

BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

CHIRANJEEVI VIBHISHANA

By

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BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN

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KULAPATI'S PREFACE

The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan – that Institute of Indian Culture in Bombay – needed a Book University, a series of books which, if read, would serve the purpose of providing higher education. Particular emphasis, however, was to be put on such literature as revealed the deeper impulses of India. As a first step, it was decided to bring out in English 100 books, 50 of which were to be taken in hand almost at once.

It is our intention to publish the books we select, not only in English, but also in the following Indian languages: Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam.

This scheme, involving the publication of 900 volumes, requires ample funds and an all-India organisation. The Bhavan is exerting its utmost to supply them.

The objectives for which the Bhavan stands are the reintegration of the Indian culture in the light of modern knowledge and to suit our present-day needs and the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour.

Let me make our goal more explicit:

We seek the dignity of man, which necessarily implies the creation of social conditions which would allow him freedom to evolve along the lines of his own temperament and capacities; we seek the harmony of individual efforts and social relations, not in any makeshift way, but within the frame-work of the Moral Order; we seek the creative art of life, by the alchemy of which human limitations are progressively transmuted, so that man may become the instrument of God, and is able to see Him in all and all in Him.

The world, we feel, is too much with us. Nothing would uplift or inspire us so much as the beauty and aspiration which such books can teach.

In this series, therefore, the literature of India, ancient and modern, will be published in a form easily accessible to all. Books in other literatures of the world, if they illustrate the principles we stand for, will also be included.

This common pool of literature, it is hoped, will enable the reader, eastern or western, to understand and appreciate currents of world thought, as also the movements of the mind in India which, though they flow through different linguistic channels, have a common urge and aspiration.

Fittingly, the Book University's first venture is the *Mahabharata*, summarized by one of the greatest Indians, C.Rajagopalachari; the second work is on a section of it, the *Gita*, by H.V. Divatia, an eminent jurist and a student of philosophy. Centuries ago, it was proclaimed of the *Mahabharata*: "What is not in it is nowhere." After twenty-five centuries, we can use

the same words about it. He who knows it not, knows not the heights and depths of the soul; he misses the trials and tragedy and the beauty and grandeur of life.

The *Mahabharata* is not a mere epic; it is a romance, telling the tale of heroic men and women and of some who were divine; it is a whole literature in itself, containing a code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations, and speculative thought on human problems that is hard to rival; but, above all, it has for its core the *Gita*, which is, as the world is beginning to find out, the noblest of scriptures and the grandest of sagas in which the climax is reached in the wondrous Apocalypse in the Eleventh Canto.

Through such books alone the harmonies underlying true culture, I am convinced, will one day reconcile the disorders of modern life.

I thank all those who have helped to make this new branch of the Bhavan's activity successful.

K.M.MUNISH

PREFACE

Almost all the important characters in the *Ramayana* acted according to the highest traditions and culture of their society and of their time. Rama and his brothers were Kshatriyas. It was Rama's duty to accept willingly and carry out the promise of his father to Kaikeye by exiling himself. If Lakshmana, as a loving and loyal brother, decided to follow him into the forest, it was only to be expected. Bharata did not want to benefit as a result of what he considered a mistake by his father. He wanted to rectify that mistake and place his elder brother on the throne. But when Rama refused saying that their father's wishes should be respected, Bharata too donned hermit's robes, placed his brother's sandals on the throne as a sign of sovereignty and ruled as his representative.

Similarly, the Rakshasa characters also followed their traditions. They loved their king, glorified him and were extremely loyal to him. It was their duty to fight and die for their king, if necessary. They did not bother to question the rights and wrongs of the conflict. Even those who thought that their king was wrong in imprisoning Sita, nevertheless fought and died as true soldiers. The honour of a soldier was more important to them than anything else. There was nothing surprising in all this.

Only Vibhishana was an exception. He had a difficult choice to make. His heart was torn between love and loyalty to his brother Ravana on the one hand, and his conscience and righteousness on the other. No other character in the whole of the *Ramayana* had to contend with this clash of loyalties. It is this conflict raging within himself that makes him, perhaps, the most interesting character in this epic.

A man torn by opposing loyalties is often indecisive. He is unable to make up his mind and allows events and circumstances to overtake him. So was Vibhishana. He enjoyed the comforts and the luxuries that Ravana provided so lavishly out of wealth acquired by unfair means. He was content to lead a virtuous life in the midst of so much sin and vice. A man of religious temperament and abstemious habits, he put up with the oppression of hermits and saints as well as the drunken orgies of his brother's court without a murmur of protest for a number of years. Even when Sita was captured and brought as a prisoner to Lanka, or when Hanuman came to Lanka, he did not advise his brother to return Sita. He contented himself merely by advising Ravana not to kill Hanuman.

Only when circumstances forced the issue of war and peace to the forefront did he advise his brother to return Sita and sue for peace. Even then, his advice was couched in the politest language. It is extremely doubtful if he would have left Ravana, but for the fact that he was publicly humiliated and ordered to leave.

A person who must undoubtedly have felt deeply about Ravana's misdeeds, but kept his feelings hidden till the very last possible moment, and who left his brother when there was threat of war, is likely to be accused of treachery, whatever his intentions might be. Ravana did accuse him of being a traitor and of biding his time, though his words could be attributed to sudden anger.

But that Ravana was not alone in his suspicions is evident from what Valmiki says of him. According to Valmiki, when Rama and Lakshmana had fallen on the battle-field by the arrows of Indrajit, Vibhishana weeps:

*I on their might for aid relied,
And in my cause they fought and died.
Lost is the hope that soothed each pain:
I live, but live no more to reign,
While Lanka's lord, untouched by ill,
Exults in safe defiance still*

- Griffith's translation.

It is evident that Valmiki, at any rate, considers Vibhishana as part traitor and part saint, motivated not only by his moral scruples, but also by his hopes of gaining a kingdom. But because of the love shown by Rama towards Vibhishana, the Vaishnava world has adopted him as one of its saints. Kamban, on the other hand, does not attribute any such base motives to Vibhishana. He makes him out to be a selfless and virtuous individual whose only objective in life was the service of God and Man. However, that two such great poets could express differing opinions on his character indicates that there is some room for suspicion. This makes him all the more interesting.

An objective study of events shows that Vibhishana could not have been a traitor who was 'biding his time'. He was never ambitious for worldly power. He was not a man of action. He was virtuous and would normally have followed his brother loyally and faithfully. He was as much concerned in his actions with preserving his brother's throne as with righteousness, till the very end. He did not act until events overtook him and circumstances beyond his control forced him to leave his brother's realm. All these do not indicate the mind of an aspiring and scheming adventurer motivated by jealousy and waiting for an opportunity to capture his brother's kingdom, but rather a weak-willed individual who could not make up his mind. Probably because of the conflict within himself, combined with an inherent inability to take the initiative, he was a prisoner of indecision. He was a worthy predecessor to Hamlet rather than to Iago. It is such a Vibhishana that I have attempted to portray in this book.

While I have largely followed Valmiki in the narration of events and circumstances, I have not hesitated to depart from him where the interest of the story demanded it. For example, if we accept that Vibhishana was not motivated by narrow, selfish interest, then it follows that he would not desire to succeed Ravana to the throne of Lanka. Kumbhakarna is older and should rightly inherit Ravana's kingdom. Vibhishana would have made some attempt to offer it to him. The only opportunity he had to do so was on the battle-field; and I have followed Kamban in making Vibhishana meet Kumbhakarna before the battle and offer the crown that Rama had given him.

One area where I have departed both from Valmiki and Kamban is in depicting the feelings of the people of Lanka when he succeeds to his brother's throne. Both the poets describe the people as being enthusiastic supporters of their new king. This, I consider, to be somewhat unrealistic. Ravana had made them the richest and the most powerful nation on earth. He had brought them greatness. They had loved him, glorified him and were proud of his achievements, since they were theirs also. And finally, they had followed him willingly to defeat and death.

Vibhishana had helped to bring about tragedy. He had helped the enemy and had come to the throne by the power of that enemy. Ravana had called him a traitor in open court. Under such circumstances, they cannot be expected to accept him with enthusiasm overnight. They might have acquiesced in his succession because there was no other alternative. The discontent, if any, would naturally have been under the surface. But enthusiasm? No. That is why I start the story from that point.

It is when Vibhishana becomes king and learns what his subjects think of him that the need to search his own heart to see what truth there is in the hasty accusations of his brother, believed by many of his subjects, arises.

One of the problems that the modern writer faces in writing a mythological story is in the treatment of the super-natural. To accept the super-natural as literal truth is somewhat repugnant to the scientific temper of the modern age.

Such ideas as Hanuman changing his size, or travelling at such speeds and heights; the Rakshasas becoming birds and flying; the power of the various weapons described in such great detail – we know that these are beyond the realm of realism and can only be imagination. We know that many of the events portrayed could not have taken place in the form in which they have been related. On the other hand, to eliminate the super-natural altogether is impossible. The natural and the super-natural are so inextricably interwoven that any attempt to remove it would be to destroy the literary and artistic merits of the story. Ancient poets are well known for their art of exaggeration; and the descriptions of the grotesque features of Rakshasas should not be taken literally. Similarly, many other super-natural things have to be attributed to poetic licence.

On the other hand, it is quite likely that some of these people did have certain mental and spiritual powers which enabled them to perform certain feats which seem impossible for us today. Modern psychology is just beginning to probe into this vast field of the potentialities of the mind. The ancient people probably had a greater knowledge of science than we give credit to them. For example, when the Vanara army was crossing the bridge into Lanka, the Rakshasa known as 'Fiery Eyes' attempted to set fire to the bride. He must have tried to do so by focusing the sun's rays by means of lenses to produce heat. Rama, under advice from Vibhishana, used mirrors to reflect the rays back, as a result of which the Rakshasa was consumed by the heat he himself tried to create. From this incident, it is obvious that the Rakshasas had some knowledge of the Laws of Reflection and Refraction and made use of it in warfare. Under these circumstances, one can only speculate as to what was real and what was due to the poet's imagination and belief, be sceptical in accepting things literally, but keep an open mind with regard to what the future may reveal.

Though very little historical data is available with regard to the incidents portrayed in the *Ramayana*, it is obvious that the war between Rama and Ravana represents the struggle for supremacy between the incoming Aryans and the ancient nomadic tribes inhabiting India in the pre-Aryan period. It was essentially a struggle between a stable agricultural society and a nomadic civilization. The Devas were not celestial beings but probably people who lived in the Himalayan region and beyond. Similarly, the Rakshasas and Vanaras were not demons and monkeys but different races of mankind, but the physical differences between them were such that they were described as belonging to different species. Men like Vibhishana must have contributed to the integration of Hindu society in those early days.

Therefore, in retelling this story, all that can be done is to accept the super-natural as imaginative or symbolic truth in the interests of the story and then ignore it. What is of universal and lasting interest is not the super-natural but the conflict of characters and situations which are relevant even today.

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LIST OF CHARACTERS MENTIONED IN THE STORY

Rakshasas

Ravana - King of Lanka

Kumbhakarna } - Ravana's brothers
Vibhishana }
Khara }
Dushana }

Maliavan - Ravana's grandfather

Indrajit }
Atikaya } - Ravana's sons
Akshaya }
Virabahu }
Mahiravana }

Kumbha }
Nikumbha } - Ravana's nephews
Mokarakya }
Taruni }

Maricha - Ravana's uncle

Rakshasis

Mandodari - Ravana's wife
Nikosha - Ravana's mother
Surpanakha - Ravana's sister

Saroma - Vibhishana's wife
Trijata - Vibhishana's daughter
Tataka - Maricha's mother

Humans

Rama - Prince of Ayodhya
(Incarnation of Vishnu,
the Preserver)

Lakshmana }
Bharata } - Rama's brothers
Satrughna }

Dasaratha - Rama's father
Janaka - Rama's father-in-law

Sita - Rama's wife
(Incarnation of
Goddess Lakshmi)

Kaikeye - Bharata's mother

Vanaras

Sugriva - King of Kishkindha
Vali - Sugriva's brother
Angada - Sugriva's nephew

Hanuman } - Sugriva's ministers
Jambuvan }

Nala - Architect and a
Commander of the army

Neela - General in the army.

CHAPTER ONE

INTROSPECTION

1

THE CORONATION

Yesterday, I was crowned king of Lanka. It was a distinguished gathering that attended the ceremony. The Devas and the Yakshas had sent their representatives, which was an indication that they had decided to forget their quarrels with my brother Ravana. There was Sugriva, the king of Kishkinda and leader of the conquering Vanara army. His nephew, Angada, and his trusted lieutenants, Hanuman and Jambuvan, were there also. They were there in the pride of their victory, to confer on me not only what was mine by right, but to give away what was theirs by conquest, for I had helped them to win the war against my brother. Lakshmana was there to ensure that everything went off smoothly and to crown me on behalf of his brother Sri Rama. I was sorry that Rama was not there in person. After all, he had called me his brother and conferred on me this kingdom – or what was left of it – for as long as his fame shall last on this earth. But I suppose, his presence was too much to expect.

Sitting on the throne that was once adorned by my brother Ravana with so much cruelty and grandeur, I looked round the assembly, at my own kith and kin, the Rakshasas. My grand-father, Maliavan, sat in a corner, with sad and bleary eyes, bearing the burdens and sorrows of great age. My mother, Nikosha, was there, bravely trying to hide her tears. They had both tried to advise my brother against his wanton and self-destructive course of action and failed. Of all their numerous progeny, I was the only one left. There were a few Rakshasa chieftains who had somehow escaped being slain in the war and were looking shame-faced and crest-fallen. Some old retainers –too old to fight - were there, moving about and trying to look important for the occasion. But the gallant flower and youth of the Rakshasa clan – my cousins, nephews and other young warriors - lay dead on the battle-field with vultures picking at their carcasses, until I cremated them all.

So, my coronation was a melancholy ceremony. The funeral pyres that I had lit had not died down; the eyes of the women-folk were not yet dry from weeping for their beloved ones. Only the old, the infirm and the cowardly were there among my subjects – except perhaps the children. These were the people over whom I will have to exercise my sway and create a new nation from the cinders of the old. As the smoke from the holy fire reached the heavens and as Brahmins recited hymns from the Vedas, I took my oath of office. Lakshmana placed the great diamond crown of my brother over my head. It was very heavy and I felt most uncomfortable in it and took it off as soon as it was prudent to do so. The Vanara army rejoiced and raised slogans in my praise. To them, I was a good fellow who had joined them at a critical moment and had helped them to win the war. Therefore, I deserved to inherit what was left of my brother's throne. But my own people were gloomy and silent.

Many celebrations had been planned party in connection with my coronation, but mainly because I wanted the Vanaras and the Rakshasas to become friendly and get to know each other. While the Vanaras participated enthusiastically, the Rakshasas were reserved, and not their usual selves. Considering what they had gone through in the last few months, it was understandable.

The day before I was crowned, I issued a proclamation to my subjects. Defeat had stunned them. They could not understand it. They found it difficult to believe that their beloved king Ravana, the conqueror of the three worlds, the terror of the Devas, the Rakshasa who had got the gift of invincibility from Brahma, the Creator, could be defeated and killed by mere men and monkeys. And yet, it had happened! It was the greatest tragedy in the history of the Rakshasa race. So, I wanted to soothe their feelings, offer them some hope and solace. Without minimizing the enormity of the tragedy that had overtaken us, I wanted at the same time, to offer words of encouragement for the future. The proclamation was therefore very carefully worded. Sri Rama had seen it and approved it. The proclamation said:-

Brother Rakshasas:

The greatest misfortune in the history of our race has overtaken us. Our city and our country lie in ruins. The flower of the Rakshasa youth has been sacrificed at the altar of war. The prosperity of our nation has been destroyed. There is grief, humiliation and despair in every Rakshasa home. As your king, I share in the desolation and misery that faces us. My heart bleeds for the sufferings and the tribulations we have undergone.

But the past is over and done with. Only the future matters. From the ashes of the past, we must rebuild our future. From the rubble and stones that lie scattered around us, we must create a new Lanka. We must rise once more and gain the admiration, respect and even the love of the entire human race. In the past, we had taught others to fear us. In the future, they will learn to love us.

Such rebuilding is not going to be easy. The road will be long and hard. There will be many obstacles. But the task is not beyond our capacity. We have the talent and the energy. What we need is to forge the will to do so. Let us, therefore, try and forget the past and march forward towards our new destiny with courage, unity and resolution.

It was short and I had deliberately refrained from making any references to my predecessor who had brought the nation to such a crisis. I felt that many of the people – in spite of all the sufferings they had undergone – still loved him. Nor did I want to be very specific about my future policy and plans in the very first statement. The only reference to any change in policy was about gaining the love of the entire human race. In the past, Ravana had almost always been feared, but rarely loved by non- Rakshasas.

I wanted to be an ideal ruler, not cruel and haughty like my brother. I wanted to be the father of my subjects, share in their joys and sorrows – especially their sorrows. It was my duty to help them in their hour of defeat though I myself had no part in their humiliation. But it was also my duty to make them good and virtuous so that the blot on our national character that my brother had brought would be erased. My ambition was that future generations would say that under Vibhishana, the Rakshasas turned over a new leaf. They were better than the rest of the human beings, or even the Devas. In spite of everything that has been said about our clan, we were a part of the human race. We could marry among mankind and they could marry us. But because of our physical features, our character and our abilities, and our attitude towards life, we were classified as belonging to another race – even another species. We were referred to as demons, even monsters. It was my hope to make my people an integral part of humanity.

In order to be able to do all this, I ought to know my people. I must understand their feelings and aspirations. But I realized I was almost a stranger to them, for I had never felt one with them. And lately, in their greatest hour of sorrow, I had gone over to the opposite side. Therefore, I wanted to find out for myself, what they felt and thought.

Last night, after the ceremonies were over and the guests had departed, I disguised myself as an elderly Rakshasa from one of the outposts of the kingdom who had arrived too late to take any part in the fighting and who was out of touch with what had been happening at home. To a Rakshasa like myself, a disguise is no problem, for we are adept in that art. Even my wife or daughter would not have recognised me. And I went round the streets of the capital to find out for myself what my people felt and thought and what grievances they had that I could redress. I knew that all good monarchs did this periodically as a check on what their ministers and advisers told them.

THE DESOLATE CITY

There was desolation everywhere. The fire, started by the Vanara army, had left its trail of destruction. Marble mansions, proudly rising to the clouds, now stood like grey skeletons thrusting from the earth. Twisted beams and molten metal were lying about. Humbler homes had been reduced to rubble and cinders. Stray dogs wandered in the streets looking emaciated, rooting in the gutters in search of something to eat and snarling at each other. The prosperous city that was once the pride and glory of Lanka and the envy of all, had a forlorn appearance. Even those palaces and mansions that had escaped the fury of the fire were gloomy and deserted. The occupants had either been killed, or had gone away. And the Vanara soldiers were going round singing, and picking up things they considered valuable.

I suppose all conquering armies are the same – may be a little better or a little worse. They all take your wealth, and sport with your women. Often, the commanders are powerless to stop their own soldiers – at least during the first few days. The Vanara army was no exception. The Rakshasa maidens, used to a somewhat permissive life in their own society, did not find it strange that the Vanaras should solicit their favours or that they should oblige them. But what they did not understand was that the Vanaras' own code forbade such behaviour and they ought to be thoroughly ashamed of themselves. I decided to speak to Hanuman about it the next morning.

We, Rakshasas, are a pleasure-loving people. We like wine, women and song, and indulge in all of them with a freedom unknown to others. The coronation day is a day of celebration, and I thought, hoped – in spite of my own personal aversion – that people would be celebrating my coronation in the usual manner. But what I saw surprised and pained me beyond measure.

There were very few young people since most of them had perished in the recent war. Those that were left were maimed. Men hobbled about on crutches. Many were blind and quite a few were lying in corners, alone, untended and uncared for. Some moaned and cried out in pain. My heart bled for them and I made a mental note to organize a medical relief to these poor destitutes who had suffered for their king and country. Old men and women and a few children sat about in groups, silent for the most part or talking occasionally in whispers. They were all drinking, but they were drinking not hilariously as they used to do, but merely to drown their sorrows. I went from group to group, but no one noticed me or bothered to speak to me. After wandering for quite a while, I came across one group larger than the others, where there was some noise. A Rakshasa, sitting on the stone steps of the building, was holding forth.

