

LAKSHMANA—TOO

Within the Palace, the companions of Rama, elated and happy, ready with their bright countenances and splendid robes were waiting to accompany him to the Festival Hall. Sumantra went into the apartments that lay still deeper inside the Palace. There he saw Rama, seated on a golden cot, scattering Divine Light around him, and Sita standing by his side, gently fanning him. He shone like the Moon with the star, Chitra.

Sumantra was in a hurry. He could not brook delay. He said, “Rama! Mother Kaikeyi and your Father have both asked me to bring you quickly to the Palace of that Queen. They have sent me on that mission here. I have hurried hither for that same purpose.” As soon as he heard those words, Rama turned towards Sita and said, “Sita! This is a

sign of some obstacle, and not of anything else. I am not unaware of this, but I kept silent and said, ‘Yes’ for everything, so that Father might be happy. Father’s orders are to be honoured, lest he be pained.” While Rama was talking in this strain, the heart of Sumantra was pounding fast inside him. He was trying to interpret Rama’s words and the picture of Dasaratha lying wailing on the floor. He was now convinced that the obstacle Rama spoke of was genuine.

But Sita interrupted Rama; she said, “Lord! What are you talking about? On this auspicious occasion you should not speak thus. Whatever the obstacle, father-in-law’s words must be honoured. If he is content, we are content. For his sake, we must renounce whatever has to be. Do not hesitate even a little, go immediately. Whether the Coronation takes place or not, we shall be equally happy. Mother Kaikeyi has inordinate affection towards you. Anything that she directs us to do, any order that she gives us, will be for our good beyond doubt. There is no one here on earth who is as solicitous for our welfare as Mother Kaikeyi. When Father and such a mother send word that you should hasten towards them, how happy we should be!” Saying this, Sita followed Rama to the main door of the Hall and wished him well.

Rama told her, “Sita! Don’t I know all this? For me, the days that are past, the days that are around us and the days yet to come are all the same. I welcome each day with

full joy. To uphold the reputation of Father, I am prepared to do anything I am prepared to go anywhere. I am indeed immensely happy that you share my feeling and second my resolve.” Rama moved out, accompanied by Sumantra. When they ascended the chariot waiting on the road in front of the Palace, people raised shouts of “*Jai, Jai Ramachandra Prabhu ki Jai.*” The acclamation shook the skies.

Sumantra announced to the populace, “Now the chariot is not taking Rama to the Coronation Hall. It is taking him to where the Emperor is. So, allow the chariot to go as fast as it should. Rama will return in a few moments, so wait here.” Sumantra explained the reason for the hurry, and drove in hot haste. When Rama was proceeding thus along the city streets to the Palace of Kaikeyi, in his divine chariot, as soon as he was sighted, heroes cheered like lions. Minstrels and courtiers started paeans of praise. The strains of many instruments of music filled the sky. Acclamation of “Jai,” “Jai” rose from the thick masses of people on both sides of the road. Women in their best clothes, bedecked with jewels, thronged the terrace of the house and filled the windows, eager to wave lamps when Rama passed by.

When he approached the Palace, they showered floral petals and waved sacred lamps. People gazed upon the Prince until he passed beyond reach of the eye. Then, they relished with joy the picture of “Rama in the chariot” they had imprinted on their hearts, and, stood without stirring

wherever they were, like idols of themselves, lost in contemplation of the Bliss that filled them.

The chariot rode into the precincts of the Palace of Dasaratha named Vardhamana, as imposing as Mount Kailas itself. It passed through the three quadrangles guarded by vigilant bowmen.

Then, Rama alighted from the vehicle. Thereafter, he moved through two more quadrangles on foot. While walking across, he told his companions and even Lakshmana to stay back. For Rama knew what was about to happen soon. In spite of this, he was acting like a mortal, as naturally as any would under the circumstances! Finally, Rama entered the apartments of the Queens and the place where Dasaratha had fallen on the bed. His hair was dishevelled. He was wearing clothes of ‘yesterday.’ He was lying on the bed without any regard to propriety. Rama was astonished at the spectacle. Kaikeyi was standing by the side of the bed.

Dasaratha’s face had lost all trace of brightness. He was lamenting and wailing. He raised his head. His eyes fell upon Rama. His tongue failed to spell out what he longed to say. Tears streamed from his eyes. Though he tried to speak, no sound came. Rama had never before seen or experienced such a fearsome scene. He was filled with anxiety. He hastened to the presence of his father, and held both his feet in his hands. “Tell me, father, why you lament

so? What is the cause? I shall try to confer joy on you, in the best manner possible. I shall dedicate my very life for the sake of restoring your ananda. Tell me what has caused this grief, do not weep,” he pleaded.

At this Dasaratha exclaimed, “Rama!” and broke into tears again, unable to continue. He lost consciousness. Rama tried to revive him and console him, but he fell deeper into grief and could not be pacified. Then, Rama mustered courage and took his father to task, “Father! what is all this? You have to instil courage into young persons like me. On the other hand, you are weeping and wailing and filling us with fear! No. This is not right. This is the occasion to be happy; but is it Dharma, is it proper, for you to sink into grief? Till this day, whenever you were angry or worried, my coming to you used to remove in a trice all signs of those troubles, and to make you beam with ananda. You used to gain peace again when you drew me near, didn’t you? How is it then that the longer you look at me the more you suffer from sorrow? This makes my grief too more painful. Can you not mention the reason for this strange behaviour and bring solace to me? Won’t you tell me? Has any wrong been committed by me? Or, if there is anything I have to do, tell me, I shall do it without fail. I shall correct myself, if you tell me my faults. Do not grieve. Do not doubt or hesitate. Tell me with the authority of affection what I have to do, and I shall bow to the order. Father! Your being plunged in grief is not good augury for you, for me as well as for the Empire.”

