

THE BROTHERS MEET

Bharatha and Satrughna went straight to the place where the Ministers, the Royal Preceptor, and the leading citizens of the Capital had assembled. All of them were awaiting their arrival, anxious to know what they had resolved upon, and silently expectant to listen attentively to what they were about to tell them.

Meanwhile, Bharatha fell at the feet of the Preceptor and declared, “Divine Master! I am telling you my honest intention. Please believe my sincerity, for, I am not hiding anything. I am opening my heart without any reservations. The effect is harder than the cause. The metal that is extracted from the soil is harder than the soil, you know. Born in the womb of the hardhearted Kaikeyi, I am indeed even more hard- hearted. Or else, how can you explain that I am still alive, despite the fact that Rama is far away from me? Kaikeyi has transferred Sita and Lakshmana into the

forest, she has sent her husband into heaven, plunged the subjects of this vast Empire in sorrow and anxiety, and brought eternal infamy on her son. And you are now demanding that I should rule over the Empire and cover myself with lasting disgrace. I am not in the least happy over this. I do not deserve this at all. Will not people laugh at me in scorn if I sit on the Lion Throne as Lord Ruler when Rama is moving about in the jungle?

“My reign will bring only harm to the people; for, my accession itself will be immoral and unrighteous. And who will deign to honour an usurper and obey his commands? I cannot punish the unrighteous and the immoral! With what face can I correct wrong doers, when I myself have done mountains of wrong in ascending the throne that is not rightfully mine? People would certainly point the accusing finger at me, when opportunity arises, though they may keep quiet for some time, for fear of the reprisals that I might inflict using my authority.

“The evil design of my mother has now become transformed into an agonising headache for me. I cannot wait even a single moment here without seeing Sita and Rama. I am only communicating to you my terrible anguish. Only the sight of Rama can cool my heart and cure my agony. No words of consolation or explanation can bring me solace in my grievous plight. I have obtained permission from Kausalya and Sumitra. I have decided to proceed at dawn tomorrow to the place where Rama is at present. My

sins, however plentiful they might be, will be reduced to ashes the moment the eyes of Rama fall on me. Even if Rama does not speak to me, I shall be happy taking his darsan always, hiding behind some tree, and following him at a distance, delighted at the chance. Elders who have gathered here! Pray for me, bless me that I may progress as a result of the darsan of Rama. Ministers! Give me permission to go to the presence of Rama. I am the slave of the Lord Rama. He is the Lord for all of us.”

In that assembly, not one among the Ministers, the Feudatories, and the leaders of the people could raise his voice in reply. They realised the depth of Bharatha’s remorse. They understood that Bharatha had an unsullied heart and that he was refusing to be bound by the coils of the conspiracy his mother wound round him.

The chief of the Elders of the city rose from his seat and said, “Lord! We too shall come with you. We too find separation from Rama an insufferable agony. We do not care what happens to our lives after we get one chance to have his Darsan.” He asked for this permission on behalf of everyone gathered there.

Others too responded to the suggestion wholeheartedly and came forward with prayers that they too be taken to Rama. Within minutes, the news spread into every nook and corner of the vast City; and men, women, children, young and old, got ready to start! Who can dissuade whom?

There was no one that day among the huge population of Ayodhya so cruel as to prevent others from proceeding to Rama for his Darsan. The mothers, Kausalya and Sumitra, too set out on the journey with their maids.

Meanwhile, Kaikeyi, overcome with repentance for her errors and her sins, communicated with Kausalya and prayed that she too might be allowed to accompany the queens. She pleaded that she might be permitted to pray for pardon, and join the others in their attempts to persuade Rama to return to Ayodhya. Kausalya, who had a pure unblemished heart, did not entertain the least doubt or deviation from right consciousness. She sent word that Kaikeyi could certainly join her.

Bharatha was informed that the entire City was on the move. He informed the Ministers that at least a few had to stay behind, in order to guard the City, without leaving it helpless. So, some were left behind. Vehicles were made ready before every house during the night itself, so that the inmates might join the trek, during the early hours. Practically everything on wheels was commandeered for the purpose. Food and drink for the entire mass of people were duly arranged. Like Chakravaka birds, the men and women of Ayodhya awaited the heralding of the dawn, so that they might journey towards their dearly beloved Lord. It was a night of ecstatic anticipation for the citizens. They spent it in contemplating on the Darsan that awaited them.

The army with the entire force of chariotry, elephantry, cavalry and infantry got ready to march. Vedic scholars were directed by the Minister that they had to keep on reciting the auspicious hymns. They had also to take with them the ceremonial requisites for the ritual worship of Fire. Right on time, according to the calculations of the astrologers, the leading chariot for Bharatha and Satrughna, and next in order the palanquin for Queen Kausalya were brought before the palace. Bharatha ordered that everyone must occupy the chariot or vehicle allotted. And allowing his chariot to move on with no one in it, Bharatha and Satrughna walked on, by its side barefooted.

People thought that they might walk in that manner only for some little time, for some short distance. But they found that Bharatha was in no mood to get into the chariot, however long the distance to be covered. Kausalya could not tolerate this. She said, "Son! I cannot suffer the sight of your walking. Sit in the chariot at least for some time." At this, Bharatha replied, "Mother! This is only to make amends for the sins I am burdened with. Do I suffer now while walking on the road at least a fraction of what Rama and Sita are suffering in the forest, while they walk barefoot? When they are walking barefoot, it is highly wrong for me, their servant, to ride in a chariot. Pardon me for disobeying your command. Permit me to walk as I am doing now."

Meanwhile, the Royal Preceptor, Vashishta, and his consort Arundathi, who were seated in the preceding

chariot, stopped their vehicle and witnessing the determination of Bharatha, they prayed to Bharatha at least to sit in their chariot and act as their charioteer. But Bharatha was adamant. He said, "I am the servant of Rama and I am bound only to his chariot. Until I get the precious chance to act as his charioteer, I shall not ride in any chariot nor hold the reins of any other steed. This is my vow." Vashishta desisted from any further persuasion. He was genuinely delighted at the love and reverence that Bharatha bore towards Rama.

They reached the bank of the River Thamasa at nightfall on the first day. The next day, they reached the bank of the Gomathi. The Thamasa is a tributary of the Gogra River, while the Gomathi is a tributary of the Ganga. As soon as it was dark, the vehicles were stopped, shelters were provided for women, children and the aged. The Minister ordered the soldiers to distribute food to the people, systematically and with due respect. Really, throughout the journey, everyone carried out the work assigned to him with care and enthusiasm. They took good care that no one suffered any hardship.

Resuming their journey, with the dawn of the third day, they reached Sringerapuram when darkness fell on the land. The king of the Nishadas saw the huge concourse and the army on the march. He was perturbed; for, he wondered why Bharatha was proceeding to the forest and why he was taking with him the army with all its

components. What was the significance of it all? He tried to solve the mystery. He discussed within himself the pros and cons of this unusual procedure. He argued within himself: "When the tree is poisonous, its fruit too is bound to be poisonous." He tried his best to foil the plans of Bharatha. He directed his men to keep every boat sunk in the depths of the Ganga and to deprive the prince of all means of crossing the river. He ordered that they should prevent the concourse from crossing over to the other bank, even at the cost of their lives.

