

RAMA AND SITA

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

Below is a list of words that appear in the story. Read the list and get to know the words before you start the story.

- apprehensive**—nervous; troubled
banish—cast out
boundless—without limit
canopy—covering
conduct—manage; direct
crafty—clever; sly
cringing—fearful; weak-hearted
distressed—worried; upset
elated—delighted; overjoyed
engaging—clashing; battling
exile—separation or removal from one's home or country
fidelity—loyalty; faithfulness
forlorn—very unhappy; miserable
hermit—one who lives alone, often in the wilderness and usually for religious reasons
humiliation—shame; dishonor
oath—pledge; promise
obligingly—agreeably; willingly
regal—kingly; royal
unwittingly—unknowingly; without meaning to
wielded—used; handled

Main Characters

- Bharata**—son of Dasa-ratha and Kaikeyi
Dasa-ratha—king of Ayodhya; father of Rama and Rama's brothers
Hanuman—Sugriva's advisor
Kaikeyi—one of Dasa-ratha's three wives; mother of Bharata
Kumbha-karna—brother of Ravana
Lakshmana—Rama's faithful brother
Rakshas—wild demons; warriors of the jungle
Rama—exiled king of Ayodhya
Ravana—king of the Rakshas
Sita—Rama's wife
Sugriva—king of the monkeys
Surpa-Nakha—Raksha princess
Vibhishana—brother of Ravana

Rama and Sita

A Hindu myth from India

Rama is a king without a throne and a warrior general without an army. The only things left to him are his lovely wife, faithful brother, and humble jungle home. But even those things are threatened when Rama accidentally offends a savage king.

Rama! Rama, wait!"

At the sound of the distant voice, three people turned and peered through the dense jungle growth. One of them was Rama,¹ the prince of Ayodhya.² With him were his wife Sita and his brother Lakshmana.³

"Who can be calling me?" Rama wondered. He looked at his two companions, who shook their heads. They were as confused as he was.

"Rama!" they heard again. As the three looked in the direction of the voice, they at last spotted a man running toward them.

"Bharata!"⁴ said Rama in surprise. "Why are you here,

¹ (rahm. or ra' ma)

² (a yo' de a)

³ (se' ta) (lock shman' or lock shma' na)

⁴ (bar' at or ba ra' ta)



brother? Why aren't you at home preparing to rule our father's kingdom?"

"Rama," said Bharata, panting. "I come with important news. Your **exile** is over! You can return to Ayodhya immediately and take the throne."

Before Rama could answer, his brother Lakshmana broke in. "How so, Bharata? What about the promises our father made to your mother, Kaikeyi?⁵ Didn't he promise to make you king? And didn't Kaikeyi make him **banish** his favorite son to the jungle?"

Bharata lowered his dark eyes. "I'm sorry to report that our father is dead. He died of grief. He wished he'd never made those promises to my mother."

Then Bharata looked at Rama. "Rama, my mother has changed. She now sees that the promise she forced from our father was wrong. She agrees that, as the eldest son, you have the right to the throne, not I."

As Rama listened to his brother, his thoughts turned toward home. It was hard to imagine that his father was dead. King Dasa-ratha⁶ had been a wise and fair ruler, and the people loved him. He had also tried to be fair to his three wives. But it was his favorite wife, Kaikeyi, who had caused all this trouble.

When the king decided to retire, Kaikeyi was happy. After all, her husband was growing old, and he deserved to rest.

But then Kaikeyi heard that her husband was about to appoint his eldest son, Rama, as the new king. She became fiercely jealous.

Kaikeyi wanted her own son Bharata to be the new ruler. So she took advantage of the fact that Dasa-ratha had promised her two favors.

"First, I want my son Bharata appointed king," she declared to her husband. "And not only that. I want you to banish Rama to the jungle for fourteen years!"

Poor Dasa-ratha. He had given his word. And if he went

back on his promise, he would lose the respect of his people. The **distressed** king was forced to give in.

Rama, being a model son, took the news well. Obeying his father was more important to him than becoming king. So he immediately packed his things and set off into the jungle. Rama's wife Sita and brother Lakshmana—ever loyal to the prince—insisted on accompanying him during his exile.

Rama brought his attention back to the present. "Bharata, you know I can't go back. My father's **oath** holds true—even in death. So here in the jungle I must stay."

Rama looked at Sita and Lakshmana. "I know that you two are determined to stay with me during my exile," he said. "But you still have a chance to turn back. You can both return to Ayodhya."

Sita, a beautiful woman with long black hair, shook her head. "Rama, as your wife, it's my duty to stay by your side—no matter what. My feelings haven't changed. I'm staying with you."

Lakshmana, a strong young warrior, felt the same. "Brother, there are many dangers here in the jungle. You need someone to back you up. I'm staying with you as well."

