

The Story of Rama: A Synopsis

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Prologue

Long ago in ancient India, a wandering poet named Valmiki met a hunter in the forest. That wild hunter had just shot an arrow, cruelly killing a male krauncha-bird (3).^{*} Until this unexpected disaster, the krauncha-bird had lived happily with his mate. But now he lay dead, and the female krauncha-bird wailed in sorrow. Hearing the mournful cries of the female bird, Valmiki turned to the hunter and said:

O Hunter! May you ne'er be blest
Nor reach the realm of timeless rest.¹
For thou hast rent² this krauncha-pair
While they were joined in love most rare.

As soon as he said these words, Valmiki knew that he had invented a form of poetry never used before. This verse had four lines, each with eight syllables, and contained some rhymes. He called the new stanza a shloka, as it reminded him of shoka, the Sanskrit word for "grief." It was sorrow and grief that Valmiki had felt when he was first moved to rebuke the hunter. Later, Valmiki used the shloka form to tell a story of separation and sorrow that had, for a long time, been in his heart.

^{*}When you see a number in parentheses, turn to that page to see the illustration.

¹The "realm of timeless rest" refers to what Hindus call moksha. They believe that when most people die, they are reincarnated, only to die again and be born again. Hindus strive to leave this tiresome cycle of reincarnation for a peaceful state free from rebirth and redeath. This is moksha, which means "release" or "liberation."

²"Rent" means torn apart or separated.

Valmiki's poem about separation and sorrow is known as the Ramayana. Rama is the hero's name, and ayana means "journey" or "career." In the simplest terms, the title means "The Story of Rama." Here now is the main outline of Valmiki's oft-told tale, the Ramayana.

1. Bala-kanda

The Ramayana has seven long sections called kandas. The first section, the Bala-kanda (pages 2-19), tells of Prince Rama's birth, his youthful adventures, and his marriage to the Princess Sita. Bala refers to "childhood" or "early" events.

Once upon a time the gods assembled in distress over the power of Ravana, the remarkable ruler over the rakshasas. As a prize for perpetual prayers and penances, he had won from Brahmadeva* the gift of invulnerability from gods and goblins. He could be killed neither by divines nor by demons. But he was reckless with that power, careless in his might. Reflecting on those conditions, the Lord Vishnu* recalled that Ravana's boon protected him from gods and demons but not from humans. So then and there, Vishnu decided to be born as a human in order to rid the world of the rakshasa ruler (5). This is how the great god Vishnu came to be born as the man, Rama.*

In the city of Ayodhya, in the kingdom of Kosala, lived King Dasharatha. He had three wives but no sons. Hoping to get a son, he performed a complicated royal rite which required him to serve each wife some payasam, a sweet pudding of milk and rice (7). As a result, each woman miraculously conceived. In due time, Queen Kausalya bore Prince Rama, Queen Kaikeyi gave birth to the noble Bharata, and Queen Sumitra had the

* See the Glossary at the end of the book for this and other unfamiliar terms.

sovereign twins Lakshmana and Shatrughna. Vishnu was in each of these four sons, but he was most especially present in Rama.

When Rama was sixteen, a holy sage named Vishwamitra came to Ayodhya and asked the young prince to go with him to the forest. The forest dwellers needed help to destroy the wild rakshasas who were deliberately disturbing the quiet devotions of the holy hermits. Accompanied by his devoted brother Lakshmana, Rama went with Vishwamitra. No sooner had they entered the forest than they met the accursed rakshasi Tataka. Vishwamitra told Rama to kill her, but Rama hesitated because Tataka was a woman. But, persuaded that her dreadful deeds deserved the most dire punishment, and observing that she was then charging at him in unruly wrath, Rama shot an arrow (9). It pierced her hard heart. She fell down dead. This was Rama's first victory against the rakshasa raiders. Thereupon, Vishwamitra took Rama aside and, while Lakshmana stood by, taught him the mastery of celestial spells and wondrous weapons (11).

One day, travelling North, the trio saw a miracle. A beautiful lady saint named Ahalya had been separated from her husband by a curse. She had been condemned to remain invisible and immobile in one place while her husband wandered elsewhere. The curse could only be broken by Rama. As soon as he entered the place where Ahalya stayed unseen, unmoving, the curse was lifted. As Rama and Lakshmana looked on, caught by surprise, Ahalya regained her former shape, and she began to shine with luminous beauty (13). Moments later she was reunited with the sage who was her faithful husband.

Vishwamitra, Rama, and Lakshmana continued on their way to the nearby kingdom of Videha, where King Janaka lived. He had a beautiful and virtuous daughter, whom he had wondrously found as an infant. He named her Sita, which means "furrow," because he first saw her in a field while he was plowing (15).

King Janaka had declared that any man who could lift and string Shiva's heavy bow might have Sita for his wife. As Sita grew in years and beauty, many suitors tried, but none succeeded in budging the weighty weapon. But when Rama entered the contest, he easily lifted the bow and strung it. So tightly did he set the string that he cracked the bow in two (17). So pleased was Sita by this astonishing sight that she came forward and offered him the garland of marriage (19). On the very same day that they were wed, Sita's sister married Lakshmana and her two cousins wed Rama's other brothers, Bharata and Shatrughna.

2. Ayodhya-kanda

The second section of the story (pages 20-47) focuses on the kingdom of Ayodhya. It is there that Rama, eldest among the sons of King Dasharatha, is offered the throne, but fate forces him instead to flee from the kingdom.

Rama lived with Sita for many happy years in Ayodhya. The people knew and loved him for his modesty and virtue. When the aged King Dasharatha announced his wish to retire, all agreed that Rama should succeed him. He called Rama to his side and set the date for the succession (21).

Lavish preparations for the coronation were begun. All the people of Ayodhya were joyous, except for one old woman. Manthara, a hunchback maid to Queen Kaikeyi, was mean and envious. She ceaselessly nagged her lady, "Your noble son Bharata should be crowned king, not Rama!" (23). At last, Kaikeyi's heart grew cold and jealous. Cunningly, the Queen decided to hold the King to a promise made many years before, that he would one day grant her any two wishes no matter what those wishes might be. The beautiful Queen called the King to her and demanded the fulfillment of her heart's desire. "Banish Rama to the forest wilderness for fourteen years. Let my son Bharata be crowned King of Ayodhya instead!" (25).