And the King of the Nishadas stood ready with his bow and arrow, set to attack, willing to sacrifice his life in the cause of his beloved Rama, in spite of the fact that the forces which Bharatha was leading were far superior in strength to his own.

Guha alerted his community and all its members to be prepared for the imminent battle. Then, he got ready to meet Bharatha in order to discover whether he had come as foe, or as friend, or whether he was neutral, only a passing visitor who need not be worried about. Knowing that Bharatha was a Prince of Imperial lineage, he secured as offering to be presented to him large quantities of flowers, fish, flesh and fruits.

He planned to discover the innate intent of Bharatha by noting his reactions to the various articles that were offered to him. Roots and tubers and fruits are Sathwic food.

If he preferred them, he must be reckoned a friend. The flesh of slain animals is Rajasic food. Preference for that type of food would mark out the “middle of the road” neutral, who is neither ally nor adversary. Fish, if accepted eagerly, would indicate a foe, for they are Thamasic items of food.

Taking with him these offerings, Guha, the Chieftain of the Nishadas, proceeded to the presence of Bharatha. Good omens greeted him at the very first step. His eyes fell on the Sage Vashishta. He ran forward and fell at his feet, announcing himself by name. The Preceptor recognised him as the companion of Rama. He blessed the Chieftain, and calling Bharatha to his side, he spoke to him of Guha as the “friend” of Rama.

As soon as those words fell on his ears, Bharatha embraced Guha warmly, and showered questions on him about his health and welfare. Bharatha prompted Guha to relate to him how he met Rama. When Guha mentioned how Rama spent one whole night with him on the banks of the selfsame river, Bharatha showed great earnestness to listen to his description of that night. His eyes and ears were panting with thirst for the nectar of that narrative.

The chieftain of the Nishadas was all praise and adoration for Rama. He showed him the thatched hut he had prepared so that Rama, Sita and Lakshmana could rest for a while. He told him of the conversation he had with Lakshmana during the night. On hearing all this, Bharatha

and Satrughna could not stop the stream of tears flowing down their cheeks. They could not suppress the surging waves of sorrow. Watching them, Guha was convinced that they had genuine brotherly feelings towards Rama and that there was no trace of hostility in them. He was struck by their devotion and the sincerity of their dedication.

Bharatha had a close look at the huts constructed for the use of Sita, Rama and Lakshmana. He desired that they be tended with due care so that they suffer no damage. Following the orders of the Preceptor, Bharatha performed the ceremonial bath in the holy river Ganga, along with his mothers. Bharatha asked Guha to take them to the place where Rama spent the night. Pointing his finger to a heap of darbha grass that had been scattered by the wind, Guha said, “Sita and Rama rested here, on this bed of dry grass that night.” Bharatha and Satrughna prostrated before that holy spot. Bharatha lamented, “Alas! My Lord accustomed to sleep on a thick soft silken bed, how could he sleep on such hard stuff? Alas! How did that holy mother Sita bear all this hardship?” Overcome with grief, Bharatha could not move from the place for a long while.

Rising, Bharatha requested that he be shown the places which Rama, Sita and Lakshmana had rendered holy by treading on them. Guha took them to an Asoka tree, under whose shade they sat for some time to eat a frugal meal of fruits. There too the brothers fell on the ground reverentially, knowing it to be holy ground.

While they were moving round the places sanctified by Rama, Sita and Lakshmana, the two brothers suffered indescribable agony. The humility, reverence and devotion they manifested touched the heart of the Nishada chieftain. Bharatha could not contain his anguish when he contemplated the discomforts that Sita—Goddess Mahalakshmi Herself—the dearly beloved daughter of Emperor Janaka, the daughter-in-law of Emperor Dasaratha, and the Consort of Rama the Mighty, was enduring. Bharatha disclosed to Guha that the inhabitants of Ayodhya City could not survive in that City any longer, for the holy couple, Rama and Sita, had left it. They felt that Ayodhya had been transformed into a jungle, for it had no Rama in it. He said that he too could not bear their grief, and he too realised that Ayodhya was wherever Rama was. So, he explained, he had come with his following and with the inhabitants, to the sacred Presence of Rama.

Guha grasped the situation clearly now and gave up all the suspicions he had entertained, when he saw Bharatha advancing with his army, with its four components of infantry, cavalry, elephantry and chariotry, towards the jungle where Rama was. He opened his heart to Bharatha and begged to be pardoned for the doubts he had framed in his mind about his intentions. Bharatha said that his fears were natural and that he had committed no wrong. For the truth was, he was indeed a wicked barbarian! “I am the reason for the exile that Rama is going through,” he said. “For that one crime, I deserve to be killed. He who kills me

commits no sin,” he groaned. When Bharatha was condemning himself so harshly, Guha poured out his prayers for pardon.

News spread in Sringerapur, the Nishada Capital, that Bharatha had come to the bank of the Ganga. At this, the subjects of Guha hurried in groups to honour the brother of Rama. They fed their eyes on the beauty and majesty of the brothers. They praised them to their hearts’ content. They prostrated reverentially before them. They also roundly reprimanded Queen Kaikeyi. They blamed the God of Destiny, Brahma, for being so cruel. They shed profuse tears. They extolled Rama through manifold forms of praise. They prayed to Bharatha and Satrugna (everyone of them, men, women, children, all) to bring Rama, Sita and Lakshmana back with them.

Bharatha was struck dumb at this demonstration of extreme agony at separation from Rama! Tears rolled down his face. “Praying is my task. What happens to the prayer is dependent on the Grace of Rama. I am but a slave. Who am I to exert pressure on Rama? Join with me in my prayer. Pray from the depths of your hearts that Rama should return to Ayodhya. His heart will certainly melt at our agony. This is our duty. Let your prayers help my prayers to succeed. Rama has come to save the world, and he will not refuse the prayers of the people.” Bharatha consoled and comforted the Nishadas and others in ways best suited to their needs and capacities. Meanwhile, darkness fell on the earth, and

Bharatha asked the Chieftain of the Nishadas to direct his people to go home. They ate the fruits brought by Guha and spent the whole night talking about Rama and His glory.

When the eastern sky brightened to usher in the new day, Bharatha instructed the Minister to awaken the populace. He bathed in the sacred Ganga, with his brother. The Mothers too finished their baths. Everyone got ready to continue the journey. Guha, the Chieftain of the Nishada tribe, collected enough craft to row over the large mass of people, the chariots, the horses, and other sections of the armed forces that had accompanied Bharatha. The task of ferrying them across the Ganga was quickly and successfully accomplished. After ascertaining whether all had been transported across, Guha moved forward into the jungle, showing Bharatha the way. The Brahmins, and the Preceptor Vashishta walked on as one group. The people of Ayodhya followed in one vast mass. Units of the army followed behind. Journeying thus, Bharatha reached the confluence of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna, the sacred Prayag, in the afternoon. Bharatha had never walked so much on foot, and so, his soles became sore and they hurt with a burning sensation. Yet, he plodded on, for he felt his pain as recompense for the pain inflicted on Rama. He ignored it, for he was conscious only of the pain Rama was undergoing at that very moment.

