

THREE

THE INDIAN LIFE

WHEN VISHNU, OR RATHER Vishnu in his avatar as Rama, fought his savage battles with the prince of demons, one of his parts took on human shape and thus entered the cycle of forms once more. His name was Ravana and he lived as a warlike prince by the Great Ganges. Ravana had a son named Dasa. But the mother of Dasa died young, and the prince took another wife. Soon this beautiful and ambitious lady had a son of her own, and she resented the young Dasa. Although he was the firstborn, she determined to see her own son Nala inherit the rulership when the time came. And so she contrived to estrange Dasa's father from him, and meant to dispose of the boy at the first opportunity. But one of Ravana's court Brahmans, Vasudeva the Sacrificer, became privy to her plan. He was sorry for the boy who, moreover, seemed to him to possess his mother's bent for piety and feeling for justice. So the Brahman kept an eye on Dasa, to see that the boy came to no harm until he could put him out of reach of his stepmother.

Now Rajah Ravana owned a herd of cows dedicated to Brahma. These were regarded as sacred, and frequent offerings of their milk and butter were made to the god. The best pastures in the country were reserved for these cows.

One day a herdsman of these sacred cows came to the palace to deliver a batch of butter and report that there were signs of drought in the region where the herd had been grazing. Hence the band of herdsmen were going to lead the cows up into the mountains, where water and grass were available even in the driest of times.

The Brahman had known the herdsman for many years as a friendly and reliable man. He took him into his confidence. Next day, when little Prince Dasa could not be found, only Vasudeva and the herdsman knew the secret of his disappearance. The

herdsman took the boy Dasa into the hills with him. They caught up with the slowly moving herd, and Dasa gladly joined the band of herdsmen. He helped to guard and drive the cows, learned to milk, played with the calves, and idled about in the mountain meadows, drinking sweet milk, his bare feet smeared with cow-dung. He liked the life of the herdsmen, learned to know the forest and its trees and fruits, loved the mango, the wild fig, and the varinga tree, plucked the sweet lotus root out of green forest pools, on feast days wore a wreath of the red blossoms of the flame-of-the-woods. He became acquainted with the ways of all the animals of the wilderness, learned how to shun the tiger, to make friends with the clever mongoose and the placid hedgehog, and to while away the rainy seasons in the dusky shelter of a makeshift hut where the boys played games, recited verse, or wove baskets and reed mats. Dasa did not completely forget his former home and his former life, but soon these seemed to him like a dream.

One day, when the herd had moved on to another region, Dasa went into the forest to look for honey. Ever since he had come to know the woods he had loved them, and this particular forest seemed to him uncommonly beautiful. The rays of sunlight wound through leaves and branches like golden serpents; the noises of the forest, bird calls, rustle of treetops, jabber of monkeys, twined into a lovely, mildly luminescent network resembling the light amid the branches. Smells, too, similarly joined and parted again, the perfumes of flowers, varieties of wood, leaves, waters, mosses, animals, fruits, earth and mold, pungent and sweet, wild and intimate, stimulating and soothing, gay and sad. In some unseen gorge a stream gurgled; a velvety green butterfly with black and yellow markings danced over white flowers; deep among the blue shadows of the trees a branch broke and leaves dropped heavily into leaves, or a stag bellowed in the darkness, or an irritable she-ape scolded her family.

Dasa forgot about looking for honey. While listening to the singing of several jewel-bright small birds, he noticed a trail running between tall ferns that stood like a dense miniature forest

within the great forest. It was the narrowest of footpaths, and he silently and cautiously pressed between the ferns and followed where it led. After a while he came upon a great banyan tree with many trunks. Beneath it stood a small hut, a kind of tent woven of fern leaves. Beside the hut a man sat motionless. His back was straight as a rod and his hands lay between his crossed feet. Under the white hair and broad forehead his eyes, still and sightless, were focused on the ground. They were open, but looking inward. Dasa realized that this was a holy man, a yogi. He had seen others before; they were men favored by the gods. It was good to bring them gifts and pay them respect. But this man here, sitting before his beautifully made and well-concealed fern hut, so perfectly motionless, so lost in meditation, more strongly attracted the boy and seemed to him rarer and more venerable than any of the others he had seen. He seemed to be floating above the ground as he sat there, and it was as if his abstracted gaze saw and knew everything. An aura of holiness surrounded him, a magic circle of dignity, a flame of concentrated intensity and a wave of radiant yoga energies, which the boy could not pass through, which he would not have dared to breach by a word of greeting or a cry. The majesty of his form, the light from within which radiated from his face, the composure and bronze unassailability of his features, emanated waves and rays in the midst of which he sat enthroned like a moon; and the accumulated spiritual force, the calmly concentrated will, wove such a spell around him that Dasa sensed that here was someone who, by a mere wish or thought, without even raising his eyes, could kill and restore to life.

More motionless than a tree, whose leaves and twigs stir in respiration, motionless as the stone image of a god, the yogi sat before his hut; and from the moment he had seen him the boy too remained motionless, fascinated, fettered, magically attracted by the sight. He stood staring at the Master. He saw a spot of sunlight on his shoulder, a spot of sunlight on one of his relaxed hands; he saw the flecks of light move slowly away and new ones come into being, and he began to understand that the streaks of light had nothing to do with this man, nor the songs of birds and the chatter

of monkeys from the woods all around, nor the brown wild bee that settled on the sage's face, sniffed at his skin, crawled a short distance along his cheek, and then flew off again, nor all the multifarious life of the forest. All this, Dasa sensed, everything the eyes could see, the ears could hear, everything beautiful or ugly, engaging or frightening -- all of it had no connection at all to this holy man. Rain would not chill or incommode him; fire could not burn him. The whole world around him had become meaningless superficiality. There came to the princely cowherd an inkling that the whole world might be no more than a breath of wind playing over the surface, a ripple of waves over unknown depths. He was not conscious of this as a thought, but as a physical quiver and slight giddiness, a feeling of horror and danger, and at the same time of intense yearning. For this yogi, he felt, had plunged through the surface of the world, through the superficial world, into the ground of being, into the secret of all things. He had broken through and thrown off the magical net of the senses, the play of light, sound, color, and sensation, and lived secure in the essential and unchanging. The boy, although once tutored by Brahmans who had cast many a ray of spiritual light upon him, did not understand this with his intellect and would have been unable to say anything about it in words, but he sensed it as in blessed moments one senses the presence of divinity; he sensed it as a shudder of awe and admiration for this man, sensed it as love for him and longing for a life such as this man sitting in meditation seemed to be living. Strangely, the old man had reminded him of his origins, of his royalty. Touched to the quick, he stood there on the edge of the fern thicket, ignoring the flying birds and the whispered conversations of the trees, forgetting the forest and the distant herd, yielding to the spell while he stared at the sage, captivated by the incomprehensible stillness and impassivity of the man, by the bright serenity of his face, by the power and composure of his posture, by the complete dedication of his service.

Afterward he could not have said whether he had spent two or three hours, or days, at the hut. When the spell released him,

when he noiselessly crept back between the ferns, found the path out of the woods, and finally reached the open meadows and the herd, he did so without being aware of what he was doing. His soul was still entranced, and he did not really come to until one of the herdsmen called him. The man was angry with him for having been away so long, but when Dasa only stared at him in wide-eyed astonishment, as if he did not understand what was being said to him, the herdsman broke off, disconcerted by the boy's strange look and solemn bearing. "Where have you been, my boy?" he asked. "Have you seen a god by any chance, or run into a demon?"

"I was in the woods," Dasa said. "Something drew me there; I wanted to look for honey. But then I forgot about it because I saw a man there, a hermit, who sat lost in meditation or prayer, and when I saw the way his face glowed I could not help standing still and watching him for a long time. I would like to go again this evening and bring him gifts. He is a holy man."

"Do so," the herdsman said. "Bring him milk and sweet butter. We should honor the holy men and give them what we can."

"But how am I to address him?"

"There is no need to address him, Dasa. Only bow and place the gifts before him. No more is needed."