“I tell you we were not defeated!” he was shouting. He had a jug of wine in his hands and I noticed one of his legs was missing. “We were not beaten by valour or superior might. We were destroyed by treachery. The entire Rakshasa clan has been wiped out because one man among us turned traitor.”

I recognized him as one of the palace guards closely attached to my brother Ravana. I stopped and listened.

“Come on, Mahisha,” a woman, obviously his wife, was saying. “You have had too much to drink. You better come into the house and go to sleep”.

“Yes, I have had too much to drink,” Mahisha said, “but not so much as to lose my senses. I wish I could. Then, I can at least peacefully.”

“Go in and sleep,” one of the others remarked. “It is no use thinking of the past. It is over and done with. We must learn to think of the future.”

"I will tell you what the future holds for you." Mahisha continued. "The new king Vibhishana, your lord and master, has the power of life and death over you," There was so much venom and contempt as he pronounced my name. "He sits on the throne not by the love of his subjects, but because the conqueror put him there. And he will carry out the will of the conquerors. He will be telling us to give up our pleasures, our way of life. He will want us to worship their gods, follow their customs. I tell you, the Rakshasa way of life is finished!"

"But, my friend," I intervened in the dialogue, "I am from the outpost of the empire and I don't know the details, but isn't it a fact that our king imprisoned another man's unwilling wife and tried to make her his own?" According to the Rakshasa thinking, if she had been willing, it would have been quite proper.

"What is wrong with that?" Mahisha shouted. "It happens every day. The women always pretend they are unwilling just to make us desire them all the more. And these pigmy men mutilated our princess Surpanakha. Don't they deserve to be punished?"

"I have heard it said that Rama and Lakshmana are not mere men," I said. "They say Rama is an incarnation of Vishnu who had taken human form just to destroy our king and restore the supremacy of the Devas."

"Rubbish," Mahisha shouted. "Even the gods were scared stiff when our master was alive. In any case, what business has they to interfere with our way of living. If we do wrong, they can punish us after we are dead, which is what the gods are for. But our life is our own."

Come, Mahisha," his wife pleaded. "Don't argue; it is no good and it will get you into trouble."

"I don't care," he shouted. "If His Majesty King Vibhishana were to come here, I will tell him to his face, 'Sire, you are a traitor to your king, to your country and to your clan. I would like to see his face then.'"

Slowly, his wife lifted him up. He was too far gone in drink to resist. Hanging on to her, he hobbled into the house. As he went in, he kept mumbling, "I wish I had lost my life instead of only my leg. Then, I would not have had to witness the humiliation that has overtaken us."

The crowd slowly dispersed, talking among themselves. As they were leaving, one of them said, "At least, he has the courage to say what we all think."

"Yes," another replied. "It is easy to be brave when you are successful. But it takes a lot to be courageous in defeat."

“But I hear Vibhishana is a good man.” I ventured. “He surely will not punish anyone merely for being loyal to his brother.”

“He probably wouldn’t have the guts,” the first man said.

“Tell me seriously,” I continued. “Do you honestly think that Vibhishana is a traitor? I heard that he begged and pleaded with his brother to make peace and it was his brother who kicked him and told him to go away.”

“That may all be true,” the first man spoke slowly and carefully, choosing his words deliberately. “But he went over to the other side at a critical moment and helped them against his brother. Whatever his motives in doing so, in the eyes of the world, he would always be suspect.” It was a most significant remark. I would not be condemned, but I would always be suspect.

I walked on, to other areas and to other groups. Conversation was much the same. They were either silent or critical of the new king. There was no one either to understand his ideals or sympathise with his motives.

In one or two groups, they were discussing my proclamation. “Vibhishana wants us to gain the love of the entire human race,” one man remarked with a tinge of sarcasm. “I wonder how one does that?”

“We do that by falling at the feet of those who killed our near and dear ones,” another explained in the same note.

“It is totally against our character and tradition,” a third Rakshasa said seriously.

“We can best love them by eating them,” another referred to their habit of eating human flesh. “After all, love of food is the greatest love there is.” But no one laughed at his attempt at humour.

In another group, one man asked, “What is this ‘new destiny’ that Vibhishana is talking about?”

“He will expect us to grow crops instead of looting other people’s granaries,” another replied. “He will want us to raise cattle instead of carrying off other’s animals. He will make us hold a plough instead of a sword. We will then be able to give alms to Brahmins so that we can all go to heaven when we die. That is our ‘new destiny’.”

SAINT OR SINNER?

All this was a revelation to me, a rude shock. It made me look into my own heart and search for feelings that I had never suspected I had before. It was understandable that the Rakshasas did not like my going over to the other side on the eve of the commencement of the war. They loved and glorified their king Ravana and had shared in all his exploits. He was their hero. But I never for a moment suspected that I would be considered a traitor who went over to the enemy in order to gain his brother's kingdom.

The king himself accused me of such unworthy motives on the day of our parting, but that was done in a moment of passion. My second brother, the brave Kumbhakarna, acknowledged the righteousness of my decision, though he himself followed his king to death on the battle-field.

Everyone in Lanka knew that I did not follow the Rakshasa code of behaviour, that I disagreed with Ravana in his oppression of holy men, that I pleaded with him to make peace with Sri Rama before it was too late, and only when everything else failed and he literally kicked me out of his court did I leave him.

At least, I thought everyone knew it and in my innocence, I had assumed that none would question my motives or my integrity, however much they might disagree with my decision. To one who had spent a life-time of blameless virtue, this was a great shock. If one Rakshasa said I was a traitor, it was obvious others thought so too, though as one of them in the group remarked, they were afraid to say so. I also felt that the gloom and the sorrow that surrounded my coronation was not only because of the defeat and the humiliation and the loss of Rakshasa power, but because they thought that a traitor was succeeding their king to the throne of Lanka.

If this was what my own kith and kin felt, what of those whom I had joined? Did they too think I was a traitor and merely made use of me to serve their own ends? True, Sri Rama had called me his brother and trusted me implicitly. The Vanara chieftains respected and honoured me. But was that respect and honour shown to me because I had followed my conscience and the path of virtue, or because I was an invaluable means of their victory?

The city was silent. There were no nocturnal noises to disturb the serenity of the night. The Vanaras, after having had their fill of pleasures, had gone to sleep. The Rakshasas too had gone, to nurse their grief and their humiliation as best as they could. Perhaps, they too had found forgetfulness in their sleep.

As I walked back to my palace in the loneliness of the night, I realized gradually, there were really no answers to these questions. Future generations, who read the story of Sri Rama and his epic struggle with Ravana to establish righteousness on earth, will always be

left with a doubt in their minds as to whether I was a selfish, scheming traitor who helped in the downfall of his brother in order to gain a kingdom, or a virtuous man who chose the path of righteousness in preference to his own near and dear ones whom he loved. I realized that future poets will sing the praises of Sri Rama and his brothers, will even pay tribute to the glory and valour of Ravana, but will be mixed in their reactions towards me.

But irrespective of what the future generations might say and think, it is necessary that I must turn inwards, look into my own heart and see where – if anywhere – I had gone wrong. This is necessary for my own peace of mind, for I have to live with my conscience, not for a decade or two, but forever. I am one of those unfortunate beings who has been blessed with the gift of everlasting life by Brahma. Sri Rama too had conferred on me this kingdom so long as his name shall shine on this earth. It means, I will have to bear the burden of my conscience for ever and ever. So, you can see how important it is for me to live at peace with myself.

Countless generations will read the story of Sri Rama. When they do so, it is inevitable that they should compare the behaviour of his brothers with those of Ravana – particularly with my own behavior. Will I be justified in their eyes? Or will I be dismissed as being too unimportant? Or as being too weak or too selfish? But one thing is certain; no one will write my story in all its pathos and in all its tragedy. If someone did, he might say. 'Here was a man whose intentions were most honourable and whose actions were most suspect.'

However, since no one is likely to write my story, I must record it myself, for what it is worth. I will neither try to justify myself nor condemn myself. I will merely relate it as I have lived it and as I have felt it and let the future be my judge.

CHAPTER TWO

THE POWER AND THE GLORY

1

BRAHMA'S GIFT

We were the children of a Rakshasa mother and a Brahmin father. As such, we were brought up as Brahmins, learnt all the Vedas that it was necessary for a Brahmin to learn and were duly confirmed at the proper age. There were five boys and a girl, but four of us were always together. Ravana was the eldest, Kumbhakarna was second and I was third. Surpanakha, our sister, was the youngest.

The Rakshasas were adept in the arts of magic and illusion. We could transform ourselves at will into any being we wanted to be. We could be like birds and fly or take unusual shapes in order to frighten poor mortals. We could create illusions to deceive or mislead others. While we learnt the Vedas from our father, our mother taught us all the arts of magic and make-believe. Ravana always liked to appear like a ten-headed monster through his magic. Apart from frightening others, I think it gave him a sense of pride, satisfied his vanity and made him feel he was superior to all living things.

We three brothers were all ambitious. A study of the scriptures had taught us one thing. It was that great achievement was possible only through severe penance. It was penance that pleased the gods, made them give you whatever boons you asked for-boons that sometimes resulted in the humiliation of the very gods who had granted them. But penance was something that the gods could not resist provided it was sufficiently severe and sufficiently prolonged.

There was a lot of argument between us brothers as to what type of achievement we should seek. Ravana, the eldest, wanted unlimited power and world domination. Kumbhakarna, who was perhaps the strongest among us in physical terms, but not as ambitious as Ravana, desired unlimited strength that even the gods could not conquer. But he did not want to dominate the world or make slaves of others. And I wanted the gift of eternal life so that my soul would be indestructible. Even in those early days, I knew that physical might – however great – was no match against virtue and was likely to be transient. Victories over the gods would be temporary. It was the soul that was eternal. I took the scriptures seriously and argued with my brothers over this, but they were followers of the true Rakshasa tradition in believing that a glorious and happy life on this earth was all that mattered. The study of the Vedas had taught them nothing.

So, we three of us went into the forest and started our penance. We forgot everything, and without food or drink concentrated our minds on Brahma, the Creator of all universe. I do not know for how long we tormented our bodies and concentrated our minds,

for we lost all sense of time. In such a situation, days and nights and seasons, rain and sunshine, or heat and cold, ceased to have any meaning since we were not aware of our environment. But it must have been for a long time, because, when we came out of our penance, we found we were completely covered by creepers and our emaciated bodies had acquired a new glow.

At last Brahma was pleased with us and came before us to ask what we had prayed for, for so long and so earnestly.

Ravana was the first to speak. "My lord, grant me the knowledge of all the weapons in your armoury," he asked.

"Granted!"

"Please grant me the power of invincibility," Ravana asked next.

"You will never be defeated either by the Rakshasas or the Devas," Brahma replied.

But Ravana was not satisfied. "My Lord! Grant me the boon of immortality," he asked.

"I cannot grant you complete immunity from death", Brahma replied. "But I can make you more or less immortal. Even if you are cut to pieces, you will not die. If one of your heads is served, another will grow in its place. You can only be killed by this particular weapon and I leave it in your possession. It is for you to guard it so that your enemies will never find it."

Ravana was supremely happy. If the Devas and the Rakshasas could not kill him, then no one else could. And he had in his possession, the only weapon that could destroy him. As Brahma had said, it made him 'more or less' immortal. But I remember wondering at the time, "Why do gods impose so many conditions to their boons?" Now, I think I know the answer.

Brahma came next to Kumbhakarna. "What is your wish?", he asked.

Kumbhakarna was always slow of tongue. "My Lord, grant me the gift of sleep," said my second brother.

"Granted!" said Brahma, before we realised what had happened.

Kumbhakarna was mighty, but in his hurry, a slip of the tongue made him ask for sleep instead of weapons. Later, we learnt that the gods were jealous of our penance and of the power that the Rakshasas were likely to acquire, and one of them deliberately made him commit the slip.

Ravana, who was listening, pleaded with Brahma, for Kumbhakarna was already beginning to snore. "But my Lord, it was a slip of the tongue; what my brother wanted was weapons, like myself."

"A boon once granted cannot be taken back," explained Brahma. "Even I do not have the power. But I can modify it. He will wake up once every six months to have nourishment and to enjoy all his pleasures. But if he should ever be woken up in the middle of his six months' sleep, it will signify his end."

At last Brahma came to me. "And what is it that you desire?" he enquired.

"Lord, grant me the gift of everlasting life," I said.

"It is a most unusual request," he remarked.

"Yes, my Lord, I wish to devote all my life to the pursuit of righteousness."

"Pursuit of such an ideal will certainly take all eternity," Brahma smiled. "Granted!" he said, and disappeared.

So, there we were, three brothers, all blessed by Brahma in totally different ways. Ravana went off to conquer the world; Kumbhakarna went off to sleep. And I returned to my meditations, to my acts of mercy and to my scriptures.

2

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

Ravana was endowed with immense natural strength. Through constant training he had become an expert in the arts of combat and archery. He had the power of Rakshasa magic at his command. In addition to these overwhelming natural advantages, he now had all the knowledge in the use of celestial weapons that Brahma had granted him. And he had the gift of invincibility. He was consequently the most powerful figure among the great warriors of the time. His abilities matched his unlimited ambitions and he went about the world in all the power and glory of his youth and strength.

Like myself, Ravana too had learnt all the scriptures. In fact, his knowledge, if anything, was greater than mine. But experience has taught me that the biggest gulf in human understanding is to be found between knowledge and wisdom. For my brother, in spite of the extensive knowledge of the Vedas he had acquired, chose not to follow the logical consequences of that knowledge. A study of the scriptures should have led one to an understanding between right and wrong, between the transient and the eternal, between illusion and reality. But for Ravana, like the rest of the Rakshasas, it was 'the here and now' that mattered.

I have often wondered what it was that made us Rakshasas different from others. The Rakshasas are a pleasure loving people. We eat any kind of meat – human flesh not excepted. We drink inordinate quantities of wine. Our morals perhaps leave much to be desired, when compared to the standards of other races. Our features are different; we are darker in colour and better built than other mortals. In sheer physical strength, we are superior to other men and we are clever in the arts of magic and make-believe. This gave us a power that the other envied. But there are other men who have all these attributes and yet, they are not Rakshasas. What is it that makes us a race apart?

After pondering a great deal over this, I have come to the conclusion that it is our sense of values that sets us apart. As a race, we are interested only in the pleasures of the flesh. We spend our time indulging our senses. Even when we do penance and acquire certain spiritual powers, we use them in the fulfilment of our bodily desires. Mankind is interested in the things of the spirit. They believe that the body, that the life on this earth, is an illusion and is only a means of attaining salvation. To them, it is the spirit that matters. Through their austerities and sacrifices, they are trying to achieve something that is everlasting. Not that they do not indulge in the pleasure of the flesh. But even when they do so, they know it is wrong and it is unimportant. We, on the other hand, glory in our lust as an end in itself. While they sacrifice their pleasures for the sake of spiritual salvation, we sacrifice even our spiritual powers for the fulfilment of our base desires. It is this fundamental difference that has set us apart from the rest of mankind and made us enemies. We laughed at things they considered sacred, polluted their ceremonies and oppressed their holy men who concentrated on the things of the spirit. So, there was no room for both these races on earth.

But I was an exception among the Rakshasas. I did not eat prohibited kinds of meat like beef, and had no taste for wine. I was satisfied with one wife and I too was interested in the eternal spiritual values. Instead of teasing holy men, I gave them alms. I did not glorify the strong and I had no contempt for the weak. All this made me a freak among the Rakshasas. My brother Rakshasas tended to treat me with a light-hearted contempt and good humoured tolerance. They could afford to, for I did not pose a threat to their way of life. But it made me lonely, and gradually I found myself an alien among my own people.

THE CONQUEROR OF THE THREE WORLDS:

But Ravana was a full-blooded Rakshasa. He went about terrorizing the hermits of the forest, disturbing their meditations, polluting their sacrificial ceremonies with filth and blood and killing wanderers just for the pleasure of it. To the Rakshasas, all this was fun. They enjoyed the humiliation and the embarrassment of others. Cruelty seemed an end in itself and they gloried in such behaviour. And the rishis were often powerless because of the

gift of invincibility that Ravana had received from Brahma. But soon, he tired of these pranks and leaving them to his fellow Rakshasas, went round the world, arrogant and powerful, challenging the Devas and the Yakshas, humbling them and taking away untold wealth from their coffers.

Thus, he conquered Indra, the king of the Devas, and took away his chariot as well as a lot of his wealth. He also brought many Deva maidens as his concubines and servant girls. The god of wealth, Kubera, who was our half-brother, was also humbled by him and finally agreed to share his wealth with Ravana. Other rulers felt that discretion was the better part of valour and paid their tribute to him in order to escape his wrath, or kept out of his way. He established his kingdom in Lanka and organized a mighty army that was the terror of the entire world.

Of course, he had a few set-backs. But he was able to convince himself and his followers that even these were really victories. Once, when he wanted to go beyond the northern range of mountains, Mount Kailas, the abode of Lord Shiva, was in the way. Ravana, in his pride tried to lift that huge rock. Shiva, who was annoyed at the behaviour of this upstart, exerted a little pressure with his big toe and poor Ravana was trapped under the rock, unable to move. He spent ages in penance and meditation until Shiva took pity on him and released him. But from then on, he claimed that this had made Shiva his friend and benefactor, and in the rare religious moments, he called himself a follower of Shiva.

On another occasion, the great Vanara king Vali was meditating on the shores of the southern ocean when Ravana disturbed his concentration. Vali tied him to his tail and took him over hills and dales for days. But Ravana praised him, made him his friend and thus got himself released.

The third time was when he annoyed Kartaviryarjuna, a thousand-armed king. Ravana was imprisoned by him and was released only after a long time.

But Ravana, far from being ashamed of these set-backs, boasted about them as if they were victories. After all, no one had attempted to lift Mount Kailas! But it was significant that on the last two occasions, Ravana was defeated by a Vanara and a mere man. His gift of invincibility was no proof against these groups of people.

So he came back to Lanka as the conqueror of the three worlds, as the undisputed monarch whose word was law and who was feared by mortals and Devas alike. With the wealth he had accumulated and with the greatest architect in the world-Vishwakarma – to help him, he built palaces of gold and silver and marble for himself, his brothers and his sons. Precious stones were used for decorations and beautiful sculptures from the court of Indra adorned our palaces. Enchanting Yaksha maidens had been imported to do our bidding. Our gardens had the rarest flowers and the most beautiful trees. They could produce the kind of season our moods desired.

The wealth of all the worlds was at our disposal. We helped ourselves to what we wanted. None dared question us. Lanka had never known such prosperity. Even the poorest of Ravana's soldiers could boast of gold-plated armour, could command elephants, horses and chariots. Choicest meats of every kind and wines were available in plenty and people had only to help themselves to what they wanted. There was music and dancing and singing throughout the day. Life was a round of perpetual enjoyment. Considerable time and effort was spent by many in finding new ways of amusing themselves, and others. There were sports and games based not only on physical prowess, but on the art of deception, illusion and magic. Since the Whole world had been conquered, there was no fighting to be done and the time of each and every one was devoted to pleasure. Yes, it was an age based on what might be called the 'Pleasure principle'.

4

THE DARLING OF THE NATION

King Ravana was the darling of the nation. People loved him, gloried in him, sang his praises and did his bidding without question. Everyone was amazed at his exploits, dazzled by his wealth and enchanted by his generosity – for he shared his wealth with the poorest of his clan. It was not wealth which he coveted, but the power of acquisition and distribution, power over the lives and fortunes of other people.

He did everything in a grand manner. His palaces had to be the best in all the worlds, his army the strongest, his people the wealthiest, his maidens the most beautiful. And he was a man of grand passions. He indulged inordinately in all the pleasures of the flesh. He loved his wife Mandodari as much as any man could love a woman. But he had thousands of courtesans maintained for his pleasure. And he did not see any contradiction in such behaviour. He could never resist a pretty maiden and would never rest till he had possessed her. And this last proved finally to be his undoing.

