

## LANKA ON FIRE

**H**anuman 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 this Lanka, with His Vanara hordes, He will destroy these Rakshasa forces, rescue you and restore you to Ayodhya.”

But Sita was inconsolable. She had her doubts. “Hanuman, what is it that you say! Can monkey hordes fight against and destroy these Rakshasas who have mastered many a mysterious stratagem and subterfuge, and

who are themselves much stronger? How can the two brothers, 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 causing the death of so many of you on the battlefield, I would fain breathe my last and save all your lives.” Sita was lamenting thus, while Hanuman interrupted her and said, “Mother! Do not weep. We of the monkey hordes are the bond slaves of Rama. All of us believe that Rama is our strength and our courage. We take in as our very breath the name, Rama. We have no other source of life. Therefore, even if each of these Rakshasas increases a thousandfold in deviltry, we monkeys can easily destroy them. We can win victory over them in spite of their wiles and wickedness. You are doubting the extent of our strength and skills, since 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 at this. She said, “Hanuman! Stop. Stop. Enough. Limit yourself. If the eyes of the Rakshasas fall on you, you may not be able to return soon to Rama.” Sita protested and pleaded with him to assume his old form. Hanuman gave up the terrible form he had converted himself into, and became a quiet little monkey in no time. Hanuman fell at the feet of Sita and turned his steps away. But the plight of Sita and her anguished face were so deeply imprinted on his heart that his feet would not move away.

While returning from the place where Sita was, he saw an orchard and plucking some tasty fruits, he ate his

fill. He cast aside those that were unripe and the extra ones he had plucked. Sighting this, a Rakshasa guard wanted to frighten him away but Hanuman gave him a blow which felled him to the ground. He ran to the head of the gang of guards. He fled in terror to his superior in office and he 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 could not restrain his anger at the mischief and the insult. The flames of his ire rose to the skies. He ordered a few hundred Rakshasas to overwhelm and catch the audacious animal. Since they could not succeed in their mission, he sent a few thousand trained and heavily armed Soldier-Rakshasas into the garden where Hanuman was awaiting their onslaught. Even that formidable force could not 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 Rakshasas 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 on this expedition countless Rakshasas selected for this special assignment, but we could not 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, and that this presages some evil calamity." This was the statement they made before Ravana. He was told the plain fact, without any reservation. If the monkey was allowed to roam about, danger was certain to envelope the land.

At this, Ravana sent his own dear son, Akshayakumara, at the head of thousands of seasoned Warrior-Rakshasas. 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 death of the Prince 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 over 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 word 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 heroic army in great pomp. As they marched along, 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 trumpeting with absolute unconcern. He sat unmoved, on a

little branch of the spreading tree, and enjoyed the antics of the Rakshasas until they drew near. The soldiers rained arrows on Hanuman from all sides. With one ear-splitting roar, Hanuman jumped down and plucking a giant tree by its roots, he waved it round, beating off the rain of arrows that tried to reach him. The arrows were swept off so fast that when they hit back the Rakshasas who shot them, the impact killed 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. So, 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 Brahmastra was released with appropriate ritual formulae. Hanuman had great reverence for the weapon that is sanctified by such manthras and dedicated to Brahma. So, he did not counteract it. He reverentially prostrated before it. So, it was easy for Meghanada to bind him with the Serpent Rope.

The happy news was immediately carried to Ravana by the exultant Rakshasas. Lakhs of eager faces crowded the streets to see the monkey that had been bound. Hanuman was unaffected by fear or anxiety. He moved calm and collected watching the crowds with an amused smile. At last, he reached the Audience Hall of Ravana. The courtiers and ministers assembled there were aghast at the insulting indifference shown by Hanuman 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 the overriding emotion at that time in him. He asked, “Hey, you monkey! Who are you really? Whose is the might that 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 had a hearty laugh at his interrogator. He used for his replies a style of speech and a vocabulary which 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. He said, “Ravana, I know your prowess. I have heard that you fight with a thousand arms. I am aware also of your famous fight with Vali. But what wrong have I done? 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 with them in order to save

myself. The arrow of your son 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. You are the grandson of the great Pulastya. You are the son of Visravas. 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 towards Him. Listen to me. Place Sita at the Lotus Feet of Rama, 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, so 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. Oh, Emperor! Rivers taking birth on mountain ranges get flooded in the rainy season and roll furiously along. 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 would 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. Oh 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 towards Him. Accept my advice.”