The old King collapsed in disbelief.

Rama, on the other hand, calmly accepted this fateful turn of events (27). He treated Queen Kaikeyi's harsh demands as if they were the King's fondest wishes. "My father has made a pledge," reflected the noble Prince. "I must honor his word." The Prince now cared only to serve his father by carrying out the orders.

In bidding farewell to those near and dear to him, Rama went first to his mother, Queen Kausalya. She was distraught (29). She wanted to go with Rama. However, the courteous youth reminded her that a wife's place is with her husband. Under these new and trying circumstances, King Dasharatha would need her comfort more than ever.

And, although Rama tried to persuade Sita to stay safely in the palace during his long exile, she insisted that (as he had just told his own mother) a wife's place is beside her beloved husband. Moreover, she remembered that long ago a fortune-teller had predicted that she would one day live in the forest. Accordingly, she offered to dress in the rough bark garments of forest wanderers (31). But the sight of the rough bark against her tender skin was too much for Rama, so Sita went with him dressed as usual. As for Lakshmana, he had already decided that he, too, must share the fate of Rama's exile. Typically, he stood ready to serve his beloved brother.

The trio left the city in the state chariot driven by a trusted royal servant, Sumantra. Crowds of grieving people followed on foot. Young and old, men and women, nobles and commoners were determined to follow Rama into exile rather than to endure the pain of separation from him (33). But Rama did not want them to suffer the hardships of forest life. So he managed to slip away from the people.

When he, his wife, and brother came to within a stone's throw of the neighboring country ruled by Guha, that monarch met them and asked them to stay in his kingdom (35). But Rama was eager to keep moving, and King Guha himself took the trio across the sacred Ganges River. At midstream, Sita saluted the Goddess Ganga, the watery spirit of the stream. She promised to visit some day the holy places along the banks of the river if the three of them should all return safely after the fourteen-year journey (37).

Meanwhile, King Dasharatha had lost his will to live. The separation from his beloved son, Rama, was too much for him. He was crushed by the weight of his sorrow. One midnight, recalling a curse against him that he would die grieving for a son, his heart broke (39). He died in the tender care of Queen Kausalya.

Brother Bharata, who had been sent away on an errand before all of this happened, returned to Ayodhya. Unaware of what had happened while he was gone, he was greeted by his mother, Queen Kaikeyi. She triumphantly told him how she had won the kingdom for him. To her surprise, the boy was angry and anxious. He paused only long enough to perform the proper funeral rites for his father, then left in search of Rama.

When he found his brother in the forest, Bharata begged Rama to return to rule the kingdom (41). Rama refused, declaring that even though their father was dead, his honor must still live on. He would, he said, gladly stay away from Ayodhya. That was the pledge Queen Kaikeyi had got from King Dasharatha. "And you must rule in my place, O brother," said Rama to Bharata.

Bharata agreed to return to Ayodhya, but begged that he serve only as a humble regent for Rama. He asked Rama for his sandals. Bharata promised to place them on the throne as a

symbol of Rama's first right to rule. Because Bharata held Rama in such high esteem, he carried the sandals on his head all the way from the forest to the capital city (43). Once there, he placed the sandals in a shrine. Daily for the next fourteen years, Bharata bowed before them and acted as if Rama himself were there (45).

Meanwhile, Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana moved ever farther southward on their journey. Along the way they paused at the hermitage of Atri, a famous sage, and his extraordinary wife, Anasuya (47). While Rama relaxed with Atri, Sita went inside with Anasuya. In private Sita was instructed by the blameless, penitent woman about how a wife should honor her husband. Sita was also rubbed with salves and ointments, and given a new set of clothes and some shimmering jewels to wear on the journey. The next morning, Rama and Sita, refreshed, joined Lakshmana. The three left the hermitage behind them, entering the Dandaka Forest "as the sun enters a mass of cloud."

3. Aranya-kanda

The third section (pages 48-73) deals with the wandering of the exiles in the wilderness (aranya). Here, in such places as the Dandaka Forest, the Panchavati Glade, and the Krauncha Jungle, the trio spend almost a dozen years of their banishment, knowing both happiness and horror.

Soon after they entered the densely wooded wastes, Sita was roughly seized by a towering, blood-thirsty rakshasa named Viradha. She was quickly rescued, but both Rama and Sita were shaken by the ominous event. As Rama prepared to slay the terrible wretch (49), Viradha shouted that he was really a celestial being cursed to roam the forest. Rama's touch would free him. Filled with pity, Rama broke the curse. In gratitude, Viradha advised him and his companion to travel further into the forest. This was but one of the many meetings

and adventures Rama was destined to have during his absence from Ayodhya.

His next meeting was with the ascetic Sutikshna. He and his fellow forest-dwellers were delighted to see Rama arrive at their hermitage (51). They knew he would rid the woods of the roving raiders, those rakshasas who continually interrupted the holy men's ceremonies. Without their peaceful meditations, the holy men would forever fall short of their goals of spiritual blessedness. Rama stayed with these saintly men for ten years as their protector. During that time, the holy men knew peace and spiritual happiness.

Rama moved from there to where Agastya stayed, travelling again toward the South. This great sage handed over to Rama a quiver full of wonderful weapons (53), and invited him to live with his companions for a while in a glade not far away, called Panchavati. This Rama did, and he and Sita, served always by the watchful Lakshmana, spent several seasons there. Lakshmana built a hut for them near a sparkling stream. To its lush banks each dawn and dusk were drawn deer, two by two. Nearby, the loving couple bathed and, basking in the bounty of their world, they embraced one another.

From time to time, they explored the woods around them. Sita asked the name of every flower. Rama told her this and named as well every tree and vine. When birds built nests, she asked and learned their names too. And when she called to them, they called back to her in sweet song. At night Rama and Sita returned to their hut, and there in the fragrant darkness, they were lulled to sleep by the sound of the soothing stream. And so they lived many years in perfect happiness (55).