It is surprising how the sudden acquisition of wealth and power changes a man's character and behaviour. When Ravana acquired the power of invincibility, he assumed that he had also acquired infallible wisdom at the same time. This feeling was strengthened by the unlimited wealth he had acquired and the many victories in war he had won over many peoples and lands. The emissaries from the Devas paid him compliments all the time so that he would not go to war with them again. His own courtiers indulged in inordinate flattery in order to get what they wanted. He began to believe that the most outrageous praise showered on him by the meanest courtier to be literally true. In the beginning he used to consult his ministers on major decisions, but soon such consultations became a matter of formality, and after a time they ceased altogether.

Matters of State were often decided in the bed chamber or in the pleasure garden. These decisions were dependant on his mood, or on the prompting of one of his favourite mistresses. His ministers carried them all out – as it suited them! There was no one to advise, oppose or criticize. Only Kumbhakarna could or would have talked to him, but he was almost always asleep.

And Ravana was unpredictable. Suddenly, in the middle of his pleasures, he would turn to me and say, “Ah, Vibhishana! You are the wise one among us. You have the gift of everlasting life. You will be here when we are all dead and gone. Let us go to your palace and worship my friend Lord Shiva.”

So, he would accompany me to my palace; throw away all his ornaments and fine clothes, put ashes all over his body and sit in meditation before the image of Shiva. Then he would become completely oblivious of his environment. His concentration would be so intense that one could almost see a divine glow over his body. He would come out of the trance refreshed and rejuvenated. He would send for some poor Brahmins captured by the Rakshasas, give them expensive gifts and send them away, only to be recaptured and often tortured by his soldiers before they had left the palace gates. And the king would plunge into his pleasures with greater vigour and enthusiasm. It was almost as if he underwent a spiritual exercise in order to prepare himself for greater orgies.

Or, he would engage me in philosophic discussion. “Of what use is everlasting life?” he would ask, and proceed to answer if himself. “It is nothing but an eternity of boredom. And before long, you will find it out for yourself.”

“But, Sire, “I would plead, “a devoted life in the service of the gods can never lead to boredom. It can only be one of fulfilment.”

“No Vibhishana. A life of fulfilment is also a life of boredom,” he would say. “Look at me. Thanks to Brahma’s boon and my own strong arm, I have conquered the three worlds. I have nothing more left to conquer. I have had every kind of pleasure one can taste on this earth. You might say mine is a life of fulfilment. But I am bored, Vibhishana, bored till I could scream! No, it is not fulfilment that is worthwhile; it is the striving after a great objective that gives life its flavour. I was far happier when I was struggling under Mount Kailas, or fighting against Indra than I have ever been since. Give me a great objective or a worthy opponent and I am happy.”

In later years, I remembered these remarks of his and wondered whether it was sheer idleness and boredom that drove him to pick a quarrel with Rama. Perhaps, he had found ‘a great objective’ in Sita and a ‘worthy opponent’ in Sri Rama. Sometimes, I also had a feeling that in spite of all his fame and power, he was a little jealous of me – jealous of my everlasting life and of the peace and contentment I found in my faith.

In spite of all the boasting and cruelty, I was surprised that Ravana had a great gift for friendship. When he made up his mind to be nice to people, they were captivated by his charm. The pleasant and complimentary words he used made them feel proud that such a great king had noticed them and took an interest in their welfare. He remembered the names of even the junior commanders in his army and the menial functionaries in his court. He would remember their exploits long since forgotten by others and he would remember the names of their children, which would please them beyond measure. His generosity made most of his followers rich and he could inspire loyalty by a pleasant word or gesture. They admired his bravery, talked about his valour and tried to imitate him. They vied with one another to serve him and to gain his attention. To be noticed by him was joy and to be praised by him was ecstasy. Men did his bidding without thought of reward. They gladly marched to death to satisfy his slightest whim.

One of the results of this was that he never fought a war himself after his initial victories and after he had established himself as the master of the three worlds. Any minor challenges to his authority were dealt with by his chieftains and they would not let him go to a battle field on any account while they themselves could fight. The only time when there was a major challenge to his authority was when Indra did something that had displeased Ravana. But his young son, Meghanath, as full of pride as his father and just as brave, would not let his father go to war. Instead, he himself went, vanquished Indra and brought him back as a prisoner. Indra had to beg Ravana's pardon and pay a huge compensation before he was released. Ravana was very pleased with his son and conferred on him the title 'Indrajit – the conqueror of Indra. Meghanath was always known as *Indrajit* from then onwards.

This attitude of his followers – that he should not have to fight while they were alive – explains why in the war that followed, the entire youth of the Rakshasa army came to be killed. If he had fought in the war like other kings, by the side of his followers, the war would have stopped the moment the king was killed in battle. But as it was, his chieftains, his sons and nephews and other relations went one after the other and were all slain. He was the last to follow.

THE LONELY SOUL

To be the younger brother of a monarch is a somewhat difficult situation at the best of times. When you are all children, playing together, you are all equal. You are treated as equal by your teachers, by your parents. If anything, the youngest is the favourite, is petted and spoiled and is given preference over the eldest who is often reminded of his duties and responsibilities. But when once the eldest becomes king, the entire situation changes. He is the lord and master; everyone – however high- is his subject. His word is law. The younger

brother suddenly finds that one who was his friend and colleague until yesterday has been elevated and has to adjust himself to the new situation. Ministers, commanders of the army, priests and learned men are respected and given seats of honour in the court by virtue of their learning or valour or wisdom. For the same reason, they are consulted on matters of policy and given assignments involving daring, courage or diplomacy. They are rewarded for their good work or occasionally punished.

But where does the younger brother of the king fit into all this? His competence or courage is rarely tested. He is given a seat of honour because of his birth. He is consulted-if he is consulted at all-out of politeness. He receives grudging respect from the other courtiers. That respect is usually in proportion to the favour shown to him by the king. If the king should be annoyed with him for any reason whatever, the meanest of the courtiers ignores him or uses thinly veiled sarcasm. The king's sons-his own nephews -tend to belittle him because they know that they take precedence over him in the succession to the throne of their father.

But for all that, he is indispensable; for, a time might come when he has to succeed to the throne. If something should happen to the king and his family – in war or in some other calamity - it is comforting for the ministers and the chieftains to know that there is someone to succeed to the throne. So, the younger brother is maintained in the doubtful status of a junior princeling and then ignored for the most part-like the spare wheel of a chariot, to be used in case of an accident if it is used at all.

If this is the status of a normal younger brother, mine was even more difficult. Everyone knew that I was out of sympathy with the fun and frolics of the court and they resented what they considered my superior attitude. And Ravana was totally unpredictable. One day, he would praise me in court, calling me the wise one, saying that I was the favourite of the gods. At other times, he would say almost the same thing, but with a slight inflection in his voice. The courtiers, who were quick to recognize his moods from the tone he used, would laugh hilariously at what was considered the king's humour.

Or, he would ask, "Vibhishana, you are going to live for ever. But what are you going to do through eternity?"

"I hope to spend my time in studying the scriptures and in prayer, Sire," I would answer.

"Prayer, my dear chap, is not an end in itself," he would remark. It is only a means to end. If you want anything, you pray to achieve it, or, if you want salvation. But you have discarded power and glory, and you can never have salvation. Salvation comes only after death and you are deathless. So, what is the point of all your piety your piety and devotion?"

The courtiers would laugh and say, "You are right, Sire." I would keep silent.

“I am also a philosopher after all,” the king would claim and there would be more laughter.

“I may not live for ever like my younger brother,” the king would continue, “but my glory shall. I desire nothing more than victory over all and finally, a hero’s death on the battle field.”

“But there are no worthy opponents for you, Sire,” his courtiers would exclaim.

“Pity, there aren’t,” the king would respond.

Occasionally, he was introspective. “We Rakshasas are all sinners, Vibhishana,” he would say, “and we shall pay for it dearly one day. But you may yet be the saviour of the Rakshasa clan, for you are righteous in thought, word and deed. Even the gods respect you. But they only fear me.”

Whatever his mood, his courtiers responded appropriately. They praised him on every possible occasion, pandered to his tastes, vied with one another to do his bidding. They came to him with stories of how many hermits they had killed in the forests, how many sacrifices they had polluted and how many hermitages they had despoiled. He listened and rewarded them.

In this court of splendour, cruelty and lust, I was a misfit. I was a part of it as the king’s brother and yet, not of it. I attended the court when necessary, spoke when I was spoken to, participated in official ceremonials when required, and that was all. But I kept away from the orgies and the oppression that was practiced. I didn’t eat human or even cow’s meat; nor did I take any intoxicating liquor. Within the four walls of my own palace, I observed all the austerities as laid down by the Vedas and lived the life of a believer of the spirit rather than of the body. I was often teased by the other Rakshasas for my abstinence-particularly when they were drunk. Ravana was aware of this, but he neither stopped the testing nor did he prevent me from following my faith. All I could do was to avoid being present on occasions when I was likely to be a target of Rakshasa jokes.

But when the Rakshasas boasted about peaceful hermitages being burnt or innocent hermits being slaughtered, I was grieved at their wanton destruction of things sacred and spiritual. I would have liked to have been able to prevent such happenings or at least protest against such ungodly behaviour, but I was silent. What chance had I of making an effective protest?

What was my own attitude to Ravana in those days? This is important not only because of the accusation of jealousy that has been levelled against me, but to clear my own mind and search my heart to see if there is any truth in such an accusation.

I had always loved my brother and was proud of his achievements. Like others, I too was dazzled by his splendour and captivated by his charm. On those rare occasions when he

chose to discuss philosophic ideas with me in an introspective manner, I enjoyed my talks with him and marvelled at his knowledge. Naturally, I was irritated when his most preposterous statements were praised as gospel truth and repeated as words of wisdom, while my own conversation went unnoticed. I was often outraged and humiliated that my deepest sentiments should be ridiculed by him and his followers, while their crudities and childish pranks received approbation from all. When his courtiers boasted of their exploits against holy men, when they insulted the gods whom I received, and when they indulged in their orgies, I was sad. But I had neither the courage to protest, nor the desire to participate. And certainly, I did not consider getting away from that den of sin and lust as I probably should have done. Somehow, the idea never struck me. So, I was an unwilling and helpless witness to everything that Ravana and his minions did, feeling that one day, fate would overtake them. But is that the same as 'biding one's time' or feeling jealous?

Looking back on it all now, I realise that my action (or my acquiescence in my brother's actions) and my belief were contradictory. I should have made some attempt to reconcile them. That I did not do so for many years is an indication of the indecisive conflict that was going on within me.

There have other Rakshasas who had behaved like Ravana in the past. But they soon came to grief either because of the curses of some sage, or because a brave warrior was able to challenge them and kill them in battle. But the gift of invincibility that Brahma had conferred on Ravana meant that there was no one to challenge his authority or to check his wrong doings. So, he went on and on, unchallenged and undefeated. His followers as well as his enemies began to feel that there was going to be no end to his activities, when one day, our sister Surpanakha came, mutilated and bleeding, and put an end to it all.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

1

THE HUMILIATION

Ravana sat on his mighty throne in all his pride and splendour surrounded by his courtiers. He was attending to some minor matters of State when our sister Surpanakha rushed in wailing at the wrongs that had been done to her and demanding to be avenged.

She was a sight! She had been mutilated in the most humiliating manner. Her ears and nose had been cut off and she was still bleeding profusely. Her words became and she was still bleeding profusely. Her words became raucous and ununderstandable because of her nasal injury.

Ravana's eyes shone in anger. "Who has dared to do this to my sister?" he demanded.

"You spend your time in idle frivolities in your island home," Surpanakha cried, "and you do not know what is happening in the outside world. Two mere men who roam the forest have done this to me. They are brothers, known as Rama and Lakshmana, and they live in the forest of Dandakaranya. They call themselves princes of Ayodhya but are dressed like hermits. They carry bows and arrows and fight like great warriors. When they did this injury to me, dear brother, it was not my nose and ears alone that were lost, but your glory and honour were lost with them. Even the Devas will laugh at you now!"

"But did not our brothers, Khara and Dushana, come to your rescue with all their armies?" Ravana asked her.

"They did, my brother, they did," she replied. "But these two young men destroyed the Rakshasa armies and killed both Khara and Dushana."

We were dumb-founded at this news; No one had challenged the authority of Lanka in such a blatant fashion and succeeded. Khara and Dushana were no mean warriors. For years, they had been keeping guard in the forest of Dandakaranya so that the Rakshasas could roam at will and do what they liked. Ravana was thoughtful.

"What crime did you commit that they should have punished you in this manner?" he asked at last.

"Oh, my royal brother!" Surpanakha cried. "With those two hermit warriors was a woman who was beautiful as Lakshmi. She is known by the name of Sita. To say that her teeth were like pearls or that her lips were like coral would be to insult her. Lotus flowers blush with shame at the softness of her feet, peacocks go and hide themselves when they see her walk and the moon refuses to compete with the beauty of her face. She was not fit

to roam about the forest with those rustics. She was only fit to sit by your side as your queen. Then, the gods would have been jealous of you. I wanted to capture this enchanting woman and bring her to you as a gift. But when I attempted to do so, Lakshmana, the younger of the two brothers, mutilated me.”

We all expected Ravana to rise in anger and go to war himself against these two men, or at least send someone like his son Indrajit to go and punish them. But Surpanakha was a clever and scheming woman. She was thoroughly petted and spoiled by Ravana, particularly after he himself was responsible for her late husband’s death. Since she became a widow, she had had her own willful way, roaming the forest and having fun with all and sundry. Everyone did what she wanted because of the latitude the king had allowed her. I learnt afterwards about what had actually happened in the forest of Dandakaranya.

Surpanakha had evidently wanted to make Sri Rama her lover and she felt that Rama did not agree because of the presence of Sita. So, she attempted to kill Sita. But when she was punished for it, in order to hide her own guilt, she made it appear as if she had suffered in trying to serve Ravana. Knowing her brother’s weakness, she went on painting glowing pictures of Sita’s beauty until Ravana’s mind turned from a desire for revenge to thought of lust.

So, the expected reaction never came. There was no explosion of anger, no ordering out of the armies to kill the pigmy men who had humiliated him in such a deliberate and calculated manner. Instead, he retired to his private apartments to pine for the love of a woman he had never seen. Artists were summoned to paint portraits of Sita under Surpanakha’s directions and when they were brought to him, Surpanakha told him, “Sita is a thousand times more beautiful than all these pictures put together.” This only inflamed his desire still further and made him punish the artists.

“Why do you sit here and pine like a helpless and discarded lover?” Surpanakha taunted him. “Why don’t you go into the forest and capture her and make her your own? The only present that I ask for all my troubles is that when you defeat those men, do not kill them. Give me Rama to play with.”

From then on, Ravana started to plan the capture of Sita. The idea of revenge was only an excuse. His mind was blinded by passion and he was behaving like one who was under a power that was stronger than him. He went to Uncle Maricha who was highly skilled in the arts of deception, for advice.

But Maricha was a wise old man. He had once been chased by Sri Rama when he went to pollute sage Viswamitra’s ceremonies and his mother Tataka was slain by Rama on the same occasion. So, Maricha knew Rama’s prowess and valour. He therefore advised Ravana not to make an enemy of him. But Ravana was adamant.

“Maricha, for years you have lived in luxury and idleness at my expense,” Ravana taunted him. “But when I ask you to do something for me, you refuse and praise my enemies. I consider this disloyal. You know the punishment for disloyalty in my kingdom.”

“Ravana, you know me well,” said Maricha. “Please do not think I am advising you out of selfishness or out of fear for my own skin. I am advising you for your own good. I am old and I would rather die by the hand of divine Rama than be killed by a sinful Rakshasa like you. So, tell me what to do and I will do it”.

They plotted together, and Maricha became an enchanting golden deer wandering in the forest of Dandakaranya. Sita was attracted by it and longed to possess it. So Rama went to capture it, leaving Lakshmana to guard over Sita. But the deer eluded him and took him farther and farther into the forest. At last, Rama felt it was no ordinary deer and shot an arrow that never missed its mark. As the arrow struck his heart, Maricha became his true self and gave an agonizing cry in imitation of Rama’s voice: “Lakshmana! Lakshmana! Save me!” Rama knew then that a trick had been played on them and hurried back to where he had left Sita.

Sita and Lakshmana both heard the cry of Maricha. Sita thought that her husband was in danger and implored Lakshmana to go and save him. Lakshmana tried to convince her that Rama could come to no harm, but Sita was adamant. She accused Lakshmana of faithlessness towards his own brother. So Lakshmana left her with a heavy heart in search of his brother, after imploring her not to leave their hut. Sita was thus left alone.

It was then that Ravana went to her in the guise of a hermit asking for alms. He persuaded her to come out of the hut and carried her away to Lanka.

There is something very uncharacteristic in this episode. Ravana was often arrogant, boastful and cruel, but he had never resorted to such mean trickery before. Even in Rakshasa society, stealing another man’s wife in such a manner would not have been considered proper. In the past, he had always fought like a true warrior, according to the highest ethics of warfare. When he brought other women to Lanka, it was always by capture in a fair fight or as tribute to his victory. That he resorted to such deceit in this case is perhaps an indication of the state of his mind. It was also a sign of how much Surpanakha had succeeded in poisoning his thoughts. There was a rumour that she had been annoyed with Ravana for being the cause of her husband’s death and this was her way of getting her revenge. Whatever the reason, Ravana explained it all by saying that it was the only way he could avenge the humiliation his sister had suffered. But no one took this explanation seriously.

So he brought Sita to Lanka. Now that he had seen her and had her in his power, his passion for her seemed to increase. His thoughts and actions were motivated only by that passion. Nothing else seemed to matter. He cajoled, pleaded and threatened her in turn; but that pure and noble lady scorned him. He would have possessed her against her will, but

he was afraid of the curse on him which was that if he so much as laid a finger on an unwilling woman, he would die on the spot.

So she was imprisoned in the Asoka grove and guarded by a number of Rakshasis who were instructed to talk to her of his greatness and of the advantages of becoming his favourite wife. She was lonely and desperate and wanted to commit suicide, but was prevented from doing so by the thought that her husband would surely come and rescue her one day.

So far, I had been silent over the whole episode. I did not like what had happened and the turn events had taken. But there was very little I could do. When I saw Sita's misery and the way she was treated by the Rakshasis, I sent my daughter, Trijata, to keep her company and to offer her words of comfort. My wife, Saroma, also went and spoke kindly to Sita. Apart from offering her sympathy and consolation, I wanted her to know that all Rakshasas were not like my brother. I was rather surprised that Ravana did not object to this. In fact, he said, "Perhaps, Trijata will be able to change Sita's mind where the other Rakshasis have failed." I did not want to disillusion him.

2

THE STORY OF SRI RAMA

In spite of all the gaiety and frivolity that generally characterized life in Lanka, there was now an air of tension and uncertainty. Many of us had heard that Rama was no ordinary prince and that he was of divine origin. Piecing together various bits of information that had come to us from different sources, I was able to reconstruct Rama's past history.

It seemed that the Devas, annoyed and humiliated by Ravana's conquests and his ill-treatment of sages and hermits, went and implored Vishnu to do something about it. In response to their pleading, Vishnu was born as Sri Rama, the eldest son of Dasaratha, king of Ayodhya. He had three brothers, Lakshmana, Bharata and Satrughna. Before he was hardly out of his boyhood, he and his brother Lakshmana went with sage Viswamitra to stand guard over his prolonged sacrificial ceremonies. While doing so, Rama killed Tataka, a great and venerable Rakshasi who had been terrorizing the rishis, and chased her son Maricha who was glad to escape with his life. Viswamitra, after the completion of his ceremonies, took Rama and Lakshmana to Mithila. Janaka, king of Mithila and Sita's father, had made a vow to the effect that whosoever could bend and string Lord Shiva's bow, which he had in his possession, would marry Sita. Rama not bent and stringed the bow, but he was so strong that the bow broke in his arms. He married Sita and returned to Ayodhya. On his return journey, he humbled Parasurama, a great warrior who went about terrorizing all the Kshatriyas and snatched away from him his bow.