These words of Hanuman 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 would not have the courage to lecture thus so long in my presence. Enough of your prating, keep your mouth shut!” Hanuman did not obey. He retorted “Ravana! These words of yours 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. *Rajadharma* will not approve the deed. Punish him in any other manner, but do not pronounce the sentence of death.” The ministers of Ravana supported this stand and declared that what he had suggested was 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.” The ministers gathered in a group to decide on the mutilation. They came to the conclusion that monkeys are proud of their tails and would fain 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 soaks and drips and then set fire to the tail. This plan got unanimous acceptance. They exulted among themselves at the brilliance of the idea. “The tailless monkey will proceed to its master and bring him here for avenging the loss. Then we can witness the manliness of his master and his might.” There was a spate of whispers in the Hall.

Hanuman was watching 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 Rakshasas were enraged at this display of insulting behaviour. They procured cloth and oil and started the process of winding and soaking. But the more they wound and soaked, the longer grew the tail! 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 towards the Hall to witness the miracle. Meanwhile, bands of musicians led the procession. 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, and 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 on to the top of a golden mansion. He shouted Rama, Rama, and made the Rakshasas shudder in fear, for, a strong wind rose from nowhere and blew with great speed. Hanuman somersaulted in the air and was beside himself with joy. He jumped from one mansion to another, with the burning tail trailing behind him. The tail grew longer and longer. The conflagration swelled in size as he moved from street to street. The mansions all over the City of Lanka were caught in the conflagration and changed into heaps of ashes. The Rakshasas 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 a safe place”... agonising appeals like these rose from the throats of women and children and echoed from the sky.

Queen Mandodari heard that 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 the grief she suffered. “Alas! The foolish obstinacy of Ravana is causing the extinction of the Rakshasa clan. This blow will end only with the holocaust. I and brother-in-law Vibhishana advised him a

great deal. We prayed with folded arms. He refused to pay heed. We lamented that it will end in the destruction of every single Rakshasa. But as they say, ‘When extermination is near, discrimination flees far.’ Bad times are approaching him, and so, he is behaving in these nefarious ways.” Wherever she turned her eyes, ferocious tongues of flame glared at her. Hanuman too was very much before her eyes, jumping about in the midst of the flames. From every household there rose the cry, “Hanuman, save us.” “Spare this house.” With folded palms, they prayed, “Take pity on our children.” The wife of Kumbhakarna, the younger brother of Ravana, ran forward with her prayer. “Oh, Messenger of Rama! My husband is submerged in deep sleep. Do not set fire to our home. Save my husband from being burnt to death.”

Lanka was caught in the throes of total destruction. Ravana himself came to know of the calamity pretty soon. He ordered that the monkey be surrounded by soldiers with weapons and mortars. Those who proceeded towards Hanuman scattered in panic when the burning tail of Hanuman 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 is not fire that can 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, 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 too had become uncomfortably hot. Sita called upon the God of Fire without delay and prayed that He should save Hanuman, the genuine Bhaktha 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 super most among devotees, Vibhishana were the only two that were not erased by the fire. 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 reached the place where Sita was. He prostrated before her and said, “Mother! I shall relate to 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, and taking from her head a gemset jewel, she 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, and therefore there is no need for me to dilate on that. Tell the Lord that he must grant me the fortune of his darsan. Tell him that I prayed for it again and again. Tell him that, with Lakshmana, he 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 cannot imagine how I will spend both night and day, hereafter, 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 shall 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.

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; and 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 Karthik. The cool moonlight was as balm to the heart. The name of Rama implanted strength and joy. Hanuman had won. The monkey groups who had espied Hanuman from the 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 they were sent by Rama.

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. As soon as Hanuman touched ground, they asked him about what happened in Lanka, about Sita and her welfare, and 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 Madhuvana and gorged themselves with the fruits that grew thereon, for Sugriva had promised them all a free run of the garden, as soon as they had discovered the whereabouts of Sita. The guards posted there prevented the entry of the horde, but they streamed in nevertheless. So they ran to their master and reported that they were helpless to prevent the loot. When Sugriva heard them, he exclaimed, “Oh, 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 Ananda. Go, do not worry!” Meanwhile, groups of monkeys arrived and fell at the feet of their King and Master. Sugriva smiled at them and said, “Well, I came to know that you have 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 shall not delay a minute longer,” and hastened to where Rama was. Realising that the monkeys were proceeding towards him with the news of a successful mission, Rama and Lakshmana seated themselves on a huge boulder watching the group hurrying forward. They advanced in leaps and bounds, quite excited, and fell at Rama’s feet.

