

# THE INDIAN EPICS RETOLD

THE RAMAYANA • THE MAHABHARATA  
GODS, DEMONS, AND OTHERS

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## RAVANA

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'Ravana' means 'scream', and this rakshasa earned the name by screaming. The name came to him when he attempted to move Mount Kailas, where Shiva was consorting with his wife; Shiva answered this masterly impudence by steady'ing the swaying mountain, pressing it down with his toe so that Ravana was caught under it and shouted for his life, recognizing after all a superior force in Shiva. Ravana's advisers suggested that he should pray for relief, and Ravana prayed intensely to a tune called Sama (which is the origin of all musical sound). Shiva, greatly pleased, appeared before him to confer a boon and named him at that moment 'Ravana.'

To understand why Ravana thought of dislodging the Kailas mountain from its foundations, we must go a little further back in his life story. His original name was not Ravana but Dasagreva, meaning 'ten heads.' At birth he had ten heads and twenty arms. When he was born wolves howled and shrieking noises filled the air, portents of evil. His mother, Kaikasi, knew when he was still in her womb that he would be a demon. She was the daughter of a demon chief called Sumali, and had enticed a saintly man of great beauty, radiance, and spiritual powers while he was at meditation. The saint warned her, 'This is an unholy hour of dusk for union, and the issue coming from this union is bound to be monstrous.' She begged for some consideration, and he said, 'If several are born, at least

one shall be virtuous.' Out of this parentage came forth first Dasagreva, later known as Ravana; then Kumbhakarna; a daughter, Soorpanakha; and lastly Vibhishana. At the birth of each one of them except the last, wolves howled and the skies darkened.

Kubera, the distinguished ruler and a son of the saint by a previous wife, was a stepbrother. Once, when he came to see his father, Kaikasi, the mother of the monsters, said to Ravana and the rest, 'Ah, here comes your brother, salute him,' half in jealousy and half in admiration. And the stepbrothers went up to him reverently. Thereafter, as they grew up, they constantly heard praise of this brother and demanded, 'How is it that he has acquired so much distinction?'

'Because of his tapas,' said their father.

At once the brothers went into seclusion on a river bank, in order that they might also acquire strength and merit through proper penance. Each sat in tapas for thousands of years. Ravana nipped off one of his ten heads to mark every thousand years of penance. When he had thus sacrificed nine heads and was left with only one, Brahma the Creator appeared and said, 'I admire your tenacious penance, what's your aim and desire?'

'I want immortality.'

'Impossible,' said Brahma. 'Whoever is born must die some day—that's the law of the world.'

'Grant me, then, the boon of indestructibility—that no god, celestial being, element, or any power on earth or in the heavens shall ever overcome me.'

'Granted,' said Brahma. 'No power in any world shall defeat you. What of humans?'

'Worms!' declared Ravana. 'These pitiful, contemptible creatures, I don't have to perform a tapas for protection from them.'

'So be it,' said Brahma.

'And every time one of my heads is severed, it must return to my shoulders.'

'So be it,' said Brahma.

Kumbhakarna was about to phrase his demand when Brahma got help from his spouse, Saraswati, the goddess of learning and self-expression; she affected the demon's tongue so that, whatever he might have intended to ask for, he only succeeded in saying, 'I want to sleep—uninterruptedly.' This was granted immediately, so that instead of becoming a public menace Kumbhakarna slept for long stretches of time and humanity did not have to blame Brahma for creating yet another danger for it. When Brahma asked Vibhishana to name his desire, he said, 'May I have the strength never to swerve from righteousness even under the most trying circumstances'—a strange man in this family.

Now, strengthened by fruitful penance, the brothers returned to the world of action, wanting to test their powers, and the indestructibility promised to Ravana. Ravana's grandfather visited him and advised, 'Why don't you attack Lanka and take it back? After all, it's our country, unfairly handed to Kubera.'

'Kubera is my elder brother, I'll not act against him,' said Ravana.

But Mareecha, his uncle, argued with him, as did his grandfather. They explained, 'You are a warrior—the exercise of valour is your proper prerogative. What are your gifts worth if you are not going to use them? What are all, Kubera is only a half-brother; a half-brother is no brother at all. Even if he were a brother, what of it? If he is so close to you, let him give way to you!'

As they pursued this line of argument, Ravana saw the light. In the pursuit of fame and conquest, considerations of right and wrong did not arise. Ravana mustered an army to march on Lanka. Kubera received an ultimatum, and he submitted to avoid bloodshed. He met Ravana at the border and handed over the city to him, and took himself off to Alakapuri, in the Himalayan region, placing himself out of his brother's reach, many thousands of miles

away, at the northern extremity. But all this great space between did not prevent news of his brother's activities from reaching him.

After establishing himself securely, Ravana never allowed anyone of possibly equal status to survive around him. He delighted in tormenting other kings. It was not only physical or material qualities in others that roused his ire; he disliked even those who strove to attain spiritual qualities or pursued learning or religion. It was safest not to come under his notice. No category of creature could hope to escape his attention. He tormented those whom he did not exterminate.

Kubera sent an emissary to Ravana's court, advising him to leave everyone alone. Ravana's immediate reaction was to reach for his sword and chop off the emissary's head. His courtiers in the assembly enjoyed it as a joke. But this did not lessen Kubera's zest to improve his brother and wean him from evil. He continued to send his messages of advice.

The only normal thing that Ravana did at this time was to marry. When he was out in the forests one day, hunting, he met a girl and her aged father trudging along the forest path, and stopped to ask, 'Who are you? Why are you here?'

The man replied, 'My name is Maya. I am an architect. This is my daughter Mandodari. Her mother was a celestial creature. She lived with me until this child was born, then she deserted me and went back to her own world. Since then I have been the unhappiest creature on earth. I've brought up this child. You know the anxiety of a man who has a daughter to marry. Help me to find a bridegroom for this child.'

Ravana performed the single commendable act of his life by saying, 'I will marry this girl.' It turned out to be the happiest marriage known. For although Ravana's nature would not let him leave women alone, he proved a good husband, and Mandodari, known for her beauty,

also came to be classed amongst the five perfect women in God's creation.

Ravana suddenly realized that his brother was acting as an irritant and decided to put an end to this intolerable situation. He undertook an expedition to the far-off Himalayas. No country was too far away for him, when he set his mind to attack it. He marched to Alakapuri, sacked it, and vanquished his brother, whose only fault was that he had presumed to advise him. Finally he seized Kubera's prized possession, Pushpak—a flying chariot which could take one along the skies wherever one liked and also grant all wishes.

While flying back to his capital in Lanka, or Ceylon, Ravana found a mountain peak obstructing his passage. He felt irritated, got out of his chariot, muttering, 'How dare this miserable mountain get in my way!' and, putting his shoulder to the base of the mountain, attempted to lift it off. The mountain shook. Shiva's spouse Parvati was frightened. All the god's attendants feared that a cataclysm was uprooting them.

Shiva's personal guard and aide, Nandi, went down to see what the matter was, saw Ravana, and ordered him to go away. Ravana paused, wiping the perspiration from his brow, looked at his adviser, and laughed contemptuously.

'Why do you laugh?' asked Nandi, and Ravana answered, 'You monkey, how dare you advise me?'

Nandi was put out—he resented being called a monkey. He was deformed, dwarfish, brown-and-black coloured, with the head of a bull, anything, but not a monkey. And so he cursed Ravana. 'Your end will come through a monkey, the thought of which titillates you now. A monkey will give you food for thought.'

Proceeding from Kailas, Ravana attacked every kingdom that he noticed in his flight. He would poise himself on the border and send an ultimatum to the ruler to yield. If he resisted, he destroyed him; if he yielded, he mutilated

and enslaved him. He added several kings to his band of slaves. He also ravished their women. In one of his wanderings he encountered in the zone of Himalayan foothills a beauty named Vedavati, daughter of a sage. Ravana made advances to her. She recoiled from his touch and explained, 'I can marry no mortal. I am under a vow to marry only God, the great and only god Vishnu. I'm betrothed to him.'

Ravana sneered at this explanation. 'You foolish one, don't you know that I'm superior to your god Vishnu?' And he seized her by the hair and dragged her into his arms.

She freed herself by cutting off her hair and jumped into a sacrificial fire that her father had lit, saying, 'Only fire can cleanse me of the pollution of your touch.' Before giving up her life she cursed him. 'I'll be the sole cause of your destruction in my next birth.'

Ravana had acquired in his career three cardinal curses, which caused his downfall at the end. Nandi had given him an inkling of the agent of destruction, Hanuman, the monkey-faced god; Vedavati was reborn as Sita, the wife of Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu, in order to destroy Ravana; and Rama's coming itself was foreseen by one Aranyaka, the king of Ayodhya, who was attacked and tormented by Ravana on one of his excursions and who cursed Ravana that he would be destroyed by a member of his own, Ikshvahu, clan. Not satisfied with his conquests on earth, Ravana lusted for other victories. When sage Narada, the traveller in all the worlds, arrived and suggested, 'Why don't you attack Yama in his own world? He considers himself invincible,' the idea appealed to Ravana, and Narada felt that here was a possible way in which this mighty demon might be put an end to.

