

## THE BRIDGE

Looking at the sea, Rama questioned how it was proposed to cross it. Many among the Vanaras suggested means and methods. At last Vibhishana rose from his place and addressed Rama thus: “Lord, the Ocean owes its origin to your forefathers, Sagara and his sons. It is the family ‘preceptor’ of your line. If only you resolve that it should be crossed, the Vanaras can easily go across.”

Meanwhile, a messenger sent by Ravana was sighted by Vibhishana and the Vanaras bound him and took him to where Sugriva, their Ruler was. Sugriva ordered that his limbs be cut off. When the Vanaras prepared themselves for the execution of that order, the fellow raised a hue and cry. He shouted in his pain, “Oh Vanaras! I swear by Rama! Do not cut off my nose and ears.” His pathetic cry was heard by Lakshmana. He asked that the Rakshasa be brought

to his presence. He spoke softly to him, and admonished the Vanaras for torturing a Messenger deputed by Ravana. He wrote a letter and placed it in his hand, with the words, “Give this missive to Ravana. Repeat to him the words I now utter: Oh, Demolisher of the fortunes of your own clan! Change your heart at least this day, and fall at the feet of Rama. Rama will pardon you. Do not decimate and destroy the Rakshasa tribe in order to prop up your wives. Know there is no other means available to you to avoid the Death that is imminent.” With these hard and heavy warnings, the Messenger was sent back to his master. The fellow was overjoyed that he could escape alive. He shouted, “Jai to Lord Ramachandra,” and fell at Rama’s feet before he hied back home.

At the Court of Ravana, he related the events that had ensued and started describing with uncontrollable delight the majestic charm of Rama. He gave Ravana the letter Lakshmana had entrusted him with. Ravana enquired about his brother, Vibhishana, and asked how he fared. “Fie upon him,” he ejaculated, “His days are numbered. Death will swallow him soon. He is a pest, bred in this granary. He left this Lanka and joined the camp of my foe. Misfortune will haunt him until he dies.” He turned to the fellow and asked him, “Under this pretext, you visited their camp. Did you not tell them of our military might and adamant resolve? Tell me also what you learnt about their resources and capabilities.” The messenger, Suka, stood before the throne with folded palms, and said, “Lord! I pray that you extend

some grace to me and listen calmly and with forbearance to what I say. The very moment your brother sealed friendship with Rama he was crowned Emperor of Lanka by him! Knowing that I reached their camp as your messenger, the Vanaras caught hold of me and tortured me in various ways. I swore in Rama's name and called upon him to save me. Therefore, they allowed me to come away un mutilated, with my nose and ears intact. Had I a thousand tongues, I cannot describe the might of those Vanara armies. What a galaxy of heroic warriors are they! There are Vanaras of many different colours, of all ages and grades, of gigantic stature and strength. One shakes in terror when one casts his eyes at them. Why, even to picture them in the mind or think about them is a terror-striking experience. Imagine the might of that one Vanara who killed your son and reduced the City to ashes! It is all the result of their being reflections and echoes of the invincible might of Rama himself. Even the tiniest brat among the monkeys becomes, by that token, a horrifying monster. There are monkey warriors with various names, and each of them is endowed with the strength of many herds of elephants. Dwivida, Mainda, Nila, Nala, Angada, Vikata, Dadhimukha, Kesari, Kumuda, Daja, Gavaksha, Jambavantha—these are the Generals. Every one of them is equal in might and military skill to their Ruler, Sugriva. There are hundreds of thousands more among them, who are of equal might. Their number is beyond calculation. Their fury and ferocity can destroy earth, heaven and the nether regions, as if these were but heaps of straw. Lord, I heard that their number is

eighteen Padmas. Each Padma has a valiant General at its head. Emperor, I did not find a single Vanara, from the highest to the lowest who doubted their victory; nor was there anyone who had the least trace of nervousness on the eve of the march. They are all tightening their muscles to pound this City. They are only waiting for the signal from Rama. They have not had it so far.

“Whether the ocean yields to them and gives the right of way or not, they are determined to build a causeway of stones, and succeed in their venture. They are baring teeth and gnashing them, boasting that they would squeeze Ravana out of shape and reduce him into a handful of pulp. Fear strikes everyone who listens to their exultant roar and challenging call. The instant they hear the name Ravana uttered within earshot, they get so enraged that they pluck giant trees, root and branch, and brandish them in angry demonstration of hate. They are swaying and swinging, surging and shouting, in their eagerness to consume this City. They have equally redoubtable bears too among them. To crown all, they have Rama as their leader, capable of overwhelming millions of ‘Death-deities.’ Hundreds of thousands of Adishesas, each of which is blessed with a thousand heads and tongues, cannot do full justice if asked to describe the heroism and military skill of Rama. With one arrow shot from his bow, he can dry up even the Ocean.”