Praying thus, Rama turned towards Kaikeyi. With folded palms, he asked her, “Mother! Have I committed any wrong? Tell me who that execrable sinner is who caused such grief to father! The moment father saw me, he used to beckon me lovingly, draw me close to him, and fondle me caressingly! Now, he does not even look at my face; why is it so? He does not utter one word. He keeps his face turned away from me! If, however, the fault, the crime is mine, I am ready to suffer any punishment to atone for it. It is enough for me if father is happy. Or, is he suffering from any illness or disease? Have my brothers, Bharatha and Satrughna sent any bad news? They are well, aren’t they? Mother Kausalya and Sumitra are well, I hope! I am overcome with grief, since I am unable to understand the reason for father’s agony! I shall do whatever is needed to bring joy back to him, however hard it may be. His command, however painful, I shall discharge to the full, most loyally, with bowed head. Whoever is born, the father is the cause of his birth. Therefore, the father is everyone’s visible God. I seek nothing higher than his happiness. Have compassion on me. Tell me what has taken place. Mother! was your self-respect hurt by any incident, resulting in your speaking some harsh words against father? Or, did my mother act against his will and hurt his feelings? Mother Kausalya will never behave like that. And Sumitra? I am more certain about her. She will not at all act so. And father will certainly not lament so distressingly, even if either of them acted so foolishly. There must be some very serious reason for his plight. When father is reluctant to tell me

what that is, at least you can tell me about it and console my grief.”

Looking at Rama who was so pathetically praying to her, Kaikeyi gave up all sense of mercy and moderation, all consideration for the husband who might be plunged in deeper misery when he hears her words spoken in utter disregard of the calamities they were sure to usher in. She did not stop to enquire whether the words could be uttered or whether they were better left unspoken. She did not discriminate between the fleeting present and the oncoming future. She brushed aside the claims of love, and cast off her own innate dignity and motherly status.

She said, “Rama! Listen! Years ago, during the battle between the Devas and the Asuras (Gods and Demons) your father was wounded by dire demonic arrows and he suffered unbearable pain. I nursed him back to health and happiness. He appreciated my sacrifice and service and told me to name two boons promising to grant them to me. At that time, I felt that the only thing I craved for was his recovery and victory; so I replied: ‘I do not desire my boon now, I shall ask you for the promised boons when I feel the urge later.’ Your father said, ‘Right! whenever you like, ask me whichever two boons you wish for. I shall certainly grant them and fulfil your desire. These boons have no limit of time and are bound by no condition. Whenever you ask, whatever the boons, I shall give them,’ he vowed.

“You know that scions of the Ikshvaku line never break their promised word. Putting faith in that well-known fact, I asked now for those two boons: one, that my son Bharatha should be crowned Emperor and two, that you should be sent into the Dandaka Forest for a period of fourteen years. As a result, your father is creating this hubbub! Why elaborate further? I shall not modify nor withdraw my demands. If your father is an adherent of Truth, and if you desire to prove that you too are an adherent of Truth, you have to go this very moment to the Dandaka Forest, wearing deerskin and matted hair. You have to reside there for fourteen years.

“Since you are his very life breath, he does not like to send you into exile. He is reluctant to ask you to go. He apprehends you may take it amiss. That is the reason for this grief. Rama! No other calamity or deluge has happened here. It is meaningless to exaggerate this minor matter and make out that a mountainous catastrophe has landed on us. Rama! The father can be saved from the sin of breaking his word only when his very image, the son, resolves to fulfil the vow he fails to fulfil. Else, if he who vowed and he who is the son of the person who vowed, both neglect it, then the father has to meet the doom of eternal downfall. You are not unaware of this.”

Rama was not affected in the least, while listening to these words uttered with such deliberate hardheartedness. With a smile playing on his lips, he replied, “For this reason,

it is not proper that father should lament.” He nodded his head as if to signify his approval of the proposals made by Kaikeyi. But when this conversation fell on his ears, Dasaratha felt as if his heart was being sawn within. He rolled and groaned in extreme agony. Rama turned towards Kaikeyi and said, “Mother! It will happen as you have contemplated! I am reverentially placing on my head the promise made by my father. It is enough if father draws me near him as he so lovingly used to do until now and speaks to me affectionately, and blesses me. Well, if I am at least told that I don’t deserve these, that I have not earned that merit, I will accept it without demur and with equal joy and satisfaction. For, father always wishes the best for me. He blesses me always and desires that I progress ever. He is a great seer. He is for me not only the father, but the preceptor who teaches the highest path. What responsibility and duty have I than conferring joy on him, who is both father and teacher? This is my dearest duty, my Dharma. I will derive immense ananda in the forest for fourteen years. Not merely fourteen, if father’s wish is such, I am prepared to live all my life in the forest itself! But why is it that father is hesitating to tell me about these two boons? This is what pains me. Will I ever say no to what he says? Rama is the servant and support of the parental word, not its opponent. Is there any act of gratitude nobler than dedicating this body, which was received from the father, to his service alone? I shall offer it with ananda. I am not one who waits to be told to do so.

Mother why did you not mention to me that Bharatha is the person to be crowned? I and my brother—there is no difference between us? We know no distinction among ourselves. Also, why is it that you say, ‘This is your father’s command’? Do I ever disobey your commands? No I never do so. Whether you say it or my father says it I unhesitatingly carry it out. I am leaving Ayodhya this very day, and proceeding to the forest. Mother! Send proper messengers charged with the task of bringing Bharatha from the grandfather’s place. It is best to get him quickly. If my moving into the forest and the coronation of Bharatha happen at the same time, father will be saved from physical strain, mental anxiety and the sense of void. And you too can be fully content! Who can say how events will shape themselves?”

