

LAKSHMAN¹

“Hark! Lakshman! Hark, again that cry!
It is,—it is my husband’s voice!
Oh hasten, to his succour^o fly, *aid*
No more hast thou, dear friend, a choice.
5 He calls on thee, perhaps his foes
Environ^o him on all sides round, *encircle*
That wail,—it means death’s final throes!
Why standest thou, as magic-bound?

Is this a time for thought,—oh gird
10 Thy bright sword on, and take thy bow!
He heeds not, hears not any word,
Evil hangs over us, I know!
Swift in decision, prompt in deed,
Brave unto rashness, can this be,
15 The man to whom all looked at need?
Is it my brother, that I see!

Ah no, and I must run alone,
For further here I cannot stay;
Art thou transformed to blind dumb stone!
20 Wherefore this impious, strange delay!
That cry,—that cry,—it seems to ring
Still in my ears,—I cannot bear
Suspense; if help we fail to bring
His death at least we both can share.”

25 “Oh calm thyself, Videhan Queen,²
No cause is there for any fear,
Hast thou his prowess never seen?
Wipe off for shame that dastard tear!
What being of demonian birth
30 Could ever brave his mighty arm?

¹ This legend comes from the *Ramayana*, the other great Hindu epic. Lakshman (Laksmana) is the half-brother and best friend of Rama, the great hero-king of the *Ramayana*. Rama is in exile because of Kaikeyi, one of three wives living with his father Dasarath (Dasaratha), who prevails upon the king to install her son Bharata as crown prince instead of Rama and to exile Rama instead. Kaikeyi had been granted two boons (favours/rewards) for her help to Dasarath during a battle years before, and she had been saving them. She decided to ask for the above after it had been announced that Rama (whose mother, Kausalya, was one of the other wives; Lakshman’s mother was Sumitra, the third wife) was to be confirmed as the crown prince. Lakshman accompanied Rama and his wife Sîta into exile. In this scene, Sîta convinces Lakshman to leave her in order to go help Rama. Sîta has fallen for a ruse, however, and while he is gone she is kidnapped by Ravana, Rama’s arch-enemy, who is king of Lanka and of the demons known as Rakshases (rakshasas).

² Sîta’s father was king of Videha, in the northeastern part of India.

Is there a creature on the earth
That dares to work our hero harm?

The lion and the grisly bear³
Cower when they see his royal look,
35 Sun-staring eagles of the air
His glance of anger cannot brook,
Pythons and cobras at his tread
To their most secret coverts glide,
Bowed to the dust each serpent head
40 Erect before in hooded pride.

Rakshases, Danavs⁴, demons, ghosts,
Acknowledge in their hearts his might,
And slink to their remotest coasts,
In terror at his very sight.
45 Evil to him! Oh fear it not,
Whatever foes against him rise!
Banish for aye,^o the foolish thought, *ever*
And be thyself,—bold, great, and wise.

He call for help! Canst thou believe
50 He like a child would shriek for aid
Or pray for respite or reprieve—
Not of such metal is he made!
Delusive was that piercing cry,—
Some trick of magic by the foe;
55 He has a work,—he cannot die,
Beseech me not from hence to go.

For here beside thee, as a guard
‘Twas he commanded me to stay,
And dangers with my life to ward
60 If they should come across thy way.
Send me not hence, for in this wood
Bands scattered of the giants lurk,
Who on their wrongs and vengeance brood,
And wait the hour their will to work.”

65 “Oh shame! And canst thou make my weal^o *well-being*
A plea for lingering! Now I know

³ *Lion* here refers to the Asiatic (or, Indian) lion; *grisly bear* most likely refers to the Brown Bear of the Himalayas, since grizzlies are a subspecies of the North American Brown Bear. Other bears in India are the Himalayan Black Bear and the Sloth Bear.

⁴ Rakshases (see note 1) and Danavs are both types of demons who here would be associated with Rama’s enemy Ravana. Danavs also usually are represented as giants.