Dasaratha was now happy, but also old. He wanted to pass on his kingdom to his eldest son, Rama, and retire into the forest to meditate. But while he was making arrangements for the coronation, his youngest wife, Kaikeye, to whom he had long ago promised two things, demanded that those two promises should now be fulfilled. They were, first that Rama should be exiled into the forest for a period of fourteen years and second, that her own son Bharata should succeed his father as king of Ayodhya. In order to fulfil his father's promise, Rama with his wife went into the forest and his ever loyal brother Lakshmana followed him. His father died of a broken heart, and Bharata having failed to persuade his elder brother to return to Ayodhya would only rule as his brother's representative, placing Rama's sandals on the throne.

That is how Rama came into the forest of Dandakaranya where Surpanakha encountered him. But rumour had it that not only his birth but also his exile were all prearranged by the gods and deliberately made to appear accidental in order that he may meet Ravana and destroy him. Vishnu had to take human form, because neither Devas nor Rakshasas could destroy Ravana, according to the boon conferred on him by Brahma.

Ravana had all this information just as well as I had, but he paid no heed. He thought it was a story fabricated by the Devas to frighten him. But many others in Lanka knew the story also. They also knew that there could be no doubt about Rama's valour since he had killed brave warriors like Khara and Dushana and destroyed their armies single-handed. Such a man was not going to keep quiet when his wife had been carried away by means of a trick! He would surely come to rescue her. But when? How was he going to cross the sea between Bharat and Lanka? Will his undoubtedly great skill prove to be equal to that of Ravana? These were the questions that the knowledgeable people in Lanka asked themselves, though no one spoke about them.

Then, there was the question of Ravana's invincibility. Everyone had assumed that the boon of Brahma was proof against all and that Ravana was unconquerable. But I remembered Brahma's words carefully. "You will never be defeated either by the Rakshasas or Devas." It did not apply to mere mortals. If a man were to challenge him, Ravana was not immune. What will decide the issue was not Brahma's gift, but the courage and skill of the combatants. Not many people knew about this limitation to Ravana's boon and he himself did not think about it until the very end.

In this atmosphere of tension and expectancy, Ravana was gay and moody by turns. He would visit the Asoka grove, plead with Sita, threaten her with death and come back angry and frustrated. Then he would start drinking to forget his sorrow and plunge into an orgy that would last for days. But the gaiety was forced, not natural. It was as if that was the last opportunity to enjoy him. He himself sensed an air of expectancy-even of doom-that surrounded us all.

LANKA BURNS

It was when we were in this state of uncertainty that news was brought to us one day that a huge monkey—a *Vanara*—was destroying the Nectar grove and had killed the guards who had tried to prevent him. We were also told that he had seen in conversation with Sita before he started on his acts of destruction.

Ravana was incensed at this. “Kill the monkey,” he ordered, and sent some well-armed soldiers to undertake the task. But they were either killed or ran away in terror. One of the generals, a brave soldier of many campaigns, who volunteered to go and slay the monkey, was also killed. It was then that one of Ravana’s sons, Akshaya, boasted that he would surely capture the monkey and bring him in chains. But Akshaya, courageous as he was, was obviously no match for the monkey, and he too suffered the same fate as his predecessors.

Grief was now added to the anger that Ravana felt. Mortified by the loss of one of his beloved sons and wild at this blatant defiance to his authority inside his own city, he exclaimed that he would go and fight and kill the monkey himself. But his son, Indrajit, calmed him and went to capture the Vanara. He succeeded in doing so and the Vanara was brought on a huge cart to the presence of the king.

“Tell me, monkey,” Ravana shouted. “Who sent you to the land of the Rakshasas?”

The monkey laughed in the king’s face. Defeat at the hands of Indrajit did not seem to have cowed him or made him anxious.

“So, you are Ravana?” the Vanara laughed. “The last time I saw you, you were tied to Vali’s tail, wriggling like a worm.”

Ravana winced at this reminder of one of his defeats. “Tell me,” he asked. “How is my friend Vali? Are you his emissary?”

“Vali is dead, killed by a single arrow of my Lord, Sri Rama,” Hanuman announced. “I am a follower of king Sugriva, brother of Vali.”

“But why did Rama kill Vali?” Ravana asked, his curiosity thoroughly roused.

“Sri Rama and Lakshmana came to our mountain kingdom in search of Sita,” Hanuman related the story. “Our king Sugriva had some of Sita’s ornaments which she had thrown as you were carrying her away from Dandakaranya. Our king and Sri Rama became friends and Sri Rama promised to help our king regain his kingdom which Vali had usurped. So, Sri Rama killed Vali when Sugriva and he were fighting and put Sugriva on the throne of Kishkinda.”

“So, you, a Vanara, help a man who had killed, by stealth, the greatest Vanara king who ever lived. I admire your loyalty,” Ravana laughed.

“Vali was slain for usurping his brother’s kingdom,” Hanuman said in reply. “How can you hope to conquer the slayer of Vali?”

“Tell me truthfully why you have come here, or I shall kill you,” Ravana shouted.

“I am not afraid of your threats and I have no need to lie to you,” the Vanara laughed. “I am Hanuman, son of the Wind God, minister to king Sugriva and servant of Sri Rama. I allowed myself to be captured only in order to be able to see you. I came in search of his wife whom you captured through a piece of trickery and imprisoned her. You have ten thousand wives in your palace, and yet you have committed the sin of coveting another man’s wife. You are going to pay dearly for this sin. Sri Rama is going to kill you, and your entire clan is going to be wiped away by the Vanara army of Sugriva. I am here to give you this message.”

No one had ever spoken to Ravana in this vein before. His eyes blazed in anger and his whole body shook with fury. “Kill him! Cut him to pieces!” he shouted.

So far, I had been silent. From my seat at the head of the princes and nobles, I had watched the mounting drama of the day. But now I felt the time had come for me to speak.

“Sire,” I said, raising my voice amid the din and bustle. Silence fell on the assembly as I spoke. The Rakshasas stopped their preparations for doing away with the Vanara and looked at me. Hanuman too peered at me curiously. “This monkey has merely repeated what his master had instructed him to say. He cannot be punished for his master’s words. To kill women, to kill men who had retired from the battle-field and to kill a messenger, however vainglorious he might be, are against all rules of warfare. Therefore, I beg of you Sire, spare his life.”

“You are right as usual, wise Vibhishana,” Ravana replied, good-humouredly. His anger seemed to have disappeared. “A messenger should not be killed. But he must be punished for the destruction he has wrought in the Nectar grove and for killing our soldiers.” He turned to the soldiers who were guarding Hanuman. “Do not kill him. Set fire to his tail and chase him away from our kingdom.”

Rolls of cloth were brought and wound round Hanuman’s tail. But it seemed to go on extending endlessly. Then I remembered the words of the soldiers that Hanuman could make him enormous or minute at will. Jugs of oil were poured on the cloth. Hanuman watched these proceedings nonchalantly and without resistance, as if it did not concern him at all. He was carried outside the palace, his tail was set on fire and he was released.

Things happened so quickly after that it is difficult to describe them one after the other. Hanuman, instead of running away in pain and anguish, began to jump from roof to roof, from palace to palace, wagging his ever-extending tail and setting fire to every building in the city. The fire did not seem to hurt him in any way. At first, the Rakshasas tried to

chase him out of the city, but as the fire began to spread, the heat and Hanuman's antics made them give up the chase. There was commotion and chaos everywhere. The entire city was ablaze within a matter of minutes and the population ran out into the streets, screaming and shouting. The beautiful city, so carefully, designed, so lavishly built and so lovingly nurtured for years, became a heap of ruins in a very short space of time. Hanuman, surprisingly unharmed by the experience, escaped beyond the seas, to carry whatever message Sita had given him.

The ashes and the ruins were cleared by the orders of the king and the architect, Vishwakarma, was ordered to recreate the city in record time. But, for the first time in the history of Ravana's rule, a sense of apprehension began to spread in the Rakshasa army. It was realised that they were no longer invincible.

"If one monkey can create as much havoc as this, if he can defy our king and get away with it, how are we to face a whole army of Vanaras?, they whispered.

Hanuman's taunts and brave words, uttered in the presence of the king in open court, became general knowledge. Rama's valour and the possibility of his divine origin were also known to the commanders of the army. The most important fact of all that Ravana's invincibility was not against men and monkeys, somehow got round to the ministers and generals in the army.

But the surprising thing was that all this uncertainty about the future, the fear of possible defeat and death, did not create disaffection and disunity in the nation. On the other hand, it brought the king and his subjects closer together. There emerged a new unity and renewed determination. While the possibility of defeat was discussed privately, each and every one wanted to fight and die the death of heroes on the battle-field. Not one Rakshasa wanted to yield; no one wanted to surrender Sita and make peace. That is, no one except myself."We have had a glorious life; now we will face a glorious death, if necessary," they whispered.

So the city was rebuilt in record time; Hanuman's visit receded into the background and the gaieties and the orgies were resumed. But the spies sent out by Ravana brought information about Sri Rama's movements, about the mobilization of the Vanara army and its southward march.

4

THE COUNCIL OF WAR

One day, our mother Nikosha sent for me. "Listen, son," she said. "I believe Ravana has called for a meeting of the council of war tomorrow. Is that true?"

"Yes, mother", I replied.

She was old and her dull eyes were full of sorrow. Her frame was trembling. She spoke slowly and with difficulty.

“My eldest son will not come to see me and will not listen to an old woman’s advice,” she said. “He is arrogant, drunk with power and self-conceit. His past victories have blinded him to the reality of the situation. But you are wise and know the difference between right and wrong. You can see things calmly and dispassionately. You must go to the war council and advise him to return Sita and sue for peace.”

“You know he will not listen to me, mother,” I replied “He will not listen to anyone.”

“At this historic moment, there ought to be at least one Rakshasa who can raise his voice against injustice,” she cried. “You are that one man. You are the only hope for the Rakshasa clan. So, you must try, my son.”

So, I attended the meeting of the war council. Ravana came dressed in all his splendour, in clothes more suitable for the celebration of a victory than for planning the serious business of war. All the ministers, Kumbhakarna and Indrajit were there, beside me. After we had all seated ourselves, the king addressed us.

“As you are aware, since we ascended the throne of Lanka, no human, Deva or Rakshasa has dared to challenge our supremacy. They have all paid the tribute that is due to our power and prestige. But now, two mere men-expelled princelings from a small state – have dared to oppose our might and humiliate us. Our sister, Surpanakha, was mutilated on some flimsy excuse and when we avenged that wrong by carrying away Rama’s wife, a monkey was sent to destroy our fair city. Now we understand that they have gathered a vast army of Vanaras across the sea and are planning to invade our land.” He paused and then continued again when no one spoke.

“I have called this meeting,” he reverted to the singular, “in order to devise a plan of action to destroy the Vanara army and to kill the men who have dared to raise their arms against us. I have taken this matter lightly so far, but now it has become serious. We have been insulted and humiliated; our authority has been challenged; our city has been burnt; our soldiers and generals have been killed. And now, we are threatened with invasion. The perpetrators of these deeds must be destroyed. Their friends and followers must be taught a lesson – a lesson they will learn and never again question the suzerainty of Lanka over the whole world. It is for you to tell me how their destruction can be achieved.”

He had spoken well, presented his views in a persuasive and dignified manner and those present appreciated it. As was proper at a war council, it was the generals who spoke first. They, like their sovereign, were arrogant and boastful. “How can monkeys cross the ocean and invade us, Sire?” they asked. “They have no weapons and no armour. They have no elephants, chariots, or cavalry. They fight with rocks and stones and branches of trees. They are no match for the trained soldiers of our valiant army. The men who have dared to

challenge us have not the accumulated weapons that you have acquired as a result of penance. Even if they should succeed in crossing the ocean, we shall destroy them in no time.”

After the boastful harangues of the generals were over, Kumbhakarna, as the eldest of the king’s brothers, spoke. In spite of his laziness and long periods of sleep, every one respected him.

“Sire,” he asked, “When you picked this quarrel with the princes of Ayodhya, did you consult us? When Surpanakha came weeping with a bleeding nose and ears. Did you attempt to find out what really happened in the forest of Dandakaranya? Or, before you planned to carry away virtuous Sita, did you ask for our opinion? When you imprisoned her in the Asoka grove, did you realise the enormity of your crime? Did you? When Hanuman came here as messenger and beautiful Lanka was burnt, you did not ask us what should be done. And yet, you ask for our views now, when it is almost too late.” He looked round the assembly and everyone watched him intently. I was glad that at last, someone was speaking sense. But the words he uttered next deeply disappointed me.

“But the past is past,” Kumbhakarna continued. “It can never be retraced. To return Sita now would be a humiliation for the Rakshasa clan for all time to come. We will be dubbed by the whole world as cowards who can bully the weak, but quickly succumb to the strong. If we did that, future generations would laugh at us. I would rather die the death of a hero against a worthy opponent than live by his mercy.”

“Hear! Hear!” cried the generals.

“But do not underestimate the princes of Ayodhya or the Vanara army,” Kumbhakarna warned. “They are powerful. So, let us not allow them to land on our soil. Let us attack them before they are ready, on the other side of the oceans.”

“Well spoken, my brother,” cried Ravana as he got up and embraced Kumbhakarna.

It was now my turn to speak, but my nephew Indrajit forestalled me. He was always bold and impetuous.

“You, elders, are making a lot of fuss over a couple of men and a few monkeys,” he shouted. “You talk as if our empire was in danger! Give me permission, Sire; I shall go across the seas, destroy them all and return before the day is over.”

“Meghanad,” I cried. I deliberately used his real name and not his title to put him in his place. “In the company of elders, you should wait for your opinion to be asked before giving it.” That quietened him. Then I turned to Ravana.

“Sire! You are my king as well as my brother,” I said. “Therefore, I owe a double loyalty to you. My love for you is as great as that of anyone in this room, and my loyalty, no less.

But I beg you, Sire, please ponder over your actions-both past and future-calmly and dispassionately before coming to a decision. When you carried away Sita and imprisoned her against her will, you committed a grievous wrong. For this single act, we shall be condemned for all time. It is a blot on the Rakshasa nation. That blot can only be removed by restoring her to her lawful husband. To do this is not cowardice, as Kumbhakarna says, but merely the atonement for a sin.”

“Rubbish!” cried one of the generals, but I continued, ignoring his remark.

“We have all heard that Rama is no ordinary person. We know that even as a youth, he killed the famous Rakshasi Tataka. He not only stringed, but broke Shiva’s bow, before marrying Sita. He humbled the might of Parasurama. He has killed our brothers, Khara and Dushana, and slayed mighty Vali with a single arrow. After knowing all this, can we doubt his valour or his ability to conquer us? So, both on moral and on political grounds, I beg of you, Sire, restore Sita and make peace.”

I had spoken as humbly and as politely as I could so as not to offend him. When I had finished, the entire assembly waited, tense and expectant, for the king to speak.

“Poor Vibhishana!” the king laughed and the assembled gathering visibly relaxed. “Striking a moral pose as usual when there is no need! Nothing has happened to Sita except that she is in our custody. She has not lost her nose and ears like our sister Surpanakha. And as for your opinion about the might of our enemies, you must remember you have never been a soldier and are in no position to judge another man’s valour. As for the divine origin of Rama, if it were true, what was Vishnu doing when I defeated Indra? Why did he not come to his rescue then? When I took Kubera’s wealth, Vishnu did not come to protect him. No, Vibhishana, Rama is no more divine than you or I. Even if he were, I will not take a different stand. But I will tell you what,” and he looked round the assembly to see if they were all listening. “You need not fight this war. You will stay inside the palace with the womenfolk-doing your pujas and reading your books-while my commanders and I will deal with the enemy.”

There was suppressed laughter in the assembly at the remarks of the king. I was annoyed at the implication of cowardice in his words but I did not want to show my anger.

“But, Sire!” I remonstrated. “I am not speaking against war because I am afraid to fight. It is true I am not a great warrior, but I will not hesitate to fight for the sake of a righteous cause. But you are starting a war for upholding injustice and for the deliberate destruction of the Rakshasa race. To fight Rama is nothing short of suicide for every one of us here. You should know that your gift of invincibility does not hold well against men and Vanaras, it was a deliberate limitation imposed by Brahma in case of just such an emergency. Do you not realise the flaw in your gift? Do you not realise that Rama has come in human form to fulfil a divine purpose? How can you stand against him and defeat him?”

Perhaps I had spoken more vehemently than I intended. Ravana trembled with fury; his eyes blazed in anger and his lips trembled. "How dare you talk to me like that?" he shouted. "Do you think I rely on Brahma's gift for my victories? It is my strong right arm that I rely on, nothing else!" He rose from his seat and from his enormous height, kicked me in my chest. It was so unexpected that I rolled from my seat and fell down. Ravana drew his sword, but one of the generals - I think it was Prahastha - held him back, soothed him and let him back to his throne. As I got up, feeling hurt and ashamed, he shouted, "I did not ask for your advice on war and peace, but only on the strategy of war. Do not presume to advise your king on matters of which you know nothing!"

For a long time, no one spoke. I did not know what they expected from me after such humiliation; perhaps an apology. But I did not offer one. I had taken a step from which I could not go back.

"I am not sorry for this public insult," I said "My only grief is for the Rakshasa race that is all going to perish because of your mad lust for a virtuous woman. For many years, I have watched your cruelty and arrogance and your oppression of hermits and sages and have kept silent. But I can no longer remain so."

"I know, Vibhishana," Ravana Spoke. His anger seemed to have been spent. He spoke quietly. But there was bitterness in his voice. "I know your jealous heart. You have willingly accepted the luxury and the status I offered you but you have never relished my greatness. You have secretly grieved over my successes and rejoiced in my predicaments. My wealth and power have been a thorn in your flesh. You have been biding your time to succeed me to this throne. Now, the time has come. Yes, you have the heart of a traitor." His words became harsh and he hissed at me. "A traitor, but also a brother; therefore, I do not wish to kill you. Leave me immediately. Go and join the men for whom you have so much affection!"

"I will leave you". I said. "But I leave you and Lanka with a heavy heart. Today, your heart is blinded by passion, but when you lie on the battle-field, bleeding and at death's door, you will remember everything I have said today." I turned to the assembly. "Listen, my friends, if you think I am right and if you wish to live, then follow me."

"Go! Go!" shouted the king.

As I rose to go, I was surprised that four of the younger ministers got up and accompanied me.

I said good-bye to my mother and to my wife, Saroma. "My dear," I told my wife, "I have been banished from the kingdom. Please look after Sita and see that she doesn't come to any harm." She agreed. Then, accompanied by the four ministers, I left Lanka.

CHAPTER FOUR

MONARCH IN EXILE

1

THE SURRENDER

With deep anguish in our hearts, I and my four ministers crossed the ocean. Apart from the sorrow of leaving our home and parting from our near and dear ones, many questions and doubts assailed my heart. What were we to do now? Where were we to go?

If I were to go to Rama, my brother's accusation that I was a traitor would be confirmed in the minds of present and future generations. Ignorant people would say, "greed for his brother's throne made Vibhishana desert his king and country is a moment of danger." On the other hand, if were to go to him after the death of Ravana, how could I expect him to have any trust in me? I would appear a selfish coward who was afraid to take sides until I knew which side was going to win. But, if I were to go to Rama now, what guarantee was there that I would be accepted and welcomed? I was the brother of his enemy. I had been a silent and unprotesting witness to all my brother's cruelties. I had never raised my voice when Sita was first imprisoned. Only when there was an inevitability of war did I make my protest and leave my brother. So, how could I expect to be believed and trusted?

After a considerable amount of heart-searching and prayer, we came to the conclusion that there was no alternative for us but to surrender ourselves at the feet of Sri Rama and let him decide our fate. Though we had left our kingdom and quarrelled with our king because of him, we could not go as allies in a common cause, for we had no arms to speak of and no great competence in warfare. We could only go as refugees who had been banished because we dared to support what we considered a righteous cause. We decided to throw ourselves on Rama's generosity.

Having come to that conclusion, my companions and I landed on the seashore, near the beach where the Vanara army was camping. Soon, we were surrounded by aggressive Vanara soldiers. Knowing us to be Rakshasas from our faces and figures, they thought we were Ravana's spies and started shouting, "Kill them! Kill them!"