When Kaikeyi heard these words from Rama, she was filled with ananda and apprehension. She feared what might happen if Bharatha arrived while Rama was still present in the city. She concluded that it was best to insist on Rama leaving for the forest that very day itself. She replied, “Rama! It is possible to make arrangements to get Bharatha from where he is to Ayodhya. But there is no need why you should continue here until he reaches this city. Since you have decided to start the hermit life, why should you delay your departure? For, the longer the start is delayed, the day of your return too will be advanced! It is advisable that you get ready to leave even now.

“Your father is eager to tell you this himself; but, he is unwilling to express his command directly. Though his heart insists that he should say it, he is bothered by a sense of shame, for he loves you much. He is reluctant to inform you of his promise to me. That is the reason for his distress. He has no other grief. The quicker you depart from Ayodhya, the sooner he will recover from agony. Until you leave Ayodhya, I am afraid, he will not take food or bathe. Therefore, if you yearn to restore him to happiness, the sooner you depart the better.”

Dasaratha lying prostrate on the bed heard these heart-piercing words of Kaikeyi. He could not contain his anger and sorrow. He burst into indistinct fury, “Fie on you, traitorous demon!” and turning to Rama, he cried, “Rama” twice, before he fainted again. Rama sat on the bed, with the head of his father on his lap. He stroked the forehead and consoled and comforted him with sweet lovingness. He also spoke to Kaikeyi, “Mother! I am not a covetous fellow poisoned by worldly ambition. I have no desire to win over the people and establish my rule over the kingdom. I wish to live like a hermit. I yearn to foster and maintain righteousness (Dharma), that is all. I have also one more resolve: to confer joy on my most revered father. To realise these three objectives, I am prepared to undertake any task. A son has no greater duty, no higher good, than serving the father. Mother! Though father has not directly spoken to me, you are telling me what his command is, aren’t you? This is quite enough. Besides, you are speaking in his very

presence, and despite his hearing what you say, he is unable to alter or deny anything. Therefore, I infer that your words are virtually his. So, I bow to the order, and shall leave as directed.

“Mother! I have one little wish, which I hope you will fulfil. When Bharatha is ruling the empire, see that he obeys in every way the orders of Father and that he contributes to the joy and satisfaction of Father by his acts. For me, for Bharatha, indeed, for every son, there is nothing more holy and more fruitful than the vow of filling the heart of the father with contentment and happiness. Service of the father is the *Sanathana Dharma*, the eternal duty, of the son.”

With these words, Rama fell prostrate on the ground and touched the feet of Mother Kaikeyi. Dasaratha, who heard his Son, writhed as if the Dharma that Rama expounded and the equanimity which he revealed aroused his love even more and thus aggravated his sorrow beyond control. Knowing that Rama will not stay in Ayodhya any longer, he lost all sense of propriety and status. He shouted “Rama!” and slumped on the hard floor of the room. Women in the zenana heard the thump, and were stunned into grief and wonder. They lamented loudly among themselves at the turn of events. Rama realised that it was not advisable to delay any longer. He prostrated before his father and touched his feet. Then, he walked out of the apartment.

Lakshmana was standing at the door and listening to the words spoken inside the room. He was in tears. He was

furious against Kaikeyi and angry against his father. He found it impossible to give expression to his feelings. So, he followed the footsteps of Rama with arms folded, eyes on the ground, head bent low. Though he had lost a kingdom, and had to exile himself into the forest, Rama's face shone like the moon behind thick dark clouds, unaffected by the black veil. The splendour of his countenance was unaffected; for, he faced honour and dishonour with equal serenity. He behaved like a veteran Yogi, with no trace of agitation in thought, word and deed. He walked as if nothing had happened to cause him worry. However, Sumantra guessed that some transformation had happened inside the palace. The guess soon grew into certainty. When his eyes fell on Lakshmana, his heart suffered a shock. To add to his fears, Rama brushed aside the White Umbrella that was held over him by the attendant. He ordered that the ceremonial whisks be not used for him. He declared that he did not deserve any more the silver chariot. On hearing this, Sumantra lost strength of body and will. He was confirmed in his worst fears.

Rama did not speak a word to those around him or to the citizens he met; not that he was sad, no, he knew that others would be hurt if they heard the news. For, if he spoke, he would have to speak out the truth; and he would be spreading sadness through his own words. In spite of this, his style of walking back to the palace announced the sad news to all onlookers.

Rama did not proceed direct to the apartments of Sita. He chose to walk to the palace of Kausalya. The palace was resplendent with flags and festoons and other external marks of jubilation. The women and other attendants of the palace got intimation of the approach of Rama and Lakshmana to the mansion and they got ready lamps on plates, and ranged themselves in rows to welcome them. Old and trusted guards at the main entrance rose sharply when they espied the Brothers, and exclaimed, "Victory! Victory!" "May it be victory to you!" They bowed low and offered homage. When Rama entered the second square inside, Brahmins who had gathered there showered their blessing on him. On entering the third square, the young maids in attendance on the queen rushed in, carrying the happy tidings that Rama and his younger brother were arriving to offer reverence to the mother. They were themselves delighted at the sight of the princes. From the outer door right up to the room where the Mother was, maidens standing on both sides of the long passage waved ceremonial lamps as signs of welcome, to ward off evil and welcome joy and prosperity.

