

ENTERING INTO EXILE

Thousands had gathered in the quadrangle of the Palace. Their grief was immeasurable. Meanwhile, the Minister went in and aroused the Emperor who had fallen unconscious on the floor. He made him sit up, and placed him in position. He communicated to him the news that Sita, Rama and Lakshmana had come to have audience with him. Rama had already stood near his father, speaking words of soothing love. When Dasaratha saw Sita and Lakshmana, his grief knew no bounds. He embraced Rama closely and fell on the floor. Anguish choked his throat. He pressed his hands on his chest and tried to suppress the agony. Sita and Lakshmana could not look on at the suffering Emperor.

Lakshmana saw Kaikeyi, standing by with an air of authority; his eyes became red with rage. He looked daggers at her as if he would kill her on the spot. But he controlled

his anger, and cooled his emotion, watching the serenely calm face of Rama. At that time, Kaikeyi said, “Rama! You are plunging your father in deeper grief! The sooner you leave and reach the forest, the quicker will your father be relieved from anxiety. Do not delay any longer! Prostrate before your father, and go.” These words so devoid of elementary kindness seemed to split the heart of Dasaratha. Dasaratha suddenly shouted, “Demoness! Evil spirit! How hard and adamant are your words,” and fell in a faint. Just at that moment, Sita, Rama and Lakshmana fell at his feet. Rama said, “Father! Bless us and permit us to leave. This is a time fit for rejoicing, not pining and grieving. Overattachment brings infamy in its train.” Rama pleaded that he should be courageous and give up the delusion that makes him dote on him. Rama clasped his father’s feet, and then knelt on his knees, caressing and consoling.

Dasaratha opened his eyes and looked full at his beloved son. He sat up with great difficulty and holding both hands of Rama in his, he said, “Oh my darling Son! Listen to my words! You are possessed of self-control and discrimination. You know what is right. It is proper that you should do only the right thing. Now, it is not right when one person does wrong, for another to suffer from its consequences, isn’t it? The play of Fate is unpredictable, it is a riddle beyond solution.”

The Emperor began to pile argument on argument in his innocence and love, to dissuade Rama from his resolve to proceed to the forest.

Rama was known to Dasaratha, the father, as a Master of the Codes of Morality, and as a strict adherent of these Codes. He was skilled in justifying his acts. He was unafraid of the consequences of his resolve. Dasaratha read from the face of Rama who stood before him that he had come ready to take leave of him for the journey into exile. When he saw Sita too before him, he called her near and when she knelt by his side, he stroked her head softly, and described to her the travails of forest life. He told her that the best course for her would be to stay back, either with her parents-in-law, or with her own parents. His words came through groans of unbearable sorrow. He gnashed his teeth in rage, when his eyes fell upon Kaikeyi. All the while, he was fuming and fretting within himself, unable to contain his grief.

Sita fell at his feet and said, “Revered Father-in-law! My mind longs only for the service of Rama. That good fortune awaits me in full measure in the forest. I cannot stay back, losing this precious chance. Service rendered to parents or parents-in-law cannot give the wife the joy of fulfilment that service rendered to her husband can alone give. There is no joy or happiness greater or higher than that. Do not oppose me or present arguments against my leaving. Confer on me your blessings and send me with Ramachandra.”

Dasaratha could well understand and appreciate the yearning of Sita. He extolled her virtues with genuine

enthusiasm, for the edification of Kaikeyi, standing before him. Meanwhile, the wives of Royal ministers, and the wives of Royal Preceptors who were in the room gathered around Sita, and in their turn, they too described the hardship inherent in forest life. The Court Preceptor’s spouse sought a cleverer ruse to dissuade her. She said, “Sita! You have not been required to leave and go into the forest. It is your task to remain here and comfort the parents of your husband who are sunk in sorrow. You are half of Rama, aren’t you? So, this half must stay in order to alleviate the sorrow that the departure of the other half is causing them. Moreover since you are half of the eldest son, the Heir to the Throne, you have the right to rule over the Empire. If Rama moves into the forest and lives there to honour the word of his father, stay and rule over the realm and uphold the renown of Rama, filling his parents with delight. As the wife of Rama, this is the correct step you should take. This is your legitimate duty.”