Prayag is known as Triveni, for the river Saraswathi too enters the twin rivers at that holy place. Its sacredness

is tripled thereby. They bathed at the famous confluence with due rites. The anchorites, hermits, celibates, sages, and monks of Prayag were delighted at the chance to fill their eyes with the sight of Bharatha. They told among themselves, “Oh! he casts around him the same halo as Rama. In fact, the appearance is just the same.” Everyone who looked at him could scarce indulge in a wink, lest the delight would be interrupted thereby!

The inmates of the Bharadwaja Ashram in Prayag learnt of the coming of the brothers with contingents of his armed forces, accompanied by their mothers and ministers. Sage Bharadwaja sent his disciples to Bharatha and invited the party to visit the Ashram. Interpreting the invitation as a command, Bharatha and his entourage entered the Ashram. The brothers prostrated before that Monarch of the Monastic Orders. Bharadwaja raised them by the shoulders and drew them near with great affection. He gave them refreshingly cool drinks. He noticed that Bharatha was sitting with his head bent in shame and fear, lest his share in the exile of Rama be revealed through questions that might be asked. Bharadwaja discovered the reason for his silence and nervousness. He said, “Bharatha! You need have no apprehensions. I am aware of all that happened. No one can control or direct the path of Destiny. Why pine over the boons that your mother demanded? No trace of wrong can be attributed to her for this. The Will of God induced her to ask such boons. Kaikeyi, I know, loves Rama as her very breath. So, the reason for the turn her mind took is to

be sought, not in any human field of thought and reason, but only in the Divine plan. As the world judges events, Kaikeyi has done wrong. As the Vedas lay down, the Goddess Saraswathi who presides over the tongue has done wrong. Know that what has happened is in conformity with the Will of the Almighty.

“Bharatha! The world will enthuse over your spotless renown, and sing your praise. Vedas will be valued more on account of such as you, exemplifying their teachings and demonstrating their efficacy. Do not hesitate! The son to whom the father entrusts the kingdom is thereby deemed deserving of the right to govern it. That relentless adherent of Truth, that High-souled ruler, Emperor Dasaratha, gave the Empire to you, and ordered that you should act according to the Dharma of Monarchs.

“The exile of Rama into the forest has resulted in a series of calamities. The entire world is sunk in sorrow on account of this event. Now your mother is repenting pitiably over the wrong. You are innocent and blameless. No blemish can attach itself to you now if you rule over the Empire. In fact, Rama will be happy to know that you have taken up the reins of imperium.

“I must also say that the mission on which you are now set is very laudable indeed. Your purpose is highly commendable. For, devotion to the Lotus Feet of Rama is the spring and source of all prosperity and progress.

Bharatha! I can boldly declare that there is none so virtuous, so fortunate as you. You have proved yourself worthy of being the dearly beloved younger brother of Rama. Rama sanctified this, our Ashram, while on his way to the forest. That night, till the hour of midnight, Rama was talking to me mostly of you and your virtues. They proceeded with me to Prayag for the holy bath. They remembered you even while engaged in bathing! He felt very sad that he could not see you and Satrughna the day he left Ayodhya. I cannot measure the love that Rama has towards you.

“Besides, Rama is ever intent on assuaging the grief of those who take refuge in him. The entire world is his family. All are his kith and kin. I believe you are the ‘affection’ of Rama, in human form, no less. What you feel as a blemish on your name is, to me a lesson, an example, and an inspiration. Bharatha! You should not be weighed down by sadness. You are in possession of the Wish-fulfilling Gem! Why then should you lament that you are poor? It isn’t proper that you should do so. The Darsan of Sita, Rama and Lakshmana is verily the treasure all spiritual aspirants seek. I secured that fortune; for, I feasted my eyes on that Darsan. I could speak with them. I was in their Presence and I could touch them too. I had the privilege and pleasure of being their host. Perhaps, there was some balance of fortune still awaiting me. For, I have now this pleasure of getting your Darsan too. Ecstasy has now filled my heart. I am truly blessed. Rama has exiled himself into the forest for our sake, ascetics living therein, so that our

yearnings might be fulfilled and our holiness heightened. We are blessed indeed.”

In this manner, Bharadwaja, the great Sage, praised Bharatha for his manifold virtues and excellences. While speaking in this strain, tears of joy rolled down the cheeks of the revered ascetic. Bharatha and Satrugna had their minds set on Rama and his limitless Prema. They felt that they were indeed fortunate to be his brothers, but the joy was immediately extinguished at the thought that they had been themselves exiled from the presence of that Embodiment of love. So, they were plunged in gloom, in unbearable agony and inexpressible grief. In a voice choked by anguish, Bharatha said, rising up from the prostration he offered to the Sage, “Master! You are aware of the Past, Present and the Future. You have spoken the very Truth. You are master of the Highest Truth. Rama is unbeatable in skill and power. I have resolved to utter in your Presence only the Truth. Rama knows the workings of the people’s mind and what is now agitating them. I have at present no grief over the wrong committed by my mother. I have no fear that the people would blame me for the tragedy that has befallen them. I have no despair even when it is announced that I am ineligible for heaven.

“My father has earned high renown. Though dead, his fame has spread over the entire world. When his beloved son, Rama departed from his presence with Lakshmana, he gave up the bubble breath that very instant. He could not

survive the bolt of that tragedy. There is no need, therefore, to be anxious any more about him. But Sita, Rama and Lakshmana are moving about barefooted. Donning the robes of ascetics, they sit on mats of kusa grass. They reside in leaf-thatched huts. They are fried by the sun, soaked by rain. They shiver in the cold and bear its pangs. They are undergoing untold hardships in the forest, aren’t they? Now, tell me, am I not the sole cause for all these hardships? It is this sad fact that is eating me throughout all the hours of the day and night. Food refuses to enter my stomach. Sleep refuses to close the lids of my eyes. This crookedness of my mother’s mind has become a dagger sticking in my heart. The stratagem she devised for my installation on the throne has turned into a trap to ruin me. The agony that is gnawing me from within cannot be appeased, whatever is done. Nothing can cure it. It will end only on the day when Rama returns to Ayodhya. No other remedy exists to destroy this agony.”

The monks who had gathered were delighted to hear these words from the Prince. Bharadwaja told him, “Son! Do not grieve any more. The moment your eyes fall on the Lotus Feet of Rama the burden of grief which torments you now is certain to disintegrate and disappear.” The ascetics too consoled and comforted him in various ways. Meanwhile, the Great Sage Bharadwaja beckoned a pupil and directed him to bring roots, tubers and fruits to be placed before Bharatha and Satrugna. He also ordered his pupil to arrange for the supply of food to the aides, the ministers

and courtiers, and the citizens of Ayodhya, all of whom had borne uncomplainingly many a hardship on the way in their eagerness to have the Darsan of Rama, and who were afflicted in mind by the agony of separation from their beloved Lord.

Complying with that order most reverentially, the pupil quickly offered plentiful repast to everyone who had come as guests. For the Princes, Bharatha and Satrughna, their Families, the Ministers and Courtiers, the Pandits and the Brahmins, hospitality was arranged on an elaborate festive scale. Everything was produced plentifully and perfectly, through the ascetic's mysterious willpower itself. Bharatha was filled with wonder.