Queen Kausalya had observed vigil all night, in preparation for the holy day that had dawned. She was engaged since dawn in worshipful rites. Aged Brahmin priests were propitiating the God of Fire with Vedic hymns, when Rama was announced. The mother was overwhelmed with joy, since she could witness with her own eyes the Coronation of her son. She celebrated her joy by means of

several rites. She gave away plentiful gifts. She fasted and kept vigil. Ananda was enough food for her, the ananda she shared with all. She ran forward to clasp Rama in her arms. She caressed the curls on his head. She led him by the hand into the shrine room where she was spending the morning. She had no knowledge of the somersault events had taken. Innocent and simple hearted that she was she wore the white sari of purity and with the sacred silk cord tied round her wrist, she was gratefully engaged in the worship of the Gods. Looking at the face of Rama, she noticed an added splendour illumining it. So she could not contain within herself her Ananda. "Son!" she said, "your forefathers were all Royal Sages, Rajarshis. They were strong upholders of Right. They were supersouls, Mahatmas, each one. You shall be as long-lived as they, as renowned as they. Your glory must reach the ends of all the quarters as their glory did, Son! Follow the ideals of Righteousness which were held high by this dynasty. Do not neglect them, even in a fit of absence of mind. Hold on to them, without wavering in the least." With these words, she placed a few grains of rice on his head, in token of her blessing on the auspicious day. She placed a golden seat near hers, saying, "Son! You observed the ceremonial vigil last night, didn't you? And you fasted yesterday, according to rule. You must be exhausted. Sit here for a while, and eat a few fruits." So saying, she held forth a gold plate of fruits which she had made ready for him.

Rama was thrilled by the ananda of the mother and the love she showered on him. He wondered how he could

communicate to her the turn of events. He was unwilling to destroy the atmosphere of joy. For the sake of giving her satisfaction, he sat on the golden chair, fingered the contents of the plate and said, "Mother! From this moment, I should not touch gold. I should not sit on golden chairs. I am awaiting your blessing, for, I have to proceed as an exile to the Dandaka Forest. I came to you for taking leave." Kausalya could not understand a word of what he said. She could only say, "Son! Within a few minutes you are to be crowned King, and you talk of the Dandaka Forest! I am at a loss to make out the sense of what you say." She thought her son was teasing her with a joke. She said, "Son! In this auspicious hour, you should not, even in fun, talk of things of bad omen. Give it up, my lovely gem!" She scooped with her fingers a little from a plate of rice, boiled in milk and sweetened with sugar, and placed it on Rama's tongue! Observing her love and her ananda, the eyes of Lakshmana were spontaneously filled with tears.

Kausalya noted it. She turned to him, and enquired, "Lakshmana! Why are you sad?" She hurried towards him and tried to caress him, but Lakshmana could not suppress his grief any longer. He wept aloud and sobbed. The queen stood aghast. She did not know why he sobbed. Rama's words and Lakshmana's grief confused her much. Meanwhile Rama interceded: "Mother! If you promise not to grieve, I shall tell you one thing," and he held her hands in his, very firmly. "This is something that will endow me and you and our entire family and dynasty with imperishable

glory. So, don't give room for any anxiety, doubt or distress. Agree to it with alacrity and affection. Does it not give you great joy that I obey father's command? He has resolved to crown my brother, Bharatha! He has resolved to send me, in the habiliments of a hermit into the Dandaka forest for a period of fourteen years. I have bowed to his command and come here to take leave of you."

At this, Kausalya shrieked, "Rama," and fell on the floor. "What a turn of events is this? Is the tender child of mine to be sent into the dark jungle? What crime has my Rama done to deserve this? Can this be true? Or, is it meaningless jabber coming out of my own brain, since I had no sleep and no food?"

While she was thus trying to explain to herself and consoling herself, the happenings at Kaikeyi's palace had spread throughout the zenana and the noise of wailing and lamentation rose from maids and attendants everywhere. All faces streamed with tears in great sorrow. Cries of "Rama! Do not leave us"; were heard on all sides. Grief-stricken groups hurried to the palace of Kausalya, who was overwhelmed with astonishment, sorrow and fear. She could not unravel the mystery of it all. She could not rise from the floor, for she was weighed down with anxiety and despair. Nevertheless, she was longing to understand what had really happened to cause this universal agony. She drew Rama on to her lap, and caressing his curly hair she asked, "Son! What is this I hear? This news? Tell me clearly what

took place. I cannot bear this suspense any longer." Rama told her, "Honouring the two boons that father had promised Kaikeyi once upon a time, father granted her those two wishes." Rama told Kausalya that the first boon she was granted was, "Bharatha is to be crowned" and the second was, "I should be sent to the Forest for fourteen years."

When Rama related these facts and confirmed their truth, Kausalya exclaimed, "Rama! Did Kaikeyi really demand such boons? Kaikeyi had unbounded love and affection towards you. She would not have wished for these things any day. Let that rest. Even if she has, I am sure it must be only to test the king! For this simple thing, why should there be so much confusion and anxiety? Or, assuming that she asked for the boons, will your father ever agree to grant them? I refuse to believe this. Will your father, who cannot tolerate your absence from his presence for a single moment, send you away into the forest for fourteen years? This is plunging me into more confusion."

Seeing his mother doubting the truth of the incidents that actually took place, Rama again held both her hands in his and pleaded, "Mother! Believe my words! Father had already promised to grant her whichever two boons she desired. Afterwards, when she asked for these two, he had no inclination to break his plighted word, to take back the promise he had solemnly granted. Nor could his mind agree to order me into the forest and be without me. So, he is suffering great mental distress. I cannot bear the sight of

his affliction. I have just now returned from that palace. He is stricken unconscious. He is in terrible anguish. This is the truth. I am not so cruel as to cause such anxiety in you over a light laughable matter, believe me. I have accepted father's order. I have come to you for your permission."