One day, however, a lewd lady, the rakshasi known as Shurpanakha, interrupted their peace. She stood boldly before Rama and offered herself to him (57). Rama laughed at the

lusty hag, and jokingly suggested that instead she try her wiles on Lakshmana. But her flirting was lost on Lakshmana. He failed to see anything amusing about her. Laughed at by one brother and ignored by the other, Shurpanakha then wheeled on Sita and threatened to kill her. At that Lakshmana flew into a frenzy, and cut off the old crone's nose and ears. First, she howled in pain; then she hooted in frustration. Finally, she gave the trio a furious scowl and rushed from them directly to her brother. He was none other than the wicked rakshasa ruler, Ravana himself (59). Thus destiny drew the distant two adversaries, Rama and Ravana, together.

Ravana wanted revenge. "Rama will pay for the insult to my sister," he vowed. He decided to abduct Sita. That would bring anguish to Rama. He enlisted the help of Maricha, one of his subjects. Like all rakshasas, Maricha could assume any shape at will. Ravana told him to turn into a golden deer and to nibble sweet grasses near the Panchavati Glade. When Sita saw the glistening deer, she was enchanted by its beauty. She asked Rama to capture it for her (61). Rama reluctantly went after the deer, and left Lakshmana behind to guard Sita. Rama chased the deer into the forest, but when he got close to it, the wily rakshasa Maricha imitated Rama's voice. "O Sita! O Lakshmana!" Hearing the cry, Sita insisted that Lakshmana go in the direction of the sound and help her husband. She was, then, left alone.

At that instant, Ravana arrived at the clearing disguised as a wandering holy man. According to ancient Indian rules of hospitality, whenever a guest arrives he must be welcomed with gifts of water and food. That is why Sita immediately greeted the pious-looking man of poverty with an offering for his empty begging bowl (63). As soon as she came close enough, the pious-appearing ascetic grasped her close to him with his left hand and changed back into his threatening form as the

royal rakshasa, Ravana. The very next moment, he soared away with her.

Nearby, the ancient watch-bird Jatayu was awakened from his slumber by Sita's cries. He flew to her rescue. But Ravana, with his ruthless sword, lopped off the valiant bird's wings (65). The mortally wounded Jatayu fell helpless to the ground. He survived only long enough to see Rama's anguish and desolation when he later returned to discover that Sita had been taken away from him.

As Sita struggled against her abductor, some of the jewelry she wore fell sparkling through the air. Some monkeys saw this (67). They lived in the hills over which Ravana passed as he carried Sita to his distant harem. While they gathered the jewels to take to their monkey leader, Ravana deposited Sita, his newly-gained treasure, in the seclusion of his royal retreat.

Ravana ordered menacing rakshasis to guard her, (69), and told her, "I give you one year. Forget Rama. Favor me." He marched off. "O that I was not cursed to stand and wait for women!" His mind went to the time when Brahmadeva had punished him for once too often having his way with a woman. From that day forward, so the curse went, if Ravana touched a woman against her will, his head would split into a thousand pieces. That is why he left Sita behind him, hoping she would in time turn to him of her own accord.

Meanwhile, Rama and Lakshmana desperately searched for Sita (71). Separated from his beloved mate, Prince Rama suffered boundless grief. He discovered the dying watch-bird, but Jatayu told him only who Sita's abductor was. Rama had yet to learn where that daring captor had taken Sita.

They began to look for clues. While searching in the

trackless Krauncha Jungle, Rama and Lakshmana were accosted by a dreadful rakshasa named Kabandha. He was dark like a cloud, huge as a hill, with arms as long as a league, having no head or neck, with only one huge eye in his chest and a gaping mouth in his stomach. He grabbed the two brothers and threatened to devour them then and there. But the noble pair struggled valiantly. Gradually they overcame the hideous ogre. As he died, he asked their names and, when told, there rose from the corpse the handsome celestial, Danu (73). This hapless heavenly being had been cursed to wander hungrily in a horrifying form until Rama's blessed touch would break the spell. That time had come. As he returned to the realm of the celestials, the dazzling Danu directed Rama and Lakshmana to another who had suffered similar loss. "His name," said Danu, "is Sugriva. He will surely help you in your search for Sita."

4. Kishkindha-kanda

Kishkindha-kanda (pages 74-87) is the section of Valmiki's story named after the city hidden in a cavern deep within the wastelands and hills travelled by Rama in his southward journey. The king of Kishkinda commands a confederacy of monkeys, bears, and other forest creatures. That capital is currently controlled by Valin, who had exiled his brother Sugriva and who had also stolen Sugriva's wife. In this section, Rama and Sugriva join forces to regain Kishkindha from Valin and to rescue Sita from captivity.

It was spring. The beauty of nature reminded Rama of Sita, and he was even more grief-stricken than before at the continuing separation from his wife. As he and Lakshmana crossed Pampa Lake, reaching its farther shore, they were seen by Sugriva from nearby Rishyamuka Hill. Sugriva sent his trusted aide, Hanuman, to find out who the two strangers were and why they had come.

In an instant, Hanuman stood next to the two brothers. "We have come looking for Sugriva, the monkey-chief," Rama quickly explained, so Hanuman took them to his leader. When Rama and Sugriva met, they told each other of their misfortunes. Each had been exiled from his kingdom which, by right, he should rule, and each grieved over the loss of his wife. Over the fire of friendship, they made a pact (75). Rama promised to aid Sugriva regain his kingdom and wife from Valin, while Sugriva promised to help Rama recover Sita wherever she might be.

Sugriva then showed Rama the jewelry which had fallen on that very hill when Ravana passed overhead with the struggling Sita. Rama looked at the familiar anklets, bracelets, necklace, and earrings. He recognized every piece. He summoned Lakshmana to look as well. But Lakshmana could recognize only the ankle ornaments (77). The reason he gave was this: in all the years he had known Sita, he had never once allowed himself to raise his eyes above her feet--so great was his respect for his brother and for his brother's wife!

Rama urged Sugriva to challenge his brother Valin to single combat. He made Sugriva wear a flower garland, so that he might tell the battling brothers apart. Then he took his place in a nearby cluster of trees. There, he was hidden from view. He watched both monkey-chiefs fight bravely. But at a critical point in their struggle, Rama decided he must help Sugriva win. He shot an arrow (79). It found its mark. Valin was slain. As a result, Sugriva regained his leadership of Kishkindha, and took command of all the kingdom's forces once more. True to his promise, Sugriva sent search parties in each of the directions to discover where Ravana had carried Sita (81).