Dasa did so. It took him a while to find the place again. The clearing in front of the hut was deserted, and he did not dare go into the hut itself. He therefore laid his gifts on the ground at the entrance and left.

As long as the herdsmen remained with the cows in this vicinity, Dasa brought gifts every evening, and once he went there by day again. He found the holy man deep in meditation, and this time too felt impelled to stand there in a state of bliss, receiving those rays of strength and felicity that emanated from the yogi.

Long after they had left the neighborhood and were driving the herd to new pastures, Dasa remembered his experience in the forest. And as is the way of boys, when he was alone he sometimes daydreamed of himself as a hermit and practitioner of

yoga. But with time the memory and the dream faded, all the more so since Dasa was now rapidly growing into a strong young man who threw himself with zest into the sports and brawls of his fellows. But a gleam, a faint inkling remained in his soul, a suggestion that the princely life and the sovereignty he had lost might some day be replaced by the dignity and power of yoga.

One day, when they had come to the vicinity of the capital, they heard that a great festival was in preparation. Old Prince Ravana, bereft of his former strength and grown quite frail, had appointed the day for his son Nala to succeed him.

Dasa wanted to go to the festival. He wished to see the city once more, for he had only the faintest memories of it from his childhood. He wanted to hear the music, to watch the parade and the tournament among the nobles; and he also wanted to have a look at that unknown world of townsfolk and magnates who figured so largely in tales and legends, for he knew, although this was only a tale or legend or something even more insubstantial, that once upon a time, ages ago, their world had been his own.

The herdsmen were supposed to deliver a load of butter to the court for the festival sacrifices, and to his joy Dasa was one of the three young men chosen by the chief herdsman for this task.

They brought their butter to the palace on the eve of the festival. The Brahman Vasudeva received it from them, for it was he who had charge of the sacrifices, but he did not recognize the youth. Then the three herdsmen joined the throngs attending the celebrations. Early in the morning they watched the beginning of the sacrifices under the Brahman's direction. They saw the masses of shining golden butter given to the flames, watched as it was transformed into leaping fire; flickering, its light and fatty smoke soared toward the Infinite, a delight to the thrice-ten gods. They watched the elephants leading the parade, their riders in howdahs with gilded roofs. They beheld the flower-decked royal carriage containing the young Rajah Nala, and heard the mighty reverberations of the drums. It was all very magnificent and glittering and also a little ridiculous, or at least that is how it

seemed to young Dasa. He was stunned and enraptured, intoxicated by the noise, by the carriages and caparisoned horses, by all the pomp and extravagance; he was also delighted by the dancing girls who cavorted in front of the royal carriage, their limbs slender and tough as lotus stems. He was astonished at the size and beauty of the city, but still and all he regarded everything, in the midst of his excitement and pleasure, with the sober good sense of the herdsman who basically despises the townsman.

That he himself was really the firstborn, that his stepbrother Nala, whom he had forgotten completely, was being anointed, consecrated, and hailed in his stead, that he himself, Dasa, ought by rights to be riding in the flower-decked carriage -- such thoughts did not even occur to him. On the other hand, he took a strong dislike to this Nala; the young man seemed to him stupid and mean in his self-indulgence, unbearably vain and swollen with self-importance. He would rather have liked to play a trick on this youth acting the part of rajah, to teach him a lesson; but there was surely no opportunity for anything of the sort, and in any case he quickly forgot all about it, for there was so much to see, to hear, to laugh at, to enjoy. The townswomen were pretty and had pert, alluring looks, movements, and turns of speech. A good many phrases were flung at the three herdsmen which rang in their ears for a long while afterward. These phrases were called out with overtones of mockery, for townsfolk feel about herdsmen just the way herdsmen do about townsfolk: each despises the other. But still and all those handsome, stalwart young men, nourished on milk and cheese and living under the open sky almost all the year, were much to the liking of the townswomen.

By the time Dasa returned from this festival, he had become a man. He chased girls and had to hold his own in a good many hard boxing and wrestling matches with other young fellows. They were now making their way into a different region, a region of flat meadows and wetlands planted to rushes and bamboo trees. Here he saw a girl by the name of Pravati, and was seized by a mad love for this beautiful young woman. She was a tenant farmer's

daughter, and Dasa was so infatuated that he forgot everything else and threw away his freedom in order to win her. When the time came for the herdsmen to move along to fresh pastures, he brushed aside advice and warnings, bade farewell to them and the herdsmen's life he had dearly loved, and settled down. He succeeded in winning Pravati as his wife. In return he tilled his father-in-law's millet fields and rice paddies, and helped with the work in mill and woodlot. He built a bamboo and mud hut for his wife, and kept her shut up within it.

It must be a tremendous power that can move a young man to give up his previous joys and friends and habits, to change his existence entirely, and to live among strangers in the unenviable role of son-in-law. But so great was Pravati's beauty, so great and alluring the promise of amorous delights that radiated from her face and figure, that Dasa became blind to everything else and surrendered utterly to this woman. And in fact he found great happiness in her arms. Many stories are told of gods and holy men so enraptured by an enchanting woman that they remain locked in intimate embrace with her for days, moons, and years, wholly absorbed by voluptuousness and forgetting all other matters. Dasa, too, would have wished his lot and his love to be like that. But he was destined for other things, and his happiness did not last long. It lasted about a year, and this period, too, was not filled with pure felicity. There was ample room for much else, for vexatious demands on the part of his father-in-law, for the taunts of his brothers-in-law, and for the whims of his young wife. But whenever he went to lie with her on their pallet, all this was forgotten, vanished into thin air, such was the magic of her smile, so sweet was it to caress her slender limbs, so wonderfully did the garden of delight in her young body bloom with a thousand flowers, fragrances, and lovely shadows.

His happiness was not yet a whole year old when, one day, noise and unrest stirred the neighborhood. Mounted messengers appeared announcing the coming of the young Rajah. Then came troops, horses, the supply train, and finally Rajah Nala himself, to hunt in the countryside. Tents were pitched here and there;

horses could be heard neighing and horns blowing.

Dasa paid no attention to all this. He worked in the fields, tended the mill, and kept out of the way of hunters and courtiers. But one day when he returned to his hut he found his wife missing. He had strictly forbidden her to set foot outside during this period, while the court was in the neighborhood, and now he felt at once a stabbing pain in his heart and a premonition of disaster. He hurried to his father-in-law's house. Pravati was not there either, and no one would admit to having seen her. The pang in his heart intensified. He searched the cabbage patch and the fields; he spent a whole day and then another going back and forth between his hut and his father-in-law's; he lurked in the field, climbed down into the well, called her name, coaxed, cursed, hunted for footprints.

At last the youngest of his brothers-in-law, who was still a boy, told him the truth. Pravati was with the Rajah; she was living in his tent and had been seen riding on his horse.

Dasa lurked invisibly about Nala's encampment, carrying the sling he had used during his days as a herdsman. Day or night, whenever the prince's tent seemed to be unguarded for a moment, he would steal closer; but each time guards soon appeared and he had to flee. Hiding in the branches of a tree, he looked down on the camp and saw the Rajah, whose repellent face he remembered from the time of the festival. Dasa watched him mount his horse and ride off. When he returned hours later, dismounted, and threw back the tent flap, Dasa could see into the shadowy interior where a young woman came forward to welcome the prince. He nearly fell from the tree as he recognized his wife Pravati. Now he was certain, and the pressure upon his heart grew unbearable. Great as the happiness of his love for Pravati had been, the anguish, the rage, the sense of loss and insult were greater now. That is how it is when a man fastens all his capacity for love upon a single object. With its loss everything collapses for him, and he stands impoverished amid ruins.

