**Toru Dutt**

**Lakshman**

"Hark! Lakshman! Hark, again that cry!

It is, — it is my husband's voice!

Oh hasten, to his succour fly,

No more hast thou, dear friend, a choice.

He calls on thee, perhaps his foes

Environ him on all sides round,

That wail, — it means death's final throes!

Why standest thou, as magic-bound?

"Is this a time for thought, — oh gird

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,

The man to whom all looked at need?

Is it my brother that I see!

"Oh no, and I must run alone,

For further here I cannot stay;

Art thou transformed to blind dumb stone!

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"

"Oh calm thyself, Videhan Queen,

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

Could ever brave his mighty arm?

Is there a creature on earth

That dares to work our hero harm?

"The lion and the grisly bear

Cower when they see his royal look,

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

Erect before in hooded pride.

"Rakshasas, Danavs, demons, ghosts,

Acknowledge in their hearts his might,

And slink to their remotest coasts,

In terror at his very sight.

Evil to him! Oh fear it not,

Whatever foes against him rise!

Banish for aye the foolish thought,

And be thyself, — bold, great, and wise.

"He call for help! Canst thou believe

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;

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

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."

"Oh shame! and canst thou make my weal

A plea for lingering! Now I know

What thou art, Lakshman! And I feel

Far better were an open foe.

Art thou a coward? I have seen

Thy bearing in the battle-fray

Where flew the death-fraught arrows keen,

Else had I judged thee so today.

"But then thy leader stood beside!

Dazzles the cloud when shines the sun,

Reft of his radiance, see it glide

A shapeless mass of vapours dun;

So of thy courage, — or if not,

The matter is far darker dyed,

What makes thee loth to leave this spot?

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!

Search well and see! one brother takes

His kingdom, — one would take his wife!

A fair partition! — But it makes

Me shudder, and abhor my life.

"Art thou in secret league with those

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 now

When first thou heardst that well known voice

Thou shouldst have run to aid, I trow.

"Learn this, — whatever comes may come,

But I shall not survive my Love,

Of all my thoughts here is the sum!

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.

"Remain here with a vain pretence

Of shielding me from wrong and shame,

Or go and die in his defence

And leave behind a noble name.

Choose what thou wilt, — I urge no more,

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 Sita? No.

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

And torture me, like poisoned swords.

"Have I deserved this at thine hand?

Of lifelong loyalty and truth

Is this the meed? I understand

Thy feelings, Sita, and in sooth

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!

"In going hence I disregard

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,

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

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.

"And now farewell! What thou hast said,

Though it has broken quite my heart,

So that I wish I were dead —

I would before, O Queen, we part,

Freely forgive, for well I know

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,

Whose voices in the breezes swell

And blend with noises of cascades,

Watch over Sita, whom alone

I leave, and keep her safe from harm,

Till we return unto our own,

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

Shall tread all adversaries down,

Whoeve'r they may chance to be.

Farewell, O Sita! Blessings crown

And peace for ever rest with thee!"

He said, and straight his weapons took

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

All dangers. Hoarse the vulture screamed,

As out he strode with dauntless air.

**Summary**

The poem "Lakshman" is from Dutt's Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan (1882).

The poem takes this story from the Ramayana and opens up the discussion between Sita and Laskhman, expanding it beyond what is present in the epic. Still, much of the core elements of their dialogue are preserved from the epic. First, Sita warns Lakshman to take heed of what are allegedly Rama's cries. When Lakshman tries to counsel Sita otherwise, she accuses him of conspiring to bring Rama down and take her for his own wife. Lakshman is harmed by her words and finally bows to her wishes, drawing a circle with an arrow that she is not to cross while he goes out to assist Rama. Despite the fact that Sita is enraged and has hurt Lakshman's feelings, however, he is calm, only speaking to bless Sita and pray that the deities of the forest will keep her safe when he leaves. The poem ends with a "sorrow dark" on Lakshman's face and a "vulture scream[ing]" as he departs.

**Analysis**

In terms of its form and rhyme scheme, the poem is written in twenty-two stanzas of eight lines each and closely mirrors a standard ballad, with each stanza consisting of alternating rhymes. Importantly, however, the stanzas of a standard ballad are only four lines, so the doubling of the line count per stanza in "Lakshman" might be meant to reflect the dialogue occurring between Lakshman and Sita. Also important to Dutt's rendition of the legend is her preservation of language that mirrors other translations from the Sanskrit original, such as "succour" and "Videhan Queen" in reference to Sita. This lends Dutt's rendition the authority of an accurate and rigorous account while still allowing her to innovate greatly on the story.

Where Dutt chooses to embellish the original account, then, is in providing additional descriptions of both the surroundings and Rama, so as to round out the sentiments conveyed by both Lakshman and Sita. First, when Lakshman begins speaking in stanza 4, he quickly begins listing a series of figures that would cower before Rama, adapted from the original, including "the lion and the grisly bear," "sun-staring eagles," "pythons and cobras," "Rakshases, Danavs, demons, [and] ghosts." The rhymes that are set up between these beings and their surroundings reinforces not only their connection to nature, but also Rama's supremacy—his power both to make the world and her children bow before him and his might. Further, the move from natural animals such as lions and bears to supernatural figures such as Raskshases and ghosts emphasizes that Rama is a being who commands not only things of natural significance, but also things of divine import.

Second, Dutt has Sita taunt Lakshman and his supposed cowardice by means of a new, original metaphor: "But then thy leader stood beside! / Dazzles the cloud when shines the sun, / Reft of his radiance, see it glide / A shapeless mass of vapours dun; / So of thy courage,—or if not, / The matter is far darker dyed, / What makes thee loth to leave this spot? / Is there a motive thou wouldst hide?" Sita here is comparing Lakshman to a cloud that seems to shine only when it borrows the light or radiance of the sun. She suggests that Lakshman's courage is similar, only present when his brother (who is like the sun) is around; otherwise, Sita suggests, Lakshman is cowardly, just as the cloud is "shapeless" and "dun" without the sun's light. This metaphor connects Lakshman to the natural world as well, conveying the message that he himself is also inferior to Rama, who is the master of nature. The later detail of Sita shooting "flames from her eyes" paints Sita also as a goddess or supernatural being that Lakshman must not deny, further isolating Lakshman from the couple of Sita and Rama.

Finally, at the poem's close, Lakshman turns to nature and prays that it will keep Sita safe from harm, in a manner adapted from the original but far more explicit and extensive: "And oh ye sylvan gods that dwell / Among these dim and sombre shades, / Whose voices in the breezes swell / And blend with noises of cascades / Watch over Sita." As a merely loyal servant to the more powerful Rama and Sita, he must entrust nature with the task of protection when he fails. Further, the "hoarse" scream of a vulture serves as an ill omen that foreshadows Sita's eventual abduction by Ravana. Here, too, nature seems to play an important role as it mirrors the affairs of the demigods and legendary figured depicted in the Ramayana.

The poem is thus characteristic of many of Dutt's interests—the relationship of humanity, divinity, and nature; the complexity of family relationships; the experience of loss or bereavement; and the merging of English verse forms and poetic traditions with her own innovations and Indian inspirations. At the same time, its more formal tone and register—as distinct from those of other, more personal poems in the collection such as "The Tree of Life" and "Our Casuarina Tree"—also shows that, in writing this poem, Dutt was intentionally calling back to something other than her own experience, something deeply rooted in tradition and timeless in its telling and retelling over time.