Rama turned back to Bharata. "Well, there you are. I'm sorry you've journeyed through the jungle for nothing. But I cannot return to Ayodhya."

"But your exile has barely begun! And our people need your wisdom and your strong hand now!" cried Bharata.

Rama was firm. "Go and rule in my place," he told Bharata. "No matter what you say, I will not dishonor my father's memory by ignoring his promise."

Stubbornly, Bharata said, "I will go back to Ayodhya, but I will not rule. Before I leave, let me have your sandals."

"Why?" asked Rama with surprise.

"Just give them to me, and I'll explain."

Rama **obligingly** took off his sandals and handed them to his brother.

"Meet Ayodhya's new king!" exclaimed Bharata, holding up the sandals. "I will put these on the throne in your place, Rama. Whenever you think of your kingdom, remember that it

⁵ (keh kā ē or ka ēk' u yē)

⁶ (dash rat' or dash' a rath' a)

will be ruled by a pair of shoes until you return!" Bharata then said his farewells and returned to Ayodhya.

For days, the three exiles roamed the wilderness. Deeper and deeper into the jungle they went. But search as they might, they couldn't find a good place to settle.

Along the way, a wise old **hermit** crossed their path. The hermit greeted Rama. "I can tell by your face that you're a true hero!" he exclaimed. "I have a gift for you!"

As the exiles watched, the hermit gave Rama a magic weapon. "I give you the bow of Vishnu,"⁷ he declared. "Here also is a quiver⁸ of arrows made by the gods themselves. Take care of these. You will need them one day."

"Thank you for the fine weapon," Rama replied. "It's comforting to know the gods are with us."

The exiles bid farewell to the hermit and continued looking for a place to live. One day, the exiles found themselves in a beautiful clearing. It seemed the perfect spot to settle. So there Lakshmana and Rama built a bamboo house. Finally these three noble people had a jungle home.

Wise old hermits visited from time to time and taught Rama good and useful things. Rama and his companions also learned the ways and speech of animals.

Still, the three of them were a little bored. They missed being part of the busy palace life.

"Here we are in the deepest jungle, and there's nothing exciting to do," complained Lakshmana. He looked up at the sky as if in appeal to the gods. "Please, send us a little adventure!"

Little did Lakshmana know his prayers were soon to be answered.

It all began when the hermits complained of being attacked and robbed by strange-looking beings called Rakshas. Rama and Lakshmana were curious about these Rakshas.

"Rakshas," one hermit explained, "are fierce warrior

⁷ Vishnu is a major Hindu god. He is the preserver of earthly life.

⁸ A quiver is a case for holding arrows.

creatures. One can barely see them as they flit from tree to tree. They can change their shapes at will and they use evil magic."

"Where do they live?" Rama asked.

The hermit shrugged and said, "The trees, the ground, the bushes—anywhere at all."

"How many of them are there?" asked Lakshmana.

"Who can tell?" the hermit said. "They are part of the wilderness itself. No one can count them."

Rama and Lakshmana decided to watch over the hermits. They often stepped in to defend the hermits from the attacking Rakshas. The brothers found it easy to drive away the strange creatures.

"Some warriors these are!" chuckled Rama.

"Such evil power too!" replied Lakshmana.

They laughed at the very idea that the Rakshas might be the least bit magical. But they would soon regret not taking them more seriously.

One day, a Raksha princess named Surpa-Nakha⁹ was wandering through the jungle with her brothers. At the sight of the bamboo home in the clearing she stopped and stared in fascination.

"Go ahead without me," Surpa-Nakha said to her brothers. "I want to find out more about these odd people who dare to live in my wilderness."

But once Surpa-Nakha saw Rama, she became enchanted by his beauty. She had never seen anyone so tall, pale, and regal. The Raksha princess left her hiding place and approached the exiled prince.

"Who are you, warrior?" she asked. "Why are you here in my jungle? Why do you live in this strange house? And where did you get your mighty bow, your quiver and arrows?"

Rama found the strange, wild woman entertaining. In fact, he could barely keep from laughing at her comical looks and odd ways. But he politely related the entire story of why he and his wife and brother were living in the jungle. Then he

⁹ (soor' pa ka' or soor' pa na ka')

asked the jungle woman who she was.

"I am Surpa-Nakha," she answered boldly. "I roam this jungle as freely as I wish."

The Raksha woman then walked into the bamboo house and began to look around. Though Sita was sitting in plain view, Surpa-Nakha paid no attention to her. The brothers watched Surpa-Nakha in amusement. She reminded them of a small monkey whose curiosity had brought it into their home.

But then Surpa-Nakha did something which really surprised the brothers. She stopped her curious poking around and stood before Rama. She spoke daringly—and very seriously.