For a day and a night Dasa drifted about the woods in the

neighborhood. He was utterly exhausted, but after every brief rest the misery in his heart lashed him on. He had to stir and keep moving; he felt as if he would have to tramp on to the end of the world and to the end of his life, which had lost all its meaning and all its glory. Nevertheless, he did not wander off to distant, unknown regions. He remained in the vicinity of his misfortunes. He circled about his hut, the mill, the fields, the Rajah's hunting tent. Finally he concealed himself again in the trees overlooking the tent. He crouched in his leafy hiding place, bitter and burning as a hungry beast of prey, until the moment came for which he had been saving his last energies -- until the Rajah stepped outside the tent. Then he slipped silently down from the branch, raised the sling, and struck his enemy squarely in the forehead with the stone. Nala fell and lay motionless on his back. There seemed to be no one about. For a moment the storm of voluptuous, vengeful delight that roared through Dasa's senses was checked, fearfully and strangely, by a profound silence. Then, before a clamor broke out around the slain man and the space in front of the tent began to swarm with servants, Dasa was in the woods, lost in the bamboo thickets that sloped down toward the valley.

In the delirium of action, as he leaped from the tree and aimed the sling, letting it hurl forth its death, he had felt as if he were extinguishing his own life also, as if he were discharging his last spark of vitality and flinging himself, along with the deadly stone, into the abyss of annihilation, content to die if only his hated foe fell a moment before him. But now that the deed had been followed by that unexpected moment of silence, a craving for life which he had not realized was in him drew him back from the abyss. A primitive instinct took possession of his senses and his limbs, drove him into the depths of the woods and the bamboo thickets, commanded him to flee and hide.

Awareness of what was happening came to him only after he had reached a refuge and was safe from immediate danger. As he collapsed exhausted, struggling for breath, his frenzy giving way to weakness and sobriety, he felt disappointment and

revulsion at having escaped. But when his breathing slowed and his dizziness passed, this repugnance yielded to a defiant determination to live, and once more his heart gloried savagely in the deed.

The hunt for the killer began. Soon searchers were swarming through the woods. They beat the thickets throughout the day, and he evaded them only because he kept utterly still in his hiding place in the marsh, which no one dared penetrate too deeply for fear of tigers. He slept a little, lay on the alert for a while, crawled on a bit, rested again, and by the third day had made his way beyond the hills, whence he pushed on toward the higher mountains.

The homeless life he led thereafter took him here and there. It made him harder and more callous, but also wiser and more resigned. Nevertheless, during the nights he repeatedly dreamed of Pravati and his former happiness, or what he had in the past called his happiness. He also dreamed many times of the pursuit and his flight-frightful, heart-stopping dreams such as this: He would be fleeing through woods, the pursuers close behind him with drums and hunting horns. Through forest and swamp and briers, over rotting, collapsing bridges, he would be carrying something, a burden, a bale, something wrapped up, concealed, unknown. All he knew about it was that it was precious and that under no circumstances must he let it out of his hands; it was something valuable and imperiled, a treasure, perhaps something stolen, wrapped in a bright cloth with a russet and blue pattern, such as Pravati's holiday dress had been. Laden with this pack, this treasure, or these stolen goods, he would be fleeing and skulking, amid toil and danger, creeping under low-hanging branches or overhanging rocks, stealing past snakes and crossing rivers full of crocodiles on vertiginous narrow planks, until at last he stopped in exhaustion, fumbled with the knot of the string that tied his pack, slowly unwrapped the cloth and spread it out, and the treasure he took out at last and held in shuddering hands was his own head.

He led the stealthy life of a vagabond, no longer actually fleeing from people, but rather avoiding them. And one day his

roaming led him through a hilly region of lush grass which looked lovely and serene and seemed to welcome him, as though he ought to know it. In one place he recognized a meadow with softly swaying grasses in flower, in another a willow grove which reminded him of the serene and innocent days when he had not yet known love and jealousy, hatred and revenge. It was the pastureland where he had once tended the herd with his companions; that had been the most untroubled period of his youth. Now he looked back upon it across vast chasms of irrevocability. A sweet melancholy in his heart answered the voices that welcomed him here, the wind fluttering the silvery willows, the jolly song of the little brooks, the trilling of the birds, and the deep golden buzz of bumblebees. It all sounded and smelled of refuge, home; never before, used as he was to the roaming herdsman's life, had he ever felt that a countryside was so homelike, so much part of him.

Accompanied and guided by these voices in his soul, with feelings like those of a soldier home from the wars, he wandered about this pleasant landscape, for the first time in many terrible months not a stranger, a fugitive, a candidate for death, but with an open heart, thinking of nothing, desiring nothing, surrendering utterly to the tranquil present, grateful and somewhat astonished at himself and at this new, unwonted, rapturous state of mind, this undemanding receptivity, this serenity without tensions, this new mode of taking delight in close observation. He felt drawn to the forest which lay beyond the green meadows. In among the trees, amid the dusk speckled by sunlight, the feeling of returning home intensified, and led him along paths which his feet seemed to find by themselves, until he passed through a fern thicket, a dense little forest of ferns in the midst of the greater woods, and reached a tiny hut. On the ground in front of the hut sat the motionless yogi whom he had once watched, and to whom he had brought milk and butter.

Dasa stopped, as if he had just awakened. Everything here was the same as it had been; here no time had passed, there had been no killing and suffering. Here, it seemed, time and life were

hard as crystal, frozen in eternity. He stood looking at the old man, and there returned to his heart that admiration, love, and longing which he had felt upon his first sight of the yogi. He looked at the hut and thought that it probably needed some repairs before the onset of the next rainy season. Then he ventured a few cautious steps forward. He entered the hut and peered around. There was little there, almost nothing: a pallet of leaves, a gourd containing some water, and an empty pouch made of bast. He took the pouch and went into the woods searching for food. He returned with fruit and the sweet pith of certain trees. Then he went off with the gourd and filled it with fresh water.

Now he had done all that could be done here. There was so little a man needed to live. Dasa kneeled on the ground and sank into reveries. He was content with this silent repose and dreaming in the woods, content with himself, with the voice within him that had led him here where as a boy he had once sensed something like peace, happiness, and home.

And so he remained with the silent yogi. He renewed the pallet of leaves, found food for the two of them, repaired the old hut, and began building a second for himself a short distance away. The old man appeared to tolerate him, but Dasa could not quite make out whether he had actually taken notice of him. When he rose from his meditation, it was only in order to go to sleep in the hut, to eat a bite, or to walk a bit in the woods. Dasa lived with him like a servant in the presence of a nobleman, or rather the way a small pet, a tame bird or a mongoose, say, lives along with human beings, useful and scarcely noticed. Since he had been a fugitive for so long, unsure of himself, suffering pangs of conscience, seeking concealment and perpetually fearing pursuit, this life of repose, the effortless small labors and the presence of a man who did not seem to notice him, did him a great deal of good for a while. His sleep was not troubled by frightful dreams; for half and then whole days at a time he forgot what had happened. The future did not enter his mind, and if ever a longing or desire came to him, it was to remain where he was, to be accepted by the yogi and initiated into the secret of a

hermit's life, to become a yogi himself and partake of the proud indifference of yoga. He had begun to imitate the venerable ascetic's posture, to sit motionless like him with crossed legs, like him to gaze into an unknown and surreal world, and to cultivate apathy to everything around him. Whenever he made such attempts, he tired quickly; he found his limbs stiff and his back aching, was plagued by mosquitoes or bothered by all sorts of itches and twitches which compelled him to move, to scratch himself, and finally to stand up again. But several times he had felt something different, a sense of emptiness, lightness, and floating in air, such as sometimes comes in dreams in which we touch the ground only lightly now and then, gently pushing off from it to drift like a wisp of fluff. At such moments he had an inkling of what it must be like to float about that way all the time, body and soul divesting themselves of all weight and sharing the movements of a greater, purer, sunnier life, exalted and absorbed by a beyond, by timelessness and immutability. But these intimations had lasted only a moment. And every time he plummeted back into his ordinary self, disappointed, he thought that he must persuade the master to become his teacher, to initiate him into his exercises and secret arts and make a yogi of him also. But how was he to do that? It did not seem as if the old man would ever notice him, that there would ever be an exchange of words between them. Just as the yogi seemed beyond the day and hour, beyond the forest and hut, he also seemed beyond all words.