The reaction of Ravana to this report of the spy and messenger was a peal of wild laughter. He said, “Fie on you. Giving ear to the pratings of the monkeys that surround

him and of that arch coward, Vibhishana, you are extolling that fool so high. It is sheer nonsense to describe the strength and heroism of mere monkeys. Enough, enough, can *monkeys* ever be so strong! I have heard enough, long ago, of the power and might of this Sugriva; and what can this poltroon Vibhishana, who has become his minister now, do? Can he contribute any wealth, victory or resources to Rama?"

The messenger could only pine within himself and bewail the lack of intelligence that Ravana was exhibiting. He folded his palms in obeisance and stood silent. Then Ravana tore the envelope of the missive that Lakshmana had sent, and after perusing it, handed it over to his minister. He said, "You are like the thithiri bird afraid that the sky will fall upon its young fledglings! Poor thing! It covers the little ones holding its head over them as a cover! Can the sky ever fall and kill the birds? Can these anchorites, these ritual-ridden priests, who try to frighten me by a shower of words, ever succeed?" Suka, the messenger, watched the heroics of Ravana for sometime. Then he intercepted with the words, "Lord! What I have now said is the full truth. Read well and carefully the contents of that letter and act, without any sense of resentment or pride. Listen! Give up the hostility you have developed. Rama is very tender of heart and compassionate. He is the master of the three worlds. If only you approach him, he will take you under his protection and guard you from harm. He will pardon all your wrongs. Surrender Sita to him. Give heed

to my prayer." The envoy pleaded plaintively that Ravana save himself from ruin.

While he was pouring out his pleas, Ravana's eyes reddened with anger and shame. He roared in protest, "What! Do you take me to be a criminal! Did I send you, Oh fool, to go and surrender at the feet of those prattling babies of the forest? Audacity and impertinence cannot go further," and rising from the throne, he kicked the fellow out of the Hall. The Rakshasa, Suka, fled to the camp of Rama and sought refuge. But the Vanaras seeing him again amidst them were moved into revenge. However they restrained themselves, and awaited the orders of Rama. Sugriva led Suka to the presence of Rama. Suka prostrated before Rama and related in detail his story and fate. He prayed that he might be accepted as Vibhishana was accepted, and that he might be protected by his new Master. Rama, as the very embodiment of compassion, called to his presence the leaders of the Vanaras, and directed them to welcome their new brother, Suka. He too was overcome by gratitude and he declared that his life had reached its goal.

Then, Rama directed Lakshmana to bring him the bow and arrow, and when he brought them, Rama said, "Haughty persons deserve no kindness. Mischievously cruel persons deserve no softness. Misers by nature deserve no moral teaching. Egotistic persons deserve no advice. Greedy persons cannot benefit from insistence on renunciation. Persons stricken with anger deserve no counsel on being at

peace. Lust-crazy victims deserve no scriptural readings. Saline fields deserve no seeds of grain. So too this Ocean that does not yield to soft request deserves no mercy.” So saying, he fitted an arrow to his bow. At this, Lakshmana was afraid what the consequences would be for the Ocean. The Ocean too was rendered hot at the mere preparation to shoot the arrow into its depths. The denizens of the deep suffered extreme agony. As if terror-stricken, the waves began screaming. Wave after wave rolled towards the place where Rama stood and gently lapped his feet, as if praying for mercy. At that time, a Voice was heard as if from the sky, “Lord! There are two generals in the campus, Nala and Nila, who are targets of a curse pronounced by a sage. That curse can now be used as a blessing, listen. The story can now be told.” The Ocean itself communicated the details of that dire incident to Rama.

“There were many hermits living on a river bank in cottages. While young, these two entered these hermitages. While the sages were immersed in deep meditation, seizing the holy icons called saligrams which they worshipped, they used to cast them into the waters of the river. The sages were enraged at this sacrilege and they cast a curse on them, in this manner. ‘Boys! May all things that you throw on water never sink. May they float instead. May they remain just where you have thrown them, even if the waters flow fast in floods.’ Therefore, every rock they throw will float at the very place. Have your Name inscribed on every slab and rock. Your Name is light, not heavy at all. Thus, even

huge mountain peaks when thrown would float and form a bridge. I shall also contribute my share of help; for when the search is for Truth, all Nature must serve the seeker.” Rama decided not to let go the arrow he had fitted; but since his arrow, once fixed had to find a target, he aimed it at a forest area in the far distance and as a result, it became a dry desert.

Rama called together the ministers and directed them to construct the bridge across the Ocean. Hanuman said, “Lord! Your Name is the bridge that can safely transport man across the Ocean of Life. Which bridge can be stronger and safer than that?” Jambavan, the aged General, said, “Lord! Your prowess, which is a raging conflagration, can dry up this mass of water. It is sure to be filled to the brim again by the tears of the women widowed in Lanka during the coming battle with Ravana and his armies.”

Rama smiled at the simple sincere loyalty and valour of these devotees. Jambavan reminded Nala and Nila of the assurance given by the unseen source, which was no other than the Ocean itself, about the use that can now be made of the curse they had drawn upon themselves while young. He directed them to install Rama in their hearts and throw hills, hillocks, mountains and rocks into the sea. At this, the Vanara heroes ran in all directions, and brought back entire hills on their heads and shoulders, as if they were as light as balls used for games. They stood in one long line and passed the hills from shoulder to shoulder, all the while repeating aloud the Name of Rama. Off and on,

they also uprooted huge trees and passed them onward to the bridge site, where Nala and Nila were casting the materials into the water.