"I am a powerful princess," Surpa-Nakha told Rama. "I have great magic. My kingdom is **boundless**. You are not nearly as powerful as I am. Even so, I think I'll take you for my husband."

Rama stared at the jungle princess, not quite sure how to react. "As you can see, I already have one wife," he said, trying not to laugh.

"Your human wife is no match for me," Surpa-Nakha said sternly. "Put her aside at once. You should be honored that I have taken an interest in you."

Now Rama couldn't help but show his amusement. "No, Surpa-Nakha," he said with a grin. "I'm forever bound to Sita. And you would not be happy as my second wife. Why don't you ask my brother instead? Lakshmana is all alone in this jungle home."

The Raksha princess looked at Rama in confusion. Was he really daring to reject her?

Lakshmana quickly picked up Rama's playful spirit. "Oh no, Surpa-Nakha," he said teasingly. "You would not want me for a husband. I'm no more than a slave to these other two. You're a fine princess and could never marry a slave."

Then Surpa-Nakha realized that the two men were mocking her. Never in her life had she been treated with disrespect. Never before had her pride been wounded.

"How dare you insult me!" she shrieked. "Who do you think I am? Do you think me weak and powerless?"

With those words, the little jungle princess darted wildly across the room toward Sita. Surpa-Nakha seemed to grow taller, and magic crackled in the air around her. The gentle Sita grew pale and trembled before the wild woman's magic.

Surpa-Nakha laughed at Sita's fear. She turned again to Rama and shouted, "Do you prefer this **cringing** human woman to me? Very well, then. You shall have her dead body as your companion!"

Rama now saw the danger he had **unwittingly** caused. He swiftly leapt between the two women. Standing protectively in front of Sita, he cried, "Help me, Lakshmana!"

Lakshmana charged across the room and grabbed Surpa-Nakha's hair. He snatched her away. Quickly he whipped out his sharp knife and yanked the wild woman's head back. Before Surpa-Nakha could react, Lakshmana had sliced off the tip of her nose. Then, with two quick flicks of his knife, he slit both her ears.

The Raksha woman ran bleeding and screaming from the house and vanished into the jungle. Rama could still hear her cries of pain and fury as he bent to take care of his wife.

Sita was shaken by Surpa-Nakha's magic. But she soon began to regain her strength.

"My sense of humor has gotten us into trouble," Rama said to his wife and brother. "I'm sorry for that. What will happen next?"

The Raksha woman's cries had scarcely died away when Rama and Lakshmana became aware of strange sounds of movement in the jungle. Shadows slid from tree to tree, and the vines shivered as though in an icy breeze. The **canopy** of trees seemed to close overhead, making the jungle even darker than usual.

"What's going on?" wondered Rama.

He didn't have to wait long to find out. Raksha warriors had heard of their princess' pain and **humiliation**. They were now gathering to engage in war against Rama and Lakshmana.

As well-trained warriors, the two brothers could scent a coming battle. Rama took up the powerful bow of Vishnu with

its quiver and arrows. Lakshmana grabbed two mighty swords. Then the brothers stood side by side, waiting for the attack to begin.

Shadowy forms poured out of the jungle and started the attack. Soon the Rakshas and exiles were **engaging** sword with sword and returning arrow for arrow.

It was a fierce battle. The air snapped with sparks, as though lightning were dancing under the dark trees. All the jungle animals and birds fled from the battle. The entire jungle shook and groaned from the destruction.

The brothers never really saw their attackers. Nor did they know how many Raksha warriors they fought. At times they believed thousands of Rakshas thundered through the jungle toward the bamboo house.

"Where are they all coming from?" Rama shouted to Lakshmana.

Rama's brother shook his head. "They seem to appear out of thin air!" he replied.

Time also flowed strangely. Did days or weeks of fighting pass? The brothers couldn't tell.

Rama and Lakshmana fought on against the mysteriously shifting shapes of the enemy. The brothers **wielded** their weapons with skill and strength. They held firm even in the face of the demons' most terrible spells. Vishnu's bow could not miss while Rama handled it. And Lakshmana's swords cut through flesh and magic alike.

Throughout the battle, Sita hid in the bamboo house. Though she trembled with fear, she had faith in Rama and Lakshmana. She was certain they would defeat the Rakshas.

At long last the wilderness became quiet again. Rama and Lakshmana stood exhausted but unharmed in the jungle clearing.

"Listen," said Rama softly.

"What? I don't hear anything," replied Lakshmana.

"That's what I mean," said Rama. "Surely we didn't kill *all* the Rakshas. Where did they go? They must live somewhere."

"Surpa-Nakha said that she was a princess," Lakshmana

said. "Where there's a princess, there must be a king."

"And where there's a king, there's a kingdom," replied his brother. "The only question is where?"