Ravana made an expedition to the world of Yama, the god of death, was repulsed by him, and was about to be struck with his staff, called Yama Danda, the very sight of which is said to spell doom for the beholder. But at

this moment Brahma reminded Yama that he had conferred the boon of indestructibility on Ravana, and Yama, out of consideration for this promise, simply vanished from the spot, leaving Ravana to imagine that he had vanquished him.

Ravana's next expedition was to Kishkindha, in order to subdue its ruler, Vali, a monkey chieftain of enormous strength. His followers advised Ravana to desist from this expedition. He brushed them aside, but when he arrived at Kishkindha he found Vali gone. Vali's wife and brother told him that Vali had gone out to the shores of the four oceans in order to perform his evening prayer, and that Ravana was welcome to wait for his return. Ravana did not care to wait, but went after Vali.

He found him praying on the southern shore, facing the sea. Ravana fell on him from behind. Vali just picked him up, tucked him under his arm, and went through his prayers without even turning to notice the disturbance. After his prayer he moved around the three other shores without setting Ravana down. It was only after his prayers, when he had returned to his palace at Kishkindha, that he released Ravana from under his arm and asked, 'Now what? What do you want?'

Ravana, as ever, respected superior strength. He broke into praise of Vali, called him the greatest being that he had ever seen in his life. He begged him to honour him with eternal friendship and offered him a share of all his spoils in territory, cattle, slaves, wealth, and women, and sealed the pact before fire.

After that Ravana settled down to a routine life, ruling, tyrannizing, enjoying the pleasures of life, a man of tremendous dynamism and accomplishments, achieving success in all that he attempted. His life continued peacefully until he began to hear of a young man called Rama, son of Dasarata, the ruler of Ayodhya. Constant reports reached him of the greatness of this young man: his uprightness, personality, skill at archery, strength,

learning, humility, godliness, fearlessness. Above all, he had qualified himself to marry the daughter of King Janaka by lifting, bending, and stringing an ancient bow, while other contestants failed even to move it.

The whole world seemed to be engaged in singing his praise. 'He is after all a human being—miserable human being, why are people going mad about him?' thought Ravana. He shut his ears whenever he heard the name 'Rama' mentioned. 'Does this miserable human being hope to rule the world as I do?' he often asked. The situation was intolerable. He racked his brains to find ways and means of wiping out this rival on earth. He consulted one of his henchmen called Akampana, the 'Unshakable', who advised, 'This man is now in Dandaka forest with his wife and brother, living the life of an exile. All that you have to do is to abduct his wife and take her away to your palace, and he will die of a broken heart. There is no other way of attacking him as he is practically invincible. Moreover, Sita is worth adding to your collection.'

Ravana thought this a sound procedure, sought his uncle Mareecha, and asked for his help. Mareecha said, 'Don't go near Rama or his wife. He'll finish you. Don't be foolish.' Mareecha having argued him out of it, Ravana went back to his palace to think over the matter himself.

While he was resting thus, his sister Soorpankha burst into his chamber with blood on her face. She wailed, 'What men you are! What brother worth the name would be resting and lounging while his sister is gashed and hacked? Get up and act!'

Ravana was fond of his sister and sprang to his feet, crying, 'What's this blood? Who has molested you?'

'Rama,' she cried. 'I was in Dandaka when Rama and his brother attacked me. Rama told his brother, "Cut her up, snap off her nose," and that brother chopped off my nose and ears and gashed my face in a dozen places.' She lamented and cried and finally said, 'Unless you go and

avenge this, you are not my brother, you are not a warrior, and all your achievements will count for nothing.'

Akampana once again advised Ravana to abduct Sita. Ravana sought his uncle Mareecha again and commanded him, 'You shall help me in this task. No argument about it.'

Mareecha once again expatiated on the greatness of Rama and ended up by saying, 'I have no doubt that Rama will kill me if I go there.'

Ravana said, 'If you don't go I will kill you, make up your mind.' Rather a strange order from a nephew.

Mareecha said, 'If I've no chance of living, I'll die by Rama's hand; he is at least an enemy. Let me be killed by him rather than by a nephew. I have watched him in action while he guarded the sages of Dandaka, whose sacrifices we once attempted to disrupt.'

Ravana let out an imprecation at the mention of Rama's valour, but felt happy to have made a start on the whole business of abduction. They evolved their plan of action.

Mareecha, fully aware that he was going to his doom, assumed the form of a golden deer and strutted up and down in front of the hermitage where Rama was staying with his brother Lakshmana and his wife Sita. Sita was fascinated by the deer and said, 'Catch that beautiful animal for me.'

Rama said, 'Leave it alone, content yourself by looking at it.'

'I want to have it,' insisted Sita.

'It's good to watch, but it may be anything; don't be misled by appearances.'

Fates were at work, and Sita, normally docile and self-effacing, became unusually demanding and insistent; the golden deer seemed to have stirred up a lot of hidden obstinacy in her. Rama argued with her, but she was firm in her demand.

Rama said, 'It may be an evil spirit in this form. I have known such.'

But Sita countered him by saying, 'Why do you say such things of a beautiful creature?'

Rama hesitated for a moment. Here was this tender being following him into exile ungrudgingly, accepting her lot without a word, wearing the bark of trees for clothes, eating roots and leaves, living in the open, and lying on hard ground at night, although she had been brought up in her father's palace in every kind of luxury. Rama said, 'All right, wait here. If it's real I will bring it alive; if it's an evil illusion, I'll kill it and bring the hide for you. Don't let anyone approach you here.' He asked his brother to stand guard at the gate and followed the deer.

At his approach the deer receded a few yards. It drew him after it. In the heat of the chase Rama hardly noticed how far he had gone. Then suddenly understanding the true nature of the creature, he shot an arrow, wounding it mortally. Before dying, the deer assumed the voice of Rama and let out a wail, 'O Sita, O Lakshmana, I'm dying, come at once!'

This was heard over the babble of birds and other forest noises by Sita, who became hysterical and said to Lakshmana, 'Go at once to your brother's assistance. He is in great danger.'

'He is not', said Lakshmana. 'No danger can come to him.'

'How can you stand there and talk? Didn't you hear his cry?'

'His command to me is not to leave your side. I must obey him.'

Once again the voice called for help. Sita became desperate and cried, 'Will you go or not?' When Lakshmana still refused to leave her unprotected, she spoke harshly. She insinuated that he wanted to see his brother dead so that he might possess her. This hurt Lakshmana deeply, and he left, after saying, 'God alone should save you.'

This was the moment Ravana had been waiting for.

His strategy had worked perfectly. He emerged from his hiding, stood at the door, and cried, 'Alms for a mendicant.'

Sita opened the door. There stood a perfect mendicant, with sacred marks on his forehead, rosary around his throat, wearing ochre robes, and holding a wooden bowl in his hand. She said, 'Mendicant, please wait there.'

The mendicant answered, 'This is indeed wonderful courtesy, to ask me to wait at the gate! Tell me to go away, and I'll go.'

'Don't be offended, sir,' Sita said. 'My lord will be back soon.'

The mendicant laughed contemptuously. 'Hunger cannot wait for the return of men.'

There were certain codes of hospitality that had to be respected. Sita unrolled a mat of woven grass for the guest, set some fruit before him, and withdrew into an inner part of their hut.

He called her and, when she came out, seized her arm and revealed himself. He explained, 'Come with me. I'm the most invincible being in all the seven worlds. Brahma has granted me immortality. I'll give you a palace to live in and every comfort and luxury. You don't have to allow your beautiful self to languish here. Come with me. I'll make you my queen. Your order will be a command for every soul in Lanka....'

'Rama will kill you, begone before he arrives.'  
'I am greater than Rama.'

She screamed and called for help, tried to wrench herself free, but Ravana just applied his favourite stranglehold whenever he wanted to take a woman. He seized her by the hair, lifted her like a child, and sped away in the Pushpak Vimana to Lanka.

When Rama returned to the ashram and found it empty, he lamented and cried, but did not fall dead as Ravana and his advisers had anticipated. He set himself the hard task of searching for his wife and recovering

her, and followed her trail with the help of various forest creatures.

Ravana's capital, Lanka, was a city of palaces, museums, and gardens, encircled and decorated with all the booty of his various campaigns. The people moving in the streets reflected their ruler's prosperity in their dress, ornaments, and general deportment. The air was charged with music, the chanting of hymns and songs glorifying Ravana. Ravana's palace itself was a jewel set in the midst of all this, heavily guarded by armed rakshasas. The halls were packed with souvenirs and relics of Ravana's various expeditions, and his own inner apartments were filled with gold and gems.

In his chamber hundreds of beautiful women lay about languorously. He was a gigantic person of enormous capacity and versatility in love, able to assume any form or shape and to please all these women, including his chief wife, Mandodari, who occupied a golden cot of her own in the midst of this crowd of fair women garnered from all corners of the world. The women sang and played for him continually. He had halls for drink, separate halls for food, music, and pleasure.