But it must be said that not only the two brothers, but the entire gathering from Ayodhya looked upon the pomp and profusion as mere trash! They were not charmed in the least. The scents, the bouquets of fragrant flowers, the juicy fruits and the attractive tasty dishes struck them with awe. The two resplendent seats specially set up for Bharatha and Satrughna defied all description.

When all was ready, the Sage invited everyone inside the specially erected Hall, where they were to partake of the banquet. They entered that marvel of beauty. The Royal Preceptor and his consort were led to high seats reserved for them. The queens too entered the place, covered and cordoned off for their sake, and bending under the weight of sorrow, they too complied with the command of the Sage.

At this time, the bright-faced disciples of the Sage brought in the brothers, Bharatha and Satrughna, with all due honour. In accordance with the practice of that renowned Hermitage. The young ascetics stood on both sides of the passage, waving yak tail whisks and reciting scriptural hymns. They approached the magnificent seats set for them; but as soon as they came near, they bowed their heads and fell on the floor, in respectful obeisance. They took the whisks from the hands of the pupils, and started waving them reverentially, standing one on each side of the Lion Thrones! They were adoring the thrones, instead of sitting in them! All present were surprised at this gesture, this homage offered to the empty Thrones.

When the Sage invited them to occupy the Thrones, Bharatha and Satrughna fell at his feet and implored, "Master! These Thrones belong to Sita and Rama, and not to us. We have no right to them. In this holy hermitage, those two alone, Goddess Lakshmi and Narayana, have the title to sit on Lion Thrones. We are their servants. Permit us to serve them thus." At this, the ascetics and the entire assembly were thrilled with joyous appreciation. They extolled among themselves the immense depth of the devotion that the brothers had for Rama. Tears of joy flowed from their eyes. The monks were astounded at their faith and its steadfastness.

The brothers offered the elaborate fare that was brought as food to the Thrones picturing in their minds the

charming figures of Sita and Rama, occupying them. A little while after, they broke off small particles from the offered dishes and placing them adoringly on their eyelids, they ate them as sacramental food. The elders, ministers, aides and the residents of Ayodhya craved pardon from the Sage Bharadwaja for not partaking of the food, since, as they said, they could not relish any food, overwhelmed as they were by the agony of separation from Rama. They refused to eat, for they felt that the Darsan of Rama alone could give them the sense of contentment. That was the nectarine feast they yearned for. They were plunged in a gloom as deep as the standard of the Sage's hospitality was high. They said they were too engrossed in their anxiety for the sight of Rama to entertain the idea of food. The sage had finally to accede to their wish to be left alone. He could not prevail upon them to sit down at the feast.

Everyone got ready to start for the forest, even as early as the first intimations of dawn. They prostrated before the Sage, secured his blessings and his permission before they left the hermitage. While the servants walked in advance showing them the way, the palanquins and chariots followed immediately after. Bharatha walked behind, with his hand on the shoulder of the Chieftain of the Nishadas, Guha. He appeared as the very personification of fraternal love and devotion. He had no footwear to guard against thorns and pebbles. He had no umbrella over his head to guard him against the scorching sun. He did not allow anyone to hold one above him. He did not permit anyone to bring him

footwear. But the earth took pity on him and transformed the path he trod, soft and sweet. The wind comforted him, blowing cool and gentle, all through the journey. The Sun drew a cloud between him and itself.

They reached the bank of the River Yamuna when evening fell. Throughout the hours of night, boats were seen gathering by the bank in countless numbers. Hence, at daybreak the entire mass of people could ferry over at the same time! Then, they finished their bath, and proceeded forward, after prostrating before the holy river in reverential gratitude.

Thenceforward, Bharatha and Satrughna moved on in the robes of recluses, into which they had changed. With them walked the Ministers, the Companions of the Princes, and their aides, carrying the pictures of Sita and Rama in their hearts. While on the march, inhabitants of the villages on the way stood in awe at the strange crowds that passed along. Women who were walking towards the river to bring water to their homes placed the pots on the ground and stood stunned, looking at the brothers, without even winking their eyes for one moment. They wondered who they were and concluded that they were the same two brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, passing through that path again, this time without the Sita whom they had with them then, but accompanied by the armed forces, the chariots, elephants, horses and foot soldiers. They wondered where Sita could be at that time? They searched for her amidst the moving

mass, with eager curiosity. They shared their disappointment with their friends in sad whispers.

“The other day, when we saw Rama and Lakshmana, the brothers were shining with the splendour of physical charm, youth, virtue and intelligence. But there is some sadness clouding the faces of these two; and so these might not be those who passed this way that day,” argued a woman in the group. Their conversation was overheard by one of the spies of the royal entourage, who reported it to Bharatha.

Meanwhile, the women came to know that they were the brothers of Rama, and that they were proceeding to where Rama was, in order to have darsan. At this, one rough-natured woman burst into rage. She exclaimed, “Ruling over the Empire that his father gave him, look at this person, going to have Darsan of his brother Rama, accompanied by the armed forces! Has he no sense of shame?” she asked.

Another woman interrupted her at this point. She said, “Sister, don’t say so. Our Emperor Dasaratha can never have, from his loins, children with hearts so hard. He must be going to Rama with the various units of the armed forces, in order to pray to Rama, and persuade him to return to Ayodhya, and to take him back with Imperial Honours.”

A third woman declared her acceptance of this interpretation. She said, “Yes, yes. Who knows which snake rests in which hole on the earth? No one can pronounce on the nature of another. Who can judge the feelings and

motives that prompt others to action. They may be of very high order, for aught we know. But Rama is the firm adherent of Truth. He will not return to Ayodhya until the full term of fourteen years is spent in exile, whoever might plead with him and pray to him. This is my belief.” She expressed her noble sentiments in this manner.

The spies duly reported the conversation of these village women to their Master, Bharatha, and to Satrughna. They were delighted to know that those unsophisticated women from the rural regions had grasped the greatness of Rama to such an amazing extent. Thus, they walked along listening to the people’s admiration for the virtues of Rama and for their own humility and fraternal devotion. They were every moment fixing their minds on Rama only.

Many Brahmins, ascetics, monks and other holy men were encountered by them as they walked on. They found that all whom they met were engaged in the pleasant task of extolling Rama and his virtues. On seeing them Bharatha prostrated before them and enquired where they were coming from. When the holy men struggled to master the surging waves of ecstasy and at last succeeded in discovering their voices in order to reply, Bharatha watched them in eager expectancy. When they said they were returning after having Darsan of Sita, Rama and Lakshmana, he and his brother fell flat on the ground before them, and rose with tears of joy streaming down their cheeks.

They said, “Oh! How fortunate you are! Tell us, tell us how far are they? Where are they?” They enquired about

the health and welfare of those holy men also, and learning from them that they had to continue the journey for some distance more, they decided to spend the night at the place where they were.

As soon as dawn broke, they discovered that they were quite near to the Chitrakuta Peak. So, urged on by the yearning to meet Rama, Lakshmana and Sita, the Mother, they continued the journey, with redoubled haste. By about noon, they could hear the murmur of the Mandakini River. They could see clearly the Chitrakuta Peak.