The brothers were right—the Rakshas did indeed have a king. His name was Ravana¹⁰ and he was Surpa-Nakha's brother. He ruled the Rakshas from his palace in the kingdom of Lanka.¹¹

Ravana was furious when he saw what had happened to his sister's nose and ears. After listening to her story, Ravana thought long and hard. He had to come up with a way to destroy Rama.

It was not only his sister he wanted to avenge. Rama and Lakshmana had also killed Ravana's brother and countless other warriors during the battle.

"Rama will pay for this," Ravana murmured angrily. He closed his eyes and thought some more.

"I have it," Ravana decided at last. "I will seize his most prized possession. Yes, I will capture his wife Sita and bring her to my palace!"



Not long after the battle, Lakshmana and Sita were out walking near their jungle home. Suddenly Sita spotted a deer drinking from a stream nearby.

As the deer raised its head, Sita gasped at the sapphires set in its antlers. The jewels glowed brightly in the sunlight. As the deer turned and faced Sita, she glimpsed the shine of its silky coat. Sita took a step closer, and the deer looked directly into her eyes.

"What a beautiful deer!" Sita said in wonder. "I just have to have it for my own."

But when she moved closer, the deer gracefully leapt the stream and disappeared into the trees. Sita drew a deep, sad sigh. She had been fascinated by the beautiful animal.

Lakshmana ran up beside Sita. He had seen the deer too.

¹⁰ (ra van' or ra va' na)

¹¹ Lanka is now known as Sri Lanka. (Until 1972 it was called Ceylon.) It is an island nation off the southeast coast of India.

But worry rather than wonder showed on his face.

"Oh, Lakshmana, won't you catch it for me?" Sita begged. "What a marvelous pet it would make!"

Lakshmana knew something was wrong. "Forget about the deer, Sita," he said. "It's long gone by now."

But Sita could not get the magic deer out of her mind. That night, she described it to Rama and begged him to capture it for her.

"Please, Rama," she said. "It's not very often I ask for anything, but I really must have this deer! It seems just a little thing to do after all your mighty deeds."

Before Rama could answer, Lakshmana spoke up. "This cannot be an ordinary deer. Its coat is like fine silk, and it has sapphires in its antlers. Why would a deer like that be freely roaming the jungle? No, that animal is magic—and its magic is probably evil."

"Something so beautiful can't be evil," Sita insisted. "You can tell that it's a royal creature. And such a fine animal doesn't belong in this wilderness. Its true home is in a palace garden."

"Don't forget that the Rakshas can change their shapes," said Lakshmana. "As lovely as it seems, this deer could be a magic warrior. It wouldn't be wise to bring a thing like that into our home."

But Sita was still enchanted by the jeweled deer. "If you cannot capture it," she pleaded, "then kill it and bring me its skin and antlers. It would make a rug finer than any in the kingdom. Rama, I must have this deer, one way or the other."

Rama had said nothing during this argument. By his wife's description of the deer, he knew it was no ordinary creature.

"Is Sita right?" Rama wondered. "Does this creature deserve a life in a palace garden? Or is Lakshmana correct in saying it's a Raksha magician in disguise?"

Rama didn't know. But whichever was the case, he decided to track the animal down.

The next morning Rama took up his bow and quiver of arrows. "Stay close to Sita and watch over her," he told

Lakshmana. "There's something about Sita's attachment to this magic deer that worries me."

"I'm glad you feel that way too," Lakshmana replied. "I promise to keep Sita safe. In return, you must promise to be very careful."

Rama easily found the tracks of the beautiful deer and followed them deep into the jungle. From time to time he caught a glimpse of the animal. He could see it was as beautiful as Sita had claimed. But try as he might, he could not get close to it.

The deer led Rama farther and farther away from his wife and brother and their jungle home. But just when Rama thought he had lost it completely, the deer would appear again. The creature seemed to be playing a game with him.

Finally Rama felt **apprehensive** about being away from his companions so long. He did not believe he could capture the deer alive. So he placed an arrow in the bow of Vishnu. The next time he glimpsed the deer, Rama shot at it. The arrow struck its target, and the deer fell to the ground.

Rama approached the deer and found it dying. The strange creature seemed to flicker like a flame. It looked like a Raksha one second and a deer the next. Rama stood and watched in silence, wondering what to do.

"Sita will be upset if I don't bring the deer back," he said to himself. "But what if the animal was sent to bring us harm?"

Rama's thoughts were interrupted by a strange sound coming from the deer. The dying creature suddenly raised its head and called out in a piercing human voice. The sound of its outcry made Rama's skin crawl.

"Lakshmana, help me!" the deer cried. "I'm wounded! I'm dying here in the jungle! Help me!"

With those words, the deer lowered its head and died.