Nevertheless, one day he spoke a word. There came a time during which Dasa again dreamt night after night, often bewilderingly sweet and often bewilderingly dreadful dreams, either of his wife Pravati or the horrors of life as a fugitive. And by day he made no progress, could not long endure sitting and practicing, could not help thinking about women and love. He tramped about the forest a great deal. He blamed the weather for his condition; these were sultry days with sudden gusts of hot wind.

One more such bad day came. The mosquitoes hummed.

Dasa had had another of his anguished dreams that left him with a sense of fear and oppression. He no longer remembered it, but upon waking it seemed to him that it had been a wretched, outrageous, and shameful relapse into earlier states and stages of his life. All day long he moved restively about the hut, or squatted gloomily. He dabbled at odd tasks, several times sat down for meditation exercises, but would each time be seized by a feverish unrest. His limbs twitched, he felt as if ants were crawling over his feet, had a burning sensation in the nape of his neck, and was unable to endure stillness for more than a few moments. Now and then he cast shy and ashamed glances at the old man, who sat in the perfect posture, eyes turned inward, face floating above his body in inviolable serenity like the head of a flower.

On this day, when the yogi rose and turned toward the hut, Dasa went up to him. He had waited long for this moment, and now blocked his way and with the courage of fear addressed him.

"Forgive me for disturbing your peace, reverend father," he said. "I am seeking peace, tranquility; I would like to live as you do and become like you. As you see, I am still young, but I have already tasted much suffering. Destiny has played cruelly with me. I was born to be a prince and cast out to become a herdsman. I became a herdsman, grew up, strong and happy as a young bull, innocent in my heart. Then my eyes were opened to women, and when I beheld the most beautiful of them, I put my life at her service. Not to possess her would have killed me. I left my companions, the herdsmen. I sued for Pravati's hand, was granted it, became a son-in-law, and labored hard for her. But Pravati was mine and loved me, or so I thought. Every evening I returned to her arms, lay upon her heart. Then, behold, the Rajah came to the neighborhood, the same on whose account I had been cast out as a child. He came and took Pravati from me; I was condemned to see her in his arms. That was the greatest agony I have ever experienced; it changed me and my whole life. I slew the Rajah. I killed and led the life of a criminal and fugitive. Every man's hand was against me; my life was not safe for an hour until I stumbled upon this place. I am a foolish man, reverend father; I am a killer

and perhaps may still be caught and drawn and quartered. I can no longer endure this terrible life; I want to be done with it."

The yogi had listened quietly to this outburst, with downcast eyes. Now he opened them and fixed his gaze upon Dasa's face, a bright, piercing, almost unbearably firm, composed, and lucid gaze. And while he studied Dasa's face, seemingly pondering his tale, his mouth slowly twisted into a smile, then a laugh. Soundlessly laughing, he shook his head, and said: "Maya! Maya!"

Utterly bewildered and shamed, Dasa stood stock still. The yogi, before his evening meal, took a short walk on the narrow path that led into the ferns. With quiet, rhythmic step he paced back and forth. After several hundred paces, he returned and entered his hut. His face was once more as it had always been, turned toward something other than the world of appearances. What had been the meaning of the laugh breaking through that impassive countenance? Had that terrible laughter at Dasa's anguished confession and plea been benevolent or mocking, comforting or condemning, divine or demonic? Had it been merely the cynical bleat of an old man no longer able to take things seriously, or the amusement of a sage at another's folly? Had it been rejection, farewell, dismissal? Or was it meant as advice, an invitation to Dasa to follow his example and join in his laughter? Dasa could not solve the riddle. Late into the night he continued to ponder the meaning of this laughter with which the old man seemed to have summed up his life, his happiness, and his misery. His thoughts chewed on it as if it were a tough root that somehow had a hidden savor. And likewise he chewed upon and pondered and mulled over the word that the old man had called out so loudly, so laughingly and gaily and with such incomprehensible amusement: "Maya! Maya!" He half knew, half guessed the general meaning of the word, and the intonation the laughing old man had given it seemed also to suggest a meaning. Maya -- that was Dasa's life, Dasa's youth, Dasa's sweet felicity and bitter misery. Beautiful Pravati was Maya; love and its delights were Maya; all life was Maya. To the eyes of this yogi Dasa's life, all men's lives, everything was Maya, was a kind of childishness, a spectacle,

theater, an illusion, emptiness in bright wrappings, a soap bubble -- something one could laugh at and at the same time despise, but by no means take seriously.

But although the yogi might be able to dismiss Dasa's life with laughter and the word Maya, Dasa himself could not. Much as he might wish to become a laughing yogi himself, and to see his own life as nothing but Maya, the whole of that life had been roused in him once more during these restive days and nights. He remembered now all the things he had nearly forgotten when he found refuge here after the stresses of his life as a fugitive. There seemed to him only the slightest hope that he would ever be able to learn the art of yoga, let alone to become as adept at it as the old man himself. But then -- what was the sense of his lingering in this forest? It had been an asylum; he had recuperated a bit and gathered strength, had come to his senses somewhat. That was something, was in fact a great deal. And perhaps out in the country the hunt for the Rajah's murderer had ended and he could continue his wanderings without any great danger.

He decided to do so. He would depart next day. The world was vast; he could not remain in this hiding place forever.

This decision gave him a measure of peace.

He had intended to leave at dawn. But when he awoke after a long sleep the sun was already high in the sky. The yogi had begun his meditation, and Dasa did not want to leave without bidding good-by. Moreover, he still had a request to make. And so he waited, hour after hour, until the man rose, stretched his limbs, and began his pacing. Then Dasa once more blocked his way, bowed repeatedly, and obstinately remained until the master directed an inquiring look at him.

"Master," he said humbly, "I am going my way. I shall no longer disturb your tranquility. But permit me a request this one last time, venerable father. When I told you about my life, you laughed and exclaimed, 'Maya!' I implore you, teach me more about Maya."

The yogi turned toward the hut, his eyes commanding Dasa

to follow. Picking up the water gourd, the old man held it out to Dasa, signing to him to wash his hands. Obediently, Dasa did so. Then the master poured the remainder of the water into the ferns, held the gourd out to Dasa once again, and asked him to fetch fresh water. Dasa obeyed. He ran, emotions of parting tugging at his heart, for the last time down the little footpath to the spring. For the last time he carried the light husk with its smooth, worn rim to the little pool which so often reflected in scattered flecks of light the muzzles of deer, the arching of treetops, and the sweet blue of the sky. Now, as he stooped over it, it reflected for the last time his own face in the russet dusk. He dipped the gourd slowly and thoughtfully into the water, feeling a weird sense of uncertainty. He could not understand why, or why it had hurt him, since he meant to leave anyhow, that the old man had not asked him to stay a while longer, or perhaps stay forever.

Crouching by the brink of the spring, he took a drink. Then he rose, holding the gourd carefully so as not to spill any of the water. He was about to return along the path when his ear caught a tone that both delighted and horrified him. This was the voice he had heard in so many of his dreams, that he had remembered with such bitter longing in many a waking hour. It coaxed so sweetly, sounded so charming, so childlike and loving in the dusk of the forest, that his heart shivered with fright and pleasure. It was his wife Pravati's voice. "Dasa," she called coaxingly.

Incredulously, he looked around, still holding the gourd; and suddenly she appeared among the tree trunks, slender as a reed on her long legs -- Pravati, his unforgettable, faithless beloved. He dropped the gourd and ran toward her. Smiling, somewhat abashed, she stood before him, looking up at him with her big doe's eyes. As he approached he saw that she wore red leather sandals and a beautiful, costly dress. There was a gold bracelet on her arm, and precious stones flashed in her black hair. He checked his stride. Was she still a rajah's concubine? Had he not killed Nala? Was she still going about with his gifts? How could she come before him adorned with these clasps and gems and dare to call his name? '

But she was lovelier than ever, and before he had time to demand an explanation he could not resist taking her into his arms, pressing his forehead against her hair, raising her face and kissing her mouth; and as he did so he felt that everything had returned to him, that everything was his once more, all that he had ever possessed, his happiness, love, lust, joy in life, passion. All his thoughts had already moved far from the forest and the old hermit; the woods, the hermitage, meditation, and yoga had vanished, were forgotten. He gave not another thought to the old man's gourd, which he was to bring back filled with water. It remained where he had dropped it by the spring as he rushed toward Pravati. And she, for her part, began hastily to tell him how it was she had come here, and all that had happened in the interval.