These words were spoken as softly and sweetly as the whispering of autumn moonbeams into the ears of chakravaka birds; but they made Sita reel in misery. She was so overcome that no reply came from her.

During this interval, Kaikeyi had secured hermit’s robes of fibre as well as rosaries of tulsii. She held them before Rama and said, “The Emperor holds you as dear as his very life. So, he is bringing down eternal infamy on his head, unwilling to let you go. His affection for you is

clouding the righteousness of the course. He will not utter the words, ‘Go into the forest,’ at any time, under any circumstances. It is fruitless to await his agreement and his permission. So, decide on any one of these two steps: Are you courting infamy and dishonour and staying to rule over the Empire? Or, are you leaving for the forest and bringing eternal glory to the Ikshvaku Dynasty? Decide and act.”

Rama was glad that she spoke so. But the words entered the heart of Dasaratha like sharp nails driven in by heavy hammer strokes. “Alas! What cruel fate is mine! That I should be alive even after hearing such harsh words!” he exclaimed, and rolled to the floor in a faint. Regaining consciousness, he recalled the words he had heard, and again, became unconscious. Rama could not bear the sight of his father’s helplessness in the face of the situation that confronted him. He felt that he should accept the suggestion of Kaikeyi and leave; for, the sooner he left, the better it would be for all concerned.

He received in his hands the fibre robe his stepmother had brought and winding one of them around himself, he gave the other to Sita. She stood holding it in her hands, with her head bent in embarrassment, for she did not know how to wear it or fasten it around her. It looked too short a piece. Rama, who had already worn his robe, came near and spoke to her in a low voice. She was ashamed to confess that she did not know how to wear the fibre garment, which hermit women draped around themselves so elegantly. She

whispered, “Besides, this is not like the ones we wear. It is too short and not wide enough!” Rama consoled her, and putting courage into her, took her aside and saying that it could be worn ‘thuswise’ he wound it round her himself. Seeing this, the wives of the hermits and other women of the palace shed tears of sympathy.

At this juncture, Vashishta, the Royal Preceptor, arrived at the scene. He stood aghast, taking in the situation at a glance. He fell foul of Queen Kaikeyi. He declared that Sita need not wear the garment of fibre. He asserted that Kaikeyi had asked for and had been granted two boons only—Bharatha to be crowned and Rama sent into the forest. He said that Sita could go into the forest with all regal paraphernalia and every requisite for a comfortable sojourn there.

At this, Rama unwound the garment he had placed over her dress. But Sita came forward and fell at the feet of the Sage. She said, “Master! Of course, my wearing that garment is not the direct consequence of mother Kaikeyi’s desire. Can I not follow the ways of my Lord? Would it be proper for me, would it bring credit for me, if I live in the forest bedecked in jewels and costly silken garments, when my Lord is wearing the garment of a hermit? It would be extremely absurd for a dutiful wife to adopt this attitude, wouldn’t it be? Therefore, give me permission to put on these garments, so that I may maintain the wife’s code of conduct and carry out my duty.”

The adherence to righteous conduct which prompted this prayer moved the mighty Sage into tearful compassion. With sorrow stuttering his voice, he said, “Sita! This line of thought comes quite naturally to you, since you are the embodiment of virtue. But as kings and rulers, there are certain principles to be respected, by you and others. The crooked and wicked brain of your mother-in-law Kaikeyi needs some correction and warning. As a matter of fact, this day your husband was to be crowned Emperor of this realm. Though that event did not take place as a result of a combination of circumstances, including promises made long ago, I must say that it is against political justice to crown Bharatha instead. Only the eldest son has the right to the Throne. No one else has the claim. If he for any reason gives up the right through his own free will, as he has done now, you, as the other half of his person, have the right to wield that authority; no third party can exercise it.”

When Vashishta was expounding rules of political morality, Kaikeyi was visibly affected by fear. But she was not unaware of the fact that Sita would not desire to exercise regal authority and power. However long Vashishta elaborated on her rights and claims. Sita refused to pay attention to them. She was yearning for the chance to wear the fibre garment of the hermit in preference to the robes of Imperial Splendour. The wife of the Royal Preceptor felt that Sita would never retract from her resolve; so, she and others took the garment and wound it round her, in correct hermitage style.