"Why did the deer's words frighten me so?" Rama wondered aloud. Then he realized the truth. "Its voice!" whispered Rama in horror. "Its voice was exactly like mine! I've been tricked by the Rakshas!"

The deer's piercing voice echoed throughout the jungle.

At last it reached the clearing, where Lakshmana and Sita awaited Rama's return. But it didn't seem far away. It sounded very near.

At the sound of the magic deer's cry, Sita gasped and clutched Lakshmana's arm.

"Go quickly!" she said.

But Lakshmana did not move. "I don't believe it," he replied. "It must be another Raksha trick. I promised Rama that I would stay and guard you."

"You claim to love your brother," Sita cried furiously. "Didn't you hear him call? Go to his aid at once!"

"Rama has never been defeated," insisted Lakshmana. "Surely you don't think that deer got the best of him?"

"Betrayed!" screamed Sita, her eyes blazing. "My husband is wounded and bleeding. And didn't you hear how close he sounded? He must be just beyond those trees! Will you let him die right within your reach?"

Lakshmana was deeply hurt by Sita's words, but he didn't know what to do. He felt sure the cry had been some kind of trick. Even so, it had certainly sounded like Rama's voice. How could he be certain his brother was not in desperate danger? Lakshmana took up his sword and rushed into the jungle.

But when Lakshmana reached the nearest trees, he saw no sign of Rama.

"Strange," he murmured aloud. "The voice sounded so near! Maybe just a little farther..."

So Lakshmana continued deeper and deeper into the wilderness in search of Rama.

In the meantime, Sita paced back and forth in front of the bamboo house. When she grew tired, she sat and listened carefully for the slightest sound. But for quite some time, there was nothing to be heard but the jungle breeze and the cries of the animals.

Sita closed her eyes and lowered her head—not in weariness but despair. "I was wrong!" she said, beginning to cry. "Oh, how I wish I had not asked either of them to leave! It was my selfishness that caused this."

A sound reached Sita's ears. She raised her head and leapt to her feet with joy.

But it was not Lakshmana and Rama standing before her. It was only an old hermit.

Disappointed as she was, Sita was glad to see a friendly face—and she was sure she could trust the jungle hermits. She politely offered him water and bread.

Sita was unaware that the jungle had suddenly grown silent. And she didn't notice that the birds and beasts seemed to be waiting breathlessly and fearfully. Even the trees and vines didn't move in the breeze.

The hermit looked all around. He studied the thatched roof¹² of the bamboo house.

"Why do you live here?" he asked Sita. "You are obviously of noble blood. Why don't you have a husband who can provide you with a palace?"

"I am proud to be the wife of Rama," Sita answered, holding her head high. "He's a hero and a godlike man. What more should a woman desire?"

"A true king," cried the hermit, leaping to his feet. "A true king such as me!"

The hermit's shape flickered wildly for a moment. In a flash, he took the form of a Raksha—a Raksha king, that is. For King Ravana had come to complete the next step of his plan.

Sita tried to run, but Ravana laughed and caught her by her long dark hair. Sita winced in pain. But then her eyes widened as she glimpsed an extraordinary sight.

A great golden chariot drawn by strange winged creatures skimmed the treetops and landed in the clearing. Ravana swept Sita up in his arms and leapt into the chariot. She didn't even get a chance to scream before the chariot rose into the sky and flew away over the jungle.

"Rama, help!" Sita cried over and over. But it was no use. No one could hear. Sita was alone with the king of the Rakshas.

¹² A thatched roof is made of straw or grass.

Immediately Sita gathered her thoughts. She knew she would have to help herself. Looking down, she spotted a group of monkeys watching from the tops of some jungle trees. An idea formed in Sita's mind.

Carefully, so as not to attract Ravana's notice, Sita removed one of her golden bracelets. Its jewels glittered brightly in the sun. As the chariot passed over the monkeys, Sita threw the bracelet down to them. Ravana was too busy laughing over his victory to notice any of this.

As the chariot flew on, Sita dropped a jeweled necklace onto another group of monkeys. Later still, she tossed her earrings into the treetops.

Meanwhile, in the jungle, Lakshmana found Rama safe and alive.

"We've been tricked," Rama told his brother. "We've all been tricked. But where's Sita? Surely you didn't leave her alone?"

Before Lakshmana could even answer, the wilderness began to rumble with a low moaning sound. It sounded as if the beasts and birds, the insects and fishes, and even the trees themselves were in mourning.

Rama and Lakshmana knew something was very wrong. They rushed back to the bamboo house. "My wife is gone!" cried Rama.

The brothers wasted no time setting out to search for the missing princess. They traveled swiftly over the hills and streams and along the jungle paths. But Rama and Lakshmana found no sign of Sita at all.