Ravana woke up at dawn, to the chanting of hymns and the recital of scriptures. He elaborately groomed and decorated himself. Followed by an imposing retinue of men and women, he went forth to visit Sita, whom he held captive in a secluded wood named Asoka Vana, a place of waterfalls, garden walks, orchards, and grottoes, surrounded by ramparts. Sita sat in dejection under a simsupa tree. Ravana's aim was to break her spirit and make her yield, through loneliness, solitary confinement, or — worse — the terrifying company of fierce rakshasa women, dwarfs, and freaks. Sita was in mourning. She had removed her jewels and stuck them in the branches

of the tree; her hair was wild and unkempt, her face mud-stained, and she was clad in a sari of yellow colour.

Ravana entered her precincts, but in spite of all the care he had taken to make himself attractive, he could never get her to look up at him, nor did she take note of the retinue that followed him. She seemed oblivious of her surroundings. Ravana stood before her to attract her attention and, failing, addressed her somewhat aggressively. 'Woman, this obstinacy will do you no good. Be my friend. As a rakshasa, it is within my right to abduct anyone's wife and force her to yield to my wishes. It'll not be difficult for me to take your love by force.'

Sita raised her hands and covered her ears, unable to bear the word 'love' from anyone except Rama. She averted her face, and Ravana felt infuriated. He said, 'I'll have greater pleasure if you yield to me voluntarily. I'll wait for it. Look at me, I'm the greatest being in all the worlds today. The gods tremble at the mention of my name. My wealth and strength are unparalleled. My prayers, meditations, and learning are unmatched. By my special strength I can summon the great gods like Brahma and Shiva when I want them. Don't be a fool. Don't waste your beauty in seclusion and sorrow. I'll make you my chief queen. You will enjoy all my wealth and authority. You may give gifts to whomsoever you desire. Be my queen and let us go round the world happily; come, decide. You have tried to make yourself bad-looking, but still your beauty remains unimpaired. I long for your touch. I'm maddened by your beauty. I have no other thought.'

Sita plucked from the ground an insignificant blade of grass, threw it before her and addressed it, shunning talking to Ravana directly, and to show that she viewed him as no better than that straw. 'You are seeking your own doom,' she said. 'Is there none in all this crowd around you who can give you good advice? You and your capital will perish. Rama's anger is like the great fire. You won't be able to withstand it, for all your boasting and



bragging. You are trying his patience. Ravana, don't seek your own destruction. Were you not ashamed to steal me from my husband when he was away? Would you have dared to approach us, if he had been there? You sneaked in when—'

'Stop that,' cried Ravana, his eyes rolling in anger. He resented being criticized in the presence of his followers. 'Don't speak of that man again, a worthless fellow who instead of ruling his kingdom has preferred to wander in the forests like a tramp, wearing the bark of trees instead of finery. How dare you mention him to me? You are foolish and lack discrimination. How could you think of him as a husband? Forget him.'

'Don't you remember how he destroyed single-handed your kinsmen who attempted to disturb the peace of the sages in the forest? You will share their fate presently. It is not too late for you to mend your ways. He'll forgive you. Let me go back to him.'

Ravana ground his teeth and leaped up and down in rage, until one of his wives embraced him before all and said, 'O love, why do you care for this simpleton, when you have all of us to worship you as our lord? Ignore her and treat her like dirt and she will come round. Come, let's go and enjoy ourselves, O resplendent one.' She held him in her arms and tried to lead him away. He was appeased and emitted a sound almost like laughter.

Before going away, however, he uttered a stern warning. 'You have already wasted ten months; only two more are left for you to make up your mind. If you do not yield by then, I'll ask my cooks to take you and prepare a meal for me of your flesh and bring me your blood to drink.' He also ordered the guards around to frighten her.

After he was gone some of the women went on praising the glory of Ravana and upbraiding Sita's foolishness in trying his patience; the other women, the fierce, grotesque ones, approached her and spoke among themselves. One said, 'I'd like to feast on her liver—she looks so tender,

I'd like to bite her off and chew her up raw. I'm pregnant and a longing is coming over me to taste human flesh.'

Another said, 'Let's kill her and feast on her—send for strong liquors and strong condiments to go with the delicacy, to make our dinner perfect.'

If we kill her and swallow her without further ado, our lord'll be happy again, because he will forget her when she is no longer there.'

All this nightmarish talk affected Sita in the end, and she broke down and sobbed. 'Rama, Rama, have you deserted me?' She brooded for a while and decided to end her life. With this resolution she arose; she wound her long tresses about her throat with a view to strangling herself.

All this was being watched by Rama's emissary Hanuman, sitting in the top of the tree. Hanuman, son of the god of wind, endowed with enormous strength and also the gift of assuming any stature or form he desired, had surrendered himself totally to the service of Rama. (It is said that even today he is inconspicuously present wherever the name of Rama is mentioned.) He had been given the task of tracing the whereabouts of Sita; he followed various trails and clues and had arrived in Lanka by assuming an enormous stature and striding across the ocean that separated India from Lanka. After stepping on the soil of Lanka he shrank himself to the size of a little monkey, which enabled him to move inconspicuously all over the capital while searching for Sita. Finally he arrived at Asoka Vana and sat amidst the branches of the simsupa under which Sita languished. He watched Ravana's arrival and departure and the torment that Sita was subjected to, and, when Sita had lost all hope, he made his presence known; events took a different turn from that moment.

Ravana, revelling in the thought of his invincibility and invulnerability, received the first shock to his complacency one morning when the fierce guardians of Sita came in a panic to announce, 'An enormous monkey has appeared

on the walls of Asoka Vana, menacing us. This monkey has uprooted every tree there, destroyed our parks. The place is ruined, even the hillocks have been smashed up and levelled, the tanks and ponds have been splashed dry of water, and not a creeper, flower, or tree is left. Lord, we have no words to describe the devastation.'

'How did it happen?'

'The monkey accomplished it all single-handed. He seems to possess the energy of a cyclone. The only thing he has left intact is the simsupu tree; not a leaf on it has been touched. We noticed that our prisoner conversed with that frightful monkey; but she won't tell us what goes on between them or who he is or where he has come from.'

Ravana despatched a band of warriors to destroy the monkey, but none returned. The city echoed with the battle cries of the monkey as he roared and hurled boulders and rocks and iron bolts plucked out of buildings at his pursuers. When he struck the earth with the crashing pillar of a temple he had brought down, sparks flew up and scorched his pursuers. He perched himself on the portals of the city's temple and cried, 'Your end is come,' and the city reverberated with his roaring challenges.

Ravana became concerned when none of his warriors returned from their encounter with the monkey. Finally he sent his son Indrajit, the greatest warrior of the times. Every dart aimed at this creature seemed to glance off and fall ineffectually, while he puffed himself up to the dimensions of a cloud over the capital. Indrajit, as a last desperate act, selected his Brahmasthra, the mightiest weapon known. At the touch of it Hanuman lay limp.

The Brahmasthra was deadly, but Hanuman enjoyed a favour from Brahma himself that if ever he was attacked by it, its effect should last only one muhoortha, or four-fifths of an hour. Hanuman welcomed this brief interlude, as he wanted an opportunity to see the rakshasas at their worst and also meet their chief, Ravana.

The rakshasas were happy when they found him lying helpless but, fearing that he might spring on them suddenly, they brought hempen ropes and fibres and bound him and carried him into the presence of their king, Ravana. Hanuman was impressed with the grandeur and personality of Ravana.

Ravana, when he saw this monkey placed before him, had a momentary flash of memory of the curse Nandi had uttered at Kailas: 'Your end will come through a monkey,' and reflected as to whether this was going to be the fulfilment of the curse. But this flash passed, and he not only rationalized it the next minute as an unworthy fear, but forgot it in an instant. He addressed the captive through one of his attendants, as it would have been beneath his dignity to talk to him directly. 'Who are you? Which of my enemies has sent you in this form? Kubera? Indra? Speak the truth.'

The interpreter added, 'Hide nothing and you will be forgiven by our gracious king. Speak the whole truth.'

Hanuman answered, 'Looking at you, Ravana, I pity you. I am sent neither by Indra nor by Kubera; they are not your only enemies. You are your worst enemy. You have brought me here.'

Ravana was beside himself with rage at this levity. But he did not want to dispose of the monkey before eliciting some information.

To further questions Hanuman answered, 'I pity you, I said, because you have earned the wrath of Rama. Even now it is not too late for you to repent and beg his forgiveness. Do it and save yourself. Even now you may begin a new chapter of your existence. I feel anxious for your welfare. You are so valorous, so mighty-looking, so well endowed. But how unwise!'

Ravana would not let him speak further. He hated to be advised. He immediately ordered his men to kill the monkey. At this point his brother Vibhishana intervened. 'It is not proper to kill a messenger.'

Ravana hated advice as to how emissaries were to be treated, but he respected his brother and cried, 'What else should one do with a mischievous, destructive monster such as this?'

Vibhishana answered, 'He is but an agent, and we cannot kill him. Moreover, if he is spared he will return home and fetch your real enemies to this soil and then you will know everything.'

This struck Ravana as a sensible thing to do. He smiled. 'So be it. All the same, we must punish this devil for his misdeeds. He has laid waste my most cherished garden built for my women, and razed to the ground our temple.'

'Whatever may be his misdeed, he cannot be killed, according to the laws of kings and their messengers. We may maim, mutilate, and torture a messenger, but we may not kill him.'