The whole of that day they worked without rest and with no thought of food or sustenance. They built a length of fourteen yojanas in one day. Refreshed by a good night's sleep, they rose before dawn, during the *Brahmamuhurtha* itself, and resumed work. They acclaimed with cheers, "Jai to Sri Ramachandra, our Lord," and hurried to the various corners of the land in search of hills and mountains. They brought them onto the shore and piled them there for being used by Nala and Nila.

The second day, the bridge was extended by another twenty yojanas. The next day, they were able to build it for a further length of twenty-one yojanas. The fourth day saw the bridge extending over a further twenty-two yojanas. And, on the fifth day, by constructing a further twenty-three yojanas, they completed the 100-yojana bridge in another successful spurt.

Thus, Nala and Nila, unconcerned with exhaustion or the need for rest, intent on fulfilling the task assigned by Rama for the completion of his mission, were able to announce in the Presence of Rama that the bridge was ready, because his Name and Form were ever before those who toiled for its completion.

Rama was informed through Sugriva that the hundred-yojana bridge, he had resolved upon was finished and ready

to be used. Rama and Lakshmana were pleased at the devotion and sense of duty of the Vanaras, who finished the job so soon and so well. Rama directed the Ruler of the Monkeys, Sugriva, to pass along the long line of Vanaras the order that each one should deposit the hill he was transporting at the time, at the very place he stood, and take a little rest before returning to base. Sugriva conveyed the order to those who were engaged in passing from shoulder to shoulder, the boulders and peaks for the bridge. Hanuman was at that moment transporting a huge hill from the far north. When he heard that Rama had ordered that it be deposited, he cast it down, near Brindavan where he was at the time. He was surprised to hear a loud wail from the fallen peak. "Alas," it cried, "I have lost the chance of service to Rama." It could not be consoled or comforted. When Hanuman brought its condition to the notice of Rama, Rama smiled in appreciation. He said, "Ah! Even mountains are yearning anxiously to participate in this task!" He expressed joy at their enthusiasm. He told Hanuman, "Go quickly. Console the hill. Tell it not to be sad. During the coming Dwapara Age, I shall hold that hill high on my palm, for seven days and nights. On hearing this, the peak will be happy." That assurance made it the Govardhana Hill, which the Lord held aloft as promised in the Tretha Age.

On the fifth day, Rama sat on the seashore, and was delighted when he saw the bridge. "Oh Vanaras," he said, "Your devotion and skill in service are beyond description. By your sense of dedication you have won my heart." At

that time, Vibhishana came into the presence and said, “Lord, we have to enter Lanka tomorrow. So I have a prayer to place before you.” Rama replied, “What is it? Tell me.” Vibhishana continued, “Ravana is a devout worshipper of Siva. He has intense attachment towards that aspect of Godhead. Yet, it is certain he will meet death at your hands. I pray that, to commemorate his devotion to Siva, you may, on the eve of moving towards Lanka and entering it through this bridge, install a Sivalinga here, so that in coming centuries, when people enter Lanka along this route, they can worship the Sivalinga and remember these events. They would indeed be fortunate to have such an experience. The Linga would be extolled by them as Rama Lingeswara, the Idol installed by Rama. Even when the bridge is eroded and crumbled by time, the spot could be identified by future generations by means of the Idol worshipped here.” Rama was happy at the suggestion. He said, “I shall fulfil your wish. You are the future Ruler of Lanka, and in order to please you, I am ready to carry out your wishes, whatever is involved.” At this, Sugriva directed the Vanaras to get all the requisites for the installation. He procured an impressive Linga sending Hanuman himself for the purpose. Rama performed the ceremonial ablution for the Linga with water from the sea and invoked Vitality and Grace into It. Rama’s words had the effect of manthra or sacred formula. So, nothing more was needed to sanctify the Linga. The Vanaras uttered hymns and their ecstatic shouts echoed from the heavens. Amidst the Jai Jai of the hordes standing around, Lakshmana and Sugriva helped Rama to plant the

Linga in position and to complete the ceremony of Consecration.

Then, the Vanaras started marching over the bridge in regular formation, with the picture of Rama in their minds and the name of Rama on their tongues. The scene was inexpressibly sublime. Rama and Lakshmana stood on the bridge and looked at the sea surging on both sides. The presence of Rama, the Ocean of Compassion, raised the spirits of the Ocean below. Waves rose to catch a glimpse of Rama. The denizens of the sea peeped over the waters and frolicked in joy at the sight of Rama. They discarded their natures and stared long and hungrily at the Divine Form of Rama. The Vanaras had prepared a Camp on the Lanka end of the bridge. So when the vanguard reached the heights, the news spread throughout the island. Very soon, Rama, Lakshmana, Sugriva and Vibhishana, who crossed at a slow pace, also reached the main gate of the fort of Lanka. Accepting the orders of Rama, the Vanaras plucked entire trees and dancing in joy, they ate the fruits and cast the branches and twigs over the battlements into the City itself. They heaved huge boulders over the wall and dropped them into the streets beyond. They sought out Rakshasas moving about alone outside the fort. They teased and tormented them, threatening to wring their necks. Such pranks of the monkeys could not be restrained.