On the second day of their search, Rama and Lakshmana came across a group of monkeys. Rama had learned the dangers of showing disrespect to others, so he spoke politely to the creatures.

"Kind monkeys, I wonder if you could help us?" asked Rama.

Sugriva,¹³ the king of the monkeys, responded in kind. "What might we do for you, lords?"

¹³ (soo grēv' or soo grē' va)

"Sita, my wife, is missing."

Rama then told the monkeys of their battle with the Rakshas and the episode of the magic deer.

"Those that battle against the Rakshas are friends of ours," Sugriva replied. "I will send word to all the monkeys in the jungle. If anyone can find clues to Sita's whereabouts, the monkeys will."

And sure enough, within a few hours, Sugriva brought Rama a collection of jewelry. Rama recognized every item as Sita's.

Sugriva nodded wisely. "The monkeys who found these things say they fell down from the sky," the monkey king said. "When the monkeys looked up, they saw a chariot carried through the air by winged beasts. I know of only one such chariot in all the world. It belongs to Ravana, king of the Rakshas."

Rama could not help but smile with pride. "The wise and gentle Sita has truly outsmarted Ravana," he declared.

"Indeed she has," agreed Lakshmana. "But where can Ravana have taken her?"

"To his kingdom, a place called Lanka," said Sugriva.

"And where can we find Lanka?" asked Rama.

"We've heard that it's across the great ocean to the south," Sugriva said.¹⁴ "I will send for my most clever advisor, Hanuman.¹⁵ If any of the monkeys can find the kingdom of the Rakshas, he can."

In a few minutes a wise-looking monkey stood before Rama and Sugriva. Hanuman agreed immediately to **conduct** the search for Sita.

"I would be honored to help," he said with sincerity.

Rama was overjoyed. "When you find Lanka, look for a woman with long black hair. She wears a jewel in the center of her forehead. If you find her, give her this ring. She will then know that I'm coming to her rescue."

Hanuman gathered a group of able monkeys and left for

¹⁴ The ocean referred to is the Indian Ocean.

¹⁵ (ha' nu man)

the south. Before long they reached a large body of water. Hanuman caught a passing bird and asked it, "Is there land across this water?"

"Yes," said the bird. "But it's too far away for you to reach."

Hanuman laughed. Of all the monkeys in the world, he was the greatest jumper. He reared up and leapt out over the seemingly endless ocean. For hundreds of miles he soared above the water. At last, he neared a great island with a palace city on its coast.

Without a sound, Hanuman dropped inside the palace walls. In a courtyard, he saw a Raksha woman with wounds on her nose and ears.

"Surpa-Nakha!" he thought. "This is indeed the Raksha city. And I've surely found the palace of Ravana."

Hanuman scampered across the palace walls and roofs looking for Sita. He soon arrived at another courtyard which was guarded by fierce Raksha women. Inside he saw a human woman with long black hair and a jewel hanging on her forehead. She looked terribly **forlorn**. Hanuman tried to get her attention, but the woman never looked up.

Hanuman hurried down from the wall and played around the woman's feet, making chattering monkey sounds. She took no notice of the sounds at first. But soon she realized the monkey was speaking to her.

"I bring a message from your husband," Hanuman said. "He wants you to know that you will soon be rescued."

Sita stared at the creature in amazement. Then she looked into Hanuman's wise eyes and kindly face. She had no doubt that the monkey spoke the truth. She took his paw.

Hanuman gave her the ring Rama had sent. Sita quickly hid it in her robes. Relief and joy swept over her, but she sat quietly so the guards wouldn't notice. She removed the jewel from her own forehead and handed it to the monkey.

"Give this to my husband," she whispered. "Tell him I weep for him. Tell him that now I have hope."

Just then, Hanuman realized he had attracted the attention of the guards. He darted toward the palace walls, hoping to

leap to freedom. But the guards set up a cry, and the monkey saw that he could not escape. He hid Sita's jewel in a wall just seconds before he was captured.

Hanuman was taken before Ravana, who was in terrible spirits. The Raksha king's eyes blazed with anger, for Sita would have nothing to do with him. The sight of the monkey didn't make him any happier. Ravana was well aware that monkeys could be **crafty** enemies.

"Kill the monkey at once," he told the guards.

The guards argued among themselves about the best way to kill Hanuman. Finally they tied an oily rag to the monkey's tail and set it on fire. Screaming wildly, the monkey scrambled to the top of a roof.

Hanuman's screams soon reached Sita's ears. She prayed desperately for this brave creature who had risked his life to bring her hope.

The gods heard Sita's prayers and saw to it that Hanuman was not harmed by the flames. Instead, as the monkey leapt from roof to roof of the city, house after house caught on fire. Before too long, much of the city was burning.