With these words, Rama fell at the feet of his mother. Kausalya lifted him up tenderly. She said, "Rama! What strange behaviour is this? However barbarian a person may be, will he demand these horrible boons? Can ever any human being think of sending you, who is to be crowned in a few minutes, into the forest and for fourteen years? Am I to suffer throughout my life? I got a son, after observing many a vow and ritual. Looking on your lovely face, I overcame the pangs of those years of sorrow. I have no other desire; I ask for no other boons. It is enough for me if my son is with me, near me. Have I become unfit for this little gift? Did I deliver a child only to throw it into the forest? Will any mother agree to send her son into the jungle? Alas, what sin have I committed in the past? In which of my precious lives have I kept apart a mother from her son? Since the day when you were initiated into Vedic studies, I was deriving happiness every moment from the thought that the day of your Coronation was drawing near. Have those sweet dreams of mine come to naught? Have all my hopes been dashed to the ground and broken to pieces? Have all the vows, vigils, rites and rituals I so scrupulously observed and performed, for ensuring your joy and happiness, been in vain? Oh! What a big sinner am

I? Why has my heart not broken on hearing this news? Perhaps, I have to hear and bear much more heartbreaking news! Death does not help me! My heart still beats, in spite of this shock. Alas, even death awaits the allotted moment. He comes; but on seeing my plight leaves me alive, postponing the moment of my release. Yama too has no mercy towards me. I am pronounced undeserving of even the realm of Death. Oh Rama! That this calamity should happen to us!" She lamented and fell on the floor in a faint. Coming to, she rolled on the floor, pressing her heart with the palm of her hand. Rama could not quietly look on the scene. The wailing of the maids, who gathered around blasted his ears like thunderbolts.

Rama did not utter a single word. He sat near his mother and stroked her forehead, caressing her hair and consoling her. He brushed away the dust with which her clothes were covered. Like a huge well-set rock struck deep in the sea, Rama sat unhurt by the lashing of the surging billows around. He was above and beyond the blows of grief and the blandishments of joy. He was filled with as much equanimity now when he had to leave for the forest for fourteen years, as he had a few moments ago, while proceeding to the Durbar Hall to be crowned as the Ruler of a great empire!

Kausalya too knew that Rama would never swerve from his path of duty. She was aware that Rama would never break his plighted word, and that he would not stray a hair's

breadth from the path laid down by his father. She was certain that her lamentations would not induce him to turn back. So, she gave up all attempts to persuade him to give up his resolution. “Son! Of what use is it to blame others when one is destined to meet these tragic developments? No. It is sheer waste of words. Everything is for our own good. No one can say ‘no’ to the dictates of the Divine. I have had no happiness in this Ayodhya, in this palace. I can be happy only where my Rama is. So, I shall come with you. Take me with you,” she said. And she attempted to rise to her feet. The maids held her and seated her leaning against the wall. They spoke softly and sweetly to bring her round.

Lakshmana was watching the anguish of Kausalya and listening to her words. He could not control his emotions. He was bursting with anger. He held his hands tight over his chest, and said, “Oh! Revered Mother! I shall never accept this. Is Rama to leave the kingdom and betake himself to the forest, yielding to the prattle of a woman? I cannot tolerate it. Father has become too old. His mind is very unsteady as a result. And he is entangled in sensual pursuits, and he has become a slave to the enticements of Kaikeyi. He is pitifully uxorious. He has no sense of discrimination about the consequences of his actions. He is liable to issue any kind of order in his infatuation. Orders of such type should not be obeyed. The king is in a state of feeble-mindedness, unable to distinguish the real from the unreal, the momentary from the momentous. When such

rulers give orders out of infatuation they can well be disobeyed. What crime did Rama commit that he should be sent into the forest? Even the cruellest enemy of Rama (if he has any), or even the most hardhearted barbarian suffering punishment for his crimes, cannot point his finger at the slightest slur on his behaviour or action. No king on earth has the authority to drive into the forest, as an exile, a person of such unquestioned innocence, purity of intentions and holy sanctity. Rama is steady in his straightforward path. He is the master of his senses. He honours and treats with respect enemies of every type. Will any father drive such a son into the jungle? Moreover, the king is most attached to Dharma. He is a hero full of sacred ideals. He is an adherent of the best in all faiths. Can such a king issue this command? Judging from this, it is certain that Dasaratha is either insane or enslaved by passion. Any command from a person who is either of these, is unworthy of consideration. The words of a king who behaves like a lunatic or an infant need not be honoured at all. Forgetting the dictates of political morality, giving up the path of worldly wisdom, throwing to the winds the demands of paternal affection, he has become mad, giving free vent to his whims and fancies. Need his command be treated as valid? I won't agree that it should be respected.”

Lakshmana turned towards Rama, and clasping his hands in reverence, he said, “Rama! Pardon me! Assume the rulership of the realm before news of this spreads and becomes known to all. I shall be by your side, with my

bow. Whoever in Ayodhya stands up against you will have to meet the arrows from this bow. Of course, there is no such, either in Ayodhya or any other place. But if any opposition develops, this great City will become a desert, with no human inhabitant. My sharp arrows will see to that. Why repeat a thousand things? If Bharatha opposes, or anyone on his behalf, I shall destroy him, root and branch. I will not care. Even Dasaratha, if he stands forth as a supporter of Kaikeyi in this struggle, I shall capture him and shut him up in prison.”

