before her brother, Ravana, rending the air with her weeping. Hearing it the Rakshasas of Lanka were frightened that some calamity had overtaken their land. They came out into the streets and started discussing in groups what the reason could possibly be. Surpanakha barged into the Audience Hall of Ravana, the Rakshasa Emperor, and spouted angry invectives, to the astonishment and anxiety of everyone present.

Her appearance was monstrous. Her body was covered with blood, her words were poisoned by anger. Ravana understood that someone had inflicted great injury on her. Ravana was shocked at her plight. He roared from his throne, “Sister! Tell us in full what happened.”

Surpanakha replied, “Brother, if you are a genuine Rakshasa, if the superhuman powers gained by you after years of asceticism are real, then come, the moment has arrived to use your valour, your courage and your heroism.

Arise, do not ignore the calamities that await you and let things go by, lost in the intoxication that drink provides.

“You have paid no attention to events that are taking place at Panchavati, who has come there, for what purpose, and for what task. Princes determined to destroy the Rakshasas have entered the Dandaka Forest. They are felling to the ground *lakhs* (100,000) of Rakshasa soldiers. They have cut to pieces the brothers, Khara and Dushana. They have wiped out of existence, in the wink of an eye, thousands launched against them. Their heroism is beyond description. Their personal beauty—Ah!” Here, Surpanakha halted and stood silent, contemplating the splendour that had enraptured her. Hearing her story, Ravana became uncontrollably furious. He gnashed his teeth. He slapped his thighs as if in a burst of challenge. “What? Did those vile persons kill Khara and Dushana? Perhaps they did not know my name, that I am behind them as their support. Perhaps they have not heard of my might and vengeance.”

Ravana continued to boast aloud retailing to the people present his exploits. Surpanakha interrupted him, saying, “Oh Mass of Wickedness! When your arch enemy is dancing on your head, you are sitting here like a coward, extolling yourself and your invincibility! This is no sign of an emperor worthy of his throne. Perhaps, you do not know that *sanyasins* are ruined by the company they keep, emperors are ruined by the ministers they employ, wisdom is ruined by desire for appreciation, and the sense of shame is destroyed by imbibing drink. Well brother, do not neglect fire, illness, an enemy, a

snake and a sin on the ground because it is small and insignificant. When they grow big, they are bound to inflict great harm. Therefore hasten, do not hesitate.”

These words of Surpanakha poured the poison of hatred into the ears of Ravana. At this, Kumbhakarna, the other brother who was present, asked Surpanakha with a smile on his lips, “Sister, who sliced your ears and nose?” With a loud wail, she replied, “Alas! This wicked deed was done by those very Princes.”

Ravana then consoled her, to some extent. He then asked her, “Sister, the nose is on the face. The ears are on the sides of the face. They cannot be sliced at one stroke. Now, tell me, were you sleeping soundly, when they cut them off? This is indeed surprising.” The people present also wondered how it could have happened. Surpanakha replied, “Brother, I lost all awareness of my body, why, of the region where I was when those soft sweet hands touched me. When my eyes were drinking the charm of their beautiful faces, I was not conscious of what they did. The very sight of those princes rendered me so entranced that I lost all awareness of myself and the surroundings. What shall I say of the ecstasy I derived by conversing with them! They bubble over always with joyful smiles. They know no other attitude or reaction. Even masculine hearts will surely be fascinated by their charm. They are really enrapturing representations of the God of Love. I have never so far set eyes on such beauty. Fie upon our Rakshasa prowess, our vile stratagems, our abnormal figures, our ugly

appearance! We are indeed disgusting. Look upon them but once. You will swear I am right. Why? Khara and Dushana who died in the battle were reluctant to fight with them. They were protesting and pleading with me: ‘How can we feel enmity and fall upon these embodiments of auspiciousness and paragons of beauty?’”

The courtiers and ministers assembled in the Hall listened to this description with awe and delight. Her words confounded even Ravana. The picture of Rama that she drew was something that gave him great joy and peace, when he contemplated on it. Deep within him, he felt an urge to cast eyes on that inspiring embodiment of divine charm. As he listened to his sister, the anger that had raised its hood within slowly slithered away. He decided to investigate calmly what really happened at Panchavati.

So, he addressed his sister thus: “Sister, tell me, do those two brothers live at Panchavati all alone? Or, are there others with them? Have they no followers, companions or courtiers?” Surpanakha replied “No. They have no band of bodyguards or kinsmen or warriors. The elder of the two, named Rama, has a woman with him, who is endowed with superlative beauty. She is even more charming than they. She is the very Goddess of Love, in human form. The two brothers are resident at Panchavati, with this woman. They roam about freely and without fear in the forest glades and valleys. In fact, I have never so far set eyes on such perfect feminine beauty. The like of her does not exist on heaven or earth.”