Hanuman found a pail of water and put out the fire on his tail. Then creeping through the smoke so nobody could see him, he found Sita's jewel. He grabbed it and escaped from the island.

The palace fire was soon put out. But Ravana was furious over the damage the flames had caused. And he knew that Rama would soon come to rescue his wife. Ravana held a meeting with his brothers to discuss his plans.

"First, I will kill the woman Sita," Ravana said to them. "She thinks herself too good for a Raksha king—she doesn't deserve to live. After Sita is dead, I'll defend Lanka against Rama and the monkeys."

But Vibhishana,¹⁶ one of Ravana's brothers, objected. "It was wrong to kidnap this noble woman," he said. "I told you that from the beginning."

Another of Ravana's brothers, the giant Kumbha-karna,¹⁷

¹⁶(vib hē shan' or vib hē sha' na)

¹⁷(koomb' karn or koom' ba kar' na)

woke up from his deep sleep long enough to voice his opinion. "I agree with Vibhishana," he said. "However, Ravana, you are our king. I will support your actions whether I agree with them or not."

With these words, Kumbha-karna dozed off again. The giant had a sleeping sickness that made it impossible for him to stay awake very long.

"Killing her and making war will only make a bad thing worse," Vibhishana insisted. "You must set things right by setting her free."

Ravana rose to his feet. "I'll never set her free!" he shouted fiercely. "You're a traitor and a coward. If you were not my brother, I would kill you as well. Either take my side or leave!"

Without another word, Vibhishana left the city. Ravana continued talking with his other brothers, who decided to stay and support the king. Together, they organized the fierce Raksha troops to defend Lanka against the coming threat.

Meanwhile, Hanuman reached home again, breathless from his terrible adventure. Rama was **elated** at the sight of Sita's jewel.

"She weeps for you," the monkey told Rama. "But she's grateful to have hope again."

Without further delay, Rama set about planning the attack on Lanka and Sita's rescue. Suddenly Lakshmana spied a Raksha coming toward them and immediately got ready to attack.

"Wait!" said the Raksha. "I come in peace. My name is Vibhishana. I'm here to tell you that you must march on the city at once. My brother Ravana plans to kill Sita. There's no time to be lost."

"But why are you telling us this?" asked Rama.

"I want to join you," said Vibhishana simply.

Following Rama's orders, the monkeys cut down thousands of trees and built a bridge to Lanka. Then an army of monkeys—led by Rama, Lakshmana, and Vibhishana—marched toward the Raksha kingdom in high spirits.

The Rakshas attacked Rama's army even before they

reached the island. The battle was long and fierce. The Rakshas changed into monsters and hurled magic at the attackers. But the monkeys were excellent warriors—swift and full of surprises.

Rama defeated most of Ravana's brothers with his powerful bow. Then he went after Kumbha-karna.

The giant brother of Ravana was barely able to wake himself for the battle. But he did his part for the Rakshas by devouring hundreds of monkeys. Finally Rama shot one arrow through Kumbha-karna's heart, killing the giant instantly.

At last, Rama broke through the palace wall and entered the courtyard where Ravana was holding Sita captive. Rama arrived just as Ravana was about to murder Sita.

"Come use your sword in a real challenge," called Rama. "You hide from battle to do your damage on a defenseless woman. Prepare to die."

"You'll be the one who dies, not I," was Ravana's reply.

Ravana swung his sword and nearly cut Rama with the sharp blade. Then Ravana tried to escape by changing into a bird.

Whispering prayers to the gods, Rama drew the bow of Vishnu and released an arrow. The Raksha king was struck dead in his tracks before he even knew what hit him.

Ravana's death put an end to the battle. The Raksha warriors quickly dropped their weapons and surrendered.

Though Ravana had done much evil, Rama treated the king's body with respect. He ordered a funeral pyre¹⁸ built for Ravana. Vibhishana, now the king of Lanka, lit the pyre.

As the fire burned, the gentle Sita appeared. Joyfully and gracefully, she walked toward her husband.

Rama, too, was overjoyed to see his wife again. But he took care not to let others see his joy.

You see, Rama knew in his heart that Sita had been faithful to him. But he also knew that others would always doubt her **fidelity** if she were not tested. So he crossed his arms and pretended to be displeased with her.

¹⁸ (pī-er) A funeral pyre is a pile of wood used to burn a dead body.

Sita gazed deeply into Rama's eyes. She understood his thoughts. "Build another pyre for me, Lakshmana," she said simply.

Rama made no move to stop his brother. When the pyre was lighted, Sita turned to the crowd. "I swear that I have been faithful to my husband in every way," she said. "If I lie, let me die in this blaze!" And with those words, the brave princess stepped into the flames.

For a moment, Sita seemed to be swallowed up by the flames. The entire crowd gasped and cried aloud and wept. Still Rama stood with his arms folded, showing no emotion of any kind.