While Lakshmana was holding forth in this strain, Rama looked at him sternly, intercepting the flow of his feelings and admonished him thus: “Lakshmana! Your words are crossing the bounds. No one can deny me what I wish for. None can change the march of my will. My exile in the forest cannot be avoided. You are talking prompted by your love towards me and the desire to prevent your separation from me. Forbear! Forbearance will save you against all anxiety and fear. Be patient. Don’t get agitated. Do not entertain ideas of hatred against either father or brother Bharatha. They are pure, holy persons. Kaikeyi too is highly venerable. She is to be honoured and worshipped. The boons she asked are also blameless. She loved me, caressed me, fondled me, nursed me, played with me, derived joy from me, more than her own son, Bharatha. When the Mother prays today for such boons from father, boons quite contrary to the ways of the world, surely there must be some hidden significance in the affair. This must

be the Divine Plan, not mere human tactics. Be quiet, give up your fears and hatreds. We shall await what happens next.” Rama advised him.

At this, Lakshmana fell at the feet of Rama and said, “Rama! On what basis, under what authority is Bharatha to be given the Crown that ought to be yours? Which other son has the right which the eldest has not? You are obeying this absurd, unjust order because of father; but I will not approve of it, whatever you may say in justification.” Turning to Kausalya, Lakshmana continued: “Revered Mother! To tell you the truth, I am devoted to Rama. I speak this on oath. I cannot exist even a single moment apart from Rama. If Rama has no desire for the Kingdom and if he moves into the forest, I will follow him. I will walk in his footsteps, I will be the shadow for him. If he but orders so, I shall jump most joyously into the blazing fire. I shall heed only his orders, not of anyone else. Mother! I cannot bear the sight of your sorrow. He is your son. He is my Ramachandra. How can anyone be away from his own life breath?”

Listening to Lakshmana, Kausalya was a little comforted. She stroked the head of Lakshmana saying, “Your love gives me much consolation. Your words give me great strength. Brothers of your kind are rare indeed! The world considers the mother who has borne such children as venerable and holy; but, we are afflicted now with the feeling that we are great sinners. Rama will not

desist from his resolve. Exile is inevitable for him. I want only this now: Take me also with you,” she wailed.

Rama looked at Lakshmana and said, “Brother! I know the extent of the love you bear towards me. I am not unaware of your heroism, your ability and glory. Mother is suffering great grief, since she is unable to understand the true facts and the value of self-control. Besides, since I am the child born of her loins, grief is natural. But consider; for all values of life, righteous conduct, Dharma, is the very root. And Dharma is secure only on the foundation of Truth.

“Sathya and Dharma are interchangeable. One cannot exist without the other. Truth is Goodness. Goodness is Truth. I am now achieving both Sathya and Dharma, while acting in accordance with the command of Father. No one dedicated to the good life shall break the word plighted to the mother, the father or the esteemed Preceptor. Therefore, I shall not overstep the orders of Father. That is certain. It was not Kaikeyi that ordered me. She only communicated to me the command of father. And she did so, in his very presence; so, one has to bow his head in reverence to it. If it wasn't father's command, when Kaikeyi was telling me that it was, he could have declared that it wasn't, couldn't he? He didn't. He was simply bewailing and groaning; for this reason, it is as authentic as his own command. So, I shall not deviate from any resolution. There is no possibility of my going back on it. Do not allow your reason to slide into this terror-creating Kshatriya mentality. Give up

violence and cruelty and adopt my stand.” Rama stroked the back of Lakshmana, who was weighed down by anger and sorrow and spoke soft loving words to assuage his grief. Then, turning to his mother, Kausalya, he said, “Do not obstruct my resolve and cause breach of my vow. Whatever may happen to anyone, my exile to the forest cannot be averted. Send me with your Love. Bless my vow, my resolution.” Then he fell at her feet and prayed for permission to leave.

The mother was shaken by the agony that was torturing her. She placed her hands on the back of Rama and wept aloud. Seeing her plight, Rama too was unable to restrain his emotions. He held her feet and said, “Mother! My word is supreme Truth. Listen. No hardship will happen to me while in the forest. I will spend these fourteen years with the largest measure of happiness and joy. I shall come back and fall at these Feet again. I shall fulfil all your hopes about me. Mother! It is Dasaratha's Command! It is a Command which not only I but you, Lakshmana, Sumitra and Bharatha too have to carry out to the very letter. This is the ancient law, the *Sanathana Dharma*.

“Mother! I shall make another appeal, pardon me. The arrangements made by you and others for crowning me must be used by you, with equal joy and enthusiasm, for the Coronation of Bharatha. Father has entrusted the forest region to me. It is best. It is in accordance with the highest Dharma that each should do his duty allotted to him. Trying

to avoid one's duty because it is hard to accomplish, is to entertain the idea of difference between me and Bharatha. What you have to do is to bless us both, asking each to carry on successfully the responsibility entrusted to each."

Kausalya listened to these words of Rama. She could not bear the grief that descended on her. She groaned in great pain. "Oh my son! Father brought you up and helped you grow and was happy to see you tall and strong. So, he deserves reverence and obedience. Am I too not worthy of reverence? And obedience? And consider this! The wife is the husband's half. The husband is the wife's right half. Thus, when each is the half of the other, I am half of Dasaratha, am I not? That is why the wife is named the *Ardhangi* (half the body) of the husband. When you say that you have been commanded by Dasaratha, it is only the command of half of him. It did not originate from all of him. It will become authoritative only when this half too agrees. When I do not, it is not valid as a command. You know the meaning and significance of Dharma in all its varied aspects; so, you must be aware of this too. Without the mother's acceptance, no duty can be binding and nothing deserves the name Dharma. More than the father's command, the mother's is to be followed. That is the more important duty. For, it is the mother who nourished you into childhood and boyhood, not the father! Had the mother not borne it for nine months, there would be no child at all! You are now throwing that mother into the flames of grief, and proclaiming, 'Oh, it is my father's command. I must

obey it at all costs.' I shall not accept that conduct as correct. No treasure is richer to the mother than her son. And for mothers such as I, the son is all. When the son looks askance at me and considers the father's order as superior, of what benefit is it for me to secure heaven and live on Divine Nectar there? I shall rather be in hell. I shall deem it heaven if my son is with me.