Her story was astonishing, astonishing and delightful, like a fairy tale, and Dasa plunged into his new life as if it were a fairy tale. Pravati was his again; the odious Rajah Nala dead. The pursuit of the murderer had long since ceased. But more than all that, Dasa, the prince who had become a herdsman, had been proclaimed the rightful heir and ruler. In the city an old herdsman and an old Brahman had revived the almost forgotten story of his expulsion and made it the talk of the country. He who had been hunted high and low to be tortured and executed as Nala's murderer was now being sought much more ardently throughout the land, so that he could be brought solemnly to his father's palace and installed as Rajah.

It was like a dream, and what pleased the amazed Dasa most was the pretty chance that of all the seekers sent about the country, it had been Pravati who had found him and been the first to salute him. On the edge of the forest he found tents erected. The smell of smoke and roasting game filled the air, Pravati was joyously hailed by her retinue, and a great feast began at once when she presented Dasa, her husband. Among the throng was a man who had been Dasa's companion in his days as a herdsman. It was he who had led Pravati and the retinue here, with the thought that Dasa might be found at one of the places dear to him from

earlier days. The man laughed with pleasure when he recognized Dasa. He ran up to him, ready to embrace him or give him a friendly pat on the back. But his fellow herdsman had become a rajah, and he stopped as if suddenly numbed, then moved slowly and respectfully forward and bowed low. Dasa raised him, clasped him to his breast, affectionately called him by name, and asked how he could reward him. The herdsman wanted a heifer calf, and three were promptly assigned to him from the Rajah's best stock.

More and more people were introduced to the new prince: officials, huntsmen, court Brahmans. He received their salutations. A meal was served; music of drums, sitars, and nose-flutes sounded; and all the festivity and pomp seemed to Dasa like a dream. He could not fully believe in it. For the present the only reality seemed to him Pravati, his young wife, whom he again held in his arms.

Moving by small daily stages, the procession approached the capital city. Runners had been sent ahead to announce that the young Rajah had been found and was on his way. The city resounded with the boom of gongs and drums as Dasa and his retinue approached. A white-clad parade of Brahmans came forward to meet him, headed by the successor of that Vasudeva who some twenty years before had sent Dasa to the herdsman. The old man had died only recently. The Brahmans hailed the new Rajah, sang hymns, and led him to the palace, where several great sacrificial fires had been lit. Dasa was shown into his new home. There were more welcomings, homages, benedictions, and speeches. Outside the palace, the city celebrated joyfully until late into the night.

Instructed daily by two Brahmans, Dasa quickly acquired the knowledge necessary to a ruler. He attended sacrifices, pronounced judgments, and practiced the arts of chivalry and war. A Brahman named Gopala taught him politics. He explained the position of his house and its regal privileges, what claims his future sons would have, and who were his enemies. The principal one was Nala's mother who in the past had robbed Prince Dasa of his rights and had sought to take his life, and who now must

certainly hate her son's murderer. She had fled to the protection of their neighbor, Prince Govinda, and was living in his palace. This Govinda and his house had been dangerous foes from time immemorial. They had made war upon Dasa's forefathers and claimed certain parts of his territory. On the other hand the Prince of Gaipali, Dasa's neighbor to the south, had been friendly with his father and had always disliked Rajah Nala. Visiting him, lavishing gifts upon him, and inviting him to the next great hunt belonged among Dasa's important duties.

The lady Pravati had rapidly adapted to the ways of the nobility. She had the bearing of a princess, and in her beautiful dresses and jewelry she looked splendid, as if she sprang from as fine a lineage as her husband. Year after year they lived together in harmonious love, and their happiness gave them a certain glow, like those whom the gods favor, so that the people adored them. And when, after long waiting, Pravati at last bore him a beautiful boy to whom he gave his father's name, Ravana, his happiness was complete. All that he possessed, all the land and power, the estates and barns, dairies, cattle, and horses, acquired a fresh importance in his eyes, an added glory and value. His wealth had pleased him because it could be lavished on Pravati, whose loveliness could be enhanced with apparel and jewelry. Now his rich possessions delighted him all the more, and seemed far more important, because he saw in them his son Ravana's inheritance and future happiness.

Pravati's chief pleasures lay in festivals, parades, and pomp, luxury in dress and finery, and a large corps of servants. Dasa preferred the joys of his garden. He had ordered rare and precious trees and flowers planted there, and stocked the grounds with parrots and other brilliantly plumaged birds. Feeding and talking with these pets became one of his daily pleasures. In addition, learning attracted him. He proved a grateful pupil of the Brahmans, learned to read and write, memorized many poems and proverbs, and kept a personal scribe who understood the art of making scrolls out of palm leaves. Under the scribe's skillful hands a modest library grew. The books were kept in a small opulent

room with gilded paneling of precious woods, carved with reliefs representing incidents in the lives of the gods. Here he sometimes invited his Brahmans, the foremost scholars and thinkers among the priests, to conduct disputations on sacred subjects: on the creation of the world and on great Vishnu's Maya, on the holy Vedas, the power of sacrifice, and the still greater power of penance, by virtue of which a mortal man can make the very gods tremble with fear of him. Those Brahmans who had spoken best and advanced the most elegant arguments received fine gifts. As the prize for a successful disputation, some departed leading away a fine cow. On occasion there was something both ridiculous and touching when great scholars, who a few moments before had been reciting maxims from the Vedas along with brilliant exegeses of the same, or who had just proved the depth of their knowledge of all the heavens and seas, stalked off swollen with pride in their awards, or fell to bickering with one another over their prizes.

In general, for all his happiness, his wealth, his garden, and his books, Prince Dasa at times could not help regarding everything that pertained to human life and human nature as both strange and dubious, at once touching and ridiculous, like those same sagacious and vain Brahmans, at once bright and dark, desirable and contemptible. When his gaze dwelt on the lotus flowers in the ponds of his garden, on the lovely iridescent plumage of his peacocks, pheasants, and rhinoceros birds, on the gilded carvings of his palace, these things sometimes seemed to him virtually divine, aglow with the fires of eternal life. But other times, and even at the same times, he sensed in them something unreal, unreliable, questionable, a tendency toward perishability and dissolution, a readiness to relapse into formlessness, into chaos. Just as he himself had been a prince, became a herdsman, descended to the nadir of a murderer and outlaw, and ultimately became a prince once more, moved and guided by unknown powers, with all his tomorrows forever uncertain, so life's wayward Maya everywhere contained simultaneously nobility and baseness, eternity and death, grandeur and absurdity. Even his beautiful, beloved Pravati had sometimes, for brief moments,

appeared to him in a ludicrous light, stripped of her charm; she wore too many bracelets, had too much of pride and triumph in her eyes, and tried too hard to move majestically.

Even dearer to him than his garden and his books was his son Ravana, the fulfillment of his love and his life, the object of his tenderness and solicitude. He was a true prince, a lovely, delicate child, doe-eyed like his mother and inclined to pensiveness and reverie like his father. Often, when Dasa saw the boy standing for a long time in front of one of the ornamental trees in the garden, or sitting on a rug, absorbed in contemplation of a stone, a carved toy, or a feather, eyebrows slightly raised and eyes staring quietly, somewhat absently, it seemed to him that this son was very like himself. Dasa realized fully how intensely he loved him the first time that he had to leave the boy for an indefinite period.