But I shouted above the din, "I am Vibhishana and I have come to seek refuge at Rama's feet."

Someone must have carried my plea to Rama while the Vanara soldiers held us captives for king Sugriva was sent to investigate and to take us to Rama. When we reached Rama's presence, I fell at his feet.

‘Sire! I am Vibhishana, brother of Ravana. I have come to take refuge at your feet because I can no longer tolerate his vile doings,’ I said.

“Is this one of Ravana’s schemes to deceive me?” Sri Rama enquired.

“No, Sire. I came because he would not listen to my advice to restore chaste Sita to you and beg your pardon,” I said. “I left him because I could no longer live in that den of sin and vice. I have no other motive except to serve you,”

“Before accepting you, let me hear what my advisers have to say,” said Rama and called for a meeting of his council. He asked for their opinion of what should be done about me.

I could not but compare the simple dignity and majesty of Sri Rama with the splendour and bombast of Ravana and his ministers. Sitting inside a hastily prepared hut on the shores of the ocean, they discussed my fate.

King Sugriva was the first to give his opinion. “Sire, this Rakshasa says he has come to serve us. But how do we know that he is speaking the truth? What proof can he give us of his honest intentions? Even assuming that he speaks the truth, it is evident that he has deserted his brother. He has left his kith and kin in a moment of emergency and has come to join us. How can we trust such a man? A person who has let down his blood brother in a moment of danger may let us down also in a moment of similar danger, or if it happens to suit his interests.”

Lakshmana, Angada, and Jambuvan – they all spoke echoing the words of Sugriva. They thought it might be another of Ravana’s tricks based on Rakshasa magic. I thought my fate was sealed.

“Hanuman, you are silent. What do you think?”, Rama asked the only Vanara who had visited Lanka.

‘Wise men have spoken before me, Sire,’ said Hanuman. “I am therefore a little reluctant. Vibhishana evidently knows how you gave up your kingdom for your brother and went into exile. He is aware of how you killed Vali and restored Sugriva to the throne of Kishkinda. He has learnt about the fate of his brothers, Khara and Dushana, who fell victims to your arrows. Therefore he understands your goodness as well as your greatness. He knows he is safe under your protection. I think that is why he has come to you.

“When I was in Lanka, I visited every nook and corner, every palace and every tower and battlement in order to find out about its defences. Every house, from the richest to the poorest, was full of flesh of all kinds and wine to intoxicate the mind. There were orgies and cruelties of all sorts. Vibhishana’s was the only mansion where I did not see such sights. Instead, I found a prayer hall with images of various gods. There were fresh flowers at the feet of the idols indicating daily performance of Puja and meditation. And in the Asoka

grove, it was Trijata – Vibhishana’s daughter - who offered words of comfort to Sita and was her constant companion. And finally, when I was in the presence of Ravana, bound hand and foot, and Ravana wanted to kill me, it was Vibhishana who pleaded for me and saved my life. All these indicate Sire, that we cannot doubt the sincerity of Vibhishana in coming to us.

“At the same time, Vibhishana will be useful to us in our war against Ravana. He knows the thinking and the strategy of the enemy. He is familiar with Rakshasa magic and will be able to guide us in aiming our weapons. Further, if the other Rakshasas know that we have given him asylum, perhaps some others will come to our side as well. Taking all these factors into account, I humbly suggest that we may accept him, Sire.”

Everyone was silent after Hanuman had spoken. I shed tears of joy as he uttered those wonderful words. As last Sri Rama spoke.

“Friends, the highest ethics of Dharma indicate that we cannot refuse sanctuary to a person who had unconditionally surrendered himself to us. Even if Ravana himself were to come to me in abject surrender and throw himself at my mercy, I am bound to accept him. The moment we break that rule we cannot claim that we are fighting to establish righteousness on earth. But when your interests happen to coincide with the rule of Dharma, then it is not only wrong but foolish to refuse.”

Then, he turned to me. “Vibhishana, I accept you not only as a refugee from Rakshasa oppression, but as an ally and a brother. From now on, you will be a trusted comrade in arms, a respected counsellor and a noble friend.”

Sri Rama turned to the others, and said: “And I hope you will all accept him as such.” Thought it was a request I knew it had greater force than a command. “Lakshmana, please make arrangements for Vibhishana’s coronation. The world must be informed of our determination, not only to destroy Ravana, but to put Vibhishana on the throne of Lanka.”

As Lakshmana went off to make preparations, the Vanara chieftains gathered round me. Whatever reservations they might have had in the beginning in accepting me as a friend and ally seemed to have been forgotten. They asked me a hundred questions about Lanka, about Ravana and about the Rakshasas. While I had hoped for acceptance of my surrender and for sanctuary, I had not dreamed of such an enthusiastic reception. I was anointed with holy water from the Southern ocean, taken in procession round the camp of the Vanara army and crowned king of Lanka. Perhaps, I was the first “Monarch in exile” in the history of this world.

A LESSON IN LEADERSHIP

After my coronation, Sri Rama sent for me. He was in council. He wanted to know from me the strength of the Rakshasa army – in terms of numbers and in terms of the arms they possessed. They enquired about the defences of Lanka and the individual skill and valour of the different commanders and warriors as well as their weaknesses. I gave them all the information they needed, told them about the mighty and the laziness of Kumbhakarna and the archery and magical powers of Indrajit. Hanuman, who had been in Lanka and had fought Indrajit and seen Kumbhakarna snoring, was able to confirm the information I had given. I told them about the gift of invincibility that Ravana had obtained, but how it would not apply where men and Vanaras were concerned. While I was questioned minutely about the various details, I realised that I was not telling them anything new, but merely confirming the information they already had.

The question of crossing the ocean was discussed next. It was discovered that Nala, one of the minor Vanara commanders, was an architect who knew the art of bridge building. He had not come forward with an offer, out of sheer modesty. He was, therefore, asked to design and build the bridge and the entire army was pressed into service for gathering and transporting the enormous quantity of materials necessary for such an undertaking.

Again, I could not but be impressed by the quiet dignity and nobility of Sri Rama. Lakshmana was somewhat short tempered and hasty in his judgements. But the kindness and consideration that Rama showed to the meanest of his followers and the interest he took in their well-being was in refreshing contrast to the proud boasts and unpredictable tantrums of Ravana. Two incidents that happened during the building of the bridge illustrate what I am trying to convey.

Though Nala was only a junior commander in the Vanara army, as far as building the bridge was concerned, everyone had to take instruction from him. All materials were brought to him and he used them in the most appropriate manner possible. Once, when Hanuman brought some materials, Nala received them absent-mindedly in his left hand-an act of rudeness, particularly towards one who was his superior. Hanuman was angry at this discourteous act and was about to throw a huge rock at Nala when Rama interfered.

“Hanuman!” he soothed him. “Don’t you know that every skilled craftsman receives materials with his left hand and uses them with his right? This is the only way by which he can use both his hands and the work can progress fast. It is a sign of efficiency and not a sign of rudeness. You should not look for insults where none is intended.”

Hanuman was soothed and the work went on without interruption.

On another occasion, an army of squirrels plunged into the sea, then rolled on the sand, went on the bridge under construction and shook themselves dry. Hanuman who saw this became furious, picked up the squirrels and flung them away. But Rama told him, "Don't you see, Hanuman, in their own way, these little animals are helping our cause. They bring the sand in their wet bodies and drop it on the bridge to help the work. You, with your size and strength, can bring rocks and even mountains. But they, with their little bodies can only bring sand. You should not treat with contempt the efforts of others, however insignificant they might be. You should not hurt them with your superior strength."

After that incident, the squirrels had an honoured place in bridge building.

Such little incidents confirmed in my own mind all the good and noble things I had heard about Sri Rama. How lucky I was, I told myself, to have left the sinful and violent atmosphere of Lanka and come to breathe the free air of Rama's environment.

3

ACROSS THE BLACK WATERS

The construction of the bridge proceeded smoothly and successfully. Nala had been given one month in which to complete the work and he was keeping well within his time. There was a forest of trees near the sea shore. These were cut down; the logs were tied together and made into rafts. Rocks and stones were brought to cover them all. The sand brought by the squirrels and others was used to cover the holes and crevices. It made the bridge to walk over.

The news of the building of the bridge had evidently spread far and wide. Other people came to help or just to watch the construction. As the bridge was nearing completion and the Vanaras supplying materials were nearing the shores of Lanka, they could see the Rakshasas on the other side, sullen and morose. We all felt that Ravana would make some attempts either to prevent the constructions of the bridge, or to destroy it as it was nearing completion. But nothing like that happened. Evidently, Kumbhakarna's advice about attacking the Vanara army before it crossed the ocean was not taken. The Rakshasas merely eyed us curiously, while the Vanaras danced in joy as they worked.

At last, the bridge was completed. I accompanied Sri Rama and others to view it. It was a glorious sight! It hung on the ocean like a garland. After looking at it with satisfaction for some time, Rama sent for Nala. He placed both his hands on his shoulders and said, 'Nala, you have done a wonderful job. But I have nothing now with which I can reward you. After Sita is rescued and I return to Ayodhya, I shall load you with riches. Meanwhile, you have my blessings in full measure.'

"Your blessings are more than any riches you can offer me, Sire," Nala replied happily.

At Sri Rama's request, Nala had also constructed a temple for Lord Shiva. Rama offered worship there and then we began to cross the bridge. Rama went ahead accompanied by Lakshmana. Sugriva and I followed. Hanuman, Angada and Jambuvan followed us. The vast army of Vanara soldiers marched behind us singing, laughing and shouting 'Victory to Rama'.

As we were crossing the bridge, a Rakshasa known as 'Fiery Eyes' came over to oppose our progress. I knew his skill at raising fire. It was evident that Ravana's objective was to burn the bridge while we were crossing it so that the entire army would perish in the sea. I therefore advised Rama to fix mirrors to his bow and shoot mirrors at the Rakshasa before he reached the bridge. The heat that was directed by 'Fiery Eyes' at the bridge was reflected back on to the Rakshasa himself by the mirrors shot by Rama and he was burnt by the heat that he had generated.

The vast army landed safely in Lanka.

4

THE TRUSTED ALLY

I had been accepted as a friend and ally by Sri Rama, Sugriva and others. I was invited to attend the meetings of the council. Plans and strategies were discussed in my presence freely and openly. Everyone treated me with kindness, consideration and respect. But still, I could not help wondering how much they trusted me and what confidence they had in my honesty, integrity and the high ideals I had placed before myself when I left my brother Ravana. Did some of them still think of me as a clever spy sent perhaps to trap the Vanara army? Or, did they consider me as a traitor to his king and country who had gone over to them in an attempt to gain a kingdom? Or, did they think of me as a person who had struggled between his country and his conscience and had finally decided to follow the latter? In the situation in which I was placed, it was inevitable that such doubts should arise in my heart and I should be worried about them.

Therefore, I decided to prove my sincerity by helping Sri Rama and his cause to the best of my knowledge and ability. Giving them all the information I possessed about Ravana's army was a result of that decision. When 'Fiery Eyes' was destroyed as result of my suggestion about mirrors, I felt I was establishing greater confidence in the minds of the Vanara army. The third incident that helped me to prove my honesty was my discovery of the presence of Ravana's spies in our midst.

As I was walking round the camp of the Vanara army, I came across two Vanaras moving about in a somewhat suspicious manner. Being a Rakshasa myself, it was no difficult matter for me to detect that they were Rakshasas disguised as Vanaras. I captured them and

wanted to kill them on the spot, but Sugriva decided to take them to the presence of Rama himself. Rama, with his usual kindness of heart not only released them, but gave them some presents.

But after these incidents, I felt that my loyalty was accepted without question by all.

5

'GIVE UP SITA OR GIVE UP LIFE'

Facing the city of Lanka was a lofty mountain. On the first evening, Sri Rama and I, accompanied by Sugriva and others climbed to its top so that we could have a good view of Lanka. I pointed out the various important buildings, palaces and other land-marks. Tall buildings that reached to the clouds and exquisite mansions glittered in the evening light. Their majesty and grace were a tribute to the wealth and power of Ravana. It was a glorious sight and Rama confessed that he had never seen such a beautiful city. "Why is wicked Ravana king of such a wonderful city?" he asked.

King Sugriva as the leader of the Vanara army was responsible for preparing the siege of Lanka. A vast cluster of huts had been constructed along the shores of the ocean as living quarters for the entire army as well as the leaders. A separate group of Vanaras were specially detailed for procuring food and other essential materials needed for fighting the war. The army was divided into four groups, to guard each of the gates to the city. Neela was the general commanding the army at the eastern gate. Angada was placed in charge of the army at the southern gate. The western gate, which was the most important since Rama and Lakshmana were there, was under the command of Hanuman. And Sugriva himself was in charge of the northern gate. Sentries were also posted at the entrance to the bridge, to prevent reinforcements coming to Ravana and also to stop any Vanaras from escaping. I myself was in charge of looking out for any Rakshasa spies and advising the leaders on the methods of Rakshasa fighting and magic.

In spite of our presence on Lanka soil, Ravana made no attempt to attack us. So, Sri Rama called a meeting of the council to consider the next move. It was decided to send another messenger to Ravana in order to find out his intentions before actually commencing the attack. Lakshmana was of the view that we should attack without any further parleys, but Rama, as always, counselled patience. "Let no one say we did not give him a chance to mend his ways," he said.

The messenger chosen was Angada, because, as wise Jambuvan told us: "Hanuman has already been to Lanka. If he were to go again, Ravana might think we have no other brave warriors on our side. Further, Angada, as the son of Vali, can talk to Ravana on equal terms."

So Angada was chosen. Sugriva gave the message that he was to deliver. "Tell Ravana to return Sita and ask for mercy at the feet of Sri Rama. If not, ask him to fight and face the total destruction of his race."

I too gave my message. "Tell my brother to remember his misdeeds. When I spoke for his welfare, he kicked me in open court. Tell him he shall pay for it with his life unless he makes amends."

But Angada was soon back. When Ravana found out that he was the son of Vali, he told him that it was wrong of him to help and serve the man who had killed his father and that he should join Ravana who was a friend of his father and well-wisher of Angada. But Angada told him he was being foolish. He reasoned with Ravana at first to return Sita. When reasoning failed, he abused him soundly and finally snatched away his crowns and returned.

"He will not listen to reason, my Lord," he told Sri Rama. "I told him to give up Sita or to give up his life on the battle-field. He prefers to destroy himself and his race."

"We have no alternative now but to fight," Rama informed us. "Let us prepare for war and rid this world of the Rakshasa menace for ever."

With those prophetic words of Sri Rama, war might be said to have been declared.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE GREAT STRUGGLE – I

1

NOT WITHOUT PITY

It is not my intention to write a detailed account of the war in all its violence, cruelty and bloodshed. There is no pleasure for me in recapitulating the merciless slaughter of my own kith and kin day after day; for once war was declared, Rama showed no mercy and I learnt to understand another side of his character. The destruction of the Rakshasa race was his mission and he carried it out with calculated thoroughness. There were of course pathetic, tragic and even tender moments in the war, but these were not allowed to influence the ultimate result.

It is impossible for me to write about these tragic events without grief and without pity, but if I were to do so, some will say I am hypocritical. On the other hand, I cannot write as if I was participating in a war against an enemy whom I hated and whom I could have destroyed without any qualms. I am therefore describing only those sections of the war in which I myself had some part. I will be as brief as possible in linking these to form a coherent whole.

Of course, I did not do any actual fighting. I had never been a warrior and my personal contribution in actual warfare would not have amounted to anything. Further, it was quite likely that some of the Rakshasa chiefs might have wanted to kill or at least maim me in order to gain favour with Ravana. Therefore, Rama instructed me not to expose myself to unnecessary danger. On the other hand, my knowledge of Rakshasa magic and strategy enabled me to give useful suggestions on the methods we ourselves had to adopt in some critical battles of the war. The weapons by which the various Rakshasa chiefs were likely to fall were known to me and I passed in this information to Rama and Lakshmana at the appropriate time. I venture to think that this was one of the factors that effectively turned the war in our favour and ultimately enabled us to win.

2

THE NOOSE OF SNAKES

The first major battle was started by Indrajit. He came out of the gates of Lanka with a huge army and a bitter battle was fought between the Vanaras and the Rakshasas in which many people died. It was interesting to watch the methods of fighting adopted by the two sides. The Rakshasas had a lot of conventional weapons such as bows and arrows, swords, maces and clubs which they used with skill acquired as a result of long years of training. The

Vanaras, on the other hand, used only stones and rocks, branches of trees, and occasionally they would wrestle. One would have expected the trained Rakshasa soldiers to gain the better of the Vanaras in no time. But the Vanaras were so quick in their movements, so agile in avoiding the Rakshasa thrusts and so accurate in aiming their own missiles that they often got the better of their enemies. The chariots used by the Rakshasas were often unwieldy and their armour cumbersome so that the Vanaras could aim their missiles and disappear before the Rakshasas could string their bows. Often, when one Vanara was fighting a Rakshasa, another would climb on to the enemy's chariot without his knowledge and kill him or at least injure him. The Rakshasas found that the Vanara methods of fighting were most irritating and they were not able to put their skills to the best possible use.

Indrajit's immediate objective was to kill or capture Angada who had humiliated Ravana by snatching away his crowns. Though he did not succeed in doing so, he wrought great havoc in the Vanara army. Because of his magical powers, he was able to aim flaming arrows with great accuracy while he himself was invisible behind clouds of smoke. Rama and Lakshmana could not aim their arrows because their enemy was invisible. It was at this time, when Rama and Lakshmana were somewhat confused, that Indrajit aimed his 'noose of snakes.' It was a magic dart that multiplied itself into numerous serpents. These serpents, with flaming tongues lashed themselves round Rama and Lakshmana. Their hands and feet and throat were tightly entwined and they lay helpless on the battle-field.

The Vanara army wailed while Indrajit returned to report to his father of his success. Sugriva, Angada and other Vanara chiefs were in tears and wondering what to do.

I was not aware of all this as I was in a different part of the battle-field, but knew something was wrong when I heard the cries of the Vanara army. I hurried back and knelt before the prostrate form of Sri Rama. "How am I to live without you, my Lord?" I cried. "Of what use is kingdom and glory when is dead?"

"I am sorry I let you down, Vibhishana," Rama spoke slowly. "I promised you your kingdom and I have not fulfilled my promise although you left everything for my sake." He apologized to Angada for having killed Vali and thanked Sugriva for his help and friendship. He gave messages to be conveyed to Ayodhya. Then, he spoke no more.

As the wind blew over his calm and serene face, Rama, though he seemed unconscious, remembered Garuda, the divine kite and the killer of snakes. Rama's thoughts must have been conveyed to that bird, for soon it came. The serpents loosened their coils and slithered away in fear of Garuda. Within a short time Rama and Lakshmana were well. How we all rejoiced!

After this incident in which we were nearly defeated, I decided to stay by the side of Rama or Lakshmana during the fighting so that I could explain to them the intricacies of Rakshasa magic and deceit. They could then take appropriate counter-measures.

The news of the release of Rama and Lakshmana from the noose of snakes must have cast a gloom over Lanka. A series of chieftains appeared one after another and they were all killed by the Vanara army.

3

THE REPRIEVE

It was then that Ravana decided to face the enemy himself. The next day, he marched into the battle-field with a huge army. He was in a golden chariot made by Brahma and resplendent in shining armour. His ten heads bore crowns studded with precious stones. His chariot was full of weapons, lances, clubs, swords, as well as bows and arrows of various sorts acquired through penance and strategy. His grandeur dazzled and chilled the Vanara army.

At first Sugriva, then Hanuman and then General Neela fought Ravana, but none could master him. It was then that Lakshmana stood in his path and challenged him.

They both fought well. But their arrows, while creating havoc in the opposing armies, could not touch each other. Lakshmana, his anger thoroughly roused, sent an arrow that broke Ravana's bow in two. Immediately, Ravana picked up another and in that short instant, he found that Lakshmana had killed all the eight horses of his chariot as well as his charioteer. Ravana realised that Lakshmana could not be beaten in archery. So, he threw a magic spear which could not be destroyed by arrows. It hit Lakshmana with such force that he fell down unconscious.