The moment their eyes discerned the Peak, the citizens of Ayodhya and the two brothers prostrated on the ground, in reverence. Rising, they walked forward, with renewed vigour. Those who were too exhausted and had despaired of further exertion, suddenly found that they had developed elephantine resources of energy. They walked fast, without paying any attention to their physical condition. Those who bore the palanquins and trudged along on bleeding soles suddenly found reinforcements of strength by cheering Jai, Jai, and reciting the name, Rama, Rama, while they hastened forward.

Even before the hour of dawn that day, Rama had risen from sleep. He communicated to Sita that his father was coming into his consciousness more often than on other days. At this, Sita said, “Lord! You know that I do not get any dreams, any day. But this night I had a very wonderful dream! I can even say it wasn’t really a dream. I dreamt

that Bharatha and Satrughna had become frail and weak, as a result of separation from you. I dreamt that, finding it impossible to be in Ayodhya without you for a single moment, they are coming to us, with not only the people of Ayodhya, but also the Queens Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi.” Tears gathered in her eyes while she was describing the experience.

Rama called Lakshmana near and told him, “Brother, you heard, didn’t you, the account of Sita’s dream? This does not indicate good tidings; for Sita saw all the others and I saw in my dream only father, father alone, with no association or relation with the rest of them. This strikes me as a bad omen. Come! It is best we take a bath.” Accordingly, the three of them went to the river for the bath.

Just then, birds flew across the sky in flocks. The northern region was darkened by a thick cloud of dust. Many animals and birds were scared into wild haste. Taking note of this unusual occurrence, Lakshmana climbed a tree to find out the reason.

He saw an army on the move, with infantry, cavalry, chariotry and elephantry advancing to where they were. He inferred that a king was at their head. He informed Rama accordingly. Rama told him that it was the dream of Sita coming true! He advised that the best course would be to return quickly to the “thatch”—the *Parnasala*.

Meanwhile, the Bhils, the Kirathas and other tribesmen of the jungle ran into the presence of Rama and gasped out the news that a regular military force was advancing towards the spot and that the chariot of the royal leader of the army had a flag with the sign of the banyan tree upon it. Sita, Rama and Lakshmana were confirmed in their inference that it was no other than Bharatha who was coming towards them. They had no more doubt on that point. By this time, Lakshmana started quaking with anger. When coming to have a darsan of Rama, why bring troops in full strength he argued. That vile woman, his mother, must have advised him and he seems to have accepted her wicked stratagem, to attack the lonely and unarmed Rama in his jungle retreat and ensure that he does not return and reign, he surmised. Lakshmana was well-nigh consumed by the flames of anger that rose in him. His eyes were reduced to red-hot coals. His words became sharp as sword thrusts. Rama realised the change that had come over him. He said, "Lakshmana! Forbear! Don't be agitated. Be calm. Bharatha is strong in virtue. His love is immeasurable. He adds lustre to the royal line of Ikshvaku, like the lotus to the lake. It is not proper to cast aspersions on one so pure, so immaculate and holy." Thus describing the exact nature of the motives and mind of Bharatha, Rama succeeded in quietening Lakshmana's upsurge of anger. Very soon, Bharatha himself sent word through some forest dwellers that he was seeking the Darsan of Rama, along with his brother Satrughna and their attendants and followers. Rama felt glad when this happy

news was brought to him. Like lakes in late autumn, his lotus eyes were filled with water.

All this happened while Rama, Lakshmana and Sita were returning in haste to the "thatch" after their hurried bath. Bharatha saw them when they reached the cottage of grass. He was torn by agony. He shouted distressingly, "Rama," in extreme agony. He fell flat on the feet of Rama and sobbed aloud on the ground. Lakshmana saw the anguish Bharatha experienced at the separation from them. He realised that his estimate of intentions was very wrong! He suffered terrible contrition within himself. His head was bent by the weight of sorrow. He shed profuse tears along with Bharatha and Satrughna.

Rama raised his brothers from the ground and sought to calm their feelings and quieten their grief. Even while he was so engaged, the Queens, Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi, and the ministers, the Royal Preceptor Vashishta, the Pundits and Citizens, the members of the armed forces came near, and were overcome by both grief and joy when they saw Rama. Their sorrow when they looked on Rama in hermits' robes by the side of the lowly hut could not be wiped out by the joy at setting their eyes on their dearly beloved Prince. They wailed and wept, shedding tears of grief and gratitude. The cry, "Rama! Rama!" that rose from their torn hearts sped over the vast expanse of earth and sky.

Rama spoke to them soft and sweet and persuaded them to control their emotions. Then, he walked towards

the mothers, but could not bear to look on that picture of misfortune and misery. He became aware of the calamity that had befallen, but he soon consoled and comforted himself. He drew Lakshmana near him and told him the fact. Feeling that it would be better that Lakshmana be informed more fully, he requested Sumantra, the loyal Minister of the Line, to relate to him the details and also the facts regarding administration of Ayodhya. At this, Sumantra fell down unable to bear the burden of grief. Struggling to rise he said amidst sobs, “Lakshmana! Where can we have Dasaratha hereafter? He was reduced to ashes by the flames of sorrow at being separated from Rama, Sita and you. Ayodhya has become a jungle. Wherever you look, you see only sorrow. Whatever you hear, you hear only wailing. Not merely men, even birds and animals cast off their lives when you left. Those who survive are keeping alive in the hope of your return.” Hearing this, Lakshmana shed streams of tears. He stood like a stump, unable to reply.

Without a word, Lakshmana approached Rama, and told him in a faltering voice, “I could not imagine, even in my dreams, that such a terrible calamity would happen. We could not see our father in his last moments.” Rama consoled him, saying that there was no profit in grieving over what has already come to pass. “Physical bodies are as transient as bubbles in water. They are bound to burst and disappear, if not today, at least the day after,” he said. He gave expression to many a moral maxim, until both the brothers went to the river to finish the bath ritually laid down when one hears of the death of those who are near of kin.

Meanwhile, Sita went towards her mothers-in-law, and touched their feet in great reverence. She also prostrated before the feet of the wife of the Royal Preceptor. She met the women who had come from Ayodhya and with due consideration put them at ease, by her sweet welcome. When their eyes fell upon Sita, the Queens wept aloud. The womenfolk who had come from Ayodhya saw the plight of their charming young Princess and they were so overcome with sorrow that they too could not desist from wailing. Coming to know that Emperor Dasaratha had left the body, Sita prostrated before the Queens again and again, saying: “Alas! What misfortune is ours! The Emperor gave up his life because he could not bear separation from us!” Sita felt that the news of Dasaratha’s departure was as a thunderbolt on her heart. She and the Queens wept for long at the turn that events had taken. Everyone that day could not take either food or drink. They had no mind for either. The entire day and night were spent in sorrow.

When the sun rose Vashishta directed Rama to perform the obsequies of the departed father. They were carried out in strict conformity with Sastric injunctions. Since Sri Rama Himself uttered the manthra sanctifying the waters, “May the holy waters of Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswathi, Narmada, Sindhu and Cauvery come into this vessel and sanctify the water therein,” the ritual was rendered sacred and eminently fruitful.