Very soon, news reached Ravana that the enemy was at the gate. Though possessed of ten throats, Ravana was using only one throat so far to communicate with others;

but now he roared through *all the ten*, in anger and hate. He did not remember that it was a bad omen to speak through the ten throats! There was a curse laid on him long ago, that when he spoke through all the ten his end would draw near. Within a few seconds of the roar, he recollected the curse and was frightened at the fact. But however much he attempted to control the other throats, his voice came out of all the ten. The Rakshasas who noted this strange occurrence inferred that his destruction was imminent, now that Rama and his Vanara armies had entered Lanka. They sat amidst their wives and children and lamented that their lives would end that day or the next. They decided to use the little time they had at their disposal in merrymaking and pleasure. When calamity approaches, discrimination departs, says the proverb.

Even when he knew that the curse was coming true, Ravana dismissed the warning, and told himself that nothing evil would happen to him. He moved into the Queen's apartments, for, he was afraid the Ministers might read from his fallen face that he was overcome by the awareness of the curse. Ravana sank within himself through anxiety and agony. "Will they, as when my sister fell into their hands, slice off the noses and ears of my ten heads? Or will they slice off the heads themselves?" These fears haunted him.

He saw Mandodari, the Queen, in the apartment. Her eyes discovered that Ravana had become forlorn. She decided to administer wise counsel to him. She held his hands in hers and in a soft, smooth and sweet voice, she

said, "Lord! Please listen to me, give up your anger; pay heed to my words. Think them over carefully. Those whom we can win over by reverence and devotion, we should not plan to win by hatred and opposition. In such circumstances, we have to resort to intelligent reasoning. It will not bring any good if we oppose such sacred persons. You cannot achieve victory if you encounter Rama. The glow-worm cannot vanquish the Sun. Listen to me. Take Sita, at least this moment, and while returning her safely, prostrate before him and pray for pardon. Do not ruin your life and destroy Lanka and sacrifice the lives of its women and children. Persisting in your resolve to fight is not in line with the devotion and dedication to God that you are famous for. If you hold fast to this horrid decision, even Siva, whom you have pleased hitherto, is sure to give you up. Good deeds alone can win the grace of God. How can God reward and appreciate such heinous acts?"

Mandodari spoke in this strain for a long time trying to mend his ways and to save him from destruction. "Lord! You are as dear to me as my own life. Pay heed. Rama is no ordinary human prince. He is the very person who destroyed Madhu and Kaitabha come again. He killed Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakasipu. He is the Lord who trampled on the head of Emperor Bali. He demolished the pride of the thousand-armed Karthaviryarjuna. Then why boast of the prowess of your mere twenty? He is worshipped by the entire world. He is of the most auspicious form. A long time ago, you had yourselves told me that Brahma had told

you that God would incarnate as Rama in order to relieve the earth of the burden of cruelty and vice. Do you not remember? Aware of all this, how is it that you do not give up this path, and recognise the truth? Return to Rama the Acme of Chastity, the Diadem of the Virtuous, the Incomparable Jewel of beauty, Sita. Then let us crown our son as Emperor of this realm and spend the rest of our days in peace and plentiful joy in the immediate presence of Rama. Ah! How fortunate is your brother! He is moving in the cool shade of Rama's grace. It is not too late. At this very moment, hasten towards Rama who is at the very entrance of Lanka and fall at his feet, praying for pardon."

Mandodari, was in tears when she spoke thus. She rolled at the feet of her lord, appealing to him to be warned in good time and to take immediate measures to rescue himself and his empire, his people and his fame. Ravana raised her to her feet and wiped her eyes. He said, "Dear one! Why are you agitated thus? Wherefrom all this fear, this lack of courage? There is no one more powerful than me in the world. The rulers of the eight directions have been defeated by the might of my arm. Death dare not step near me. Do not yield to fear. You are extolling that weakling Rama in my hearing unaware of the depth and extent of my might." With these words, he left the Queen and entered the Audience Hall, where he promptly sat on the Throne. Mandodari noticed his movements and the trend of his thoughts. She said to herself, "What a fool! This is the inevitable fate of persons who do not give up their false

pride. Good counsel cannot enter their minds. When one is suffering from fever, sweet things taste bitter. He is now having the poisonous fever of pride. Therefore, nectarine counsel is rejected by him, as if it is poison. What more can I do now?" She pictured in her mind the calamities and sorrows that were in store for Lanka. She felt that, before witnessing and sharing in all that misery and grief, it would be better to end life itself. With a heavy heart and with thoughts of Rama filling her, she went into her room and threw herself on the bed.