To have carried Lakshmana away into Lanka would have been a great victory for Ravana. But he found that he could not lift Lakshmana off the ground. Meanwhile, Hanuman came and carried the body of the young hero to Rama where he soon recovered.

Ravana was still on the battle-field in another chariot, challenging all and sundry and killing Vanara soldiers indiscriminately. Rama decided to meet him; but since he had no chariot at his command and to fight from the ground would put him at a disadvantage, he rode on the shoulders of Hanuman.

This was the first meeting between Rama and Ravana. What a contrast they were in appearance as well as in temperament! It was a contrast between simplicity and pride, between austerity and splendour, between right and wrong. Remembering how Hanuman had killed one of his sons in the Nectar grove, Ravana aimed his sharpest arrows at Hanuman. But his darts were destroyed by Rama. One of the celestial weapons aimed by Rama hit Ravana in the chest and he was knocked out.

Rama could easily have killed him then, but he stopped aiming his arrows when he saw that Ravana had fainted and waited for him to recover. When Ravana recovered consciousness, Rama told him, "My arrows have made you faint. It is against my ethics of warfare to kill an enemy who had fallen unconscious on the battle-field. Therefore, I will not kill you today. But I shall relentlessly destroy you root and branch and shall place Vibhishana on the throne of Lanka." With these words, he shot a half-moon arrow which knocked down all the ten crowns of Ravana. And the great Ravana, conqueror of the three worlds, left the battle-field, ashamed and crest-fallen.

4

A LESSON IN LOYALTY

I wondered whom Ravana would send next and was surprised to see the mighty form of Kumbhakarna emerging from the gates of Lanka-surprised because Kumbhakarna slept for six months at a time and I knew he had been asleep for less than three months. According to Brahma's prophecy, the day when he was awakened untimely would be the day of his death.

I loved Kumbhakarna deeply, for in spite of his enormous appetite and indulgence in wine and women, he was a good Rakshasa and a good brother. If he had come to fight, it was only because of family loyalty and patriotism and not because he thought he considered Ravana was right in what he had done. Knowing that Brahma's prediction would come true, I was deeply grieved that he should come to such an untimely end.

When Rama asked who he was, I explained all this to him and requested that I may be permitted to meet him and persuade him to come to our side. I wanted to make one last attempt at bringing about peace, for if Kumbhakarna were to come over, then perhaps, Ravana might reconsider his attitude. At least, I wanted to save Kumbhakarna from a premature end, if possible. Rama agreed with me and asked me to speak to him. So I walked alone, unguarded and unarmed, across the bloody battle-field strewn with corpses, to meet my brother.

When Kumbhakarna saw me, he threw away his weapons, jumped down from his chariot and ran across to meet me.

"Vibhishana! Vibhishana!" he cried as he embraced me. "Why have you left the sanctuary of Sri Rama and come to me? Have you too gone mad, dear brother, like the rest of the Rakshasa race? I had hoped that there would be at least one virtuous Rakshasa left alive to expatiate for all our sins. At least, you could perform our funeral rites, if nothing else. Please go back to Sri Rama and live, brother".

“Kumbhakarna,” I wept. “Sri Rama has crowned me king of Lanka. But I place that crown at your feet, dear brother. You are the elder and you should succeed Ravana, not I.” I prostrated before him and touched his feet. “Please take this burden of kingship away from me. And do not waste your might in an unjust cause. Come with me and ask forgiveness of Sri Rama.”

“What! Succeed to the throne of my brother!” Kumbhakarna laughed. “Become king and sleep on the throne for six months at a time! No, my dear Vibhishana, I do not want to make myself more ridiculous than I am already.”

“Should the entire Rakshasa race be sacrificed because of the sins of one Rakshasa?”, I asked.

“Poor Vibhishana!” Kumbhakarna hugged me again. “To you, virtue is the only thing that matters. To me, loyalty to my king and race, and honour as a warrior come before everything else. To return Sita would be dishonour for the entire Rakshasa race. For me, death is preferable to such an ignominious surrender. I would rather go down in history as a brave warrior killed in battle by a worthy enemy than as one who lived at the mercy of his conquerors. I cannot change my nature any more than you can change yours.”

“But don’t you realise, you are sacrificing yourself needlessly.” I pleaded with him again. “You know that Ravana’s cause is lost. And don’t you realise how much I love you?”

“Yes, we have always been fond of each other,” Kumbhakarna spoke almost to himself. “But we have always been different in our attitude to life. After all, Vibhishana, life is transient; you are here today and gone tomorrow. It is not so important that I should attempt to preserve it at the cost of my honour.”

“So, this is the end,” I cried.

“This is not the end, Vibhishana,” Kumbhakarna laughed again. “Death is not the end. Killed by the worthy Sri Rama, I shall go to heaven. And my fame shall shine untarnished as a great warrior as long as Rama’s name shall live. After all, many warriors have fought for their causes and won or lost. But not many warriors have fought and died, knowing their cause to be lost. No, this is not the end.”

“For me, there is no end,” I wept, “for I am deathless. For me, there is nothing but an eternity of struggle.”

“I wonder which of us is the luckier, brother,” asked Kumbhakarna. “For, my struggle will be over shortly, while yours will go on. No wonder you take life so seriously.” He laughed again. He was so cheerful at the prospect of approaching death.

“If that is your final decision, good bye, dear brother,” I cried.

“Good bye, Vibhishana.” For the first time I saw tears in Kumbhakarna’s eyes. “Do not give up your righteous attitude, whatever the temptation. That is the only thing that will sustain you. And tell Sri Rama that I shall destroy as much of his army as possible before I die. I shall pay my debt to Ravana in full measure.”

With tears streaming down my face, I walked back to our lines as both sides got ready for battle.

Kumbhakarna was terrible in the way he fought. It was almost as if he thought people would say that he had not paid his debt to Ravana unless he did maximum damage to the enemy. With a spear and a mace, he felled thousands of Vanaras. Great heroes like Angada and Neela were knocked unconscious. Even Hanuman writhed in agony under his blows. He hit Sugriva with an iron rod, picked him up and marched back to Lanka. But as he was getting inside the gates, Sugriva regained consciousness, bit Kumbhakarna’s ears and nose, jumped off his shoulders and came back to us.

Kumbhakarna roared in shame and agony at the pain Sugriva had caused him. He returned to the battle-field swearing vengeance on all. When Lakshmana went to oppose him, he shouted, “Where is your brother hiding? Why doesn’t he come out and fight?”

So, Rama went out to fight Kumbhakarna. My brother threw challenges at him. “Do not think of me as one of the other Rakshasas you have killed so far. I am mighty Kumbhakarna. You have come all the way from the kingdom of Ayodhya to find your grave on the shores of Lanka.”

Stung by Rama’s sharp and piercing arrows, he rushed at Rama with his mace, but the Vanara chieftains barred his path. But they could not hold him. So Rama sent a special arrow-the weapon of Brahma-which cut off Kumbhakarna’s right hand. Undaunted, Kumbhakarna rushed at him with a spear in his left hand. Rama cut off that hand as well. Finally, another special arrow cut off his head. Hanuman picked it up and threw it into the ocean as Kumbhakarna had requested before his death. I shed tears of sorrow for a fond brother and a mighty warrior of the Rakshasa race.

Kumbhakarna was universally loved. His heart was whole. He was not torn by a conflict of duties or a clash of loyalties. Our spies informed us that the whole of Lanka mourned his loss and Ravana himself was prostrate with grief.

Having lost his brother, Ravana now sent his sons into battle. They marched into the battle-field in all their magnificence and pride, with shining jewels and golden armour. They

hurled abuses at the Vanaras and shot their arrows into the ranks of the Vanara army. The Vanaras threw rocks and stones at them with unerring accuracy. Five of Ravana's sons were killed, one by one.

Only Atikaya, the bravest of them all remained. He was a great warrior who was equally at home on an elephant, a horse or a chariot. He created terror among the Vanaras and drove straight to where Rama was standing.

"Listen, Uncle!" he addressed me. "You have been righteous and good. Tell me, if I die in this battle, will I go to heaven? Will the Lord look kindly on me?"

"You seem to be virtuous," Rama spoke to him. "If you wish to live, I can make over the kingdom to you and to Vibhishana, after I have slain Ravana."

"I do not want a kingdom," Atikaya shouted back. "What I want is glorious death. Tell me, whom am I to fight?"

Just then, Lakshmana came and challenged him. "What fight this hermit? Haven't you any one better?" Atikaya jeered. "He seems very young."

"Escape from my arrows if you can," Lakshmana shouted and aimed his fiery darts at him. But they proved powerless against his impenetrable armour. At last, I advised Lakshmana to use his Brahma weapon to kill him. Knowing him to be a brave warrior, a virtuous Rakshasa and a loyal son, I wondered to myself, "How many of the brave and good Rakshasas have to die before there is an end to this carnage?"

It was then that Indrajit, the bravest and the most talented of Ravana's sons, came into the battle-field for a second time. Knowing his skill in magic, I had already warned Rama and Lakshmana about him. My warning proved to be correct. He must have performed some special ritual and acquired special tricks, for even with my knowledge; it was not possible for me to find out what he was up to. He came into the battle-field without our knowledge and rained fiery arrows from all directions. He shouted challenges, but his words came from one corner of the sky while his arrows came from another. He went from one end of the battle-field to another, from one gate of Lanka to the next, mercilessly slaughtering the Vanara army. Sugriva, Angada and Jambuvan were all lying wounded and writhing in agony. In all this confusion, Rama and Lakshmana were completely paralysed without knowing what to do and I was unable to help them. They aimed their arrows in the direction from which Indrajit's darts were coming, but of course, he was not there.

At last, when the Vanara army was more or less completely annihilated, Indrajit shot two flaming half-moon arrows that knocked Rama and Lakshmana to the ground, mortally wounded.

In misery and loneliness, I surveyed the battle-field. There was desolation everywhere; the entire Vanara army had been killed or maimed and Vanaras lay in pools of blood,

groaning in pain and bemoaning their fate. Stones and trees used by the Vanaras were scattered everywhere and the burnt out arrows of Indrajit, their magic potency lost, were sticking out of Vanara carcasses. Vultures and other birds of prey hovered over the whole field, waiting to feast on the dead. Those who were uninjured had fled in terror of Indrajit's weapons and they were nowhere to be seen. None of the commanders could be found for they had all been killed or wounded.

On the day Kumbhakarna was killed, though I grieved over his passing, I could not help a feeling of elation, for victory seemed very near. My hopes for establishing righteousness in Lanka, my plans for reforming the Rakshasa race and bringing them back to the fold of humanity, my aspirations to go down in history as a wise and far-sighted ruler who won the hearts of his subjects through love and compassion—all these were about to fructify. How long ago was that? Hardly two days. Within this short space of time, such a tragic change had taken place over the whole situation. My friends and allies, people whom I loved and respected, in whom I had pinned my faith and for whom I had given up everything, lay dead on the battle-field and my hopes were shattered. The shore of Lanka was a graveyard of my friends as well as my hopes and aspirations. Such was the futility of war and its fortunes.

In the ghastly silence of the battle-fields, gay sounds of music and celebrations floated from behind the turrets and battlements of Lanka, adding an ironic touch to my grief. Yes, there was desolation on the battle-field, and in the minds of all virtuous men everywhere.

In all this savage butchery of Indrajit, I myself was unharmed. None of my nephew's weapons had touched me, possibly because of Brahma's gift of deathlessness. If that were so, then, Hanuman should also be alive, for he too was deathless. So, I searched for him. He was slowly recovering his senses from the blow he had received from Indrajit.

Dusk had fallen. Together, torch in hand, Hanuman and I went slowly round, bending over the bodies of the dead and the dying. Sugriva lay in the dust, surrounded by his soldiers. Angada's body was covered with arrows; Neela lay dead, clutching a huge tree in his hands. At last we came to Jambuvan, the wisest and the oldest of the Vanaras. He was barely conscious.

"Jambuvan, my friend," I spoke to him. "All our friends, including Sri Rama and Lakshmana lie dead or dying on the battle-field. What are we to do? How are we to bring them back to life? You are the wise one. You must advise us."

"Send Hanuman to the Sanjeevi mountain," Jambuvan whispered. He was barely able to speak. "There, you will find four kinds of plants having four types of medicinal properties. You will recognize them easily because they shine in the dark. They have wonderful powers of all kinds and they will restore the dead to life. But they must be brought here before the night is over."

While Hanuman departed to bring the wonderful, life-giving plants, I kept vigil over the silent battle-field; I could hear the noise of revelry coming from inside the city. I could well imagine the orgies that were going on, almost hear Ravana's boastful words as he praised his wonderful son. I earnestly hoped those boasts would be temporary. I waited and prayed that Hanuman's mission might be successful and our friends might be restored to life before the long, dark, night was over.

It was still dark when Hanuman returned to Lanka with the medicinal plants. It seemed that each of the plants had a property of its own, to heal the wounds, to mend broken bones, to join limbs that were severed and lastly, to restore the dead to life. We went round the battle-field administering the medicines and reviving people. The wounded were healed; the maimed were mended; the dead were brought to life. They all woke up and shook themselves, as if they had got up from a deep sleep.

Everyone thanked Hanuman most profusely. He was embarrassed at the compliments and the words of praise, Sri Rama embraced him warmly. "How can I repay you, my friend," he said tenderly. "What riches can compensate for your help? I will for ever be in your debt."

As dawn broke over the eastern shore of Lanka, the joyous shouts of the Vanaras drowned the victory celebrations of Ravana and Indrajit.

The spies and watchers on the towers and turrets must have reported to Ravana what had happened, for the noise of the celebrations soon died down, followed by a deathly silence inside. We wondered who would come out to do battle next, but none appeared. And then it was discovered that all the gates of Lanka were barred and bolted from the inside. They were not opened for five days. Ravana had become a prisoner inside his own fort.

CHAPTER SIX

THE GREAT STRUGGLE - 2

1

THE SECOND BURNING

So far, the war had progressed more or less evenly, with neither side gaining an advantage over the other. True, Ravana had lost brave warriors like Kumbhakarna and Atikaya, but we also had come to near disaster by the wiles of Indrajit. However, the possession of the Sanjeevi herbs and the bringing back to life of the entire army was a major turning point in the war. From then on, Ravana was at a disadvantage. More than anything else, there was fear in the hearts of many Rakshasas that Rama was unbeatable. If the dead could be brought back to life, it was greater than anything that the Rakshasa magic could produce. The locking of the gates of Lanka was a clear indication of this defeatist attitude.

When the hostilities were resumed, the Rakshasas no doubt fought valiantly. But they were not fighting to win the war. They were fighting to win glory for themselves, to die the death of heroes; they were moving inexorably towards their destiny.

When the gates of Lanka remained closed for five days and no more came out to fight, Sri Rama held a council to consider what should be done.

“Lord, we must somehow make the Rakshasas come out and fight,” Jambuvan said. “Otherwise, we cannot defeat them. Let us send some monkeys inside the city and let them set fire to every house in Lanka. That will force them to open the gates.”

So, a large number of agile Vanaras were sent inside the city. They easily climbed over the walls and turrets and battlements of Lanka. They killed the guards who were manning them and terrorized the population. They raided the store rooms and brought out all the oil, butter and cloth that had been stored there. With these, they made torches and set fire to the city. From the shores of Lanka, we could see smoke and fire rising above the towers of the city walls. Men, women and children screamed and ran for shelter, but there was no shelter since almost every building had caught fire. So, they had to open the gates and rush out to the seashore where the Vanaras were waiting for them with torches. Lanka was burnt for a second within a space of few months.

Ravana had no other option but to renew the war.

THE LOYAL NEPHEWS

In fighting this war, Ravana was going through his kith and kin as thoroughly as if he were planning their destruction himself in a pre-arranged manner. Having lost his brother and all his sons –except Indrajit who was probably kept back with some ulterior motive-he now sent his nephews.

Kumbha and Nikumbha, sons of Kumbhakarna, were the first to appear. They were bold and powerful, but they found their weapons were powerless against the valour of the Vanara chieftains. The Vanara army fought with a new confidence. Enraged by the fall of all their commanders, Kumbha fought with frenzy and knocked Angada and other Vanara chieftains unconscious, but king Sugriva seized him and dashed him to the ground, smashing his skull. Nikumbha, seeing the death of his brother, rushed forward towards Sugriva with his mace, but Hanuman intercepted him. Nikumbha made him faint with a tremendous blow on his chest and tried to carry him into Lanka, but Hanuman regained consciousness and tore off Nikumbha' head.

Mokarakhya, son of our youngest brother Khara, was the next to come out of the gates of Lanka. He was a cleaver and wily fighter. He knew he could not win in a fair fight and had to resort to some stratagem to outwit the enemy. Knowing that Rama and the Vanaras considered cows and bulls as sacred and would not hurt them, he sent away his horses and elephants and instead, marched into the battles field surrounded by thousands of cattle. His chariot was drawn by bullocks and was covered with cattle-skin. He wore cattle-skin armour. He and his Rakshasa army advanced behind a vast screen of cattle.

Rama faced them, but did not know what to do. To kill a cow was a grave sin and he could not get at the Rakshasas without harming the cattle at the same time. The Rakshasas aimed their arrows using the cattle as a very effective shield. The Vanara chieftains threw away their rocks and stones and fled in despair. At last, having slain thousands of Vanaras, Mokarakhya approached Rama.

Rama too was afraid to defend himself at first, lest his arrows hit any of the cattle. But he remembered in time the weapon of wind. This created a terrific gale and drove the cattle away from the battle-field. After a terrific struggle with bows and arrows of different types, Rama sent the fire weapon which burnt Mokarakhya to ashes.

THE LIMITS OF SUFFERING

The next morning, a warrior came out of the gates of Lanka with a vast army. The flag on his chariot had the name of Rama inscribed on it. So, I knew it was Taruni.

He brushed aside the Vanaras who opposed him. "I want to fight Rama," he shouted and marched on, easily disposing of the rocks that the Vanaras threw at him.

"There seems to be no end to the guile practiced by the Rakshasas," said the Vanaras to each other as they fled from his arrows. "Yesterday, a fellow came surrounded by cattle and this fellow had the name of Rama inscribed all over his chariot." Though thousands of Rakshasas were killed by the Vanaras, Taruni succeeded in knocking down Sugriva, Hanuman and Angada. He came to where Rama and I were standing, watching the progress of the battle.

"Who is this warrior?" Rama asked me.

"He is another of Ravana's nephews, Sire," I replied.

Taruni got down from his chariot and saluted us.

"If he is fighting for the other side, why does he salute us?" Rama asked. "And why does he have my name on his flag?"

"Because he is devoted to you, my Lord," I replied. "He is virtuous, god-fearing and valiant."

I considered for a while. "You have to kill him, because, in spite of his devotion to you, he is fighting for the Rakshasa cause."

"I don't understand, Vibhishana," said Rama, perplexed. "If he is virtuous why does he fight for Ravana?"

"He is a soldier, Sire", I replied. "It is the duty of a soldier to fight and die for his king and he is merely carrying out his duty. But he knows that death by your hands would mean eternal salvation for him."

"All Rakshasas desire the victory of Ravana," Lakshmana exclaimed.

"But don't you know, Lakshmana that the desire of my devotees is never for worldly gain?" Rama asked his brother.

As Rama said this, Taruni came forward and challenged Lakshmana. They fought a great battle. Both were highly skilled in archery and the arrows sent by one were skillfully destroyed by the other. Lakshmana's serpent dart was destroyed by Taruni's Garuda dart.

The fog dart of Lakshmana created a darkness which was dispelled by Taruni's light dart. At last, Taruni rushed at Lakshmana and hit him mightily with an iron club. Lakshmana fainted and Hanuman picked him up and left the battle-field.

Taruni came to Rama with folded hands. "Dear Lord, you are the God of all gods, the saviour of the world, friend of the friendless and the unfortunate. I was born as a vile Rakshasa. Release me from this body with your own hands so that I may go to heaven."

"How can I fight such a true and loyal devotee of mine, Vibhishana?" Rama asked me. "I cannot kill him and Sita shall remain unrescued." Rama sat silent. I too was silent.