After one month, the parties sent to the North, to the East, and to the West returned. None had seen any trace of Sita or of her rakshasa captor. But the search party sent to

the South did not return. That group was led by Angada (Sugriva's nephew), and included in it Hanuman (Sugriva's aide), Jambavan (leader of the bears), and several others. They had wandered for many days without food or drink.

Weak and hungry, they came upon a mysterious cave. The cave's entrance was overgrown with exotic plants and was dripping with water. Cranes and ducks and herons flew from the cavern's mouth, carrying in their beaks tender shoots and scented roots. Thinking they would find something to eat and to drink there, the search party decided to enter the dark chamber. They took hold of one another and crept toward the entrance (83).

Once inside the cave, however, they lost their way. Also, they lost all track of time. At last, almost overcome with hunger and thirst and weakness, they saw a great light. Deep within the pit they found a female ascetic. Her name, she told them, was Swayamprabha. She was glowing with an inner radiance of spiritual power. She graciously offered them fruit and sweet juices. Refreshed, they asked her to lead them out of that place. She agreed to help them, but ordered them to cover their eyes.

When they opened their eyes again, the search party discovered that they were on the sea shore. It was as far South as they could possibly go. Still they had not found Sita! Moreover, they now realized that they were late reporting back to Sugriva within the month's time he had given them. Despair set in. Together they reviewed everything that had brought them to this faraway place-- Rama's exile, Dasharatha's death, Shurpanakha's visit, Ravana's abduction of Sita, Jatayu's death, Valin's defeat.

Sitting not far from them was a wingless, old vulture. His name was Sampati. When he heard them mention the name of

Jatayu, he interrupted the laments of the search party. "Jatayu was my brother. Tell me all that happened." They did. When Sampati heard the complete story, he understood why these creatures had come to this distant tip of land. They wanted to find Sita. He told them what he had seen several months before. "Ravana, King of Lanka, carried Sita across this sea in front of you. If you cross to the island of Lanka, you will find where he keeps her under guard." As the crippled vulture spoke, his wings miraculously grew back in place. He regained his former vigor (85).

Heartened by this news, and convinced by the omen of Sampati's new wings, the members of the search party likewise regained their lost vigor. Each one wanted to show his new-found strength, and each happily bragged what he could do. None but Hanuman, however, was able to vault the many miles across the watery gulf to Lanka. Accordingly, Jambavan, wisest among the bears, asked Hanuman to take the big jump (87). Then and there, Hanuman, son of the wind-god Vayu, began to grow larger and larger. At last he was big as a mountain. Turning to the South, he braced himself for the leap to Lanka.

5. Sundara-kanda

The Sundara-kanda (pages 88-95) is the section of the Ramayana described as, literally, "beautiful" (sundara). Those familiar with the tale give different reasons why this is so. Some say it refers to the "beautiful" nature of Hanuman, whose great feats make possible what happens in this part of the story. Others say it has to do with all the "beautiful" things he sees in Lanka--its towering palaces, its verdant groves, its fragrant valleys. Yet others say it refers to Sita, "beautiful" because she endures hardship and threat in captivity. Still others say it has to do with the "beautiful" messages Hanuman delivers to Sita from Rama, and which he brings back to Rama from Sita. All agree that it is inspiring to read, and many Hindus believe that if they read the Sundara-kanda in

times of gloom, their problems will clear up.

Hanuman soared skyward (89). He shone like the sun. He crossed the surging sea in a single bound. In no time at all he reached the distant shore of Lanka. At first he could not find Sita. He looked everywhere--in Lanka's streets, in all the houses, even in the royal harem. Finally he went beyond the city to the gardens and orchards of the royal estate. There in the center of a grove known as the Ashoka Arbor he found the captive princess seated in the shade of a giant tree.

She was very pale. Like the waning moon, she had become quite slim. The grief of separation from her beloved Rama had not, however, dimmed her radiance. She glowed by virtue of her inner purity. Like the moon, too, she remained always luminous and lovely.

Even while he watched from a hiding place not far from her, Hanuman saw the cruel king, Ravana, make his regular visit to Sita in her seclusion. "For ten months you have remained here mooning over Rama. You have but two months left to forget him and show favor to me. I warn you, relent or my cooks will make mince-meat pie out of you for me to eat." Sita remained brave all the while that Ravana was there, but when he left she broke into tears.

While she wept, Hanuman crept nearer to her. Gently he murmured that he was a messenger. "Rama sent me." Sita lifted her eyes in disbelief, and Hanuman caught his breath at the sight of her fragile beauty. He gave her Rama's ring to show that he spoke the truth (91). He promised her that Rama would come for her. In turn, she removed the jewel which still adorned her hair. "Give this to Rama. Tell him to come for me, or I shall die."

Hanuman left her with comforting words, then went back to the streets of the capital determined to do mischief to the

rakshasas and to see Ravana face to face before leaving Lanka. With this in mind, he got into fights with rakshasa soldiers. After scuffling with several he decided to let them capture him. He knew that, as a prisoner, he would be taken before Ravana. Sure enough, he was soon hauled before the king, and there Hanuman heckled him. Furious at this insult, Ravana ordered Hanuman bound head and foot. "Set his tail on fire!"

Hanuman smiled at this, for it was just what he wanted. Once his tail was flaming, he easily slipped out of his bonds and into the night. No one could catch him. Laughing at how helpless they all were against his wonders, Hanuman hopped from house to house until he had touched each with his tail, setting the entire city on fire (93). Satisfied that the rakshasas would remember him and his visit forever, he went to the seashore. In one mighty leap he crossed the ocean once more, and rejoined the group waiting for him on the other side.

They were overjoyed to see him. And, when he told them he found Sita and that she was waiting only for Rama's rescue, they were beside themselves with glee. All of them at the same time turned their backs on the South and returned in the direction where Rama and Sugriva waited for them. Tardy or not, they had good news.

On their way they came to a grove where bees had made hives in the trunks and branches of all the trees. It was a preserve known as the "Honey Forest." On an impulse the search party stopped there, stole some honey, made mead, and drank it down. Already intoxicated from what Hanuman had seen and told them, they all got roaring drunk (95). When news reached the waiting Rama and Sugriva, the two knew that such a celebration could mean only one thing--Sita had been found. And, they were correct, as was soon confirmed when the carousers reeled home.