Ravana felt pleased to find this loophole and said, 'We will show him what we can do. A monkey's treasured possession is his tail; set fire to it and drag him along the streets of this city so that our people may rejoice.'

The attendants at once got busy. They took hold of the end of the monkey's tail and padded it with huge quantities of rags. They poured oil over the rags covering his tail and set it on fire. They then dragged Hanuman through every street, lane, and byway, in order to exhibit their triumph. Hanuman welcomed this, as it helped him to study the plan of the city.

As the fire at the tail raged, men, women, and children lined the way and jeered at the monkey. When this news reached Sita, she prayed to the god of fire not to harm Hanuman. In answer to her prayer, the fire did not scorch Hanuman, although it blazed and roared. Suddenly Hanuman shrank himself to the size of a little monkey, so that the ropes around his body slipped down. He got out of the bonds, jumped onto the top of a tall building, assumed again his huge shape, and applied the fire at his

tail to the building; then he jumped from building top to building top, covering the entire city thus, and soon set it completely in flames. The god of wind, who was Hanuman's father, helped the flames to blaze and spread. When Hanuman was satisfied that he had performed his task well, he rested for a moment on the summit of a hill and watched the burning city and then went and plunged his tail in the ocean in order to put out the fire, at which the waters of the sea hissed and rose to the height of a mountain.

The time was come for Ravana to take serious note of the developments. He invoked a council of war. He assembled his ministers, chiefs of the army, and his brothers, who were devoted to him, at the council hall and began, 'Strange things have happened in this city of Lanka. A monkey has devastated our lovely capital. It is an evil spirit, not a mere monkey. Our enemies are active. To this day no one had entered this island city without our permission. How this monkey managed to enter the city, what the guardian spirits of the city were doing, are matters for investigation.'

Ravana made a long oration, by which he hoped to gain the support of his councillors without betraying his anxiety. After a lot of preamble, while his councillors muttered words of praise and approval, he came to the point. 'Apparently our city needs guarding, and we must consider how well we may exercise our defences. Let us not forget that this human creature Rama is diabolic and strong. He will surely make an attempt to cross the seas and come here. . . .'

'Let him, we will smash him, it will do him good to try his luck that way,' said his commander-in-chief. 'Your Majesty may leave it to us.'

Another said, 'I'll fly across the sea and wipe out Rama and his army single-handed.'

Another said, 'Permit me and a few of our rakshasas to assume human form. We will fly across the seas and

merge in their camp. . . . ' He gave a long, involved strategy.

One of the warriors flourished his iron club in the air and said, 'This weapon has never been washed, as the blood and flesh of my foes dry on it. Let me go this instant and get a new coat of paint on it, that is the blood of Rama, Lakshmana, and this wretched monkey. I will destroy all the monkeys in this world. There should be no trace of that species when I am done with my job.'

Capping all this was one rakshasa who said, 'No one should come with me when I go out to meet this party. I want to suck their blood and feast on their flesh all by myself. . . .' He smacked his lips.

After all these demonstrations of aggressiveness and loyalty, they stood up, raised their arms, and roared aloud, invoking maledictions on their enemy. It was reassuring for Ravana.

In order to offset all this enthusiasm, Vibhishana rose to his feet and waved to the assembly to sit down and hear him. 'My dear brother and king, at the beginning you asked us councillors to speak plainly, without varnishing truth. So I will speak now. O brother, it is good to talk of a fight, but that should come last, after we have tried all other means. We must first get an idea of the strength of our enemy before venturing on an expedition. Hanuman, single-handed, has demonstrated what he can do. With an army of similar creatures and Rama's strength added, our kingdom may be wiped out in the twinkling of an eye. But before we consider all this let us examine the primary cause of all the troubles. What is the provocation for them? It is your wrongful act. What justification had you for abducting Rama's wife and subjecting her to such suffering? First restore her and set right your own mistake.' Thus he spoke beseechingly, respectfully, with his hands folded and with a deep bow.

There was a roar of protest when he suggested the restoration of Sita. 'Oh, no,' said the warriors, to please Ravana, 'our chief is strong enough to do what he pleases. We will fight, we will fight.'

Ravana remained in thought for a moment and said, 'Let us meet again tomorrow and consider our plan of action.'

At dawn of the next day Vibhishana, who was resolved to save his brother if he could, sought a private audience with Ravana. Vibhishana said, 'I do not want to flatter you. Save yourself while there is still time. A war seems unnecessary; if you restore Sita to Rama, there will be an end of this episode. Rama is not vindictive and he will forgive you. Moreover, have you not noticed the portents ever since Sita set foot on our soil? Our sacrifices are rejected by the god of fire, and you never see a flame rise even when you pour a great quantity of ghee; snakes and vermin are everywhere, particularly in places of worship. The gods have deserted us completely. Elephants, horses, and camels are seized with strange maladies. Foxes howl within the city, crows and vultures screech and circle overhead at all times. Let us read the signs correctly and learn our lesson. Send Sita away.'

'No talk of giving up Sita. She will yield to me sooner or later. I have brought her here because I want her, that is all there is to it. You are exaggerating everything. You are panicky and frightened. Our enemy is not all that you say. I can smash him. Leave me now.' Vibhishana left him and immediately crossed over to Rama's camp.

To reinforce his ego, which seemed to be wobbling, Ravana dressed himself imposingly, perfumed himself, wore resplendent ornaments and armour, drove in a gold chariot through the streets, followed by warriors in battle dress, to the accompaniment of trumpets and drums; people lined the streets in vast numbers and cheered him, and that strengthened his feeling of invincibility and grandeur. A vast army of demons stood guard at the

assembly hall, which was decorated. Priests chanted holy verse. The air was thick with the perfume of incense and flowers. Ravana kept thinking, 'I have no equals in this or any world.' There was a respectful silence.

Ravana addressed the assembly. 'We have no place for cowards. We need have no fear of anyone in this world or any world. You are wonderful warriors assembled here, and you have always counselled me properly in all my affairs, and nothing has gone wrong. No doubt a swollen monkey has come and disturbed us. Such unexpected intrusions are common in this world. We should not let that depress us unduly. That monkey has come because Sita is here. Have I not the right to acquire and keep any woman I want? Who can say I have not? Do you fear that this world is going to be destroyed because of this woman? Whoever thinks so is our worst enemy. She will yield to me sooner or later. She is rather eccentric and I do not wish to handle her roughly. She has only asked for time to decide, and I have granted it. Perhaps she has a foolish notion that her husband will come to her rescue!' Ravana let out a laugh at the thought of this, and the assembly joined politely. 'There can be no question of restoring her to her people and asking their pardon. That is unthinkable and an atrocious proposal. We have never known defeat, and I now seek your counsel.' He paused and felt stimulated when the hall was filled with murmurs of approval.

Kumbhakarna, the sleeper, was awake today and said, 'Great king, you were mistaken in seizing this woman when her men were out. If you had encountered them and slain them, this same Sita would have admired you as a warrior and followed you of her own accord. Women adore valorous men. But you made a mistake. If you had consulted me I would have advised you properly. You have earned the enmity of Rama without consulting us beforehand, and now you seek our advice when it is too late to do anything about it. However, I do not wish to

waste our time in thinking of the past. Although I do not approve of your procedure in this matter, I am with you. I give you my support, you are my great brother. We will wipe out Rama and all his followers. Do not let Sita go. She is yours. Keep her. Now put away your cares, and leave everything to us.'

With all this brave assurance, a time came when Ravana heard the news that Rama's army had landed on their soil. Various reports were given as to how the sea, considered impassable till then, had been crossed. Rama had stood on the southernmost point of the ocean, in India, and after fasting and praying for three days ordered the ocean to cleave and make way for his army. The sea god did not respond to this prayer, and after due warning Rama shot his shafts into the sea; the waters churned and heaved and all aquatic life perished, and it looked as if the ocean was to become a desert. The sea god appeared before Rama in all humility and explained, 'I am subject to the laws of nature as the other four elements are, and I cannot swerve from them, as you, my lord, know; but what I can do is to grant facilities for your army of monkeys to build a causeway. I will give them every help; please order them to go fetch boulders and rocks and wood. I will receive everything and turn it to good account.' Thus a causeway came into being and, having crossed it, Rama's armies stood on the soil of Lanka.

Ravana deployed the pick of his divisions to guard the approaches to the capital and appointed his trusted generals and kinsmen in special charge of key places. Gradually, however, his world began to shrink. As the fight developed he lost his associates one by one. No one who went out returned.

He tried various devious measures in desperation. He sent spies in the garb of Rama's monkey army across to deflect and corrupt some of Rama's staunchest supporters,

such as Sugreeva,\* on whom rested the entire burden of this war. He employed sorcerers to disturb the mind of Sita, hoping that if she yielded, Rama would ultimately lose heart. He ordered a sorcerer to create a decapitated head resembling Rama's and placed it before Sita as evidence of Rama's defeat. Sita, although shaken at first, very soon recovered her composure and remained unaffected by the spectacle.

At length a messenger from Rama arrived, saying, 'Rama bids me warn you that your doom is at hand. Even now it is not too late for you to restore Sita and beg Rama's forgiveness. You have troubled the world too long. You are not fit to continue as king. At our camp your brother, Vibhishana, has already been crowned king of this land, and the world knows all people will be happy under him.'