Meanwhile, Ravana sent for his ministers and set about making preparations for the battle that was imminent. "Rakshasas!" he accosted, "The Vanaras, the Jambavanthas, and the men who are now attacking us are not even a morsel for our maws. Do not lose courage, hesitate or argue. Plunge into the fight. Get ready," he yelled. But Prahastha stood up from his seat, and with folded palms, he said, "Rakshasas! Let us not desert the right path. Lord! These ministers of yours speak words that are in line with your desire. But that will not ensure success. One solitary monkey crossed the ocean and coming into our City performed many a wonderful feat. At that time, these ministers and these armies could not put an end to his destructive antics. You say monkeys are but morsels for our maws. Well, when that monkey was here, where were those maws? Did they have no hunger? When it burnt the City into a heap of ashes, these ministers had evidently no appetite to eat it! Lord, the words that fall from the lips of these ministers might

appear very pleasant to you now but they will bring about dire calamities as time moves on. Think about all this in the quiet hours. Rama has struck camp on our Suneela Mountain. He came over the sea through a bridge they constructed. He has with him an army of uncounted numbers of Vanaras. Can such a person be a mere man? Give up that surmise if you believe so. Do not prattle as the tongue, that is let loose, talks. Do not welcome into your ears the rhetoric of these ministers. Do not also condemn me as a coward, afraid of battle. Believe in me and in the aptness and urgency of my advice. Take Sita with you now and surrender her to him, praying for pardon. That step will save us and save Lanka. We can then claim that we have rescued our tribe from destruction. This is the triumph we can achieve. Or else, face defeat and disaster. Get ready this very moment. Your renown will last as long as the Sun and Moon endure. Do not acquire a name that will be execrated so long as the Sun and Moon endure.”

Ravana replied in dire anger and sheer bravado. He was trembling with rage at the unpalatable advice that Prahastha gave him. Raising his voice to a wild roar, he admonished Prahastha in a torrent of abuse. “Fool! Who taught you this trickery? Whence did you derive such wisdom? They say, sparks originate in bamboo clusters! You are born in my clan.” Ravana gnashed his teeth wildly. He shouted harsh and vulgar abuse. Finally, he kicked Prahastha out of the Hall. But before going out, Prahastha clarified his stand condemning his father and his

overweening pride which had rendered him blind. Ravana, he said, would be the cause of the destruction of the dynasty. He consoled himself that for one who is mortally stricken and is awaiting his last breath, no drug can be of any use. “So my good advice appeared futile to my father,” he told himself. He proceeded straight to his mother and related all that happened. Both agreed that there was nothing they could say or do, which would turn him on to the right path. So they sat together and were lost in the contemplation of Rama and his majesty.

The Vanaras put up a nice camp for Rama and Lakshmana on the Suvela Hill. They prepared soft rests for them, heaping grass, leaves and flowers, and made them into nice beds. Rama appeared as soon as they had finished. He sat upon it, to give them joy. A little later, he placed his head on Sugriva’s lap and went to sleep. Bows and arrows were kept in readiness on both sides of the bed. The Vanaras were scratching their palms which itched, in anticipation of hitting Ravana and killing him. They were holding back only because Rama had not given them the “go.” Hanuman, the lucky, and the Crown Prince Angada were reverentially massaging the feet of Rama. Lakshmana was standing at the foot of the bed, ready with his bow and arrow, observing the face of Rama with one-pointed attention. At this moment, Rama looked out towards the East. His eyes fell on the Moon, which was rising above the horizon. “Friends,” he said, “Look at the Moon. There is a dark patch on the Moon. Don’t you see it?” he asked. Each one of

them answered about the patch the way he felt; but Hanuman confessed, “Lord! I do not see any dark patch on the Moon. I see it as the reflection of your face. So I do not see the patch you mentioned, or any other blemish.”

That night Rama spent with the Vanaras until dawn, with delightful talk and in pleasant companionship. When day brightened, he had his bath in the sea and he performed there, on the shore itself, the rituals prescribed. He called together the ministers of Sugriva and other leaders and gave them instructions about the task ahead. Later, they met and agreed unanimously that Angada, the son of Vali and the Heir-apparent of the Vanara Kingdom, be sent as an Envoy to Ravana, before launching the siege of Lanka. Rama called Angada forward and told him, “Son, you are strong and virtuous. You have to go on a Mission from Rama to Ravana and advise Ravana cleverly and cautiously, softly and assuringly, without making him further enraged.” He was given directions about the tone and contents of what he had to tell Ravana. He took leave, after prostrating at the feet of Rama. While departing, he said, “Master! Pray bless me with the auspicious look of your eyes. I am indeed fortunate that I am entrusted with this work. Whatever might happen to me while executing it, I am ready to offer my very life to you.” Rama’s heart melted with compassion when he heard these words of Angada. Rama came forward, clasped Angada to his bosom and placed his palm on his head, showering blessings on him.