6. Yuddha-kanda

The Yuddha-kanda (pages 96-131), or sixth section of Valmiki's long poem, tells of the fateful meeting between Rama and his rival, Ravana; of their final fight; of Sita's release from captivity; and of the reunited couple's return to Ayodhya. Yuddha means "war" or "combat." So, this part of the epic describes not only the conflict between the exiled prince and the rakshasa-ruler but also the skirmishes and battles between their rank and file. Moreover, such unforgettable characters as Vibhishana, Kumbhakarna, and Indrajit figure prominently here. The clash of the troops, the daring feats of soldiers in single combat, the courage shown by all--even in defeat--stir excitement and admiration among those who hear the traditional tales of heroism. Small wonder, then, that the Yuddha-kanda, which is the longest section of the epic, is the most popular part of the Ramayana for the millions who know it.

As soon as Rama heard Hanuman's news, he quickly reacted. "Sita waits for me." He gathered his allies and headed South for Lanka, his enemy's island stronghold. His troops, eager to take on the enemy, were stopped short by the sea.

When Ravana learned of the advance, he called a council of war. All of his clansmen agreed to fight by his side--save one. That one was his upright brother Vibhishana. He advised the passionate ruler to return Sita and avoid a fateful conflict with Rama (97). This warning infuriated the rakshasa king. He clenched his fist and rejected the gentle counsel of his brother.

Vibhishana, who loved peace, decided that he could no longer remain on Ravana's side. Using some rakshasa-magic, he disappeared without a trace from his brother's sight and instantly reappeared across the sea standing in front of Rama. Bowing, Vibhishana said, "Accept me as your servant and

subject, O lord." Rama was pleased by this. He raised his hand in blessing and replied, "You have come with a pure heart. Even though you may have done wicked things before, you are here now because you wish to follow righteousness. You shall find a haven of happiness with me" (99). From that time on, Vibhishana did all he could to help Rama.

But even Vibhishana could not get Rama's armies across the water to the far-off fortress of Lanka. It was necessary to build a bridge across the waters. Could they span the great gulf? No problem for the hordes of helpers following Rama: they quickly built the bridge of boulders, and finished it in five days and five nights (101). When the causeway was completed, it was sturdy and splendid, stretching long and spreading wide.

Hanuman, always ready to help, hoisted Rama on his shoulders (103). Atop Rama's shoulders bristled his bow and arrows. Both were ready for the fight. Thus the two led the multitude of monkeys, the battalions of bears, and the columns of other creatures across the gulf.

The noise of the advancing armies alerted the enemy. Ravana went with his spies and sentries to the highest ramparts of his castle (105). The column of Rama's soldiers stretched as far as his eye could see. Ravana acted rashly.

He rushed to his court magicians and commanded, "Make a head just like Rama's." He took the gruesome head to Sita and dangled it close to her (107). "Here is your Rama. He is dead. I have killed him. Now you must be mine--forever." Sita gasped. The skin, the hair, the eyes, the nose, the mouth--these seemed to belong to her beloved. Grief choked her. But just then, Ravana was called away. As soon as he disappeared, the magic head faded away. Sita knew then that she had been tricked. "Rama lives!"

Ravana mourned the loss of his behemoth brother. But almost immediately, other kinsmen came, fierce fighters all. One by one they pledged to protect their king and marched onto the plain. But not one ever returned. All were killed. Only Indrajit remained. He was all that stood now between the rakshasa ruler and the irate Rama.

Indrajit survived because he was protected by mysterious powers which he got by worshipping potent, otherworldly forces. That is how, earlier, he had stunned Rama and Lakshmana with his serpent-darts. This time, protected by the power of invisibility, he surprised them again. Riding in a charmed chariot yoked to a magic horse, he lashed out toward them.

As he approached them, both Rama and Lakshmana could hear Indrajit's every move. But they could not see him. Covertly he coursed around them. Unseen, he soared above them. And, using weapons from the gods, he assualted them with arrows from all directions (115). So it was that the air was filled with a shower of missiles, as thick and thunderous as a torrent of rain in summer. Many of their companions were wounded by those volleys. Some fell, some retreated.

At last, Indrajit dismounted from his chariot and became, for the moment, visible. The ever-watchful Lakshmana shot one swift shaft. With it, he beheaded the ruthless warrior. Indrajit, Ravana's favorite son, was slain.

When that painful news reached Ravana, he roared as if he himself had been mortally wounded. Alone, he entered the field. He was formidable in his fury. Everything that had ever been rumored about Ravana was true. He was tall. He was strong. He was skilled. He was fearless. And, he was provoked. He created havoc in Rama's ranks. The army scattered at his sight. Only Hanuman, Sugriva, Vibhishana, Lakshmana, and Rama stood their ground.

Ravana sped toward them. His eyes first fell with loathing on his brother Vibhishana. A swift spear soon followed his fierce glance. However, Lakshmana deflected the javelin and saved Vibhishana's life. This enraged Ravana. He grabbed another spear, put a spell on it, and hurtled it toward Lakshmana. The weapon was irresistible. When it hit Lakshmana, it knocked him down. Seeing this, Ravana began aiming his arrows at Rama.

But Rama ignored him. He saw only that his loyal Lakshmana lay wounded. Rama wept. Without his brother standing at his side, Rama felt as though he had lost everything.

Yet all was not lost, for Hanuman quickly came to the rescue. Riding on the wings of the wind, Hanuman vaulted North to the Himalayas, where healing herbs were said to grow high on the mountaintops. He searched but could not locate the tiny medicinal plants. Knowing that Lakshmana lay lingering near death, he tore off an entire mountain and carried it back to Lanka (117). With this mountain of medicines to heal him, Lakshmana was soon back on his feet again.

Only then did Rama again turn to face Ravana. For several seconds the two stood staring at each other. It was as if a tiger had transfixed a bull. Without taking his eyes away from his enemy, Rama told his friends, "I swear to you that the world shall soon be rid either of Ravana or of me. Remember, it is because of him that I am here. I intend to do this day a deed which people will speak of as long as the world shall last" (119).