Ravana ordered the messenger to be killed instantly. But it was more easily said than done, the messenger being Angada, the son of mighty Vali. When two rakshasas came to seize him, he tucked one under each arm, rose into the sky, and flung the rakshasas down. In addition he kicked and broke off the tower of Ravana's palace, and left. Ravana viewed the broken tower with dismay.

Rama awaited the return of Andaga, and, on hearing his report, decided that there was no further cause to hope for a change of heart in Ravana and immediately ordered the assault on Lanka.

As the fury of the battle grew, boun sues lost sight of the distinction between night and day. The air was filled with the cries of fighters, their challenges, cheers, and imprecations; buildings and trees were torn up and, as one of his spies reported to Ravana, the monkeys were like a sea overturning Lanka. The end did not seem to be in sight.

\* Sugreeva was crowned by Rama as the head of the monkey kingdom, after the death of Vali.

At one stage of the battle Rama and Lakshmana were attacked by Indrajit, and the serpent darts employed by him made them swoon on the battlefield. Indrajit went back to his father to proclaim that it was all over with Rama and Lakshmana and soon, without a leader, the monkeys would be annihilated.

Ravana rejoiced to hear it and cried, 'Did not I say so? All you fools believed that I should surrender.' He added, 'Go and tell Sita that Rama and his brother are no more. Take her high up in Pushpak Vimana and show her their bodies on the battlefield.'

His words were obeyed instantly. Sita, happy to have a chance to glimpse a long-lost face, accepted the chance, went high up, and saw her husband lying dead in the field below. She broke down. 'How I wish I had been left alone and not brought up to see this spectacle. Ah, me . . . Help me to put an end to my life.'

Trijata, one of the wives of Ravana, whispered to her, 'Don't lose heart, they are not dead,' and she explained why they were in a faint.

In due course the effect of the serpent darts was neutralized when Garuda, the mighty eagle, the born enemy of all serpents, appeared on the scene; the venomous darts enveloping Rama and Lakshmana scattered at the approach of Garuda, and the brothers were on their feet again.

From his palace retreat Ravana was surprised to hear again the cheers of the enemy hordes outside the ramparts; the siege was on again. Ravana still had about him his commander-in-chief, his son Indrajit, and five or six others on whom he felt he could rely at the last instance. He sent them up one by one. He felt shattered when news came of the death of his commander-in-chief.

'No time to sit back. I will myself go and destroy this Rama and his horde of monkeys,' he said, and got into his chariot and entered the field.

At this encounter Lakshmana fell down in a faint, and

Hanuman hoisted Rama on his shoulders and charged in the direction of Ravana. The main combatants were face to face for the first time. At the end of this engagement Ravana was sorely wounded, his crown was shattered, and his chariot was broken. Helplessly, bare-handed, he stood before Rama, and Rama said, 'You may go now and come back tomorrow with fresh weapons.' For the first time in his existence of many thousand years, Ravana faced the humiliation of accepting a concession, and he returned crestfallen to his palace.

He ordered that Kumbhakarana should be awakened. He could depend upon him, and only on him now. It was a mighty task to wake up Kumbhakarna. A small army had to be engaged. They sounded trumpets and drums at his ears and were ready with enormous quantities of food and drink for him, for when Kumbhakarna awoke from sleep his hunger was phenomenal and he made a meal of whomever he could grab at his beside. They cudgelled, belaboured, pushed, pulled, and shook him, with the help of elephants; at last he opened his eyes and swept his arms about and crushed quite a number among those who had stirred him up. When he had eaten and drunk, he was approached by Ravana's chief minister and told, 'My lord, the battle is going badly for us.'

'Which battle?' he asked, not yet fully awake.

And they had to refresh his memory. 'Your brother Ravana has fought and has been worsted; our enemies are breaking in; our fort walls are crumbling. . . .'

Kumbhakarna was roused. 'Why did not anyone tell me all this before? Well, it is not too late; I will deal with that Rama. His end is come.' Thus saying, he strode into Ravana's chamber and said, 'Don't worry about anything any more. I will take care of everything.'

Ravana spoke with anxiety and defeat in his voice. Kumbhakarna, who had never seen him in this state, said, 'You have gone on without heeding anyone's words

and brought yourself to this pass. You should have fought Rama and acquired Sita. You were led away by your mere lust and never cared for anyone's words. . . . Him. This is no time to speak of dead events. I will not forsake you as others have done. I'll bring Rama's head on a platter.'

Kumbhakarna's entry into the battle created havoc. He destroyed and swallowed hundreds and thousands of the monkey warriors and came very near finishing off the great Sugreeva himself. Rama himself had to take a hand at destroying this demon; he sent the sharpest of his arrows, which cut Kumbhakarana limb from limb, but he fought fiercely with only inches of his body remaining intact. Finally Rama severed his head with an arrow. That was the end of Kumbhakarna.

When he heard of it, Ravana lamented, 'My right hand is cut off.'

One of his sons reminded him, 'Why should you despair? You have Brahma's gift of invincibility. You should not grieve.'

Indrajit told him, 'What have you to fear when I am alive?'

Indrajit had the power to remain invisible and fight, and accounted for much destruction in the invader's camp. He also created a figure resembling Sita, carried her in his chariot, took her before Rama's army, and killed her within their sight.

This completely demoralized the monkeys, who suspended their fight, crying, 'Why should we fight when our goddess Sita is thus gone?' They were in a rout until Vibishana came to their rescue and rallied them again. Indrajit fell by Lakshmana's hand in the end. When he heard of his son's death, Ravana shed bitter tears and swore, 'This is the time to kill that woman Sita, the cause of all the misery.'

A few encouraged his idea, but one of his counsellors advised, 'Don't defeat your own purpose and integrity

by killing a woman. Let your anger scorch Rama and his brother. Gather all your armies and go and finish off Rama and Lakshmana, you know you can, and then take Sita. Put on your blessed armour and go forth.'

At last Ravana faced Rama practically alone. Rama's darts struck but did not harm him. The god Indra sent his own chariot for Rama's use in the battle at this moment. As he mounted the chariot, the charioteer whispered to Rama, 'Do not delay, bring forth your Brahmadstra.'

Rama invoked the spell and sent off this missile as a last resort. Several other weapons, employed before, severed Ravana's heads, but the heads appeared again on his shoulders each time. The Brahmadstra went forth, emitting flames, and embedded itself in the heart of Ravana, where he was vulnerable. He had asked only for invincibility from gods and others; Rama, being a god in a completely human form, was able to kill him. Ravana had asked for indestructibility of his ten heads, but he was vulnerable at the heart.

That was the end of the demon, the greatest tormentor of men and gods, whose end came exactly as prophesied, through the three cardinal curses that he had incurred in his early career—the instruments of his destruction being a monkey, a woman and a member of the Ikshvahu clan.

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## VALMIKI

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**T**he time has come to tell the story of the greatest storyteller of all times, that is, of Valmiki, the Adi Kavi. You may know what Adi Kavi means: the foremost poet, or the fountainhead of poetry. Valmiki composed *The Ramayana* in twenty-four thousand stanzas, and most of it, in one form or another, is known to every man, woman, and child in our country. Rama, the hero of the epic was Valmiki's creation, although the word 'create' is not quite apt if one considers the process by which *The Ramayana* came into existence. Rama was not a 'character' created by a 'storyteller' and presented in a 'work'. The 'work', in the first place, was not 'written'; it arose within the writer. The 'character' was not conceived but revealed himself in a vision.

The time scheme of the epic is somewhat puzzling to us who are habituated to a mere linear sequence of events. Valmiki composed as if he had a past tale to tell, and yet it was broadcast to the world by Kusa and Lava, the sons of Rama, who heard it directly from the author. One has to set aside all one's habitual notions of movement and get used to a narrative going backwards and forwards and sideways. When we take into consideration the fact that a king ruled for sixty thousand or more years, enjoying an appropriate longevity, it seems quite feasible that the character whose past or middle period is being written about continues to live and turns up to have a word with the historian.



This happened to Valmiki. Once Rama asked Valmiki, during a meeting of the immortals, in another world, 'How did you learn all about me, even before I was born?'—unsettling again all one's time sense. What one had all along thought of as retrospective on the part of the poet seems actually to have been a prophecy as well as a piece of contemporary chronicling. However, an average story-listener accepts these situations without a second thought, never questioning 'When?' or 'How?' 'Before or after?' To an ordinary Indian story-listener it seems perfectly natural that events could spread over before, after, and just now.

Rama was an incarnation of Vishnu, but in human form he became oblivious of his godliness and was subject to all the torments and mystifications of the human mind; and so he had a genuine wonder at a biographer who could write his full life ahead of his time and also attempt to solve his personal problems in the concluding stages of the story.

Valmiki answered Rama by narrating his own life:

Once there was a scholar named Sankha, who, having completed his studies at a far-off place, was returning home along the banks of the Godavari river, in deep thought, when he was startled out of his wits by a shout at his ears; a highwayman suddenly blocked his path, flourishing some dreadful weapons of his trade. Sankha babbled, 'Who are you?'

'My father's son,' replied the robber with a ghastly leer.