"Rama! What can I do at this place? I have not tasted a moment's happiness throughout my life! From birth, I was bound by the limitations imposed by mother and father; then, caught in anxiety about what kind of husband I would get, and what his character and behaviour would be. I was at last wedded to your father. For years, the agony of childlessness afflicted me. Then I had to suffer from conflict with the other wives of your father. I have no relief from that battle, from that day to this. As a result I do not know of what merit in my previous life, I secured you as son. And now, separation from you is happening to me. When have I been happy? My life has become a vast stream of grief. I am struggling in it, unable to swim. I sink in it without any hope of being saved. I had you as a branch which I could hold onto to save myself. If you deny me that, what will happen to me? As a consequence of my absence away from him, your father will not suffer any feeling of loss. He has his ananda in Kaikeyi. None else is needed by him. Therefore, instead of hanging on here, and broiling in agony and finally, giving up breath, I prefer looking on at the charming face of my dear son. Though I

may not have food and drink in the forest, I shall sustain myself on that joy.” Though Rama felt that there was some validity in her plea, he was forced by the need to obey the wishes of his father and his promise that he would not fail in that duty.

Meanwhile, Lakshmana intervened and said, “Brother! Mother’s words are the highest Truth. The mother deserves even more reverence than the father. The scripture has laid down ‘*Mathr devo bhava, Pithr devo bhava,*’ thus placing the mother first, and the father in the second position. It says, ‘Let the mother be your God,’ and thereafter ‘Let the father be your God.’ It is not proper for you to stick so firmly to your resolution and cause so much grief to mother.”

Rama turned to him and intercepted his words. “Lakshmana, you are supporting the statements of a mother who is suffering from the clouding effect of a strong attachment to progeny. Consider the order of the Father, which concerns the welfare of the empire, the world in its entirety and the human community. You have not understood the inner implication and meaning of that order. Only Dharma can ensure the other three goals of man—Wealth, Happiness and Liberation. There is no need to doubt this or argue about its correctness. When activity is merely devoted to the earning of riches, the world hates the individual. When it is devoted entirely to the selfish fulfilment of one’s desire, the world condemns it as contemptible. Therefore activity has to be in conformity

with Dharma, Lakshmana! This is not all. Dasaratha is our Father, Preceptor, and Monarch. He might give us a command, either through desire for something, or through anger against somebody or through attachment with and love towards someone, that is not our concern! We have only to obey. There is no justification for discarding it.

“A son who delights in sin might act against the command. I am not such a son. Whatever Father commands, I will bow my head in reverential homage. Regarding this, you might have a bit of doubt. When a father, a fool blinded by lust, devoid of intelligence to discriminate between the momentary and the eternal, intent only on his selfish aggrandisement, and putting his trust on the stratagems of others, inflicts injuries on his own son, you might ask, should the son put his trust in him and obey him? Without fail he ought to! He may be a fool or a cruel tyrant, are you not his son? When that is so, your status is ever lower and his is ever higher. This decides all duties and rights. The son can at best try to clarify to him and explain according to his light what appears to him confused or complicated. He should not refuse to obey, dismissing it as foolish or absurd.

“Consider this aspect also. Dasaratha is a very talented person, a great warrior and heroic fighter, a pillar of righteousness. And he is struggling in agony to keep his plighted word! He wasn’t deluded by Kaikeyi, or blinded by lust! No. He was moved by the supreme need to abide

by his promise, a promise he had solemnly made. Besides, he had told her that he would grant her the boons, whatever they be, even if the grant involved injury to his own life! I can never assent to the view that he is overcome by lust. Father is in misery, because he sees no escape from the consequences of that assertion, which his heart does not agree with, to send me into the forest.

“Lakshmana! Father is a staunch supporter of Dharma, more staunch than his predecessors on the throne. His fame has echoed and re-echoed from every corner of the three worlds. Will it not be a bad example to humanity if his Queen, the Anointed Queen, leaves him and accompanies her son, deserting the husband? Life is short. Its span is limited. To lose one’s reputation forever by thus resorting to unrighteous acts is not good, either for me or for you.”

Then, turning towards the Mother, he pleaded pathetically, “Mother!”, and before he could continue, Kausalya was numbed into stiffness by sorrow. She realised that her efforts to change the stand that Rama had taken were fruitless. She found that she could not escape the obligation to give him leave to go, with her blessings. She felt that the more she lamented, the more Rama was pained.

Meanwhile, Lakshmana was greatly moved. His eyes turned red. He lost all awareness of where he was and amidst whom. His lips became dry. His tongue was tied. He had a fixed stare. He bowed his head and looked on the ground,

tears flowed without let or hindrance. Rama watched him, and felt that it would not be proper to leave him in that state. Besides, Lakshmana might do something with himself. If left alone, he might even do injury to others. And those acts would be deemed to have happened on account of me, he thought.