Taruni felt that Rama had to be goaded to fight. "Are you afraid to fight, Rama, after having seen your brother defeated?" Taruni shouted. "Your skill is but a myth. Defend yourself now." And Taruni twanged his bow string.

Rama fought Taruni then. But Taruni matched every weapon in Rama's armoury. Unable to bear it any longer, I pleaded with Rama. "Use the Brahma weapon, Sire. That is the only weapon that will kill this Rakshasa." So Rama aimed that powerful weapon and Taruni fell with the words 'Sri Rama' on his lips.

I rushed forward and clasped dead Taruni to my heart and shed tears.

"Why do you weep, Vibhishana?" Rama enquired.

"Sire, dear Taruni was my beloved son," I lamented.

"Why did you not tell me before?" Rama demanded. "I would not have fought with him if I had known." And Sri Rama too shed tears for my lost son.

"Your heart is hard, Vibhishana," said Rama after a while. "It was you who asked me to use the Brahma weapon. And now you weep. Tears are futile now. Cast aside your grief."

Yes, tears were futile now. But was my heart really hard, as Rama had said? It bled for my son and for the tragedy of it all. Yet, from the moment I decided to follow my conscience and not my king, I knew this was inevitable. Taruni was brought up to be loyal and god-fearing. He was gallant and honourable. He combined in himself all the virtues of the Rakshasa race as well as those of other men. He was able to satisfy his conscience as well as his loyalties, while I, his father, in trying to follow my conscience, had lost my dear son. Of what use were tears now?

But of one thing, I was certain. Whatever happened now could not make things any worse. I had reached the limits of suffering. To follow one's conscience to its logical conclusion was an expensive luxury and I had paid the full price. Nothing more could be demanded of me.

Rama came and spoke to me again. "Do not grieve, Vibhishana," he said kindly. "Death is the corollary of life; the wise learn to bear it philosophically."

"Death is not the corollary of life, Sire," I cried. "Unfortunately for me, I am deathless."

"But as long as you live, you will always have my love," Rama consoled me.

"You have freed my son from his Rakshasa body and he has gone to heaven," I said. "But my lord, I have no such release to look forward to. I have to beat endless sufferings in this world for ever and ever. That is why I weep."

"For those who pursue an ideal, Vibhishana, there is no end and no peace," said Rama. "Come, let us go and rest."

4

A LESSON IN CHIVALRY

Virabahu was the son of Ravana by a celestial maiden named Chitrangada. He normally lived with his mother in her own land, but hearing his father was fighting a great war, he came to help him. Virabahu, like Taruni, was a great devotee of Vishnu and a virtuous Rakshasa, but loyalty to his king and father made him fight for a lost and unrighteous cause. He was blessed by Brahma and presented with an elephant. Virabahu's life was closely linked with that of the divine elephant. If the elephant could be killed, then Virabahu's weapons would become powerless and he himself could be destroyed without any trouble. When Virabahu came into the battle-field, I mentioned this fact to Rama, to be used when necessary.

Virabahu fought valiantly and matched his arrows with those of Rama. When he hurled boastful challenges at Rama, Lakshmana was incensed and shot powerful weapons at him. In a great rage at having been interrupted in his fight with Rama, Virabahu shot eight arrows at Lakshmana, and Lakshmana fell with blood spurting from his mouth. Virabahu rushed at him with a murderous axe intending to kill him, but Rama shot three arrows, destroyed the axe and saved Lakshmana.

Virabahu turned to Rama with contempt. "You call yourself an incarnation of Vishnu, whom I worship. Yet you do not follow the elementary rules of warfare. According to the ethics of war, when there is a combat between two warriors, a third should not interfere. I flung my axe at Lakshmana and you destroyed it. Do you call this chivalry?" Rama had to bow his head in shame.

The combat with Rama was resumed. Virabahu aimed a fire weapon at Rama which Rama destroyed with a water weapon. The combat was so fierce that at one stage, Rama

fainted and the bow dropped from his hands. Immediately, I picked up the bow and shot arrows at Virabahu.

“Well done, uncle!” he cried when he saw it was I who was wielding a bow. “You are the bravest and best of the Rakshasa race, since you are the only one who has had the courage of your convictions. I salute you.”

I was happy at the young man’s sense of chivalry for he stopped aiming his arrows at me. It was also gratifying that he had so much regard and respect for me.

“It is a thousand pities that we have to fight on opposite sides,” I said, “considering you are a devotee of Vishnu.”

“Uncle! I respect you, I worship you, but I cannot follow you,” he shouted. ‘I am not like you.”

Rama soon recovered and the combat started again. After another fierce struggle, Rama had at last to use the Vishnu weapon to destroy him.

After the battle was over, Rama asked me. “How many more warriors are there like him in Lanka?”

“There are none left, Sire,” I replied, “except Indrajit and, of course, Ravana himself.” But I asked myself, “How many virtuous Rakshasas have we killed in an attempt to eliminate Ravana? Who will be left in Lanka for me to rule?”

THE DEATH OF THE CROWN PRINCE

Yes, the magic of Indrajit had still to be beaten, and it was soon evident that he was busy again.

Hanuman and Jambuvan came one day with tears in their eyes saying that Indrajit had come to the western gate with Sita and had murdered her in the presence of thousands of Vanaras. They were powerless to do anything about it because he was beyond their reach. Rama fainted on hearing this news. When he revived, he was prostrate with grief and lamentations. “How can I live without her?” he cried. “One can survive the loss of one’s parents or even children. But how can one overcome the loss of one’s dear wife? Giving up my crown and wandering into the forest, crossing the ocean to fight Ravana, all these have been wasted efforts. This war has now become meaningless. Of what use is life now?” Lakshmana’s efforts to comfort him were of no use.

I suspected that this must have been some deception on the part of Indrajit. Cruel and merciless though he was, he would never kill a virtuous woman who had done him no harm in cold blood. It would be a blot on Rakshasa valour and chivalry for all time to come.

“Sire,” I said to Sri Rama. “Vile as Indrajit is, I cannot imagine him killing Sita. It will achieve nothing and it will bring everlasting shame on Lanka and the entire Rakshasa race. I think there is some deceit here. Let us send Hanuman to the Asoka grove to find out if Sita is still there or not.”

This was agreed to and Hanuman was despatched into Lanka. He was soon back and we were all relieved to hear that Sita was alive and well. Indrajit had evidently ‘murdered’ an imitation Sita who everyone thought was the real Sita herself.

After this incident, it became imperative that Indrajit should be destroyed. He had a boon from Brahma that if he completed a magic ritual before commencing battle, none could vanquish him. On the other hand, if the ritual was interrupted, then, that would be the day of his death. I had found out through my own spies that Indrajit had gone to perform his magic ritual and it was vital that it should not be completed. I knew where the ritual would be performed. Ravana and I were the only people who knew of the secret place set apart for that purpose. So, I went to Rama with all this information.

“Sire, it is essential that Indrajit should be stopped from completing this ritual,” I pleaded. “Please send Lakshmana and a picked army of Vanaras with me. The wicked son of Ravana shall be destroyed with their help.”

Rama was at first hesitant, but in the end he agreed when I pointed out that Ravana and Indrajit, both could not be killed by the same person and the task must be divided between the two brothers. Rama placed Lakshmana under my care and asked him to obey me in all respects. I was happy at the confidence that Rama had reposed in me.

With Lakshmana and a specially selected army of Vanaras under Hanuman’s command, we proceeded to Lanka. We broke open one of the gates to the city and killed the sentries. They were so surprised at this sudden attack that those who were not killed were confused and fled. We proceeded quickly to the quiet and lonely spot where Indrajit was engaged in performing his ritual. It was no problem for me to find the place since I knew every nook and corner of Lanka.

As soon as we got there, Hanuman jumped on the altar and stamped out the flames that Indrajit had lit for offering his sacrifice. The flowers and fruits and other materials kept there for the ritual were picked up and scattered by the Vanaras. Indrajit, who was in deep meditation - almost in a trance- with eyes closed, was disturbed by all this. When he opened his eyes, he was surprised and shocked beyond measure. He saw me there and knew at once that it was I who had led the Vanaras to this secret place, about which no one knew. Then, he addressed me.

“Uncle! You and I are born of the same race,” he shouted with tears and anger in his eyes. “You are said to be virtuous, and yet you have chosen to betray your kith and kin to the enemies of our race. You have helped to destroy so many great warriors who were a credit to our clan, and now, you have shown the way to kill me. You deserve to die!”

So saying, he aimed his arrows at me, but Lakshmana was able to destroy them all. He also managed to destroy Indrajit’s chariot and horses and was able to pierce his armour. Indrajit was at a great disadvantage now. His ritual had been interrupted and he knew that according to Brahma’s prophecy, he would surely be killed. Fear seized him and he disappeared. However, he returned with a new suit of armour and a new chariot and the battle commenced again.

I realised that if Indrajit escaped again, he might outlive the day and thus escape Brahma’s curse. It would be difficult to catch him again. So, I instructed the Vanaras to surround the place completely so that there was no way of escape. In order to prevent him from rising into the clouds through his magic, Hanuman was above on the trees. I myself stood at the gate of the enclosure to prevent Indrajit from using it. He had to fight it out now.

Finding himself out-manoeuvred, Indrajit rose to the skies where Hanuman caught him and pushed him back to the earth again. Indrajit now resorted to every trick he knew. He created sudden darkness and Lakshmana had to fight in the dark for some time. Then he created blinding light in the hope that our eyes would be blinded. At last at my suggestion, Lakshmana used the Brahma weapon which severed Indrajit’s head. It rolled in the dust with its shining helmet and diamond earrings still glistening.

The Vanaras danced in joy at the death of Indrajit. We returned to tend the wounds that Lakshmana had all over his body to receive Sri Rama’s blessings.

TIES OF BLOOD

Ravana was left alone now. His chieftains and his near and dear ones had come to fight on his behalf, one after another, and had all lost their lives. The procession of Rakshasa valour had almost come to an end. The fall of Indrajit must have been the greatest of Ravana’s misfortunes since Indrajit was not only the bravest and greatest of Rakshasa warriors but he was also the crown prince who was to succeed Ravana when the time came. He was also his father’s favourite son. So, grief-stricken and angry, Ravana came to the battle-field and drove straight to where Rama, Lakshmana and I were standing.

Rama went forward to fight him. After a long exchange of sharp arrows on either side, one of Ravana’s arrows hit Rama and he was temporarily unconscious. But Lakshmana went

forward to distract Ravana's attention and aimed his arrows so that Ravana's chariot was destroyed and his charioteer killed. When Ravana saw me standing by Lakshmana's side and advising him, he became furious.

"You, betrayer of the Rakshasa race!", he shouted at me. "I shall kill you today and no one will be able to save you!" So saying, he hurled a magic spear at me. When Lakshmana found that his arrows were powerless against that spear, he said, "Vibhishana, my brother gave you sanctuary and it is our duty to protect you, whatever the cost. I myself shall receive the spear in my chest since I am unable to destroy it." Ignoring my protests and lamentations, he went forward and stood between me and the spear which penetrated his chest and he fell down seriously wounded.

Rama, who had recovered from his fainting, now started to fight Ravana. But having killed Lakshmana—as he thought – Ravana was eager to escape. Rama too was anxious about Lakshmana's condition and allowed Ravana to leave the battle-field.

Lakshmana was still breathing. According to Sushena, our physician, some special herbs had to be brought before morning, to revive Lakshmana. Hanuman was despatched for this purpose. Ravana's guards, who had seen Hanuman leave the shores of Lanka, reported it to their master who did his best to prevent Hanuman from finding the herbs and returning before morning. But his efforts were of no avail and we were able to receive the herbs and cure Lakshmana of his serious wound.

On that fateful day, I learnt what true friendship meant. These men, strangers to me until quite recently, were willing to give their life for me, in order to keep their promise of protection. On the other hand, my own brother had wanted to kill me. But could I blame Ravana for his feelings? Had I not done the same thing myself? True, I had not wielded a weapon in my hands, nor shot an arrow that killed a Rakshasa, but I too had planned and schemed the death of my own kith and kin as ruthlessly as Ravana when he threw the magic spear at me. What mattered ultimately was not blood relationship or affection based on blood, which becomes a matter of habit after a time. What mattered was the trust and confidence in each other, based on a common ideology, common feelings of right and wrong and a willingness to suffer for each other. In spite of all the sorrows and the mental struggles I had undergone, I was glad I had found such true friendship. I could now understand why so many Rakshasas, knowing Ravana to be wrong, still gave their lives on his behalf.

And yet, when I saw Indrajit's powerful body lying in the dust with its head severed, there was a lump in my throat and it was with difficulty that I restrained myself from hugging it and shedding tears over it. Thought he was a Rakshasa who personified everything I hated, I could not control my emotions. How was one to explain this? Ties of blood were one thing; the pulls of conscience were another. One who is torn apart between these two has no peace of mind.

THE NETHER-WORLD

When Ravana did not come to fight again, I was anxious. Why was he silent? What tricks was he up to? I wanted to find out for myself. So, after getting Sri Rama's permission, I went into Lanka in disguise.

I was surprised to see Ravana making plans with his son from the nether-world, Mahiravana. Mahiravana was a son of Ravana by a maiden from the under-world. He was highly skilled in sorcery and witchcraft and even greater than Indrajit in that respect. I knew that his presence in Lanka boded ill for us. I returned in a hurry and reported to Rama and the Vanara Chieftains what I had seen. We made plans to keep vigil for the night. Hanuman was to be at the gate to the entrance to the ring of the Vanara Camp. I myself was to patrol the camp because I could recognise Mahiravana better than anyone else. I had instructed Hanuman not to let anyone into the camp. "Even if your father comes, do not let him in until I have checked him," I told Hanuman.

Mahiravana was clever. He first came as Dasaratha and wanted to see his sons Rama and Lakshmana. When Hanuman asked him to wait, he disappeared and then returned as Bharata and then again as Janaka, Sita's father. When Hanuman reported these visits, I told him not to let anyone in. Finally, Mahiravana came as Vibhishana and thinking it was myself, Hanuman let him in. When I came on my rounds again, Hanuman said, "I just saw you going in. How did you come out?"

"Hanuman! What have you done?" I cried. "Did I not instruct you not to let anyone in?"

"But you did not tell me not to let you in?" Hanuman replied. "Perhaps, you are the impostor. How do I know?"

But I was soon able to prove my identity. Together we searched the entire camp. The false Vibhishana was nowhere to be seen. And Rama and Lakshmana were missing.

I discussed our problem with all the Vanara chieftains. We came to the conclusion that Hanuman should be sent to search for Rama and Lakshmana in the three worlds. But knowing that Mahiravana came from the nether-world, Hanuman disguised himself and went there first. Listening to the conversation of the Rakshasas there, Hanuman knew where Rama and Lakshmana were imprisoned. Making himself very small, Hanuman was able to reach the prison chamber. They were still asleep, not knowing that they had been captured and transported in the night. When they woke up, they were surprised to find themselves under the power of Mahiravana and without any of their weapons.

Hanuman comforted them. He had found out that the Rakshasas had planned to take Rama and Lakshmana to the temple of goddess Durga and sacrifice them there.

“Sire, when Mahiravana takes you to the temple of Durga,” Hanuman told Rama, “he will ask you to bow low before the goddess. Please tell him you do not know how to bow and ask him to show you. When he does, I shall be standing behind the image of the goddess and I shall sever his head with the sacrificial sword.”

So, at the appointed time, Mahiravana took Rama and Lakshmana to the temple of Durga. The bells began to ring; conches were blown and drums were beaten. The Rakshasa dedicated the sacrificial sword. Then he ordered the captives to bow low before the goddess.

“We do not know how to bow. Can you show us?” Rama asked.

As Mahiravana bent low before the image, Hanuman sprang forward, picked up the sacrificial sword, and cut Mahiravana in two. In the confusion and panic that followed, Rama and Lakshmana were able to escape with Hanuman.

The last of the followers of Ravana was thus disposed off and he now stood absolutely alone.

8

THE INEVITABLE END

When I had gone into Lanka in disguise, I witnessed the great destruction that the Vanaras had wrought there when they set fire to the city. I could hear the wails and cries of women in thousands of homes. Maimed and crippled Rakshasas went about in the streets, looking forlorn and miserable. It grieved me to see this once beautiful city that was my home—a city devoted solely to pleasure – in such straits. But I consoled myself with the thought that the Rakshasas were paying the price for their sins. The death of Mahiravana must have added its own quota of grief to all the previous miseries.

The Rakshasas were bitter at the destruction that had been caused. Their great heroes had marched into the battle-field, one after another, never to return. Now, Ravana was the only one left, to avenge all those defeats and to restore Rakshasa honour. The Rakshasas were like the magic figures of Indrajit, being propelled by a force stronger than themselves and moving helplessly towards a pre-ordained destiny. Ravana himself was no exception to this.

Since the war started, there has been a subtle change in its character. It was no longer a question of the humiliation of Surpanakha or even the imprisonment of Sita. Larger and more universal issues seemed to have taken the place of the individual grievances, important though they were. It had now become a conflict between two ways of life, between two ideologies, between the glorification of the body and the idealization of the

spirit. This aspect of the conflict was realised by all. Consequently, the Devas and the mortals were watching the progress of the war with mingled anxiety and expectation. This last battle would decide the future of the world for many ages to come.

It was in this atmosphere of gloom and fatalism that the final battle between Rama and Ravana began. It was a fitting climax to the greatest war that the world had ever known. Ravana had a great sense of history. He realised the importance of the occasion and he dressed accordingly. He put on white armour which shone in contrast against his dark skin. The ten shining helmets he wore on his ten heads had a brilliant precious stone set in each of them. He also wore a number of other ornaments that added to the majesty of his appearance. His golden chariot, hung with silken flags, glittered in the sunlight. The chariot was full of every type of weapon that Ravana possessed. The grandeur of his personality was further enhanced by a large army of Rakshasas in black armour mounted on horses and carrying spears and lances. The entire army that remained had turned out for this last and final effort.

The simplicity and the quiet dignity of Rama was in sharp contrast to the magnificence of Ravana. He was, as usual, dressed in the robes of a hermit, but he wore armour to protect himself from Ravana's arrows. Indra, the king of the Devas, had sent his personal chariot for the occasion and Rama accepted it. Ravana was furious when he saw that his old enemy, who had been hiding from him, was now helping his new enemy. "After this battle is over, I shall deal with Indra," he shouted.

They were well matched and they fought like giants. Arrows flew from their bows with the speed of lightning and were destroyed as quickly. When Ravana aimed his serpent dart, Rama destroyed it with the Garuda dart. Ravana threw a magic club that burst into flames as it approached, but Rama made it useless with an invincible spear. Ravana was enraged that his most powerful weapons should prove ineffective and wondered what to do. In that single moment of hesitation, one of Rama's arrows struck him and made him unconscious. His charioteer quickly turned the chariot round and left the battle-field.

But Ravana was soon back and the battle commenced again. Countless weapons were used by both. Clubs and spears and lances were thrown at each other besides flaming arrows from their bows. The battle raged for seven days. The Rakshasas and the Vanaras were so absorbed in this great battle between their leaders that they gave up fighting themselves and watched the progress of the combat from a safe distance.

At one point in the battle, Ravana suddenly put down his bow and chanted a hymn of praise to Rama. "Oh, worshipful Lord! You are great and good and merciful. I have done many wrong things. Forgive my sins, I beg you." On hearing this, Rama cast aside his bow and said: "How can I kill a person who asks for my forgiveness?"

But immediately, Ravana became violent again and shouted. "I am going to kill you today!" and the fighting started all over again. This abrupt change of moods is perhaps an

indication of Ravana's state of indecision in that crucial battle he was waging. Rama shot Shiva's dart at Ravana. It hit him on the chest and he trembled in pain and flung a mighty spear at Rama. He too was hurt by it. But Rama shot a thousand eyed dart that filled Ravana with terror.