'What do you want?'

'Everything you have, except your life, if you'd like to keep it.' The brahmin said, 'I'm a poor scholar, not a man of wealth. Otherwise why should I be walking back to my city? I would be riding a chariot.'

'As if I could not overtake a chariot!' said the robber aggressively. 'Let me see what is detachable about you,

apart from the hair and nails. Hee ! Hee !' He laughed in a ghastly manner. The detachable articles on the scholar's person were a goldlike ring on his little finger, picked up at a fair, and a copper talisman attached to his sacred thread. 'O brahmin, keep your sacred thread and give me that talisman.'

Sankha was very reluctant to give away the talisman. 'Oh !' he wailed. 'A wonderful sadhu gave this to me two years ago, to protect me from disease and devils. . . .'

'I'm not a devil or a disease, and so it won't protect you from me. Give it here. No argument,' the thief cried arbitrarily. The brahmin handed it over. 'What is your cash balance? How cunningly fellows like you tuck away your treasure !' the robber said, running his fingers along the folds at the waist of the brahmin's dhoti. He found a couple of coins and appropriated them with a sneer. Then he snatched away a piece of cloth covering the upper portion of Sankha's body, leaving him in his dhoti. 'Take off those sandals,' he commanded finally, looking at his feet. 'You do not deserve such luxuries, a fellow treasuring just two brass coins !' The brahmin slipped off the leather sandals, which were thick with layers of patch and which had protected him from the hot sands of the river.

Having stripped the brahmin of all his possessions, the robber said, 'Now go your way.' Grateful to be spared his life, the brahmin trotted off on the sands, anxious to be gone out of the range of the highwayman.

The sands of Godavari were hot, and the brahmin felt as if he had been asked to walk on a frying pan. He kept leaping up and forward, unable to keep his feet down. His progress was negligible, and his tormentor watched him, at first with amusement, as he kept hopping away. Presently the brahmin, casting all propriety to the winds, took off his loincloth, tossed it ahead, and hopped onto it, unable to bear the blistering heat of the sand under his bare feet. This was too much even for the robber, who

watched from a distance. The grin gradually faded from his face and he cried, 'Hey, come here!'

The brahmin accelerated his pace forward.

'I will give you something,' said the robber.

But the brahmin replied, 'I do not want it.'

As this the robber shouted, 'Stop!' and ran after the brahmin, who thought his end had come. When he caught up with the brahmin, the robber kicked off the sandals he had stolen and said, 'Take them back; I don't want them. You don't understand a good turn when it is offered.'

The brahmin gratefully accepted back his footwear. 'Now I can reach my village before the evening. You have a compassionate heart, although you like to grunt and behave like a tusked boar. Your compassion is due to a vestige of merit left from your previous incarnation.'

'How do you know?' asked the robber, interested.

The brahmin said, 'I know what you were in your previous life. I'll tell you all about it, if you are interested. But first find me some shade to rest in.'

The robber led him to a little grove of wood-apple trees where the river wound in and out pleasantly. He climbed a tree and shook the branches until some hard fruit dropped to the ground. He banged the shells on a piece of granite and presented the rind for the Brahmin to eat.

The Brahmin plunged in the river to cool his body, rested in the shade, ate the fruit, and felt better. The robber watched him with solicitude and asked, 'How is it, good?'

The brahmin muttered an assent and said, 'You were not a ruffian in your previous life, but a man of learning. You had mastered the Vedas, and could recite and give an exposition of them. You were a master of grammar, prosody, and the scriptures. People looked to you for guidance and enlightenment and brought rewards in the form of grain and gifts to your very door. Your wife was a good and practical woman. A home, a loving wife,

honour and riches from your fellow beings—what more could one desire? Normally, nothing.

'But your nature craved for something more—that is, the company of a public woman, whom you met one day on the temple steps, where a crowd was passing; your fate ordained that you should pick up a little flower garland that she let fall on the stone steps. Others ignored it, knowing it to be a common trick to attract notice. But you picked it up, and that was the beginning and end of your life of nobility. You began to spend all your time in her house. You neglected your wife, but the good lady became resigned to it. You treated her gracefully. Sometimes you made her cook the food and serve you both, and attend on that woman just like a servant. It went on until you became a sick man and also a bankrupt. You exchanged your wealth for all the disease that a woman of her type could give you, and when this transaction was complete she had no further use for your company; she threw you out and shut the door in your face.

'You went back home as an ailing bankrupt. People, naturally, took no notice of you. But it made no difference to your wife. She nursed you, found the money for your food and medicines, and fasted and prayed constantly for your welfare. One day she found a great physician, who carried in his bag the rarest herbs from all the mountains. The paste of certain astringent herbs applied to the inflammations on your body made you groan and squirm; when your wife brought a dose of some medicine to your lips, you bit off her little finger in rage. You died with her finger choking your windpipe, thinking not of her but of the prostitute.

'Still your wife laid herself on the funeral pyre and cremated herself along with your body, and in your next birth you are what you are for your sinful, selfish existence; but the first phase of your life, when you were enlightened, has left in you a vestige of compassion; and

that is why you could not bear to watch my feet blister on the sand. . . .'

'What next?' asked the robber softly.

'You will be born a hunter, who will receive the grace of the Seven Sages and become the composer of one of the world's masterpieces,' prophesied the brahmin and went his way.

Valmiki's next birth—he said, continuing his autobiography—was from the womb of a naga kannika, a beauty from the nether world of serpents, who had enticed a sage in the forests and gone back to her world after giving birth to the baby, leaving it to be tended by a hunter in the forests. The child grew up, became a full-fledged hunter, always armed with bow and arrows and seeking a wide variety of targets. In course of time he married and had children. He came to have a large family to support. This meant that he had to slaughter more creatures each day to feed his dependents. Animals and birds became familiar with the footfalls of this terrible slayer and fled at his approach.

Gradually it became difficult for him to secure the necessary amount of food for his dependents at home, and naturally he turned to other ways; he held up wayfarers in the forest paths, in keeping with the habits of his previous incarnation, and snatched from them whatever he could find on them—food, money, clothes, and ornaments. He waited for his prey in the shadows of the forest and attacked them ruthlessly. He became notorious, and people remarked, 'Oh, there is that bandit, we must be careful.'

He killed everything he could lay hands on, chased and attacked whoever passed in the valley, the forest, or the mountain. He was wild, reckless, cruel, and inconsiderate. In this condition he waylaid seven persons who were coming along the forest path one day. He jumped down from the branch of a tree and blocked the path of the Seven Sages, celestial beings who were visiting the earth.

The robber flourished a knife and bow and arrows and cried, 'Your life or . . .'

The Seven looked at him indifferently, and one of them asked, 'You flourish so many weapons and put on all this act just to get—what?'

'All that you have. There may be seven of you, but I'm equal to you, and so do not let your numbers make you foolhardy. I can string you all together like a brace of birds.'

'Why all this unpleasant talk?' asked his victims.

'You are trying to resist me!' he declared.

'No', they cried. 'We want to give you all that we have and more.'

This was a new experience for the hunter, and he asked, 'Why?'

'Not easily explained, but we want to help you.'

The hunter became suspicious at this unaccustomed word and asked, 'Why?'

'You are asking why again!' the victims said. 'Because you deserve our help, that is all.'

'In what way will you help?' he asked, growing curious. They just smiled at his question, at which he became suspicious again and declared, 'If you are trying to lead me away with clever words, you are mistaken. First hand over—'

'As you see, we are bare-handed men, possessing only the clothes that we wear. What do you expect us to give you?'

'I will search your persons,' he said aggressively. 'I generally punish those who come empty-handed. The world has no place for such worthless men.' He said with a leer, studying their faces closely, 'You are seven and may be hiding something among yourselves. Immediately deliver it, will you?'

'Yes,' they said, much to his surprise. Their tactics were novel and bewildering, but he tried to cover his confusion with bravado, and he did everything short of attacking

them; somehow he felt checked at that point, but he kept worrying them in various ways until they said, 'It is absolutely imperative that you do what we say, if you want us to deliver the goods.'

'What are these goods and where do you have them?'

'We have something precious to give you, but you will have to answer our question first. Why are you acquiring such a load of sin, robbing people and causing pain to all God's creatures? What do you hope to gain thereby?'

'I have eight children, and the ninth is coming. I have to find food or the means for them; also there are always one or two guests when we eat.'

'Poor fellow, have you ever thought at what price you are keeping your dependents alive?'

'What do you mean?'

'The life that you now enjoy or suffer is a result of your actions in previous lives, and now you are acquiring more sins every hour, instead of seeking liberation at least in a future life. Go home and ask your wife and children if anyone is willing to share this burden with you. Since they are so ready to share your loot, ask them if they are willing to share your sins too. Now go and bring us their answer and we will give you everything we have.'

'This is a dodge, perhaps,' he said.

'You have our solemn word that we shall await, at this same spot, your return with their reply.' They took their seats convincingly on a little rock under a tree.

The hunter commanded, 'Don't move. Stay there. I will be back.'

He was gone quite a while and returned, panting with excitement; he found his seven victims still waiting for him. He came up and stood before them with bowed head.

'What is their reply?' they asked.