So, Rama decided to question Lakshmana. “Brother! The fumes of anger are as incense to the horde of sins. Suppress them. You might be distressed at the thought that Rama has been so grossly insulted and dishonoured. But Sathya and Dharma, the path of Truth and Righteousness, heed no honour and dishonour. It does not crave for one and shy away from the other. Be brave. Fill your heart with courage. Remain here and serve Father. Use your days thus for the fulfilment of the highest purpose of life.” When his elder brother blessed him thus, Lakshmana was startled into speech. “Brother!” he cried, “When Rama, my very breath, is proceeding to the forest, whom am I to serve here, with this inert material physical object called body? This Lakshmana has no desire to serve anyone except Rama. You value your Dharma, your sense of duty. I too have my sense of duty, and I value it equally. Therefore, I shall come behind you. I have no need to await anyone’s order. I am not included in the persons bound to the boons claimed by Kaikeyi. Even if I am involved with them, I shall not pay heed to her commands or to the directives of her henchmen. No one other than Rama has the authority to command me or issue directives about my movements or conduct. So,

here and now, I too shall don the hermit's habiliment of bark, tie up my hair into matted locks, and prepare myself to follow you." With these words, Lakshmana divested himself of the jewels and regal paraphernalia he had burdened himself with, while proceeding to the Coronation Hall; he threw the jewels and silken robes in disgust. The ear ornaments and the necklaces fell in the far corners of the room. He was fretting to accompany his brother. Rama's heart softened at the sight of the spontaneous devotion and dedicated loyalty of Lakshmana. He went close to him, and placing his hand upon his shoulder, spoke softly, "Brother! My joy has no bounds, since I have such a brother as you! This is my great good fortune. By your coming with me, mother Kausalya too will gain some peace of mind. She is very much agitated by fear and doubt about how I shall spend my fourteen years in the forest, and whether I will return after the period of exile is over. So, tell mother to be free from fear. Go and soothe her. While we spend the hours like this, Father must be suffering more and more anxiety. Kaikeyi will suffer from the welling doubt that I may not leave at all! Therefore, I shall now go to Sita and inform her; and thence, I shall go to the Palace of Kaikeyi, to take leave of father. Meanwhile, you will go to your mother Sumitra and receive her consent to join me."

With these words, Rama went round Kausalya full circle, and fell flat at her feet in reverence. At that, the maids and attendants as well as the other inmates of the zenana, set up a loud wail, as if the Deluge had come upon them.

But Kausalya bravely drew Rama towards her when he stood up awaiting her blessings. She embraced him, and caressed his hair, and with her hands on his shoulder, she said, "Son! Rama! you are the staunchest adherent of Dharma. You are a resolute hero. You can have no cause to fear life in the forest. You have resolved on the exile in the forest. It has become impossible for me to dissuade you from that decision. May it be well with you. Fulfil your ideal, your yearning, to respect the wish of your father! Repay the debt that one owes to one's father, by acting according to his command. As for me, I wish only one thing: return happy to Ayodhya. I shall be happy on that day at least. Rama! The decree of destiny is indeed inscrutable. Its text cannot be reshaped even by the most powerful. The Dharma for whose sake you are now leaving us will certainly guard you and guide you while in exile. Rama! How nice it would be if at this very moment the fourteen years roll by, and I see your return, rather than your departure. Alas! Pardon my madness! Son! How shall I convey to you my blessings? Shall I say, let the fourteen years pass by, as fourteen days, no, no, as fourteen winks of the eye! Come safe, come soon. And be crowned Emperor. Oh, Jewel of Raghu dynasty! Oh, my dearest son! The Goddess of Dharma will surely shelter you during the years of exile, for it is to propitiate Her that you are entering the forest. She is the strongest and most steadfast of Guardians. I shall be propitiating the Gods here these fourteen years and praying that no harm comes to you. The service you have offered to your mother, your father and

your preceptor will confer on you long life, health and happiness. Your loyalty to Truth will grant you impregnable courage. The mountains, the rivers, the bushes, the anthills, the beasts and birds of the forest, these will approach you in kind affection, cater to your needs, and fill you with joy. The sun, the moon, and other heavenly bodies will ward off all evil and protect you. Even the demonic Rakshasas of the forest intent on heinous acts of cruelty will be drawn towards you, for your heart is full of cool comforting love, and they will surrender at your feet, accepting you as Master.”

Blessing Rama thus, Kausalya gulped down with some effort the sorrow that was overwhelming her, and put on a calm brave face. She smelt the crown of Rama’s head and held him hard and close in loving embrace. She kissed his cheeks. Her lips quivered, when she spoke the parting words, “Rama! Return safe; proceed in joy.” Rama knew the depth of affection that the mother was bestowing on him. He touched the mother’s feet many times in reverential gratitude, and said, “Mother! You should not grieve. You should not reduce sleep or food, do not injure your health. Remember me, at all moments with a joyful heart. Your thoughts will be reflected in my safety and prosperity. When you grieve here, how can I be happy there? When you wish that I should be happy there, you have to be happy here. And with all your heart, you must be blessing me from here.” Praying thus, he moved out of the place, averse to leave her thus; but yet, anxious to do his duty.

Rama stepped on the royal road, and started walking along, barefooted, through the concourse of citizens who had filled it. People were petrified at the sight of that resplendent symbol of truth and virtue. The citizens had heard rumours floating over the streets, telling them that Rama was leaving for the forest. They were unable to believe it as true. They prayed it might be false. But when they saw him tramp barefooted, their hearts sank. The exaltation they experienced at the news of the Coronation plunged into the depths of misery. Faces that bloomed in joy suddenly faded and dropped, wan and withered. Rama did not raise his head to look at any of the faces around him. He proceeded to the apartments of Sita.