One day a messenger arrived from the frontier region where his land bordered on that of his neighbor Govinda and reported that Govinda's men had launched a raid, stolen cattle, and even kidnapped a number of Dasa's subjects. Dasa immediately made his preparations. He took with him the colonel of his bodyguard and a few dozen horses and men, and set off in pursuit of the raiders. The moment before he rode off, he took his small son into his arms and kissed him; and love flared in his heart like a fiery pang. The force of that pang surprised him; it affected him like some bidding from the unknown; and during the long ride his reflections on it ripened into understanding. For as he rode he pondered the reason he was sitting in the saddle and galloping so sternly and swiftly over the countryside. What power, he wondered, was causing him to undertake such efforts? Pondering, he realized that at the bottom of his heart it was of small concern to him that cattle and men should have been snatched from him somewhere on his borders. Thievery and the flouting of his authority could not suffice to kindle his rage and spur him to action. It would have been more natural to him to have dismissed the news of the raid with a compassionate smile. But to have done so, he knew, would have been to commit a bitter injustice to the

messenger. The poor fellow had run all the way with his news until he was ready to drop with exhaustion. No less would he have wronged the people who had been captured and who were now prisoners, carried away from their homes and their peaceful life into foreign slavery. Moreover, all his other subjects, though they had not been harmed in the least, would also have felt wronged. They would have resented his passivity, not understanding why the prince could not protect his country better. They took it for granted that if violence were done to any of them they could count upon their ruler for aid and vengeance.

He realized that it was his duty to undertake this expedition of reprisal. But what is duty? How many duties there are that we so often neglect without the slightest compunction? What was the reason that this duty of vengeance was no trivial one, that he could not neglect it, and that in fact he was not performing it perfunctorily and halfheartedly, but with zest and passion? As soon as the question arose in his mind, his heart answered it, for once again it quivered with that pang he had felt on parting from little Prince Ravana. If the Rajah, he realized, made no resistance when cattle and people were taken from him, robbery and violence would spread from the borders of his country closer and closer to the center, and ultimately the enemy would stand directly before him and would strike him where he was prone to the bitterest pain: in the person of his son. They would take his son, his successor, from him; they would carry the boy off and kill him, perhaps under torture; and that would be the most extreme suffering he could ever experience, even worse, far worse, than the death of Pravati herself. So that was the reason he was riding off so zealously and was so dutiful a sovereign. Not from concern for the loss of cattle and land, not from kindness for his subjects, not from ambition to match his father's noble name, but out of intense, painful, irrational love for this child, and out of intense, irrational fear of the pain he would feel at the loss of this child.

Thus far he had come in understanding during that ride. He had not, however, managed to apprehend and punish Govinda's men. They escaped with their booty, and in order to show his

determination and prove his courage he himself now had to raid across the border, damage one of his neighbor's villages, and carry off some cattle and a few slaves.

He had been away many days. On the homeward ride, a victor, he had again sunk into meditation, and returned home very quietly and rather sorrowful. For in the course of his meditations he had realized how entirely ensnared he was, without any hope of escaping; his whole nature and all his actions were caught and being strangled in a diabolic net. While his leaning toward philosophy, his love for quiet contemplation and a life of innocence and inaction, were constantly growing, there was likewise growing from another source his love for Ravana, his anxiety about his son's life and future, an equally forceful compulsion to action and entanglement. Out of affection grew conflict, out of love war. Already, in the effort to mete out justice, he had seized a herd, terrified a village, and forcibly carried off poor innocent people. Out of that, of course, would grow a new act of vengeance, new violence, and so on and on until his whole life and his whole country were plunged in warfare and violence and the clash of arms. It was this insight, or vision, which made him so silent and sorrowful upon his homecoming.

He had been right, for the hostile neighbor gave him no peace. The incursions and raids were repeated. Dasa had to march out again for reprisals and defense, and when the enemy withdrew, his own soldiers and chasseurs had to be turned upon the neighboring people. Mounted and armed men were more and more a familiar sight in the capital. In a good many frontier villages there were now permanent garrisons of soldiers on guard. Military conferences and preparations troubled Dasa's days. He could not see what purpose this endless guerrilla warfare served; he grieved for the plight of the victims, for the lives of the dead. He grieved because more and more he had to neglect his garden and his books. He grieved for the lost peace of his days and his heart. Often he spoke with Gopala, the Brahman, about these matters, and sometimes with his wife Pravati.

Should they not ask one of the respected neighboring princes

to act as mediator? For his part he would gladly help to bring about peace by conciliation and surrendering a few pastures and villages. He was disappointed and somewhat angered when neither the Brahman nor Pravati would hear of anything of the kind.

His difference of opinion with Pravati on this question led to an extremely violent quarrel, and ended with a serious estrangement. Insistently, he pleaded his points with her. But she behaved as if every word were directed not against the war and the useless killing, but solely against herself. In a verbose, furious retort she declared that it was precisely the enemy's aim to take advantage of Dasa's good nature and love of peace (not to say his fear of war); the enemy would persuade him to conclude one peace treaty after another, each paid for in small concessions of territory and population. And in the end he would still not be satisfied, but as soon as Dasa was sufficiently weakened, would return to open war and seize everything that was left to him. She was not concerned about herds and villages, merits and demerits, but with the fate of the whole, their survival or annihilation. And if Dasa did not know what he owed to his dignity, his son, and his wife, she would have to be the one to teach him. Her eyes blazed; her voice shook; it was long since he had seen her so beautiful and so passionate, but he felt only sorrow.

Meanwhile the border raids and breaches of peace continued; they came to a temporary end only with the beginning of the rainy season. By now there were two factions at Dasa's court. One side, the peace party, was very small; aside from Dasa it numbered only a few of the older Brahmans. These were all learned men absorbed in their meditations. But the war party, the party of Pravati and Gopala, had the majority of priests and all the army officers on its side. The country armed feverishly, and it was known that the hostile neighbor was doing the same. The chief huntsman instructed Prince Ravana in the art of the bow, and his mother took him along to every inspection of troops.

During this period Dasa sometimes thought of the forest where he had lived for a while as a poor fugitive, and of the

white-haired old hermit who lived there absorbed in contemplation. Sometimes he felt a desire to call upon the yogi, to see him again and ask his advice. But he did not know whether the old man was still living, nor whether he would listen and give counsel. And even if he were alive and would advise, everything would nevertheless take its course. Nothing could be changed. Meditation and wisdom were good, were noble things, but apparently they throve only on the margin of life. If you swam in the stream of life and struggled with its waves, your acts and suffering had nothing to do with wisdom. They came about of their own accord, were fated, and had to be done and suffered. Even the gods did not live in eternal peace and eternal wisdom. They too experienced danger and fear, struggle and battle; that he knew from the many tales of the gods.

And so Dasa yielded. He no longer contended with Pravati. He reviewed the troops, saw the war coming, anticipated it in debilitating dreams, and as his body grew leaner, and his face darker, he saw his happiness fading, his gaiety shriveling. There remained only his love for his son. That increased along with his anxiety, increased along with the arming and the drilling of soldiers. It was the flaming red flower in his parching garden. He wondered at how much emptiness and joylessness a man could endure; at how easy it was to grow accustomed to care and gloom, and he also wondered that so anxious and solicitous a love could so painfully dominate a life that had seemingly lost the capacity for passion. Although his life might be meaningless, it was certainly not without a center; it revolved around his love for his son. It was on Ravana's account that he rose from his bed in the morning and spent his days in occupations and exertions directed solely toward war, and therefore repugnant to him. On Ravana's account he patiently conferred with his generals, and withstood majority opinion only to the extent that he prevailed on them to wait and see, not plunge recklessly into adventures.