'Not one is prepared to accept a share of my burden. I

had never thought of it all these days. They will not help me in any way. My children treated my question as a joke and laughed, and my wife said I was getting mad notions in my head.'

'We promised you a precious gift. Do you want it?'

'Yes.'

'Very well, then. Here in the shade of this tree, sit down on the bare ground, shut your eyes, and repeat, "Mara, Mara", without ever stopping. Let this word be like the breath that goes in and out of your nostrils, and natural and constant. Empty your mind of all other thoughts except the sound of the word "Mara".'

'What does it mean?'

'You will understand as you repeat.'

After they left, the bandit flung away his weapons, squatted under the tree, and uttered the word 'Mara' with every breath. 'Mara, Mara' through repetition fused together and became 'Rama, Rama', the hero of *The Ramayana*, the very sound of whose name is said to deepen one's being.

Years passed. We cannot normally measure this passage of time, which must have been thousands of years according to the stories, perhaps long enough for the nature of the country to be changed, for forests to become cities, kingdoms to become deserts, for mountains to change their contours and rivers their courses. From behind a vast mound of earth one heard constantly repeated the word 'Rama', sounding like the endless murmur of an ocean. Passers-by heard the unceasing sound, felt baffled, and passed on.

In the fullness of time the Seven Sages came that way again, and they alone knew where the sound emanated from. They broke open the crust of earth and the anthill which had grown over the old hunter, who was lost in the trance of muttering the name of Rama. His body had grown emaciated, long hair covered his head and face,

but he sat unmoved until they woke him up. Since he emerged from an anthill,\* he was known as Valmiki.

He was a rishi now, one on whom grace had descended. He was beyond hunger and thirst and the needs of the body. Presently he established his hermitage on the banks of the Ganges.

At this stage of the narration Valmiki explained to Rama himself: 'Owing to the potency of your name, I became a sage, able to view the past, present, and future as one. I did not know your story yet. One day the sage Narada visited me. I asked him, "Who is a perfect man—possessing strength, aware of obligations, truthful in an absolute way, firm in the execution of vows, compassionate, learned, attractive, self-possessed, powerful, free from anger and envy but terror-striking when roused?"' Narada answered, "Such a combination of qualities in a single person is generally rare, but one such is the very person whose name you have mastered, that is, Rama. He was born in the race of Ikshvahas, son of King Dasarata . . . " And Narada narrated the story of Rama.

Rama was unaware of his godlines in this life, although he was actually an incarnation of Vishnu come to redeem the world from the ten-headed demon Ravana. When he took human form he forgot his godly origin and was subject to the pain, pleasure, and joys of life at the human level. He was born the son of Dasaratha, who had three wives—the oldest of four sons. At a very young age Rama exhibited all the great qualities that made him an ideal man, an ideal son, and an ideal husband. His reputation for courage and excellence in archery was great.

One day the sage Viswamithra arrived at the court of Dasaratha, and said, 'I want a favour of you.'

Dasaratha said, 'Granted', immediately.

Viswamithra said, 'We are performing a sacrifice at

Siddhasrama and we want your two sons Rama and Lakshmana to accompany me and protect the sacrifice from the rakshasas who are disturbing the rishis by putting out the sacrificial fires, throwing offal on the sacred spots, and frightening the performers themselves. I can't think of anyone with the courage and competence to stand up to them, except Rama.'

Dasaratha was distraught; his favourite son, brought up so tenderly in the comforts of the palace, to go out on this dangerous mission. He began, 'They are so young. . . . Rama is not even sixteen years old, and Lakshmana . . . What can these children do?'

Viswamithra was not a man to tolerate counter-suggestions. 'Are you afraid or are the boys afraid?' he asked grimly.

The boys' teacher, Vasishtha, Viswamithra's perpetual rival in spiritual strength, said merely, 'Let Rama go, he and his brother will manage.' Rama was already off to take leave of his mother, and, followed by Lakshmana, started out with Viswamithra.

At the sacrificial ground the demons were, as usual, active. Rama and Lakshmana stood guard, shot numerous arrows into the sky in such a manner as to weave them into a gigantic umbrella above the sacrificial ground, and slew every rakshasa who approached. After the performance of the sacrifice, Viswamithra was greatly pleased and surrendered to Rama all the spiritual merit he himself had acquired. He taught him certain rare feats of archery and took him and his brother to Mithila for the swayamwara of Janaka's daughter Sita. There Rama lifted and strung a gigantic bow and qualified himself to be chosen as a husband for Sita.

After his marriage to Sita, Dasaratha wanted to make Rama his deputy and heir and seek gradual retirement, but the whole ceremony took a different turn when Kaikeyi, Dasaratha's third wife, insisted on exercising her privilege of asking the crown for her son Bharatha, and

\* *Valmika* in Sanskrit.

that Rama be banished to the forests for fourteen years. Kaikeyi had saved Dasaratha's life on the battlefield once; out of gratitude the king had promised to grant her two major favours any time she demanded them. Kaikeyi, advised by her old nurse, found this the best moment to put forward her demands.

Although Dasaratha was shattered by this turn of events, Rama took it calmly, without resentment. He accepted the situation out of a sense of duty and felt it an honour to be able to help his father fulfil his promise. He took himself off, followed by Lakshmana and Sita, to the forests.

Bharatha, who had been absent at the time, returned home and followed Rama into the forest in order to persuade him to come back, but Rama resisted his plea. Bharatha succeeded only in taking Rama's sandals with him to the capital, where he placed them reverently on the throne and ruled only as a regent until Rama should return from his exile.

Deeply stirred by this tale about Rama, told him by Narada, Valmiki could hardly find room for any other thought in his mind and spent his days in meditation at his ashram. One day, on his way to bathe in the Tamasa River, Valmiki stopped to admire a pair of krouncha birds as they were fondling each other on the branch of a tree. All of a sudden the male fell down shrieking, shot down by the arrow of a hunter and the widowed bird lamented pitiably. Valmiki was moved to the core by this experience. A mixture of rage and pity overwhelming him, he burst into a sloka, or poetic composition, cursing the hunter for his callousness. The verses ran: 'Man, the destroyer, who cannot let innocent birds mate in peace. May you perish!'

This was the poet's first composition, which actually welled up from the depth of his soul, possessing a jewel-like perfection of form although expressing grief and resentment. Valmiki went back to his ashram, repeating the stanza, and began to feel uneasy at the thought that he

had composed a stanza which was negative, violating the first principles of composition, which decreed that poetry should exalt and construct rather than destroy. He was in deep anguish, the pain of perpetrating a negative composition was no less than the memory of the dying birds.

He was in this state of profound grief when Brahma the Creator himself came down to help him. He cheered the poet by giving his stanza a different interpretation.\*

After Brahma left, Valmiki saw the whole of Rama's life in one grand vision as he sat cross-legged on a mat of wild grass, his eyes closed. His disciples sat around and listened as he recited the entire twenty-four thousand stanzas of the composition, beginning with the conception of Rama and ending with Rama's once more becoming a god after his earthly mission. Valmiki looked for a worthy repository for his composition and selected two youths, Kusa and Lava (sons of Rama himself, who had never met their father), for the task. How it all came about, how these two youths came to reside with the author of the story, will be understood if we go back a moment to the story of *The Ramayana* itself.

At Lanka, Ravana had been slain by Rama (who undertook the expedition in order to recover his abducted wife Sita), thus ending a chapter of demoniac oppression of the world. After the death of Ravana, Rama sent his emissary Hanuman to fetch Sita. Sita was overjoyed. She

\* The Sanskrit language is so highly evolved that the same word can be made to give more than one meaning by varying the stress or the syllabification. For this reason it is impossible to understand the language unless one has mastered the rules of grammar.

Brahma explained to Valmiki that the poem echoed the lamentation of Mandodari, the wife of Ravana, on the death for her demon husband. The death of Ravana implied hope again for mankind and fulfilled the purpose of God's incarnation as Rama, which was to be the conclusion of the epic germinating within the mind of the poet.

had been in a state of mourning all along, completely neglectful of her dress and appearance, and she immediately rose to go out and meet Rama as she was. But Hanuman explained that it was Rama's express wish that she should dress and decorate herself before coming to his presence.

A large crowd pressed around Rama. When Sita eagerly arrived, after her months of loneliness and suffering, she was received by her husband in full view of a vast public. Sita felt awkward but accepted this with resignation. But what she could not understand was why her lord seemed preoccupied and moody and cold. However, she prostrated herself at his feet, and then stood a little away from him, sensing some strange barrier between herself and him.

Rama remained brooding for a while and suddenly said, 'My task is done. I have now freed you. I have fulfilled my mission. All this effort has been not to attain personal satisfaction for you or me. It was to vindicate the honour of the Ikshvahu race and to honour our ancestors' codes and values. After all this I must tell you that it is not customary to admit back to the normal married fold a woman who has resided all alone in a stranger's house. There can be no question of our living together again. I leave you free to go where you please and to choose any place to live in. I do not restrict you in any manner.'

On hearing this Sita broke down. 'My trials are not ended yet,' she cried. 'I thought with your victory all our troubles were at an end! . . . So be it.' She beckoned to Lakshmana and ordered, 'Light a fire at once, on this very spot.'