What thou art, Lakshman! And I feel
Far better were an open foe.
Art thou a coward? I have seen
70 Thy bearing in the battle-fray
Where flew the death-fraught arrows keen,
Else had I judged thee so to-day.

But then thy leader stood beside!
Dazzles the cloud when shines the sun,
75 Reft^o of his radiance, see it glide *robbed*
A shapeless mass of vapours dun;
So of thy courage,—or if not,
The matter is far darker dyed,
What makes thee loth^o to leave this spot? *reluctant*
80 Is there a motive thou wouldst hide?

He perishes—well, let him die!
His wife henceforth shall be mine own!
Can that thought deep imbedded lie
Within thy heart's most secret zone!
85 Search well and see! one brother takes
His kingdom,⁵—one would take his wife!
A fair partition!—But it makes
Me shudder, and abhor my life.

Art thou in secret league with those
90 Who from his hope the kingdom rent?
A spy from his ignoble foes
To track him in his banishment?
And wouldst thou at his death rejoice?
I know thou wouldst, or sure ere^o now *before*
95 When first thou heardst that well-known voice
Thou shouldst have run to aid, I trow.^o *believe*

Learn this,—whatever comes may come,
But I shall not survive my Love,—
Of all my thoughts here is the sum!
100 Witness it gods in heaven above.
If fire can burn, or water drown,
I follow him:—choose what thou wilt,
Truth with its everlasting crown,
Or falsehood, treachery, and guilt.

105 Remain here, with a vain pretence
Of shielding me from wrong and shame,

⁵ The reference here is to Bharata, another half-brother of Rama (see note 1).

Or go and die in his defence
And leave behind a noble name.
Choose what thou wilt,—I urge no more,
110 My pathway lies before me clear,
I did not know thy mind before,
I know thee now,—and have no fear.”

She said and proudly from him turned,—
Was this the gentle Sîta? No.
115 Flames from her eyes shot forth and burned,
The tears therein had ceased to flow.
“Hear me, O Queen, ere I depart,
No longer can I bear thy words,
They lacerate my inmost heart
120 And torture me, like poisoned swords.

Have I deserved this at thine hand?
Of lifelong loyalty and truth
Is this the meed?° I understand *reward*
Thy feelings, Sîta, and in sooth° *truth*
125 I blame thee not,—but thou mightst be
Less rash in judgement. Look! I go,
Little I care what comes to me
Wert° thou but safe,—God keep thee so! *were*

In going hence I disregard
130 The plainest orders of my chief,
A deed for me,—a soldier,—hard
And deeply painful, but thy grief
And language, wild and wrong, allow
No other course. Mine be the crime,
135 And mine alone,—but oh, do thou
Think better of me from this time.

Here with an arrow, lo, I trace
A magic circle ere I leave,
No evil thing within this space
140 May come to harm thee or to grieve.
Step not, for aught, across the line,
Whatever thou mayst see or hear,
So shalt thou balk the bad design
Of every enemy I fear.

145 And now farewell! What thou hast said,
Though it has broken quite my heart,
So that I wish that I were dead—

I would before, O Queen, we part
Freely forgive, for well I know
150 That grief and fear have made thee wild,
We part as friends,—is it not so?”
And speaking thus,—he sadly smiled.

“And oh ye sylvan gods that dwell
Among these dim and sombre shades,
155 Whose voices in the breezes swell
And blend with noises of cascades,
Watch over Sîta, whom alone
I leave, and keep her safe from harm,
Till we return unto our own,
160 I and my brother, arm in arm.

For though ill omens round us rise
And frighten her dear heart, I feel
That he is safe. Beneath the skies
His equal is not,—and his heel
165 Shall tread all adversaries down,
Whoever they may chance to be.—
Farewell, O Sîta! Blessings crown
And Peace for ever rest with thee!”

He said, and straight his weapons took
170 His bow and arrows pointed keen,
Kind,—nay, indulgent,—was his look,
No trace of anger there was seen,
Only a sorrow dark, that seemed
To deepen his resolve to dare
175 All dangers. Hoarse the vulture screamed,
As out he strode with dauntless air.