Ravana was an awesome adversary, so the fight was not soon over. Every time Rama cut off his head, another grew in its place. It seemed as if the rakshasa simply could not be killed. The dreadful combat lasted seven days and seven nights. Neither hero rested for a single second.

At last Rama remembered the quiver the ancient Agastya had given him when he first entered the forest. He drew from it a sparkling arrow. It was infused with the power of the universe. Rama fixed it to his bow. He uttered a Vedic prayer. He aimed at Ravana. He shot the arrow. It pierced the iron heart of his foe, and the rakshasa ruler fell to the ground with the sound of a thousand quakes of thunder. His crown rolled in the dust. Ravana was dead. To the astonishment of all who saw it, the deadly arrow rose from the corpse, floated through the air, and slipped back into Rama's quiver. The battle was over. The war was won.

Mandodari, widow of the rakshasa ruler, rushed onto the field, collapsed at the sight of her late lord, and keened over his corpse. Staring sorrowfully at his defeated brother and the mourning Mandodari, Vibhishana realized that he himself would now be ruler of the rakshasa realm. He drew near to Rama for guidance (121).

Rama then, as always, knew what to do. As no other mortal before or since, this prince among men showed by action and instruction how a leader should conduct himself. He offered Vibhishana counsel fit for any king. First, when war is no more, a ruler should lay aside his weapons and forget former grudges. Second, when a fearless warrior falls--even an enemy like Ravana--it is proper to give that hero all due honor. Third, when even one citizen suffers, a compassionate king offers comfort. And fourth, when a monarch serves justice, he must not hesitate, even when dealing with difficult decisions. So it was that without delay Rama ordered, "Summon Sita. Prepare her for the royal welcome she deserves."

Thus Vibhishana's first royal act was to visit Sita (123). When he told her of her freedom, she rose instantly to go to her husband from whom she had been so long separated. But she was gently restrained and told that Rama had been quite clear

that she must return more princess than prisoner. So she carefully bathed and adorned herself in silk and jewels befitting her royal rank. Soon she set off in state, escorted by Vibhishana, to be reunited with her beloved Rama.

Rama had assembled all his allies. He stood with them, waiting. Sita approached, her head held high. She shone as bright as the autumn moon in her joy.

But then the unexpected happened. Rama did not come forward to meet her. He was, instead, deep in thought. Even as Sita came into sight, Rama did not seem to notice her. In fact, as she came closer, he suddenly turned away from her!

Lakshmana could not believe what he saw. Others watched and waited. Sita stopped. She stood very still. She could scarcely whisper, "My Lord, I am here." More to himself than to anyone else, Rama mumbled, "So be it." Then he addressed those who were witnessing this strange reunion in these words: "This day I have avenged a grievous insult. He who abducted this lady now lies dead. And she who was touched by that monster now stands before you. I have set her free from her long imprisonment in the house of another man. How can I possibly take back one whose reputation has been tarnished? I can no longer call her my wife."*

There was silence. Only a lone bird called. Sita's voice quavered, but she vowed, "I swear by the Earth and by all that I am that my heart has always been yours alone, my lord. If I

* Although Rama's reaction here may seem unduly harsh to Westerners, his response is consistent with Indian tradition. According to Hindu values, a girl's most precious possession is her virginity; a woman's greatest glory is her fidelity to her husband. Whenever there is the slightest suspicion that either has been violated, the father or husband has the right and the obligation to reject her.

have not been true to you, then may the fire consume me as it does all mortal flesh" (125). At this, Rama gave a sign, and a funeral pyre was built. Once it was lit, its flames leapt high. Sita saw her time had come.

All watched, rapt, as she moved toward the scorching inferno. Among all the spectators, only Rama did not blink as Sita stepped into the blaze. In a flash, she was gone. Rama made no sound at this, but a great wail of despair rose from the crowd.

Above, another flash lighted the sky. Rama did not move, but the people all looked heavenward. They saw that Brahmadeva and the gods governing the eight directions* filled the firmament. It was a dazzling sight, and the people stood riveted in the awesome radiance.

In that brief moment, Brahmadeva descended unseen by the multitudes to Rama's side. The great god reminded Rama of what he seemed to have forgotten, saying, "Your work here is done, O Vishnu. Soon it will be time for you and your lady to leave and to return to the realm beyond." Then Brahmadeva ascended out of sight at the same moment as the eyes of the crowd returned to gaze once more upon Rama and the blazing pyre.

The people saw that the flames were forming the figure

* If you study the picture on page 127, you can clearly identify these eight gods. Indra on his elephant guards the East (red). Agni, on his ram, controls the Southeast (red), and, simultaneously reveals himself in the fire below. Yama, atop his buffalo, reigns in the South (orange). Kubera, on a human, stays in the North (pink). Varuna, riding on his crocodile, guards the West (black). Vayu, on his reindeer, rules the Northwest (blue). Surya, in his chariot, governs the Southwest (yellow). And Shiva, on his bull, watches over the Northeast (gray or white). Brahmadeva with a beard--far left--guards the zenith (red). Their combined presence symbolizes that all the heavenly hosts, dominions, and powers witness the cosmic event described here.

of Agni, deity of fire. By that god's side stood Sita--more refined, more radiant, more beautiful than ever. She looked like the morning sun in all its splendor. She was robed in red, her golden ornaments glowed, her hair glistened (127). The lustrous lord of the fire addressed Rama in a voice all could hear: "This lady is innocent. She should not be branded. Accept her once more, and end the sorrow of your separation."

At last Rama stirred. He stepped toward Sita and took her lovingly by her right hand. Turning to the throng he said, "I knew from the beginning that my beloved was without blemish. But as your king, I wanted to prove her innocence before your eyes." The crowd roared its appreciation. The gods who hovered in the sky above showed their pleasure, too, by mending all the maimed among the monkeys, by healing all the bruised among the bears, and by resurrecting from the dead any and all allies who had lain mortally wounded. As the deities faded from view they directed Rama to return to Ayodhya, since the term of his exile was now up.

Accordingly, early the very next morning Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Sugriva, and Vibhishana mounted into the magic, flying vehicle called "Pushpaka" for the journey North to Ayodhya. That car had several storeys and countless chambers in it, so all Rama's allies and their spouses rode along as well. As the winged chariot soared over the route he had once walked, Rama was able to recognize the various places along the way and to recall for the others what had transpired there (129).