At one stage in this epic battle, Ravana sought the aid of goddess Durga and she appeared to be on Ravana's side, protecting him from harm. Rama, therefore, worshipped her with one hundred and eight rare lotus flowers procured by Hanuman. But during the offering, it was found that there were only one hundred and seven flowers. Deeply mortified at this and thinking that the goddess would be annoyed, Rama said, "My eyes have often been compared to a blue lotus, therefore, I shall offer one of them to Durga instead of a real flower." He was about to pluck his eye with the point of an arrow when the goddess appeared before him and said, "I stole one flower to test you. I shall no longer support Ravana. I am returning to my abode in Kailas. You will win your battle with Ravana."

As they fought again, Rama was frustrated again and again because Ravana could not be killed. When he cut off one of Ravana's heads, another one took its place; when his limbs were severed, they joined themselves together again. "What am I to do now?" Rama cried in despair. "I have used every weapon I know and yet I cannot kill him."

It was then I remembered Brahma's boon to Ravana and how he could not be killed by any weapon other than the one Brahma had given him. I explained it to Rama and said. "I know Ravana has hidden that weapon in his palace. The only person who knows where it is, is his wife Mandodari. We must find it."

So, Hanuman was sent into Lanka again. He went in the guise of an old priest, talked to Mandodari, and she, thinking that she was helping her husband, revealed the hiding place to Hanuman. It was hidden in a pillar inside the palace. Hanuman smashed the pillar, took out the weapon and brought it to Rama.

When the battle commenced on the last fateful day after a few arrows had been shot on both sides, Rama took careful aim, and invoking Brahma, shot the special weapon. It sped with fire and smoke. Ravana recognised it as the death dart and was powerless to oppose it. It struck his heart and he fell in mortal agony to the earth.

As he lay dying, he called out, "Do not think of me as a foolish and ignorant Rakshasa, Sri Rama!" he cried. "I have known all along that you are the incarnation of Vishnu. But I am a hero and a warrior. How could I resist the temptation of fighting you? What glory would have been mine if I had beaten you! On the other hand, if you were to kill me, I shall surely go to heaven in spite of all my sins. So I had nothing to lose and everything to gain by fighting you. No one else will have such an opportunity. I shall go down in history as your equal in valour and courage." He hesitated and smiled in spite of the pain he must have been suffering. "Well, almost your equal." With these words, he expired.

When the Vanaras were sure that Ravana was really dead, they surrounded him out of curiosity. They scrambled for the precious jewels on his body. The shining helmets, diamond earrings and armlets, and golden bracelets and necklaces were soon gone.

I walked towards my brother's body with Rama, Lakshmana and Sugriva. As I gazed on the huge form of the proud Rakshasa, I forgot his cruelties and sins, I forgot the insults and the humiliation I had suffered and remembered only that he was my brother. I remembered our happy childhood and youth, our ambitions and aspirations and how they drove us in different directions until they brought us to this particular tragic moment in history. I sat on the blood-soaked ground, lifted his head tenderly and placed it on my lap. My tears fell on his dark, majestic face. "Alas, dear brother!" I cried. "Your immense power made you vain and you refused to recognise the difference between right and wrong. So you had to pay the price. I am the only one left to bear the burden of Rakshasa guilt as well as Rakshasa grief."

"Do not weep Vibhishana," Rama said kindly. "Ravana lived a great life. Now he has died a hero's death, he will find peace and tranquility in heaven."

"Yes, Sire," I said. "All my brother Rakshasas have found peace. But where and how am I to find peace amidst all this grief and desolation?"

"The only peace for you is in the spiritual satisfaction of having followed your conscience," Rama replied. "You can ask for no more and no less."

When the news of Ravana's death reached Lanka, his wives headed by Queen Mandodari rushed to the battle-field. They flung themselves in the dust or fell over his prostrate body and wailed.

"Your body is pierced by so many arrows, my Lord," cried Mandodari. "Did Rama's arrows search your body to find the secret corner where your love for Sita was hidden? Or, did you die because Sita proved to be the poison of your soul? Why should I live when you are no more?"

I did my best to console her.

Thousands of tear-stained soldiers moved the body of my brother to the sea shore. He was bathed in holy water and his body was anointed with fragrant scents and sandal wood paste. He was then dressed in the rich attire of a great monarch and adorned with many jewels. The funeral pyre was carefully prepared with scented sandalwood and the body was laid on top of it. With tears in my eyes, sorrow in my heart, and a lighted torch in my hand, I lit the funeral pyre of my dead brother.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LIFE EVERLASTING

1

ORDEAL BY FIRE

I have come almost to the end of my story.

After the death of Ravana, I brought Sita to my palace from the Asoka grove. My wife and daughter helped her to bathe and dress. She was frail and thin as a result of the sorrow and indignities she had suffered at the hands of the Rakshasis. We adorned her with silks and ornaments and flowers. In spite of all her sufferings, she was indescribably lovely. We took her to Rama in a covered palanquin as a huge crowd of Rakshasas and Vanaras gathered round to have a look at the woman who was the cause of it all. She slowly got down from the palanquin, bowed before Rama and touched his feet.

Though Rama was an incarnation of God, I was surprised he behaved like any other ordinary human being would have done under similar circumstances. He turned to her and said, 'Your being carried away by Ravana was a great shame on me and my race. That shame has now been avenged. But you have lived under the protection of a Rakshasa for ten months. Therefore, how can I take you back? I have to bid you farewell.'

The entire assembly was shocked and grieved beyond measure to hear these words. That any aspersion should be cast on the chastity of a virtuous and noble lady like Sita was unthinkable. But that it should be done in public by her own husband, who was considered divine and all-knowing, was tragedy indeed.

Sita turned to him with blazing eyes, but her words were soft and polite. "My Lord!", she exclaimed. "I am the daughter of Janaka, a great king, and the daughter-in-law of Dasaratha, another great ruler. I am married to you. It is surprising and painful for me to hear you utter such words. There is only one way in which I can prove to you and to all the three worlds, my virtue in thought, word and deed."

Then, she turned to Lakshmana, "Lakshmana, please dig a pit and make a fire. In the presence of all those assembled here, I swear that if I have swerved by a hair's-breadth from the highest traditions of virtue, let me be consumed by the flames."

Rama was silent and thoughtful. The crowd of Vanaras and Rakshasas waited bated breath. Lakshmana had no other alternative but to prepare the fire. Sita entered the fire with folded hands. And she emerged again in a few minutes, unscathed and unharmed.

Even the flowers she wore had not faded. Rama then accepted her with tears of joy. “Not only I, but the whole world knows about your virtue and innocence now,” he said.

After my coronation, Rama and Lakshmana had to return to the kingdom of Ayodhya since the period of their exile was over. I provided them with an aerial chariot and they all departed and most of the Vanara chieftains with them. I too followed them, since I had been invited to be present at Sri Rama’s coronation. Finally, I returned to Lanka and to my subjects to begin the long, hard task of reconstruction and regeneration of the Rakshasa race.

2

THE HEART-SEARCHING

After the grand passions and orgies of Ravana’s court and after the excitement and tragedy of war, there was now peace in Lanka. There was gloom and sorrow and disappointment, but there was also calm after the storm of the great conflict, a calm that Lanka had not known for ages. As the country slowly limped back to normalcy, I had plenty of time to look back and consider my own role in the historic events that had taken place recently.

Slowly, the Rakshasas have learnt to accept me, even love me a little perhaps. But they often talk wistfully about the glory and the grandeur of the past, of the greatness of Ravana and Indrajit. They talk about the golden age in Rakshasa history. Kumbhakarna, they remember with great affection. But Vibhishana, they say, is all right; he is still around somewhere, but no one quite knows where. He is a good man, full of good intentions, but he does not measure up to the stature of Ravana.

Under my care, the Rakshasas have learnt to till the soil, plant crops and tend cattle. They have learnt to earn their livelihood by the sweat of their brows, but it is difficult for them. Centuries of care-free nomadic life cannot be harnessed overnight to the discipline of hard and regular work. The concept of the spirit is too in-substantial for them to grasp, let alone pursue. As one generation succeeds another, I watch their halting progress and integration with the rest of humanity with mingled feelings of hope and anxiety.

But it is my own personal responsibility in the conflict that worries me. Some people have described me as part saint and part traitor. The fact is, no other person has had to face the conflict between love and duty, between patriotism and conscience that I have had to face. No doubt many will have to face such a dilemma in the future, but none have had to face it before. I have had no one to guide me, no precedent to follow. The younger brothers of Sri Rama did not have a difficult decision involving a conflict of values. They merely did

their duty as laid down by the code, the culture and the traditions of the Kshatriyas. When Sri Rama was expelled from the kingdom, Lakshmana could have stayed in the capital in luxury and comfort. But he followed his elder brother into the forest, not only because he felt it was his duty, but he loved to be with his brother. When Bharata learnt that the rightful heir had abdicated, he did what any true Kshatriya would have done. He tried to persuade his elder brother to return to the throne of Ayodhya and when he would not, he ruled the kingdom as his brother's regent, placing his sandals on the throne. All the brothers had inherited a common sense of ethics and values and acted according to the highest traditions of those values.

My own brother Kumbhakarna too followed the traditions of loyalty to his king and brother. Ravana had looked after him and it was his duty to fight and die for him in an emergency. So, Kumbhakarna went to his death, to fulfill the debt he owed to his brother and for the sake of preserving his honour as a warrior. Only I was torn between my duty to my brother and my duty to my conscience. Even my duty to my brother, I saw in a different light. I felt it was my duty to prevent him from the folly of destroying the entire Rakshasa race because of his mad lust for a virtuous woman.

For, I too loved my brother and my country; was loyal and obedient to the very end. When he ill-treated the Rishis and humiliated the Devas, I did not object. I followed my own path of virtue, offered oblations to the gods, read the scriptures, practiced the virtues of continence and charity and went my way. But it is true that though I did not take part in my brother's cruelties and oppression, I enjoyed the benefits of the wealth he had acquired through those activities.

Now, I wonder, should I not have protested at his policy, both on ethical as well as political grounds? If he went on like that, it was inevitable that the Devas who had been humiliated and the Rishis whose meditations and peaceful existence had been disturbed should join together to plot his downfall. Knowing how he must have offended the gods by his arrogant behaviour, it was also inevitable that the gods should come to their rescue. I knew and felt all this and yet was silent. Future generations will no doubt ask, why? I am now asking myself the same question and trying to search my heart for an answer. Was it because I was afraid of my brother who tolerated no criticism and thought he was infallible? Did I in my heart of hearts-as a Rakshasa by blood- rejoice in the exploits of my brother? Did the wealth and prosperity he brought to Lanka blind me to the folly of his behaviour? All I can say is this. There were many occasions when I wanted to speak, to tell him he was wrong, that the wealth and the women he had appropriated were poison. I wanted to beg and plead with him. But, somehow, in the chorus of praise that was showered on him by his ministers and chieftains, by even his sons and wives, I could not be the lone voice of dissent. Of course, my protest would have been of no use. It might possibly have got me into trouble. But these factors should not have prevented me from raising my voice against

injustice. And yet, I kept my mouth shut, accepted the new palace that was built for me, and all the luxuries that went with it. Was it lack of courage, or lack of conviction, or a mere weakness of the will? Frankly, I do not know.

But that did not mean I accepted the situation. The conflict between love for my brother, country and clan on the one hand, and hatred of the things he was doing on the other, went on inside me, each incident adding a little more fuel to the fire within, but I was still unable to protest. When finally, I did protest, it was perhaps too late. Ravana was, by then, incapable of taking advice. He had become a god in his own way. I was accused of plotting his downfall and unceremoniously thrown out.

Some people might say I was biding my time. They would point out that I did not speak in the past only because I had no strong ally capable of challenging Ravana, and the moment I saw someone of that calibre, I was ready to speak. All I can say is that never for a moment did I consciously think of ruling the kingdom in my brother's place. In any case, if anything had happened to him, his sons or Kumbhakarna would have succeeded to the throne, not I.

It is, of course, easy to say that I should have expressed my views at a very early stage, and if necessary, left the country so that I would have had no part in what followed afterwards. It is easy to be wise after the event. It was a difficult and unusual situation; no other individual had ever been faced with such a difficult choice.

Another factor that is often used against me is that while Rama's brothers were put to considerable hardship as a result of their decisions, I inherited a kingdom as a result of mine. If I had been killed in the war, or if Ravana had won the war and then executed me as a traitor, perhaps I would have received greater sympathy and understanding. The world is ever ready to offer its pity to a man who has suffered for his choice, even if he is a villain; they say, whatever his faults, he had paid the price. But the world is always suspicious of a man who had gained anything even in the cause of righteousness. Perhaps, the suspicion thrown on me by Ravana in a moment of passion and repeated by that misguided soldier on the night of my coronation, will stick to me for ever, not because I was wrong, but because I won a kingdom. But I too have paid my price. When Kumbhakarna's head was severed, when I lit Ravana's funeral pyre and when I clasped the dead body of dear Taruni to my breast, I paid the full price for my convictions.

THE NEW RAKSHASAS

Apart from my personal responsibility, other questions are also beginning to haunt my mind. From the very beginning, I was motivated by a passion for virtue and justice. My main interest was in the things of the spirit. I was moved by pity and I had sympathy for the weak and the unfortunate. And yet, in trying to eliminate evil, how much cruelty did we inflict on our enemies? How many innocent people were killed as a result of our undoubtedly well-intentioned efforts? On the pretext of establishing righteousness on earth, how much sorrow and misery did we bring about? In fighting the war to its tragic conclusion, we had to resort to every kind of guile and deceit. If we did not practice magic, it was only because I was not adept at it, not because we did not want to make use of it. Now, I wonder, is this the way of destroying the evil and preserving the good? And finally, after all the destruction and the misery we brought about, did we really establish Rama Rajya, the rule of Righteousness, on earth? Evil seems to thrive just as much now as before, though perhaps not in such a grand manner as in Ravana's time. That is not because people are better, but only because they do not think on the same grand scale as Ravana.

Further, as time goes on the old Rakshasas die out, I find that new races of Rakshasas are coming up, with new kinds of cruelties and tortures. As the old magic is forgotten, new kinds of magic have taken their place. These new Rakshasas cannot even be recognised like the old Rakshasas, by their physical features. The cruelties of Ravana were simple and straightforward. It was easy to recognise them, even if it was dangerous to oppose them. But the cruelties and the torments of the new breeds of Rakshasas are difficult to recognise, because they are subtle and more complicated. They often take the form of benefits and even good deeds. But for all that, they poison the mind and deaden the spirit. To tell the difference between right and wrong and between a Rakshasa and a human is getting more and more difficult, even impossible to one like myself, whose mind is essentially simple. In this situation, I can only abdicate my functions, disappear into the forest and meditate, like the rishis of the past.

It is said in our holy books that when evil predominates over the good in any age, Vishnu, the Creator, is born into this world to destroy the evil and preserve the good. Sri Rama was the seventh of such incarnations. We are now waiting for the tenth and the final one. But I wonder whether one incarnation every few thousand years is enough to destroy all the evil that accumulates over that period, not only in the physical world, but essentially in the minds of men. An incarnation of Vishnu today will have to spend a considerable amount of time in trying to sort out the evil from the good. The situation becomes more complex when good and evil are both present in the same individual.

It seems to me that this conflict between good and evil is not only eternal, but continuous. It is not so much between Rakshasas and Humans as between one temperament and another, the diabolical and the ethical. Unfortunately, there are good and bad people having both temperaments. Even in my time, we had good people like Virabahu and my own beloved Taruni fighting for Ravana. If it were so then, it is much more complicated today. What is necessary is not just an avatar every few thousand years, but a series of avatars in every generation to see that the diabolical temperament is kept in check. And just as in my time, they will have to depend on a number of Vibhishanas, ready to make the right choice between their loyalties and their conscience, for their success. These Vibhishanas will have a more difficult job than I ever had, since issues will not be so clear cut. But they will have to play their role with the full knowledge that they will always be suspect. In them, I will live, for I am deathless.

4

ETERNAL GIFT AND EVERLASTING BURDEN

The tragedy of my life is made more poignant by the fact that I was granted the gift of everlasting life. When it was first granted to me, I was perhaps the happiest man on earth. To live for ever and ever, to know everything that is going to happen and be there when it does, to reject salvation that everyone aspires for and to prefer eternal service, it was something that no one had been granted before. I was immensely pleased about it all. But as the years went on, I have found life to be monotonous. People make the same mistakes again and again. While in the short term, things seem to be changing and moving, in the long term, they are really going round in a circle. From the point of view of eternity, one can only contemplate the futility and the meaninglessness of everything.

Those who live a normal span of life can lead a blameless one, do good deeds, perform sacrifices, propitiate the gods, and after a series of births and deaths, can hope for heaven and ultimate salvation. Those who are wicked and defy the laws of Man and God will rot in hell. But I am beginning to realise that for a person like myself who has been blessed with everlasting life, there is no hope of heaven and no fear of hell. And what is more important, there is no ultimate salvation. My heaven and hell are on this earth. Heaven is the luxury of following one's conscience however much it may cost in terms of happiness and contentment for oneself and for others; and hell is the sacrifice of love at the altar of one's conscience and the suspicion cast on one by the world for being conscientious. So, I have the bleak prospect of contemplating and living in this heaven and hell of my own seeking for all eternity.

I have lately begun to wonder what is meant by this gift of everlasting life. Why was I chosen for this gift and not anyone else? For, though I asked for it and it was granted, I now know that I was merely a tool and the words were more or less put into my mouth just as my brother Kumbhakarna's tongue faltered and asked for sleep instead of all-conquering weapons as he had originally intended. Gods have a way of achieving their purpose through earthly agencies, and I have a feeling that I was merely an instrument in the hands of providence for achieving some divine purpose.

What can this purpose be? Living the life of an old Rakshasa for ever and ever, being a burden on one's descendants and a nuisance to everyone else, knowing that I can never die and therefore, never truly live-all this is futile and meaningless. Surely, my physical survival cannot be the divine purpose for which I was granted this gift. Thinking on these problems for years and years, I have come to the conclusion that it is not so much my personal life that is eternal but rather the conflict I represent and the ideas I portray. I am the first to have faced this conflict of loyalties, to be torn apart by divided allegiances and to have had to decide on a course of action that would be suspect by one side or the other, and often by both. In fact, whatever course of action I had pursued, I would have been criticized. I am the first of that breed of people who are destined to face ideological conflicts within themselves and be blamed by either side for being a traitor.

So, when I talk of the gift of everlasting life, it is not so much a personal gift as symbolic one. It is what I represent that is eternal – not so much my physical life - the struggle between the selfish desire of the flesh and the demands of the spirit, between the transitory and the permanent, between what one considers the right course of action and the bonds of the flesh that pull in the opposite direction. It is this struggle that started within me that is god's eternal gift and everlasting burden for humanity. Countless individuals in the future will face such conflicts and they will have to choose between what they consider to be right and wrong and what society consider is right. In this matter of personal choice, many selfish men will pretend to be idealists and many idealists will appear selfish. Men will sacrifice their lives for what they consider to be right and others will commit murder for what they consider noble ends. So far, we have had only conflicts for self-interest or for honour. The great struggle between Rama and Ravana was perhaps the first war based on what might be described as ideological considerations. But, in future, conflicts of self-interest will be replaced by ideological wars. Each generation will perhaps produce its own crop of ideologies and its own crop of conflicts and out of these conflicts will rise new gods and new ideals. While the gods as well as ideologies may change from age to age, the principles of the conflict itself will be permanent. Men will kill and die for such ideologies more enthusiastically than they will in their own self-interest. But in each of these conflicts there will be a few Vibhishanas, trying to reconcile their clash loyalties and conscience.

So, when Brahma gave me the gift of everlasting life, he ensured, not so much my physical survival, as the freedom of universal choice between right and wrong based on individual conscience. He also ensured the survival of the courage and the sacrifice necessary to take a decision on that choice and stick to it, however much it might cost. If I have one supreme satisfaction, it is that I initiated this process of choice among men.

When Ravana used to tell me that a life of eternity or even complete fulfilment would lead to boredom, I thought he was merely being jealous of me. But I am now beginning to think that he was perhaps right after all. Perhaps, it was boredom that drove him to fight Rama and achieve a new kind of fame and death rather than the pointless life he was leading in Lanka. But I have no such dramatic end to look forward to. I have in fact, no end.