Suddenly, the flames of the pyre parted. Before the amazed eyes of the crowd, Sita walked out of the flames and stepped into her husband's grateful arms. She was not injured. Not a hair had been burned. Not even her clothing had been scorched.

"The gods knew what I myself knew," Rama shouted to the astonished crowd. "And now the world knows too. Sita never gave in to the evil Ravana—was never unfaithful to me. And now Brahma¹⁹ himself has given her back to me."

With that, the happy couple and Lakshmana returned to their bamboo house in the jungle clearing. They remained there in peace until their exile was over. Almost before they knew it, it was time to return to the kingdom of Ayodhya.

The three arrived at the palace to a joyful welcome. Rama was delighted to see his people once again. But before he joined in the homecoming celebration, he had something to do.

Alone, Rama headed straight for his throne. He looked thoughtfully at the sandals Bharata had placed there so long ago. They had done a good job in his absence.

Stepping into the shoes, Rama said to himself, "The king of Ayodhya is now ready to rule in person!"

¹⁹ (bra'ma) Brahma is a major Hindu god. He is the creator of earthly life.

INSIGHTS

The story of Rama and Sita is just a small part of a larger collection of myths called the *Ramayana*. The *Ramayana* has roots in ancient Hindu mythology. The epic wasn't written down until sometime between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. At that time a poet named Valmiki recorded it.

We know little about Valmiki except that he was a religious hermit. It is thought that he spent his life collecting stories about Rama. Then he put them together and shaped them into one long poem.

The poem was composed in Sanskrit, a language said to be older than Latin. Some people believed that Sarasvati, the wife of the god Brahma, invented the Sanskrit alphabet.

Dasa-ratha, Rama's father, was torn with grief at Rama's banishment. He was so grief-stricken, in fact, that he died. But in more than one way, the king had only himself to blame for his death.

As a young man, Dasa-ratha was filled with pride. His talents were so great that he forgot about being humble. This overconfidence ended up costing him dearly.

The king's mistake came when he was walking through the woods one day. He heard the sound of an elephant drinking from a stream. Without even looking, he pointed an arrow and shot it.

But the "elephant" turned out to be a young boy drawing water. The boy died, and a shaken Dasa-ratha went to tell the youth's mother and father.

The parents cursed Dasa-ratha. They told him that one of his own sons would be taken from him and that he would die of a broken heart. And as the couple predicted, so followed Rama's exile and the king's death.

continued

The ancient Indians believed that things moved in cycles. Like the changing seasons, all life—gods and humans included—moved from birth to death and back to birth again.

This belief was expressed in the idea of *reincarnation*. According to this concept, the souls of the dead return to earth in different bodies.

It is interesting to note that reincarnation plays a part in the Rama story. Rama was not only an earthly prince. He was also a reincarnation of the god Vishnu, who came to earth in order to kill the evil Ravana.

Ravana, too, was an incarnated god. At one time, he had a high position in Vishnu's heaven. Then he committed a serious error and was sentenced to three incarnations as Vishnu's enemy.

In this myth, we meet Ravana during his second return to earth. As the Raksha king, he gained a promise from the god Brahma that he would not be killed by a god or a demon. But foolish Ravana didn't bother to ask for protection from human beings. He felt himself too powerful to be overcome by them.

For this reason, Vishnu was reincarnated as the human Rama. Thus he was able to kill Ravana for the second time.

And in a way, Rama did Ravana a favor. Death meant the end of Ravana's second incarnation and left only one more to go.

What is the origin of Kumbha-karna's mysterious sleeping sickness?

It seems Kumbha-karna, a giant-monster, had such a huge appetite that he devoured everything in sight. The terrified people turned to the gods for help.

In response, the god Brahma gave Kumbha-karna the gift of eternal sleep. But the giant asked one favor. He wanted to be allowed to wake up once every six months to eat his fill. His wish was granted.

It is said that at one meal Kumbha-karna ate 6,000 cows, 10,000 sheep, 10,000 goats, and 400 buffalo. And he still complained of hunger!

The epic of Rama and Sita reads like an adventure story. But to the Hindus the myth also holds moral lessons. It provides a guide for living their lives.

The Hindus see Rama and Sita as examples of the perfect man and woman. Rama is an obedient son who respects the wishes of his father and the laws of his country. Sita is the ideal wife who remains faithful to her husband.

Rama's test of Sita near the end of the myth may seem cruel to us. But the Hindus understood and respected his actions. As king, Rama was an example to the citizens. If he accepted a wife who had been unfaithful, then that allowed everyone else to do the same.

Today the *Ramayana* remains important to Hindus. Every fall the epic is acted out by Indian citizens. The ritual lasts over a week and includes religious songs and dances.