The full fourteen years of his exile had elapsed by the time Rama landed outside Ayodhya. As he walked through the gates of the city, the trees lining the streets burst into bloom. The air was filled with fragrance and sweetness. Bharata welcomed his brother back to the capital. The people rejoiced.

At midday, barbers came and removed the matted hair from

Rama and from his loyal brother Lakshmana. They bathed the brothers and helped robe them in courtly attire. Sita, meanwhile, was welcomed back home by the queen mothers; they dressed her in a regal gown and adorned her with costly gems.

Later that afternoon, the people of Ayodhya filled the largest room of the palace. Everything was in readiness for the coronation (131). The throne, with the brothers Bharata and Lakshmana posted at either end, was placed in the middle of the hall. Side by side, Rama and Sita sat on it serenely. The ancient crown of Ayodhya was placed on Rama's head by the family priest, Vasishtha, while all watched and approved. The emblem of the empire, a white umbrella, was held aloft by Shatrughna, stationed behind Rama. Fans fashioned of yak tails, and serving likewise as symbols of sovereignty, wafted through the air in the capable hands of Sugriva and Vibhishana, Rama's far-flung allies. Hanuman humbled himself at Rama's feet and served his exalted friend and monarch as a living footstool. Jambavan situated himself apart and, stationed by the door, stood as chamberlain.

Surrounded by his loved ones, friends, and allies, Rama was proclaimed king and began his rule which lasted ten thousand years. During those years of his reign no woman became a widow, no one died of disease, and lifespans stretched to one thousand years. Families had many sons, rains fell when they were needed, and neither wild beast nor foreign enemies threatened the peace of that happy land.

7. Uttara-kanda

The Uttara-kanda (pages 132-153) is the last of the seven sections of Valmiki's massive epic. Uttara means "later," "subsequent," "concluding." One way to understand what is found in this part of the story is to say, simply, that here are narrated events "subsequent" to

the coronation of Rama and Sita. Another way to deal with the Uttara-kanda is to explain that it was added after Valmiki's time by other, "later" contributors who wanted to provide a "conclusion" different from the original. Is the Uttara-kanda part of the "original" Ramayana by Valmiki? The answer is not easy because it involves complex literary and historical factors. Certainly there is in India a widespread tendency to ignore this last section and to conclude the Ramayana with the simple, happy ending of Rama and Sita's coronation. Many people are uncomfortable with Rama's act of abandoning Sita when she is pregnant and with Sita's descent in the embrace of Mother Earth. Nevertheless, the fact is that for at least a millenium-and-a-half, this final section has been included as an integral part of Valmiki's epic--and that is a long-standing tradition which cannot be easily ignored.

After Rama's coronation an assembly of ascetics gathered in the royal hall at Ayodhya. They had come to pay honor to their new monarch. Among the visitors was the venerable Agastya. He praised Rama's fortune to be reunited with Sita. He also acclaimed the king's valour for having slain the rakshasa raiders. "Both men and gods now live free from fear especially," he added, "now that Indrajit, mightier even than Ravana, is no more."

Such high praise for Indrajit puzzled Rama. He asked the ancient sage to explain to him how a son could be mightier than his father. Agastya then narrated the life-stories of Ravana, Kumbhakarna, Vibhishana, Indrajit, and others. Those histories were tangled tales of complex genealogies, destined encounters, and crossed purposes. The entire evening was illuminated as Agastya told of vaulting ambitions and harrowing curses, of humble efforts and unsought boons (133). Rama retired late that night reflecting on all that he had heard.

Early the next morning minstrels woke Rama by singing his praises. As the day wore on, guests who had come for the coronation began to leave Ayodhya for their own cities. One by

another? And what...
one they came to the king. Sugriva, Vibhishana, and other monkeys, bears, and rakshasas bade Rama farewell. Each in turn received a warm embrace, a blessing, and gifts from the monarch. No tears were shed during any of the departures, yet each felt a profound sadness at his impending separation from Rama.

At last Hanuman approached Rama. He bowed and begged two boons. "Stay always in my heart, O lord, and let me live as long as your story is told" (135). Rama gladly granted those boons and, as Hanuman moved to go, the king placed around the monkey's neck a shining chain which had hung at his own throat. Thereafter it sparkled alongside the lustrous necklace of pearls which Sita had given Hanuman earlier. Comforted and graced, Hanuman left, destined to live forever.

The autumn months passed in gentle harmony. The winter weeks were spent in deeds of love. One spring day King Rama and Queen Sita sat together in the shade of an Ashoka tree. Throughout the palace garden, the sweet-scented air sang with the sounds of birds in nuptial flights. All knew that Sita was pregnant. The lovers' joy was pure and boundless (137). Rama asked Sita to name her heart's desire. She recalled her pledge to the Ganges Goddess and asked her mate's permission to visit the holy places along the river banks. "So be it," said Rama. "You shall leave tomorrow." She parted to prepare for her pilgrimage, and he rose to rejoin his court companions.

Once more seated on his throne, he spoke, "Tell me, what do people say of my rule?" One of his counselors stepped forward and said, "O King, I speak as a friend. I have heard the people grumble" (139). He told Rama that heads of households throughout the realm were concerned for the country. What if all like Rama took back home a woman touched by

another? And what if wives across the land expected leniency like that accorded Sita?

Rama grew pensive. As husband, he knew his lovely lady was blameless. As ruler, he also knew his subjects were unhappy. He dealt with this dilemma in the only way he felt he could--as a king.

He called Lakshmana aside. "Sita seeks to spend some time with the saints," Rama explained. "Go with her. See that she gets safely to the sacred stream. But return alone" (141). When all had been agreed to, Rama went into a private chamber and there lamented his lot.

At dawn the next morning, Sita was ready for her journey. She looked forward to the new day, and with parcels of gifts to distribute to the saints' wives, she set out in the state chariot. The trusted Sumantra drove, while loyal Lakshmana stood at her side. She never once suspected that she was destined for desertion.

In due time they reached the Ganges. Without a word, Lakshmana took her to the southern side. With downcast eyes, he mourned, "O lady!" Only then did Sita suspect her fate. She burst out, "But why? Why here? Why now?" (143). As he turned away, she fell to the ground and cried, "Must I then remain forever separated from my lord?" There Lakshmana left her, sobbing and bereft.