Angada then moved into the City, with Rama installed in his heart and his Form ever in his mind. He pushed aside

everyone who alerted and stopped him on the way and displayed great self-confidence and courage. He encountered the son of Ravana on the way. The Rakshasa Prince accosted him and inquired, “Here, Oh Monkey! Who are you and wherefrom?” Angada replied, “I am Angada, Envoy of Rama.” At this, the Rakshasa raised his foot to kick Angada. But Angada was too quick for him. He caught him by the foot and raising him aloft twirled his body until he dashed him on the ground. The Rakshasas who witnessed this were struck with terror. They realised that the monkey was of gigantic might and kept discreetly away. News spread that the monkey that had set Lanka aflame had returned and this created widespread confusion and fear. Angada noticed, wherever he turned, panic-stricken groups of inhabitants were watching his movements. He had no need to ask any group to clear the path. They hurried out as soon as he was sighted.

At last, he fearlessly stepped into the Audience Hall of Ravana himself. One of the guards carried the news of Angada’s arrival in hot haste to Ravana. Ravana directed him to bring the Envoy to his presence and, accordingly, Angada was taken right before the Rakshasa Emperor. Angada saw Ravana as a conscious mountain, black in colour. His twenty hands were as the branches of a giant tree. He walked up to him with no trace of fear in his heart. But all those present in that hall shuddered in their heart of hearts as they saw him enter and proceed. They were in a state of stupor. Ravana asked Angada who he was. Angada

replied, "I am the Envoy of Rama." At this Ravana asked him the purpose of his visit. "Oh Ravana!" Angada began, "you and my father were friends of old. Therefore, with your welfare in view, I have come at the orders of Rama to give you some sound advice." Angada continued softly and persuasively, "You brought away the 'Mother of all the Worlds, the Daughter of Janaka.' You were unable to withstand pride or lust and greed. Well, let bygones be bygones. At least today, at this very moment, if you realise the fact of your iniquity and act as I am telling you, Rama will pardon you. Decide to do as I suggest, without delay. Or else, with your own hand, you will bury in this soil your clan and your kingdom." When Angada spoke thus, Ravana exclaimed, "Oh vilest of Vanaras! You are indeed a fool. Perhaps you do not know that I am a foe of your 'God.' What is your name? What was the relation between me and your father? Don't be blind to the consequences of your speech."

Angada laughed outright at this outburst. He said, "Oh Monarch of Rakshasas. My name is Angada. My father's name is Vali. There was friendship between you two." Hearing the words that Angada spoke, Ravana was rendered stiff and silent. But he overcame the reaction soon and said, "True, true, there was, I remember, a monkey of that name in olden days. Oh, are you his son? Hello, Angada! You seem to have been born in that clump as a spark of fire in order to destroy it?" Angada laughed aloud at the excited reply from Ravana. He said, "Ravana, your days have come

to an end. You will soon be reaching your old friend Vali. He can tell you there the consequence of opposing Rama. Equipped with twenty eyes, you are nevertheless blind. Burdened with twenty appendages called ears, you are deaf. Caught in the thick night of ignorance, you strut in pride, proclaiming yourself great! The tribe you plan to save will be effaced. That is the plan. Sinner! Vile Barbarian! Villain blinded by pride! Demon!" When Angada gnashed his teeth in anger and poured on his head the stream of abuse, Ravana rose from his throne in a trice and shouted, "You monkey, you destroyer of your own race! Since I know and recognise the rules of political morality, I am bearing in silence your impertinence, beware. There is a limit to my patience." Ravana stared at Angada in fiery anger. But Angada was not at all affected by that demonstration. He retorted, "Oh Rakshasa Monarch! I have heard much of your righteousness, your virtues, and your political morality. Consider what wonderful achievements your righteousness has effected. Kidnapping the wife of another person, devouring the messenger duly sent by your elder brother, Kubera. These are the highlights of your political morality! You are boasting of these without a trace of shame. You dare talk of your virtues and your morality? You set fire to the tail of the messenger who came to your kingdom, and yet you proclaim without shame that you are bound by rules. Such is the behaviour of Rakshasas. You have no right at all to utter the word political morality, with your tongue. You are the vilest sinner."

When Angada was replying, without break or hesitation, the courtiers who filled the Audience Hall were aghast with fear, wondering what was in store for them. Ravana resumed his talk. He said, "Listen, monkey! Is there a single hero in your camp who can stand up against me in battle? Your Lord is broken down in sorrow at separation from his wife. He is pining and pining every day. His brother is affected and weakened by the sight of the agony. And, Sugriva? He hates you and is opposed to you, since you are the heir to the kingdom. Like a pair of birds fighting on the edge of a river, you will both drop into the flood someday. Both of you have your eyes on the same Kingdom. How then can you fight wholeheartedly and successfully against me? My brother, upon whom you seem to rely, is a coward. Jambavantha, another of your leaders, is too old to be of any use. Nala and Nila are but engineers, unaware of the art of wielding swords."

