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'A milestone'—*India Today*

BRIDGE OF RAMA

BOOK FIVE OF THE RAMAYANA



They were on the beach, baking in the sunlight after being evicted by the noisome foul-smelling exodus of the bats—the 'bat sena' as Jambavan ironically referred to them—when Sakra came bounding up the beach, sending showers of sand flying over a clutch of bears sitting morosely around, with a whoop of excitement. Hanuman calmed him down sufficiently enough to understand that some vanars foraging for food a few miles south had brought word that they had discovered Mount Mahendra. The news brought grins to the snouts of all the vanar generals. The Kiskindha vanars who had accompanied Rama and Lakshman here had been aiming for that very spot but had been disoriented by the sea-mist. Angad was exceedingly pleased that they had found the legendary mount.

From all accounts, it appeared to be the closest point on the coast to the strait that separated the continent and the island of Lanka. The scouts claimed that there were two mountains on the promontory and from the top of the taller mountain, you could just manage to glimpse Lanka. Rama decided that they ought to go see for themselves right away, and of course, everyone wished to follow their inspiring new leader, so it turned into a veritable march. The distance was easily enough crossed,

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and it was still afternoon when they climbed the first 'mountain' which turned out to be little more than a large mound, barely worthy of being called a hill. The legendary 'Mount' Mahendra itself was no more than two hundred yards tall and seemed unlikely to be the same familiar peak mentioned in so many ancient legends and tales, but Rama had no wish to question the identity of what was clearly a talismanic place to both the vanars and bears—and, come to think of it, to his own kind as well.

He glanced back from the promontory of the mountain—for he was resigned to referring to it as a mountain to avoid needless controversy—and saw a remarkable sight.

The mountain was unevenly raised, the north side closer to the sea level than the south side. The south side gave way onto a raised cliff-like runway that extended for at least a mile before losing itself in a thickly wooded spur where the coastline curved sharply inwards again. So, looking south, you could certainly term this a mountain, and a quite majestic one at that, with its white, flowering crocuses and snow firs, a most unusual fauna for a coastal locale. Looking north, as he was right now, it was much less, of course, but that only added to its sense of grandeur, the deceptive ordinariness on one side and the sweeping picturesque swoop on the other. The west side gave way sharply to a steep fall. Glancing down cautiously, for the foam-flecked waves were a good four hundred yards below, he saw that the drop was almost sheer, the face made up of the same blackrock that was seen so plentifully along the coastline here, and covered with lichenous moss, freshly green from the recent rains. The ocean lay spread out below like a great blue quilt, patched with darker and lighter sections which he thought at first were caused by clouds. Then he observed the absence of clouds in the sky and puzzled over the