Thereafter, the Preceptor, the Ministers of the Court, the Queens and the citizens of Ayodhya spent two full days

with Rama, Lakshmana and Sita. At the end of the two days, Rama approached the Preceptor, and said, “Master! Those citizens and residents of Ayodhya are suffering very much here, drinking nought else but water and eating nought else but roots and tubers. Looking at Bharatha and Satrughna and also on the Mothers, I feel every moment is as long as an age. It is best to return to the City. You are spending your time here; the Emperor has ascended to heaven. It is not proper that I emphasise the urgency more. Please act, as seems most beneficial.” With these words, Rama fell at the feet of Vashishta.

Vashishta replied, “Rama! Lord of the Raghu dynasty! Why do you speak thus? You have not realised how happy and contented these people are, since they are fortunate enough to be looking at your charm.”

When the people heard that Rama had requested them to return, each one of them felt tossed into fear and despair, as a boat caught in a hurricane in midsea. But when they heard the Sage Vashishta pleading on their behalf, they sailed smooth, as the boat does, when a friendly breeze blows into its sails. Their minds rejected the thought of returning to Ayodhya, and giving up the fortunate chance of the bath, three times a day, in the Mandakini River, living on the sweet simple meal of fruits, roots and tubers gathered by their own efforts from the forest and more than all, filling their eyes with the pictures of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana and their ears with the edifying and exquisite words of Rama.

Sita was engaged in serving the mothers-in-law, anticipating their needs and overeager to serve. She consoled and comforted them. She told them how she was spending her days happily in the forest, lacking nothing, and she made them wonder at her fortitude and skill. They were rendered happy at the thought that she was able to derive so much joy under such adverse conditions. They bore their own sorrow with greater ease, when they saw how Sita was braving her own.

Bharatha had not a wink of sleep during the night, nor a pang of hunger during the day. While the people were happy, looking on at the face of Rama, Bharatha and Satrughna were filled with misery, while they looked on at that face. They could not bear it any longer; they approached Vashishta and fell at his feet. They prayed to him to persuade Rama to return to Ayodhya, with Sita. They pleaded with him most earnestly expressing their agony in manifold ways. The Preceptor knew only too well the strength of Rama’s faith in his ideals, the tenacity with which he stuck to his sense of Truth, and his determination to carry out his father’s wishes. But he was so moved by the sorrow of Bharatha that nothing was left undone to persuade Rama to return.

He called Rama to where he was and said, “Rama! Listen to the prayers of Bharatha. Conduct yourself in accordance with the wishes of good men, the interests of the people, the principles of politics and the directives of the Vedas.” Rama recognised the affection that the Preceptor

had towards Bharatha that found expression in these words. He knew that Bharatha would never deviate from the path of righteousness, that he would carry out his directions with full heart and in word, deed and thought and that he would always follow his steps and strive for his welfare and prosperity. He felt happy at this. So, he spoke softly and sweetly a few auspicious sentences, in response to the proposal made by the sage: “Master! You are my witness, my father’s feet are my witness. Let me assert this: No one is so dear to me as my brother, Lakshmana. No one has a brother in the world as dear as Bharatha is to me. Those who are attached to the feet of their preceptor are indeed really fortunate. You have such affection and compassion on him, that is his great treasure. He is younger than me, and so, I hesitate to praise him in his presence. My opinion now is that Bharatha should speak out his mind.” Saying so, Rama prostrated before Vashishta and took his seat.

Vashishta turned towards Bharatha; for he could not reply directly to Rama. He knew that Bharatha was to be “Ruler.” He said, “Give up all hesitations and doubts. Rama is your elder brother. He has immeasurable compassion. Open your heart to him. Tell him all that you have in mind.” Hearing these words of the sage, he felt that Vashishta had probed the mind of Rama and that both of them were inclined to favour him and grant his desire. So, he was glad at the turn of events.

Bharatha stood motionless before them. Tears flowed from his eyes, red and bright like lotus petals. “The revered

sage has told Rama all that has to be said. What remains for me to add specially to the appeal he has made on my behalf! I know full well the nature of my Rama. He has no anger against even wrongdoers. He has unbounded affection for me. I cannot deny it. A sense of shame has made me silent while I stand before him. But my affection makes me delighted to look upon him. My eyes do not feel content, however long they fix their gaze on him. God could not tolerate my affection towards Rama. He could not bear to see so much love between brother and brother. So, He designed this distress, devising my mother herself as the instrument to bring it about. I know that it does me no credit or bring me any respect if I say this. How can I establish my superiority by placing the blame on my own mother? When one proclaims himself innocent, can that statement make him truly so? I am myself hesitating to declare, because of my doubts that my mother is feebleminded or that I am good and intelligent. I am diffident to state so. Can pearls grow in the shells of snails that infest tanks? Why should I blame others for my sorrows? My misfortune is as vast as the ocean. I know that all this tragedy has happened as a consequence of sins. I have been seeking a way of escaping from my grief, through some means, along any of the four quarters. I see now that there is one way out and only one. My Preceptor is the great sage Vashishta. Sita and Rama are my sovereign rulers. Hence I am certain all will be well with me. Lord! I do not wish for anything else: Rama! Grant but this one wish of your servant. Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrugna are all four the physical progeny of Emperor Dasaratha. So, all four are

equally bound to obey the commands of their father. The father has equal affection for all the sons. And there is no limitation or regulation that the commands of the father must be obeyed by this one son or that other son. You have borne the responsibility of obeying his commands, thus far. Now, it is our turn to bear the burden of exile. Sita, Rama and Lakshmana must return to Ayodhya and we two shall be in the forest as exiles until the sentence lapses. Confer on us this boon and bless us.” Thus saying, Bharatha fell at the Feet of Rama.

Listening to this prayer of Bharatha, Vashishta shed tears of joy. Rama was not taken in by this argument. He said, “Bharatha! I feel that your line of thought is not as valid as you seem to think. It is not correct so to act. Ask me for anything except this.” Bharatha replied, “In that case, brother, allow me and my brother to be with you here and serve you, as Lakshmana has been doing. This will then be a wholly satisfying holy life for us.” Rama did not accept even this prayer. He said, “Bharatha! For me as well as you, the commands of the father are unbreakable. We have to bow our heads in reverence before them and carry them out without the least murmur. The most appropriate action for us all is that I should follow the orders issued to me and that you should follow the orders issued to you. Let us not spend precious days in such purposeless talk and cause distress to the people who have come such long distances hoping against hope. Return to Ayodhya that has been allotted to you, with them, and rule them righteously. I shall

carry out the task allotted to me and act righteously guarding and fostering the forest realm assigned to me.” Neither Bharatha nor anyone else could meet this decisive statement of Rama with any counterproposal or argument. They had to accept it as the right path to take.

Bharatha was overcome with grief. He lamented, “On whom else can God heap such unbearable agony than on me, who happens to be the son of a mother who felt that Rama, Sita and Lakshmana are her enemies? Yes, Brother! I heard that you walked into the forest on bare feet with nothing to protect you from thorns and pebbles. The news wounded my mind like sharp spears, but yet I lived on! I am the cause of all this calamity; but as a sinner, I am alive; or else, I would have cast off my body long ago. My breath persisted in this body even when Guha suspected me of treachery against my brother and got ready to confront me in battle at the head of his forces! Alas! My heart is harder than diamond. That is the reason why it has not broken, in spite of those blows.