Angada interrupted this tirade and cut in with his own. "Ravana! One tiny monkey entered your City and set it on flame. Did any fool believe that it was ever possible? Now you, who know it is true, deny that the monkey is a valiant fighter. I am not in the least affected by anger when you declare that there is no one in our camp who can defeat you in battle. Yes, the texts on morality lay down that either friendship or enmity has to be only with equals. Will anyone praise a lion for destroying a frog? Surely, the attempt by Rama to kill you is too low for his status and dignity. Killing such a mean contemptible foe is something that will reduce

his majesty. The rules that lay down the conduct and characteristics of the Kshatriya caste to which he belongs are high and noble. You are a vicious, vile, vulgar sinner, who must meet death at the hands of mere monkeys only."

Ravana burst into desperate laughter. "Nasty monkeys! You dance in glee and jump shamelessly hither and thither, as the person who holds the rope tied round your waist commands. You learn the tricks he teaches and repeat them whenever he orders you, so that he may collect a few coins from the onlookers." Angada could not put up with these sarcastic remarks. He ejaculated, "You seem to know only about animals. You have not cared to know about the Lord, about God, about Destiny and about Fate. Why, have not monkeys taught you more than you know? They have demolished your parks, they have killed your son, they have reduced your City into a pile of ash. Yes, they have to perform one more feat, yet. They have to administer proper punishment to you. We have allowed you to escape the fate that you must meet. I believed that your heart will be cured by downright advice and harsh truth. But no, you have no sense of shame. You have no idea of repentance. You have no trace of morality, no habit of rectitude. What a pity! You are still gnashing your teeth in anger at Vibhishana and calling him names, like coward and traitor. You are burdening the earth by the weight of your body. The sooner you are eliminated the better. You are worse than the dogs that infest your streets. They do not have the vices you suffer from. You will soon realise that their lives are better than yours."

Angada poured abuse on Ravana regardless of convention and manners. Ravana could not digest such fiery admonitions. “Angada! Know that I am the hero, the redoubtable stalwart, who lifted the Kailasa peak by sheer physical power and courage. This Ravana is the person who laid, not flowers but his own heads, plucked by him from his body, as offerings at the Feet of Siva. This is the devotee whose might has been acknowledged by Siva himself. This is the warrior whose name strikes terror in the bravest, whose picture spreads panic. Stop your prattle praising yourself and your patrons.” But Angada was in no mood to stop. He continued his onslaught. “Oh you conceited fool! Don’t chatter away like this. Use your breath for some good purpose. Sing some songs in praise of Rama. Surrender to Him. Or else, the arrow of Rama will make your heads leap like balls from the shoulder where they are now resting. And the Vanaras will gleefully kick them about, as in a ball game. I happen to be the messenger from Sugriva, our Ruler. I have, unfortunately, no orders from Sri Rama; and I do not desire to deprive them the chance, or else, I would have put an end to your life in a trice and cast your carcass into the ocean.”

Angada grew into a fierce phenomenon as he uttered this threat. Like the lion, he slapped the ground with his palms. The earth shook so hard at the impact of those blows that the crowns on Ravana’s ten heads shook and fell on the floor. Ravana rolled from his throne, but he recovered balance very soon. Angada collected four of the ten, and

threw them with such great force and sure aim that they fell into the camp of Rama, right within the Presence. The Vanaras there were struck with wonder at the strange articles and they described to each other the excellences and beauties of the jewelled crowns. Rama knew what they were. He said that, while coming over, they appeared like Rahu and Kethu, which cause eclipses.

Meanwhile, Ravana commanded, “Bind this monkey. Don’t allow him to depart. Eat him up,” and hastily retired to the inner apartments. Angada shouted, “Shame on you! Why all this boast of strength and prowess? Go, dip yourself in the depths of the sea and hold your breath until you die. Woman stealer! Fool! Lust-ridden lout! I shall pluck your tongue out of your mouth on the battlefield and throw it as food for crows. Be warned.” Angada was gnashing his teeth in hateful anger, when Ravana turned back and called on the Rakshasas in the Hall, “Lift him by the legs and throw him on the floor. Splinter his head.” At this, Meghanada rose from his seat and holding Angada by his legs pulled him with great force in order to make him fall. Many others rushed forward to help him. However many they were, they could not move the feet even a wee bit. They only rolled on the ground, full of humiliation and unable to decide what to do next. Then, Devakantaka tried various holds to make the feet move. He too failed ignominiously. At last, Ravana himself attempted the impossible task. He held Angada by his legs and wanted to lift him and throw him forcibly on the floor. Angada laughed at Ravana’s foolishness. He said,

“Ravana! No, these are not the feet you have to hold. Place your hands on the Feet of Rama, in the genuine gesture of surrender. That will liberate you from fear and bondage.”

With these words, Angada shook his feet in order to loosen the hold. The impact of that gesture was so unexpected and so strong that Ravana hit the floor and lost consciousness. His glory and splendour were destroyed. The sense of shame spread over his faces and he looked like the moon in broad daylight, pale and poor. Angada looked at his plight and felt that he should not continue his dialogue with the coward. Rama, he remembered, had told him only to administer some good advice to Ravana. “This fellow will not yield to good counsel, he will not realise his error and correct himself. He sticks to his vicious nature. War alone can give effective cure.” Deciding thus, Angada left for the sacred proximity of the Feet of Rama. Reaching there, he submitted a report of all that had happened.