Just as his joys, his garden, and his books had gradually deserted him, so he was also deserted by those who for so many years had shaped his happiness and represented his pleasures. It

had begun with politics, with Pravati's passionate speech excoriating his fear of sinning and love of peace, almost openly calling all that cowardice. She had spoken with flushed cheeks and in fiery phrases of heroism, a prince's honor, and the prospect of disgrace. At that time, stunned and with a sense of giddiness, he had suddenly realized how far his wife had become estranged from him, or he from her. Ever since, the gulf between them had widened. It was still growing, and neither of them did anything to check its growth. Or rather, it should have fallen to Dasa to do something about it. For only he saw the gulf for what it was. In his imagination it more and more grew into the gulf of gulfs, became a cosmic abyss between man and woman, between yes and no, between soul and body. In retrospect he thought he saw the whole thing with, complete clarity. He remembered how Pravati, magically beautiful, had captivated him until he parted with his friends, gave up his carefree life as a herdsman, and for her sake lived as a servant in an alien world, the son-in-law in the house of unkind people who exploited his infatuation to extract labor from him. Then Nala had come along, and his misfortunes had begun. The wealthy, handsome Rajah with his fine clothes and tents, his horses and servants, had seduced his wife. That might have cost him little effort, for poor Pravati had not been accustomed to regal splendor. But would she really have been led astray so easily and quickly if she had been faithful and virtuous at heart? Very well, the Rajah had seduced her, or simply taken her, and thus inflicted upon him the most horrible grief he had ever experienced. But he, Dasa, had taken revenge. He had killed the thief of his happiness, and had felt the killing as a moment of high triumph. But scarcely was the deed done than he had had to flee. For days, weeks, and months he had lived in swamp and forest, an outlaw, trusting no man.

And what had Pravati been doing all that time? The two of them had never spoken much about that. In any case, she had not fled also. She had sought and found him only after he had been proclaimed Nala's successor, because of his birth, and she needed him in order to enter the palace and ascend the throne. Then she

had appeared, had fetched him from the forest and the venerable hermit's purlieus. He had been dressed in fine garments, made Rajah, and since then he had had nothing but glory and felicity -- but in reality: what had he abandoned at that time, and what had he gained in exchange? He had gained the splendor and the duties of a sovereign, duties that had been initially easy and had ever since grown harder and harder. He had regained his beautiful wife, the sweet hours of lovemaking with her, and then his son, who had taught his heart a new kind of love and increasing concern for his imperiled life and happiness, so that now the whole country was on the brink of war. This was what Pravati had conferred upon him when she discovered him by the spring in the woods. But what had he left behind, what had he sacrificed? He had left behind the peace of the forest, pious solitude, and the presence and the example of a holy yogi. In addition he had sacrificed the hope of becoming a disciple and successor, of sharing the sage's profound, radiant, unshakable peace of soul, of being liberated from the struggles and passions of life. Seduced by Pravati's beauty, entangled by the woman, and infected by her ambition, he had abandoned the only way that led to liberation and peace.

That was how the story of his life appeared to him now. And in fact it could easily be interpreted thus. Only a few blurrings and omissions were needed to see it that way. He had omitted, among other things, the fact that he had not been the hermit's disciple at all. On the contrary, he had been on the point of leaving him voluntarily. But perspectives often shift in hindsight.

Pravati regarded these matters quite differently, although she was far less inclined to reflection than her husband. She did not think about Nala at all. On the other hand, if she remembered rightly it had been she alone who had founded Dasa's good fortune. She was responsible for his becoming the Rajah. She had given him a son, had lavished love and happiness upon him. But in the end she had found him unable to match her greatness, unworthy of her soaring projects. For it was clear to her that the coming war could have no outcome other than the destruction of

the enemy and the doubling of her own power and possessions. But instead of exulting in this prospect and collaborating enthusiastically, Dasa, most unlike a prince, hung back from war and conquest and would have preferred to grow old idling away his time with his flowers, trees, parrots, and books. On the other hand there was Vishwamitra, the commander of the cavalry forces. He was a different sort of man, next to herself the most ardent partisan of the war, repeatedly urging that they strike for victory as soon as possible. In any comparison between the two, Vishwamitra could not help showing to advantage.

Dasa had not failed to notice his wife's growing friendship with Vishwamitra. He saw how much she admired him, and let herself be admired by this brave and cheerful but possibly rather shallow, perhaps somewhat unintelligent army officer with his manly smile, his fine strong teeth and well-tended beard. Dasa observed it all with bitterness and at the same time with contempt. He deceived himself into thinking he felt only scornful indifference. He did not spy on them or try to discover whether their friendship had overstepped the limits of decency. He regarded Pravati's infatuation with the handsome cavalryman, and the looks which showed how she preferred him to her unheroic husband, with the same outwardly indifferent, inwardly embittered calm with which he was wont to view everything that happened. Whether his wife was determined upon infidelity and betrayal, or whether she was merely expressing her contempt for Dasa's principles, it did not matter. The thing had come and was developing, was beginning to confront him like the war and the disaster whose imminence he sensed. There was nothing to be done about it. The only possible attitude toward it was one of acceptance, of stoic endurance. For that, instead of attack and conquest, was Dasa's kind of manliness and heroism.

Whether or not Pravati's admiration for the cavalry captain, and his for her, remained within the bounds of morality, in any case Pravati was less guilty than he, Dasa, himself. That much he understood. To be sure, thinker and doubter that he was, he tended to blame her for the evaporation of his happiness. Or at

any rate he considered that she was partly responsible for his having stumbled into the complexities of life, into love, into ambition, into acts of revenge and raids. In his thoughts he even blamed woman, love, and lust for everything on earth, for the whole crazy dance, the whole wild chase of passions and desires, of adultery, of death, of killing, of war. But at the same time he knew quite well that Pravati was not to blame. She was not a cause, but herself a victim. She had not made, and could not be held accountable for, either her beauty or his love for her. She was only a grain of dust in the rays of the sun, a ripple in the stream. It should have been his task, and his alone, to withdraw from woman and love, from ambition and the hunger for happiness. He should have remained either a contented cowherd among herdsmen, or else he should have tried to overcome his own inadequacy by the mysterious path of yoga. He had neglected to do so, had failed; he had no vocation for greatness, or else he had not kept faith with his vocation, so that after all his wife was right to regard him as a coward. On the other hand, she had given him this son, this frail, handsome boy for whom he felt so fearful but whose existence filled his own life with meaning, who was in fact a great joy -- a painful and fearful joy, certainly, but still a joy, his true happiness. Now he was paying for this happiness with the sorrow and bitterness in his heart, with his readiness for war and death, with his consciousness of moving toward a dire fate.

Meanwhile Rajah Govinda sat in his own capital, listening to the bidding of the mother of Nala, the slain seducer of evil memory. Govinda's incursions and challenges were growing ever more frequent and brazen. Only an alliance with the powerful Rajah of Gaipali could have made Dasa strong enough to enforce peace and neighborly relations. But this Rajah, although he was well disposed toward Dasa, was Govinda's kinsman and had politely repulsed all efforts to win him over to such an alliance. There was no escape, no hope of sanity or humanity. The fated outcome was drawing nearer and would have to be undergone. Dasa himself almost longed for the war now. If only the accumulated lightnings would strike; if only the calamity would

come speedily, since it could no longer be averted.

Once more he paid a visit to the Rajah of Gaipali and exchanged fruitless courtesies with him. In his council he urged moderation and patience, but by now he was doing so without hope. For the rest, he improved his armaments. The council was divided only on the question of whether to respond to the enemy's next raid with invasion of his territory and outright war, or whether to await his major offensive, so that the people and all neutrals would see who was truly guilty of violating the peace.

The enemy, unconcerned with such questions, put an end to reflection, discussion, and hesitation. One day he struck. He staged a major raid which inveigled Dasa, along with the cavalry captain and his best troops, into rushing to the frontier. While they were on the way, Govinda's main force invaded the country, stormed the gates of Dasa's capital, and besieged the palace. As soon as Dasa heard the news he turned back. He knew that his wife and his son were encircled in the palace, and that bloody battles were raging in the streets of the city. His heart pounded with fury and sorrow when he thought of his loved ones and the dangers that faced them. Now he was no longer a reluctant and cautious commander. He burned with anguish and rage, urged his men homeward in wild haste, found the battle surging through the streets, cut his way through to the palace, confronted the enemy and fought like a madman until, at twilight on that bloody day, he collapsed exhausted, bleeding from several wounds.