First, Rama inquired about their health and welfare. Meanwhile, Jambavan, the seniormost among them rose and said, “Those who have earned your compassion are indeed blessed. That 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 the plight of Sita with tears of joy and commiseration flowing from his eyes, and 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, “Oh Lord of my Life. It is impossible to describe. Sita is reduced to bones, for she does not take food nor does she sleep. She is counting every minute

praying for your Darsan. 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. The sharp verbal dagger thrusts that Ravana administers every morning and evening when he comes to her and speaks to her, I have heard with my own ears. Mother does not 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 the feet of Rama. Hearing these words, Lakshmana rose in vengeful anger and wept at Sita’s condition. The picture of Sita in Lanka burnt his inner being. He said at last, “Brother! Do not 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. Do not be dejected when grief invades or exults when joy flows in.” Rama consoled him with soft and soothing words.

Then he called Hanuman near, and invited him 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 do not 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 Rakshasas? 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 was Mother! ‘Is this a dream? Or, was it really sent by Rama to me?’ She wondered thus, doubted thus, and finally became firm in faith. Lord, her grief, the extreme anguish of hers, they 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 towards 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 and said, “Brother, prepare for the campaign, without delay.” Watching the earthshaking forces that were gathered and the preparations that Jambavan and Sugriva made, quite soon, the Gods themselves were astounded, and gratified. The monkey warriors touched the feet of Rama 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 too at Ashoka Garden sensed auspiciousness that very moment. 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.” In Lanka every Rakshasa was struck with anxiety about what was in store for him in days to come. They were afraid of the disaster that was imminent. They were convinced they could not escape the calamity. They could communicate their fears to each other only in whispers since they were mortally afraid of Ravana.

Wherever groups of Rakshasas collected in Lanka, the talk centred round the calamitous damage inflicted by the messenger of Rama. They wondered, “When the servant is capable of such tremendous heroism, what would be 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, the Queen of Ravana. 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! Do not develop enmity with the Omniscient One. You yourselves expressed the opinion that Rama is 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 with him millions of redoubtable Vanara heroes. What can our Rakshasa warriors achieve against him now? They could

not even bind and punish the messenger who got entry 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? Therefore, pray listen to my appeal. Send Sita back to Rama, in the care of brother Vibhishana, or with your Ministers. Sita too is no ordinary woman. She is exemplarily chaste. She is the very embodiment of spiritual energy that results from the 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 our Rakshasa race. Or else, as the serpent swallows frogs, the arrows of Rama will swallow the Rakshasa hordes. Give up stubbornness and pride. Offer Sita at the feet of Rama.” She fell at the feet of Ravana with this pitiable importunity.

Ravana, the conceited ignoramus, looked at Mandodari, and replied with a loud peal of laughter. He said, “Fie on you! Tender women are easily scared. That is their very nature. Their words rising from fear will turn even fortune into misfortune. When the monkeys arrive at our doors, the Rakshasas would certainly gobble them up. The gods shudder in mortal terror when my name is uttered within hearing. Why are you afraid of these tree-dwelling brutes? Fie on your fears! Get thee gone from here.” Saying thus, 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 resorted to her rooms and rolled on her bed, agitated by a multitude of thoughts.

At the Audience Hall, Ravana called the ministers together, and invited them to give expression to their estimate of the situation. “You are aware of the calamities that were inflicted by that messenger of Rama. 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, immersed in sleep for months, and who was therefore unaware of the conflagration at the time of the visit of Hanuman, 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 burnt 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 thus: “Master! We shall obey your commands. If only we have a gracious look from your eyes falling on us, we can destroy all men and monkeys and wipe them out of the face of the earth. Why assert more?” He sat down with a grunt of satisfaction. Then, Meghanada, the general endowed with

the power of adopting any form he likes, rose to speak. "Supreme Master!" he said, "Your might and majesty resound all over the world. The gods are your bondsmen. Why should we speak of the fate of men in your Presence? For who can be stronger than these gods?" His words were soaked in pompous pride. The atheistic sons of Kumbhakarna, the highly egotistic brothers, Kumbha and Nikumbha also spoke in the same strain. Akampana and other warriors also added their tunes 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 their countenances. The result was that Ravana was rendered happy, and their aim to hearten him was realised. Lastly, one Rakshasa rose and tried to catch attention. He said, "Emperor! I shall dress myself as a Brahmin and approach Rama and Lakshmana wherever they are. I shall invite them for lunch; and when they come into my hermitage, I shall bind them hand and foot. If you approve of this stratagem, I shall attempt it."