Lakshmana hesitated and looked at his brother, wondering whether he would countermand the order. But Rama seemed passive and acquiescent. Lakshmana, ever the most unquestioning deputy, gathered faggots and got ready a roaring pyre within a short time. The entire crowd

watched the proceedings, stunned by the turn of events. The flames rose to the height of a tree; still Rama made no comment. He watched. Sita approached the fire, prostrated herself before it, and said, 'O Agni, great god of fire, be my witness.' She jumped into the fire.

All the gods appeared. From the heart of the flame rose the god of fire, bearing Sita, and presented her to Rama with words of blessing. Rama, now satisfied that he had established his wife's integrity in the presence of the world, welcomed Sita back to his arms and expressed the wish to return to his own capital, Ayodhya. Vibhishana, the good successor to Ravana's throne, lent him the use of his flying chariot, Pushpak, in which Ravana had flown over Kailas and which he had then used for abducting Sita; Rama ascended it with Sita now.

Ayodhya celebrated Rama's enthronement, and an era of peace and joy commenced for the citizens. Rama and Sita were after all united again and found time to live a peaceful domestic life.

Years passed, and Sita was with child. Rama took her about the gardens of the city and the banks of Sarayu to keep her in good cheer. They were enjoying the sights of the countryside when Sita expressed a sudden desire. 'I am feeling homesick for the forests and the ashrams where we spent so many happy years. I would love to go back to them for a while, away from all the palace comforts, and to live for a few days with those saints in the forests.'

Rama smiled and understood that this was but the craving of a pregnant woman, not to be questioned or explained, and so said, 'Tomorrow I will arrange to send you down to the forests.' It proved a prophetic statement.

After Sita had retired for the night, Rama, as was his custom before closing his day's affairs, sent for his chief

of intelligence, who was to report to him every night what the public thought and said. The intelligence chief reported routine matters and then hesitated. 'What is your hesitation?' asked Rama.

The chief said, 'Forgive my mentioning it, my lord, it is but my duty to report fully everything I hear. In the market place a group of men were standing around and chatting away. I mixed with them to hear what they were saying. Forgive my repeating their words.'

'You are only doing your duty. Fear nothing. Tell me.'

'They said, "If our king Rama can take back home his wife who was lost to him for months and months, all of us can do it. Any wife who runs away can always return home with impunity. Why, then, quarrel with your wife?"'

After the officer left, Rama sought Lakshmana and told him, 'Tomorrow before daybreak you will take Sita in a chariot to the banks of the Ganges and leave her there.'

'And then?'

'That is all,' said Rama.

'When is she to be brought back?'

'Never,' said Rama and explained. 'I have to set an example to my people. I cannot afford to indulge my personal feelings.'

'But she is in a delicate state,' said Lakshmana.

'She will be well,' said Rama. 'Take her to the ashram of sage Valmiki and leave her there. The sage will look after her.'

And so next day Lakshmana escorted Sita out of the palace. She only thought that Rama had arranged to satisfy her craving for a change. 'May I not see my lord and take his leave?' she asked.

Lakshmana replied awkwardly. 'Let us go before the city wakes up. We have a long way to go.'

Sita noticed that Lakshmana was gloomy and silent throughout the trip. When they reached their destination

Sita asked, 'You have not spoken a word all the way, what is on your mind? At which Lakshmana burst into tears and Sita grew quiet anxious. 'Is Rama well? Is there any calamity that I have not known?'

Still Lakshmana could not bring himself to explain, at which Sita said, 'Why are you unhappy, especially at this moment when I feel so happy, revisiting these beautiful spots? If you feel unhappy to be away from the capital, let us cut short our stay. Please take me to a few nearby ashrams: I have brought gifts for the persons whose hospitality we enjoyed long ago. We will rest for the night with one or another of those noble souls and start back at dawn. I have also a feeling that I cannot be away from Rama too long.'

At this Lakshmana braced himself to tell her the truth. 'People may speak ill, and Rama knows there is nothing in what they say. But still . . .'

When she recovered from the first shock of this blow, Sita calmly said, 'I really do not know what to do with myself now. Perhaps I could jump into this river . . . but then, I have to think of the child to come! I have to live so that Rama's line may continue. Anyway, go back and tell Rama that I do not mind being sacrificed if it helps him. However, let him be considerate at least to those who were born with him—his brothers, I mean. Let him care for them unflinchingly and at no time sacrifice any of them for a cause.'

Lakshmana left her within sight of Valmiki's ashram and started back for the capital. Sita sat at the edge of the river and wept.

At Valmiki's ashram some men reported to the sage, 'A woman of divine aspect is at the river's edge. She seems to be in grief.'

Valmiki came out, introduced himself to Sita, and said, 'You do not have to explain anything to me. I know who you are and everything that has happened to you. Come



to my ashram, for that is Rama's intention.' He escorted her to his ashram.

She felt revived the moment she stepped into the hermitage. Valmiki presented her to the other inmates of the ashram. 'Here is one who deserves not only your respect but your love.'

Kusa and Lava, the twins, were born in the ashram and grew up there. Valmiki became their mentor, trained them in their studies, and made them the repository of his great composition, *The Ramayana*, when they were barely ten years old.

Rama was performing a special sacrifice and had sent an invitation to Valmiki, who sent Lava and Kusa to represent him. He instructed them, 'Go to Ayodhya, but don't enter the sacrificial ground. Stay in the woods and sing the story of Rama loudly enough for those inside the palace to hear you. Don't accept money or other rewards that they may offer, for you will not need them. You alone are fit to recite *The Ramayana*, for you are both gifted with music.'

Lava and Kusa set forth on this mission. They reached the vicinity of the hall, where thousands of guests and priests had assembled to witness the sacrifice. Over and above the chanting of hymns and the ritual prayers came the twin voices, reciting *The Ramayana*, gripping the attention of the entire crowd. All other thoughts went into the background, all activities were suspended, as people listened to the song. Rama dropped everything and went forward to meet the source of this great song. The personalities of the twins, when he saw them, exerted an unconscious power over him, and he invited them in. Thereafter he mustered various scholars, poets, and literary experts and made the young men recite Valmiki's composition, a certain number of stanzas each day. He analysed and studied the lines with the greatest delectation; he was thus not only the hero of the story but also its first reader.

As soon as the identities of the twins were established, Rama sent his messengers to fetch Valmiki and Sita. When Sita arrived, he welcomed her back warmly. But now it was her turn. All that she said was: 'O Mother Earth, take me back to your bosom; heed my words if I have been pure at heart,' and the earth cleaved under her feet, and she vanished into it.

Rama was seized with anger (as we have seen him on another occasion when he wanted to reach Lanka and the sea would not give way to him). He cried, 'O Earth, give me back my wife; otherwise I will wipe you out, with your mountains, rivers, seas, forests, and everything. Take care!' He had never been seen in such a rage before. Everyone trembled at the sight of him.

At this moment Brahma appeared and said, 'O Rama, you are an incarnation. You are Vishnu, and not Rama the mortal; don't let the illusion carry you away and make you forget your real identity. You are the great god Vishnu, who existed before *The Ramayana*, and will continue beyond its conclusion. You incarnated yourself as Rama for a purpose, that is to save humanity from extinction. Sita is not lost. She is Lakshmi, your eternal spouse, who, having fulfilled her role, will await you in your own world. And now the mission on which you came to the earth has been fulfilled.'

Rama was appeased. He made preparations for retirement now. He divided his kingdom among his sons, brothers, and their sons and retreated from public view. It was said that he proceeded to the banks of Sarayu, performed oblations to it, stepped into the water, and was not seen again.

The author, Valmiki, watched rather helplessly the conclusions that the characters of his epic were working out for themselves. He had a hope that he might be able

to bring his hero and heroine together, help the family reunite, and thus round off his tale. But the characters managed their affairs in their own way. At the moment when Rama was eager to take Sita back, Sita decided differently. Rama himself decided on a great renunciation. The characters, as they would in any perfect work of art, got out of control. Valmiki let them act in their own way, watched the conclusions as an outsider, and returned to his life of contemplation.

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## DRAUPADI

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The storyteller was in a loquacious mood. He sat me on his mat as usual, brought me a plateful of sweets, and said, 'I collected these at weddings I attended today, quite a lot of them, I tell you. For weeks I seem to have been doing nothing but officiate at weddings, and everyone gives me a packet of sweets; if I eat all of it at my age . . . And so I have kept them for you. This has put me in mind of the whole business of marriage. At the officiation I recite and make the bride and the bridegroom recite before the holy fire their promises, but secretly watch with interest the couple measuring each other slyly; in our society husband and wife learn to understand each other after marriage—unlike the Europeans, who, I hear, allow boys and girls to move freely and settle their own marriages. When a girl in our society consents to marry, she naturally accepts the judgment of her elders, but she also attempts to gauge the situation for herself at the first chance. While I recite the mantras I also watch with amusement the look of apprehension mingled with hope in the eyes of the bride as she sits before the holy fire, and it has always brought to my mind the situation Draupadi must have found herself in when she had to accept five husbands in one marriage!'

I hear that it is not unusual in the Western world, especially in the cinema world, for a woman to be married to five persons—but one presumes it is always one after