When he recovered consciousness, he found himself a prisoner. The battle was lost. City and palace were in the hands of his enemies. Bound, he was taken before Govinda, who greeted him disdainfully and led him into one of the other rooms of the palace. It was the room with the carved and gilded walls where Dasa kept his scrolls. Here, sitting bolt upright on one of the rugs, stony-faced, was his wife Pravati. Armed guards stood behind her. Across her knees lay their son. Like a broken flower that frail body lay dead, face gray, his garments soaked with blood. The woman did not turn when her husband was led in. She did not see him; she sat staring expressionlessly at the small corpse. But she

seemed to Dasa strangely transformed. It took a while before he realized that her hair, which only a few days before he had seen raven black, was now everywhere shot through with gray. She seemed to have been sitting that way for a long time, the boy on her lap, numbed, her face a mask.

"Ravana!" Dasa exclaimed. "Ravana, my child, my flower!" He knelt. His face fell forward upon the dead boy's head. As if in prayer he knelt before the mute woman and the child, mourning both, paying homage to both. He smelled the odor of blood and death, mingled with the fragrance of the aromatic pomade on the child's hair.

With numbed gaze Pravati stared blankly down at the two of them.

Someone touched his shoulder. It was one of Govinda's captains, who ordered him to stand up. The soldiers led him out. He had not addressed a word to Pravati, or she to him.

Bound, he was placed on a wagon and taken to a dungeon in Govinda's capital. There his fetters were partly loosened. A soldier brought a jug of water and put it on the stone floor. The door was closed and barred, and he was left alone. A wound on his shoulder burned like fire. He groped for the water jug and moistened his hands and face. He wanted to drink, but forbore; this way he would die faster, he thought. How much longer would it take, how much longer! He longed for death as his parched throat longed for water. Only death would still the torture in his heart. Only then would the picture of the mother with their dead son be erased. But in the midst of his agony, merciful weariness and weakness overcame him. He sank down and fell asleep.

When he returned hazily to consciousness after this brief slumber, he tried to rub his eyes, but could not. Both hands were occupied, were holding something tightly. When he took heart and forced his eyes open, he saw that he was no longer surrounded by dungeon walls. Greenish light flowed bright and strong over leaves and moss. He bunched several times. The light struck him like a fierce though noiseless blow. A twitch of horror, a shudder of

fear, passed through the nape of his neck and down his spine. Once more he blinked, screwed up his face as if he were weeping, and opened his eyes wide.

He was standing in a forest, holding in both hands a gourd full of water. At his feet the basin of a spring reflected browns and greens. Beyond the fern thicket, he recalled, stood the hut and the waiting yogi who had sent him to fetch water, who had laughed so strangely and whom he had asked to teach him something about Maya.

He had lost neither a battle nor a son. He had been neither a rajah nor a father. Rather, the yogi had granted his wish and taught him about Maya. Palace and garden, library and aviary, the cares of sovereignty and paternal love, war and jealousy, his love for Pravati and his violent suspicion of her -- all that had been nothing. No, not nothing. It had been Maya! Dasa stood there shattered. Tears ran down his cheeks. His hands trembled, shaking the gourd he had just filled for the hermit. Water spilled over the rim and onto his feet. He felt as if someone had just amputated one of his limbs, removed something from his head. Suddenly the long years he had lived, the treasures cherished, the delights enjoyed, the pangs suffered, the fears endured, the despair he had tasted to the brink of death -- all this had been taken from him, extinguished, reduced to nothingness. And yet not to nothingness! For the memory was there. The images had remained with him. He still saw Pravati sitting, tall and rigid, with her hair so suddenly gray, her son in her lap, as though she herself had killed him. The child lay there like the prey of some beast, his legs dangling limply across her knees.

Oh how swiftly, how swiftly and horribly, how cruelly and thoroughly, had he been taught about Maya! Everything had been deranged; charged years had shrunk to moments. All that crowded reality had been a dream. Perhaps, too, he had dreamed all that had happened previously; the tales of Prince Dasa, of his life as a herdsman, his marriage, his vengeance upon Nala, his taking refuge with the hermit. All that had been pictures such as one might admire on a carved palace frieze where flowers, stars,

birds, monkeys, and gods could be seen amid the foliage. And was what he was experiencing this moment, what he saw before his eyes, awakening from rulership and war and imprisonment, standing beside the spring, this gourd from which he had just spilled a little water, together with what he was now thinking about it all -- was not all this made of the same stuff? Was it not dream, illusion, Maya? And everything he would still experience in the future, would see with his eyes and feel with his hands, up to the moment of his death -- was it any different in substance, any different in kind? It was all a game and a sham, all foam and dream. It was Maya, the whole lovely and frightful, delicious and desperate kaleidoscope of life with its searing delights, its searing griefs.

Dasa still stood numbed. Again the gourd shook in his hands and its water spilled, wetting his toes and running into the ground. What ought he to do? Fill the bowl again, carry it back to the yogi, and be laughed at for all that he had suffered in his dream? That was not alluring. He let the gourd tilt, emptied it, and threw it into the moss. Then he sat down on the green bed and began to reflect seriously. He had had enough and more than enough of this dreaming, of this diabolic texture of experiences, joys, and sufferings that crushed your heart and made your blood stand still, only to be suddenly revealed as Maya, so that you were nothing but a fool. He had had enough of everything. He no longer craved either wife or child, either a throne or victory or revenge, either happiness or cleverness, either power or virtue. He desired nothing but peace, nothing but an end of turmoil. He no longer wanted anything but to check this endlessly turning wheel, to stop this endless spectacle, to extinguish it all. He wanted to find rest for himself and extinguish himself. That was what he had wanted when he hurled himself at the enemy in that last battle, slashing all about and being slashed at in return, giving wounds and receiving them, until he collapsed. But what then? Then there was a brief pause of unconsciousness, or slumber, or death, and immediately afterward you were awake again, had to admit the currents of life into your heart once more and once more let the

dreadful, lovely, terrible flood of pictures pour into your eyes, endlessly, inescapably, until the next unconsciousness, until the next death. That was, perhaps, a pause, a moment of rest, a chance to catch your breath. But then it went on, and once again you were one of the thousand figures engaged in the wild, intoxicating, desperate dance of life. Ah, there was no extinction. It went on forever.

Unrest drove him to his feet once more. If there were no rest in this accursed round-dance, if his one most acute desire could not be fulfilled, then he might just as well fill his gourd again and bring it to this old man who had sent him on this errand, although he did not really have any right of command over him. It was a service that had been asked of him. It was an assignment. He might just as well obey and carry it out. That was better than sitting here and pondering methods of self-destruction. Altogether, obeying and serving were better and far easier, seemlier and far more harmless, than commanding and taking responsibility. That much he knew. Very well, Dasa, take the gourd, fill it carefully with water, and bring it to your master!

When he reached the hut, the master received him with a strange look, a slightly questioning, half-compassionate, half-amused look of complicity -- such a look as an older boy might have for a younger one whom he sees returning from a strenuous and somewhat shameful adventure, a test of courage that has been assigned to him. This herdsman prince, this poor fellow who had stumbled in here, was only coming back from the spring, where he had been for water, and had been gone no more than fifteen minutes. But still he was also coming from a dungeon, had lost a wife, a son, and a principality, had completed a human life and had caught a glimpse of the revolving wheel. The chances were that this young man had already been wakened once or several times before, and had breathed a mouthful of reality, for otherwise he would not have come here and stayed so long. But now he seemed to have been properly awakened and become ripe for setting out on the long journey. It would take a good many years just to teach this young man the proper posture and

breathing.

By this look alone, this look which contained a trace of benevolent sympathy and the hint of a relationship that had come into being between them, the relationship between master and disciple -- by this look alone the yogi accepted the disciple. This one look banished the fruitless thoughts from the disciple's head. It bound him in discipline and service. There is no more to be told about Dasa's life, for all the rest took place in a realm beyond pictures and stories. He never again left the forest.