Ravana entered the apartments of the queens, overwhelmed by shame and fear. Mandodari noted the pallid crestfallen appearance of Ravana. She said, “At least, now, give up your foolish tenacity. To cultivate enmity towards Rama will bring disaster to the kingdom itself. You could not step across the line drawn by Lakshmana. How then could you hope to defeat them in battle? Your powers and might are but dry leaves before them. Your followers could not overpower the messengers they sent. Can you ever hope to overwhelm them when they invade this land in their billions? You could not stir Angada’s feet even a hair

breadth, and yet, you hope to capture and bind billions of such Vanaras! I am pained that, in spite of all experience already available, you are still holding on obstinately to your resolution. Our son was killed. Your city was reduced into a heap of ash. Your parks were uprooted. Countless Rakshasas were thrown up like balls and killed by the fall. Where were your strength and skills at that time? Boastful declarations can inflict no harm on these Vanaras.”

“Lord,” Mandodari pleaded, “Pardon me for these words. You are badly mistaken when you consider Rama a mere man. He is the Master of the Universe. He is an invincible hero. You are already aware of the extent of his might and valour, aren’t you? Recollect the facts related by Angada, quietly within yourself. Remember! You were seated in the gathering of kings in the Hall of Janaka, to exhibit your strength and skill; but you failed even to shift a little the position of the Bow of Siva. Rama lifted it as if it was a spurt of playfulness and cast it aside in broken halves. This demonstration of might was seen with your own eyes. If you still do not give up your foolish tenacity, it is an indication that your destruction *is* imminent. What could you do when the nose and ears of your own sister, Surpanakha, were sliced off? Are you not ashamed to proclaim and boast about your strength and your heroism, after all these experiences? Rama killed Vali with a single arrow. Was Vali an ordinary foe? Rama has now come with his army of Vanaras and encamped on the Suvela Hill. Rama is the very embodiment of Righteousness and Morality; or

else, why should he send an envoy to you, as he has done, to advise you how you can still save yourself? This envoy has tried to turn your mind towards accord with Rama. But you do not give up your sense of pride. You do not appreciate the moral sense that moves Rama. You do not understand the virtues that animate the supremely sacred Person who has sent the envoy. You are causing the downfall of your own kingdom! What could you do now to throw out Angada, the envoy, who entered the Audience Hall? There are in their camp thousands, nay, lakhs of Vanaras, mightier and more destructive than this one. Listen to my words, give up this demonic passion. Go and surrender to Rama.” These words of counsel reminding Ravana of happenings in the past, struck his heart like sharp arrows.

Meanwhile, a new day dawned. Ravana entered the Audience Hall as the very personification of Vicious Pride and installed himself on the Throne. Inside his head were revolving fast and furious the words of both Angada and Mandodari. Plans, fears, schemes, and surmises rolled inside him, like the earth and sky rotating round him. But none of them was along right lines, for the day of destruction of the demon clan of Rakshasas was drawing near.

Ravana accosted a Rakshasa named Vidyutjihva, and said, “Fellow! Use your magic skill and bring before me the ‘head’ of Rama as well as his ‘bow and arrows.’ Seeing them, Sita must believe them genuine. She must be plunged in grief!” Vidyutjihva rose from his seat in a trice and moved out of the Hall. He made a correct replica of the ‘bow and

arrows’ of Rama as well as of his head. Ravana was pleased at the exactness of reproduction. With them, he himself proceeded to Asokavana, where Sita was kept in confinement. Holding them before her, he said, “Oh Sita! See, these are the bow and arrows, this the head of the very person whom you are pining for and extolling, night and day. I have annihilated the Vanara hordes. Lakshmana has saved himself by fleeing from the field. In order to convince you that all this has really happened, I have brought before you this head, this bow and these arrows. Look at them.” With these words, he placed them before her. Sita was hit by grief for just one moment; but she reminded herself that there was no one, in the fourteen worlds, who could pluck that head. She knew that this was a mean trick played to terrorise her and she brushed aside the threats. She said “Ravana! Surely, your destruction has arrived. Or else, such abominable thoughts would not have come into you. You have no courage even to approach Rama. How then could you ever hope to kill him? Even in a dream, you cannot realise that hope. This is a dirty magic trick which fails to deceive me.” Sita poured scorn and insults on Ravana. Meanwhile, loud exultant shouts of “Jai,” “Jai for Lord Rama,” “Jai for Lord Rama,” were heard from all around. The Vanaras had entered the City from all directions! Ravana hurried back into his palace and the Audience Hall.

The good woman, Sarama, wife of Vibhishana, then came near Sita and consoled and comforted her. She said, “Mother! This Ravana is a trickster and all that he does is

subterfuge. No one can dare hurt Rama; just now, he has triumphantly entered Lanka with his Vanara hordes. Lanka is being shattered into shreds by the very shouts of the Monkeys.”