“I am looking on calmly at the very tragedy of which I am the cause. Yet my life is so unfortunate that I am able to stand the thrust of so much sorrow. My mother has such dreadful poison in her that scorpions and serpents discard their proud possessions in sheer shame. Being the son of such a mother, how can God allow me to escape the consequences of my destiny?” Bharatha was indulging in such self-torture that the citizens, the queens, the sages and

others who watched his grief, his penitence, his humility, his reverence and his fraternal affection were all stricken like lotus blooms fallen on ice. They reminded Bharatha of many incidents from the Puranas so that he might recover from his depression.

Then Rama addressed Bharatha. He said, “Brother! Why do you give yourself up to despair? Your sorrow is in vain. Destiny cannot be countermanded. At all times, everywhere, you will be honoured by good and virtuous people. Those who ascribe crookedness to you will be miserable here and hereafter. And condemning one’s mother? This crime will be committed only by those unfortunates who have not been trained either in the society of the virtuous or at the feet of preceptors. Bharatha! Your name will be remembered long and those who bring it to their memory will be able, by its unseen influence, to discard their vices. You will be earning renown in this world and bliss in the next. The world will be sustained by your ideals and your rule. Bharatha! Both hatred and love cannot be suppressed and hidden in the heart. They needs must find expression despite all attempts to keep them imprisoned in the heart. I know your nature very well. In order to uphold Truth, the Emperor let me go; and unable to bear the separation from me whom he loved so much, he lost his very life. It is not right for a son like me or like you to dishonour the word of such a loving father. Therefore, do not hesitate further. Tell me what you have to say, ask about things that you desire to know and decide to shoulder the

responsibilities imposed on you. That is the best course for you.” Rama spoke these words with great emphasis.

Bharatha had no chance to speak any more about his fond desires. But he resolved to press one demand of his, the final one. “Rama! The Kingdom that you have given up, that has brought on this disgrace of being the cause for your exile, I do not like to rule over. I have no love towards it either. I can never go against your will, command. I will not do so at any time. If you but cast your loving eye on me with no trace of anger, I shall consider myself blessed. Lakshmana has served you now so long. Send him back with Satrughna to Ayodhya and allow me to take his place at your Feet.

“This will bring both fair renown. Lakshmana is an expert in administration. He can rule over the Empire wisely and well in all fields of administration and bring solace to the soul of the departed father. Grant this prayer of mine. Keep me with you. Do not refuse my request. Do not kick me from the presence.” Imploring piteously in this way, Bharatha clasped the feet of Rama.

“Or else,” continued Bharatha, “kindly return to Ayodhya with Sita and stay there. We three brothers will stay on in the forest. We shall carry on our lives here in any manner that you prescribe. If on the other hand, you pile upon me this royal burden, I cannot bear the weight and live. Keep me at your feet and pile on me a weight thousand

times heavier than the Empire. I shall bear it gladly and with enthusiastic delight. I have no knowledge of the science of government, or the texts on morality. You are aware that one who is sunk in grief can have no wisdom in him. Even shame will be ashamed when one's servant answers back and points to one's want of knowledge. Do not put me in that position. Rama! I am opening my heart to your gaze and revealing my inmost feelings. I desire only to promote the welfare of the world. Kindly decide on the best course for each of us. Do not doubt our intentions. Shower your Grace on us and confer on us your commands. We shall bow our heads in loyal reverence and carry them out without hesitation."

These words of Bharatha gave the vast gathering who listened to them, great joy. Their hearts melted with compassion and gratitude. They extolled in manifold ways the affection and faith that Bharatha had placed in his brother Rama. They were affected by the expression of his deep devotion. All of them with one voice prayed, "Rama! Lord! Accept the prayer of Bharatha. With the passing away of Emperor Dasaratha, the long-established glory and happiness of the people too have passed away! The world has been pitifully orphaned. Ayodhya is wailing like a despairing waif. Like a chaste woman who has been deserted by her lord, she is lamenting her lot."

Meanwhile, Kaikeyi (the forlorn queen)—what shall we say about her! She was standing there, her heart gnawed

by grief. She was anxious to discover how she could explain her wrongs. She tried her best to seek out Rama while he was alone, so that she could beg his pardon, but could not succeed. She was ashamed even to show her face to Rama. She wondered how she could ever subject Rama, whom she loved so dearly, to all the privations and travails she now witnessed. Rama was her very breath. Therefore, she felt sure that by herself she was never capable of inflicting harm on him. She guessed that it must be the influence of some Evil Power that had possessed her which brought about this sad series of events. But she said to herself that the world would never pardon her, however strongly she asserted that it was none of her doing. Torn by these doubts and misgivings, Kaikeyi was powerless to move forward towards Rama to speak to him, nor could she walk away from him for she was anxious to have the burden lifted from her heart. She stood there, weak and frail, fearful and faltering.

Rama noted her agitation and using an opportune moment, he moved towards her in order to fall at her feet and pay her his homage.

Kaikeyi was waiting for just this chance. She clasped Rama's feet, saying, "Child! You are much younger than me. You are my son. But yet, you are the Master of the Whole World because of your virtue and your wisdom. I do not commit any wrong when I hold your feet in my hands. Come. Rule over Ayodhya. Pardon my sin. That alone can

redeem me from the disgrace which I have brought on myself. If that cannot be, keep Bharatha in thy presence at thy feet. Bestow on me that boon. That will give me peace of mind as long as I live. I have no wish to live after the consummation of this wish of mine. I am shocked that I craved for the fulfilment of those two desires, which not even the most vicious ogress would have entertained. Did I ask for them while I was the daughter of the Ruler of the Kekaya Kingdom? Or did I speak those words when I was possessed by some evil genius? Or, was I under the poisonous influence of some evil star? I do not know; I cannot tell.” She wept aloud in anguish, holding the hands of Rama fast in her clasp.

Rama shed tears at her plight. He assuaged her by his soft and sweet words. He said, “Mother! You have done no wrong, not even the least bit. The human crowd is a pack of crows. They caw loud and hoarse, without any rule or reason. Men do not try to know the truth. In their ignorance, they blabber as the whim dictates. Those boons were not asked by you of your own free will with full knowledge of the implications. All this happened thus, for I willed it to happen so. You have rendered much help for the fulfilment of the purpose for which I have incarnated and the task I have set before myself. You have committed no disservice. Mother! I am repenting very much for having made you plead with me so long instead of expressing at the very outset my gratitude for the help you have done for my plan of action. Do not grieve over what has happened. If you do

so, it will cast a shadow on my task. It will make my days inauspicious. Bless me, Mother! Shower your affection on me. Mother! Bless me.” Rama prayed and fell at the feet of Kaikeyi.