A dozen or more years passed. Under Rama's rule, order prevailed in Kosala. One day, to ensure the continued safety of his state, Rama ordered a sacrifice performed. It was an elaborate ritual and required a full year to carry out. And, as only a man and wife together may serve as sponsors for such a celebration, he ordered a golden statue of Sita made and placed beside him on the throne. Sages and saints from hermitages

near and far were asked to assist the priests. The Vedic texts required that great throngs of witnesses observe the final part of the ceremony. Toward the end of the year, then, he invited to Ayodhya neighboring monarchs as well as distant allies such as Sugriva and Vibhishana with their officers and troops.

No one knew quite when he arrived, but at some point, the venerable Valmiki came to Ayodhya with two disciples. He stayed outside the city with the priests and other sages, but he sent his two youthful followers, twin boys called Kusha and Lava, to the palace. Valmiki had taught them a long poem set to music which, with Rama's permission, they were to sing to him in his crowded court (145).

When the twins arrived at the palace, many remarked on their resemblance to Rama. As they commenced their chant in perfect unison, the strains they raised were in praise of none other than their king. How fitting that was for such a state occasion! Rama himself was strangely stirred. The boys seemed to know everything about him. He signaled everyone present to listen closely. None could find fault with the wondrous and moving words they heard. All anyone wanted to hear was more, more. The lads intoned twenty chapters at the first evening's entertainment, and continued night after night until the entire tale was told. At last, when they came to Sita's abandonment, Rama recognized them for who they were--his own sons born of Sita.

He sent word to Valmiki of his discovery. To the crowd Rama announced that if the hermit would vouch for Sita's faithfulness and if Sita herself were willing to come before the assembly and there give proof of her innocence, she might surely return to his side. The people approved wholeheartedly.

The next day all rallied round Rama. They waited. When Valmiki appeared, Sita was with him. She walked a few paces behind him. Her eyes were downcast. A tear trickled down her wan cheek. Everyone was moved with sorrow by that sight. Rama started to move forward. He was halted by Valmiki. "Hear, O King, that Kusha and Lava are your twin sons. See, O Ruler, that this woman before you is your devoted wife. Recall, O Monarch, that you banished her because of public opinion. Know, O Sovereign, that she is pure with no fault in her" (147).

Rama was relieved. His eyes then went to Sita as he stated solemnly to the assembly, "I do here declare to one and all that the brothers Kusha and Lava are my sons. I do here proclaim my everlasting love for this lady. I do here accept the truth of Valmiki's words. I wait now but for one thing--her own testimony."

All fell silent. Only a soundless breeze moved momentarily. Sita stood still, with her eyes, unblinking, fastened on the ground. Her hands were folded. Her yellow garment fluttered slightly. Very slowly she said, "If Rama has always been foremost in my heart, then may Mother Earth herself deliver me. If I have been wholly his, body and soul, then may Mother Earth herself deliver me. If I have loved none but him, then may Mother Earth herself deliver me."

Even as she spoke, the earth trembled. Then the ground began to shake more violently. A rumbling arose and grew louder until, in a crescendo, it cracked with an earsplitting sound. At that moment the ground in front of Sita fell open. A black chasm pitched downward. Out of the depths of the darkness of the abyss emerged something luminous.

As all watched, stunned by the unexpected sight, there rose out of the fathomless pit a throne. It was supported by shimmering serpents of unearthly beauty. Their eyes flared.

From their jewelled coils glittered a thousand hues of refracted light. Beaming above the throne were dazzling rays shooting to the sky. And on the throne sat the serene and beautiful Earth Goddess herself.

"My child" is all she said as she gestured a welcome to Sita with both hands (149). Her eyes returned Sita's gaze. Sita glowed. Color touched her cheeks. As she stepped toward the Goddess, she seemed to glide across the breach. Without a word, Sita slipped onto the throne, and there was supported in the embrace of her mother. Then the two, the throne, the serpents, the radiance--all sank from sight. The ground shifted, this time silently, and the hole was miraculously sealed. None could discern even the smallest cleft or furrow anywhere around. It was as if nothing had happened.

Yet it had. Sita was gone. She had returned home. Her own mother, the Earth, had delivered her. No one now doubted her innocence. All who had seen these things were dazzled, dazed, dejected. As for Rama, he was desolate. He knew he would never see Sita's earthly form again. He could sigh only "Sita! Sita!" As soon as strength allowed, he dismissed all the friends and allies, the kings and visitors, the priests and sages. They all left Ayodhya remembering in their hearts the sorrow and the splendor they had seen.

Rama never took another woman as wife after Sita. In her place, he kept the golden statue of her always at his side (151). For some time he devoted himself to the day-to-day duties of government.

After a while, Queen Mothers Kausalya and then Kaikeyi died. Lakshmana, too, passed on to the heavenly realms. Rama felt it was time for him now to leave the sorrow of earthly life and resume his celestial identity as Vishnu. He called

his kin to him. To Kusha and Lava he assigned separate cities to rule. The rest of his kingdom was divided among the sons of Lakshmana, Bharata, and Shatrughna.

In preparation for his last act, Rama dressed in fine silk and then began reciting ancient prayers. As he set forth on his final journey, a procession of monkeys, bears, and people of Ayodhya formed behind him. They followed him as he walked out of the capital and straight to the banks of the Sarayu River. He paused for a moment on the shore. He shone like the sun in all its radiance. A serene smile lit his face. He turned to his surviving brothers and told them to follow him in what he was about to do. Many others asked to accompany the heroes also. Some were granted their wish, but others were ordered to stay behind. Rama descended into the water.

He scooped into his cupped palm a sip of water, then another, and finally a third. That done, Rama submerged himself under the surface and instantly rose again transformed into his eternal form as Vishnu. Effulgent on the coils of his serpent seat, that Lord revealed himself briefly to those left below, then ascended on high (153), where he is now and ever shall be.

* * * * *

So ends Valmiki's story as first sung by Rama's twin sons, Kusha and Lava (155). Many people believe that every word in the Ramayana, from first to last, is true. It is also said that so long as mountains rise and rivers run, the story of Rama will continue to be learned and loved. Surely, all who reflect upon and daily remember the Ramayana will be richly rewarded.