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, Oh

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 so, 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. He stood up and spoke thus: "Master! The words spoken by your brother 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. He said, "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 that they be removed from the Hall. At this, Malyavantha got down from his chair and hurried home, Vibhishana too offered his prostrations to his elder brother and, with folded palms, he expostulated, "Oh King! The

Vedas and Sastras declare that in every person's heart there resides the twin natures of goodness and wickedness. 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 Rakshasas. You have no compassion towards 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."

At this, Ravana rose suddenly from his throne and exclaimed. "Fool! Death has drawn very near you. You could be alive till this moment only on account of my grace. 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 pushed Vibhishana at his feet away from him with a kick. However angrily he was

kicked, Vibhishana persisted long 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 have not done any wrong." With these words, he left the Hall. Reciting with every breath Rama Rama, and breathless with joy and excitement, he crossed the sea and landed on the other shore. The Vanaras who noticed him took him to be a messenger from Ravana, and they reported the arrival to their Ruler, Sugriva. Vibhishana was prevented from entering the camp. The information was conveyed to the Lord, thus: "Oh Rama! The brother of Ravana has come to have your Darsan."

Rama asked Sugriva, who brought him the news, what he thought about the incident. Sugriva replied that it was difficult to understand the plans and purposes of Rakshasas since they assume various forms as and when they like and so are inexplicable. We do not know why he has come among us. I guess it is to open a wedge between me and Angada, the son of Vali. 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 Sastras about defections. Yet, 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 has been sent by Ravana in order 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 shall guard him and foster him as my own life breath. Therefore, bring him in, quickly,” he ordered and Sugriva hastened to obey.

Hanuman hastened to him and in an instant, made him stand before Rama. When his eyes fell on the Lotus Face of Rama, Vibhishana shed profuse tears of ecstasy. He could scarce stand erect. “Lord,” he gasped, and fell at the feet of Rama. “Save me, save me. I am your slave,” he prayed. “Oh Protector of the Gods! I took birth in the Rakshasa race. I am the younger brother of Ravana, who rules over the Rakshasas. My name is Vibhishana. My birth as a Rakshasa 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 so earnestly for being 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, and said, “My dear Vibhishana, do not worry. The very Darsan you had of me has destroyed the Rakshasa nature in you. You are to me as close as Lakshmana and Sugriva.” These words

wiped away all fear from the heart of Vibhishana. Then Rama said, “Oh Ruler of Lanka, are all your followers and companions hale and hearty? How were you passing your days right in the midst of many million Rakshasas? How were you able to maintain your devotion and dedication to God in that environment?” He also enquired of him various matters relating to his activities.

At the end, Vibhishana said, “Oh 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 the bow and arrow in your hand. When your nature and your loveliness are known, they flee from the mind. Attachments and hatreds infest the dark hearts that know not the light of wisdom. Lord, I have earned the fruition of dearest dreams when I could cast my eyes on your Lotus Feet and touch them with my hands and head. My fear and sorrow have been destroyed. I have not done a single good deed any day, but yet you embraced me. Oh, how great is my good fortune!” From Vibhishana’s eyes, tears flowed in streams. They were tears of joy and gratitude.

Rama intercepted his words and said, “Vibhishana, you possess all desirable excellences. Or else, you would not have earned this Darsan, this chance to touch me and contact me, and this opportunity to converse with me.” At this Vibhishana was thrilled with unbounded joy. He fell at the Lotus Feet of Rama again and again. Rama told him, “Go, have a bath in the sacred waters of the sea, and return soon.” Accordingly, Vibhishana left for the seashore. Rama

asked Hanuman to bring from the sea a pot of the sacred water. When Vibhishana prostrated at the Feet of Rama, after the bath, Rama took a handful of water from the pot that Hanuman had brought and, sprinkling the drops on Vibhishana's head, he declared, "I am making you by this rite the Ruler of the Kingdom of Lanka." Vibhishana rose and said, "Oh Lord! Why do I need a kingdom? I am content if I 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 Vanaras stood all around, struck by the compassion and grace that Rama bestowed on the person who surrendered his all at His Lotus Feet. Their hearts were filled with Bliss.

Rama saw the Generals of Vanara hordes and spoke to them. "Leaders! Take this 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 towards the seashore.