Meanwhile, Lakshmana too wore the same sylvan garments as Rama had on. Rama decided that there should be no more delay. The three prostrated reverently before Dasaratha, who fainted away at the sight of his sons in their ascetic attire. They prostrated also before Kaikeyi who was standing nearby. They fell at the feet of sage Vashishta and of his Consort. And they started towards the forest.

Citizens of Ayodhya who had gathered at the Palace gates saw them walking as hermits. They broke into bitter sobs. Many were so shocked that they fell unconscious. Many beat their heads in sheer despair. While on the door step of the Royal Gate, Rama once again prostrated before Sage Vashishta, and spoke a few words exhorting the people to remain calm and to uphold virtue. He told them that they should not grieve over the turn of events, that he would return to Ayodhya after the fourteen years of stay in the forest, and that the order of exile was only for their good, for his own good and for the good of the whole world.

Then, he distributed largesse to the poor. He gifted houses as well as gold, lands and cows to Brahmins, so that they could perform ritual worship and sacrifices without stint. He prayed to the Sage to arrange for the performance of Vedic sacrifices on appropriate occasions. He stood with folded palms before him and said, “Holy Sage and Preceptor, for these, the people, and for my parents, you are the real parents. Advise the King, admonish the King, that he may rule over the people as he would treat his own

children.” When the people heard this prayer repeated on their behalf, they became sad, heartbroken. Some of them beat their breasts, cursing themselves for losing the fortune of being ruled by such a Prince. Some inflicted injuries on their own heads. Some rolled on the ground and wailed aloud.

Meanwhile, Rama turned again towards the mass of citizens, and with palms folded, he spoke a few words to them. “My dear people, you are as dear to me as my very life. Our Sovereign Ruler has sent me to protect and foster the forest region. Do not entertain any animosity against him for this reason. Guard him and pray for him at all times. Adhere to his commands. Make him happy and be happy yourselves. Your love for me should not lead you to dislike the King. Never wish ill for him. Those only are dear to me who work for the happiness of the King, after I leave for the forest. Those are the people who are really devoted to me, who do what I really like. Fulfil this desire of mine. Honour these words of mine. Make me happy. My dear people! Being separated from me, my mother, Queen Kausalya, will naturally be immersed in grief. Every mother in a similar situation will have unbearable agony. But I plead with you, since you are intelligent and full of sympathy, do your best to alleviate her sorrow and comfort her.”

Then he called Minister Sumantra near, and said, “Oh Sumantra! Proceed now to Father. Advise him and quieten him. That is the task on which you have to busy yourself.”

Sumantra was overcome with grief. He stood silent, with tears streaming down his cheeks. He could not restrain his sorrow. He sobbed and wept aloud. Other Ministers who were standing around him, as well as the Aides in attendance, attempted to bring him round into a state of calmness and courage. But they were too sad to stand there. So, they went into the palace, in accordance with the directive given by Rama. The entire city was sunk deep in a vast sea of sorrow.

Meanwhile, Dasaratha recovered from his faint and became conscious of what had happened. He lamented, “Rama! Rama!” and tried to raise himself up. But heavy with grief, he fell on the floor again. When he rose, he tried to walk, but could not. He moved falteringly around.

At that moment, Sumantra entered the room, and endeavoured to hold him and console him. But with huge outbursts of anguish surging in him, how could he convey consolation to his master? However, he remembered Rama’s order to that effect, and so he dutifully swallowed the sorrow that was overwhelming his heart and sat by the side of the Emperor with tears still flowing in streams. He could not utter any word for a long time.

Dasaratha opened his eyes, he saw Sumantra by his side; exclaiming in uncontrollable grief, “Rama!”, he fell into the lap of the old minister and poured out his sobs. Then, he rose and groaned, “Sumantra! Rama has gone into

the forest; yet, my life has not gone out of this body! What can my life gain by sticking to this body?" Then, getting a little calmer, he said, "Here! Hasten behind Rama! Take a fast chariot and go. My daughter-in-law can never bear the heat of the sun. She will soon have blisters on those lotus petal soles! Go! Go with the chariot!"