When Rama spoke thus, Kaikeyi recovered her mental peace a little. The other Queens, Kausalya and Sumitra, heard the conversation and when they realised that Kaikeyi was but the innocent instrument of the Divine Will, they too consoled and comforted their sister, Kaikeyi. Nevertheless, Kaikeyi stuck to her wish and held on to her prayer that Rama must accept the throne and be installed as Emperor with Sita as the Empress of Ayodhya and that Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrugna must serve them and be their loyal companions in court. She said that she would spend her life until death put an end to it, witnessing this Glory and sharing in this ecstasy. She repeated these words often and pressed for the grant of her wish.

Four days and nights were thus spent by them in the forest, praying, pleading, consoling, explaining, assuaging, weeping and imparting solace. They had all only one wish ruling their hearts: to persuade Rama to return to the Capital. At last, Rama directed Vashishta, the Royal Preceptor, and Bharatha to return to Ayodhya along with the Queens and the citizens. News of this order spread despair among them. They said that the place where Rama was, was for them as delightful as a million heavens put together; and so they refused to move. They said that only those whom the Gods

discarded would turn their backs on the forest where Rama was. They said, “Oh what great fortune is this that awaits us here! A bath in the holy Mandakani River, delicious fruits for appeasing hunger, the Darsan of Sita and Rama, so charming to the eye, so exhilarating to the heart! Where else is heaven? What else is happiness?”

They talked in this strain among themselves and resolved that they should persuade Rama by every means to return with them if they have to go at all. Each one of them expressed his inmost wishes in words soaked in sweet love. Finally, one wise old Brahmin said, “Well. If we possess the good fortune and the merit to deserve the auspicious and happy company of Rama in this forest, He would certainly agree to keep us here. If that is not our destiny, our evil fate itself will harden the heart of Rama, and He would drive us back to Ayodhya. If Rama does not bestow Grace who else can? What does it matter where we spend our days, when we cannot spend them in the presence of Rama? Away from Rama, we are but living corpses.” When he finished, all of them responded with the exclamation, “True! True! These words are absolutely true.”

When Emperor Dasaratha passed away, the Family Preceptor Vashishta had sent a message to Janaka, and as soon as he received it, he and his queen, Sunayana, had come to Ayodhya for condoling the bereaved. They learnt there about all developments. When Bharatha arrived, and decided to proceed to Chithrakuta along with the Mothers,

the Royal Preceptor, and the leaders of the people, Janaka and his queen also accompanied them. They were waiting long for a favourable chance to meet Sita and Rama.

Meanwhile, Sita’s mother directed a maid to find out whether Kausalya and the other Queens were available for an audience, and she hurried towards their residences. It was the eleventh day of the bright half of the Jyeshtha month. The Queens met that day, in the forest—the four of them. Queen Kausalya paid honours to Queen Sunayana, and treating her with great respect, offered her a seat. It was the first time the Queens met Janaka’s consort.

As soon as Queen Sunayana saw the Queens of Ayodhya, Kausalya, Sumithra and Kaikeyi, she felt that even the hardest diamond would melt before their loving conversation, their tender manners and their compassionate comradeship. She found that their bodies had become emaciated, and that their heads were bowed by sorrow. Their eyes were fixed on the ground below their feet. They were shedding streams of tears. The three Queens extolled the virtues and excellences of Sita and Rama, but could not stop the outflow of grief.

Queen Sunayana could find no words to speak. At last, she said, “Mother! Of what avail is sorrow at this stage? Providence directed things along this crooked way. A diamond-edged cutter was used to sunder the cream on the milk! We have heard of the life-giving Amrith, the heavenly

nectar; but, we have not seen it. But we are privileged to see now the equally potent poison. We have the visual experience only of crows, storks, vultures and owls; but the visual experience of the Celestial Hamsa which has Lake Manasa Sarovar as its habitat is beyond us. Queens! The sport of destiny is full of contradictions and absurdities. They are as unpredictable as the wayward sport of children.” While trying thus to console the Queens, Sunayana herself could not restrain her tears.

At this, Kausalya said, “Sunayana! This has happened not through the fault of one particular person. Happiness and misery, profit and loss, are all the consequences of Karma, the deeds, words and thoughts of the persons themselves. Has it not been declared, *Avasyam anubhokthavyam, krtham Karma subhaasubham?* Good or bad, whatever karma has been done, its consequences have to be willy-nilly suffered or enjoyed. God knows the hardship-filled process of Karma. He confers the appropriate consequence according to the deed. Each one carries on the head this Divine Command. Oh, Queen! We are entangled in delusion, and we yield in vain to grief. Why should the merit earned and stored by us in previous lives desert us when we grieve? Can this rule of cause and effect holding sway over the world from before the beginning of the world be set aside for our sake? It is a mad hope.” Kausalya ended her attempt at consoling, with many a sigh.

When she finished, Queen Sunayana spoke thus: “Mothers! You are indeed highly fortunate, for, Emperor Dasaratha has a renown for holy merit that few rulers have. You are the Consorts of such a noble person. You are the mothers of the very embodiment of Dharma, the very personification of love, Rama, whose heart embraces all beings in compassion. You have earned everlasting fame all over the world. What you said now is the ultimate truth. Happiness and misery are the two pots balanced on back and front by the rod to which they are tied and placed on the shoulder. Everyone has to carry both in equal measure. In case one has no misery, one cannot identify happiness, can he? *Na sukhaallabhyathe sukham.* From happiness, no happiness can ensue, isn’t it?” Kausalya said amidst her sobs, in a grief-stricken voice, “If Sita, Rama and Lakshmana reside in the forest, many calamities will happen. I know that Bharatha cannot survive separation from Rama. My agony is heightened when I see Bharatha, more than when I see Sita, Rama and Lakshmana. Fear overpowers me when I think of Bharatha.” Sumitra and Kaikeyi agreed that it was very true. They too were saddened at the condition of Bharatha.

Sumitra spoke next. She said, “Mother! Through your blessings and good wishes, our sons and daughter-in-law are as pure as the Ganga itself. Bharatha had never so far asserted that he was the brother of Rama and claimed something from him. But now he is demanding that he should fulfil his wishes, in a sathwic, highly righteous

manner. Even the Goddess of speech, Saraswathi, will hesitate to accept the assignment of describing the virtues, the humility, the large-heartedness, the fraternal attachment, the steadfastness of that faith, the courage and inflexibility of that courage, that mark out Bharatha as a great person. Can the ocean be measured by means of a snail shell? Bharatha is at all times, under all conditions, the effulgent Lamp of the Royal Line; only, people did not realise this until now. A gem has to be examined before its value can be determined. Gold has to be tested on the touchstone, before its genuineness and fineness can be known. Let us not talk despairingly about him at this time. Our reason is now affected by sorrow and deluded by filial attachment.” Sumitra wiped her tears, as she concluded her wise words of consolation.

Hearing her words, the Queen of Mithila, Sunayana, thought within herself, “The queens of Ayodhya are really very great, one greater than the other, in nobility. They do not praise their own children, as mothers are prone to do. They extol the virtues of the sons of co-wives. This is quite against the nature of women, as usually found in the world. How they are describing and appreciating sons born to the other wives of their husband! These queens, who do not distinguish between their sons and the sons of the other queen, are ideal housewives for the whole world. Ah! What large heartedness! What purity and perfection in the feeling of Love?”

Kausalya mustered some little courage, and addressed Sunayana thus: “Queen of Mithila! You are the consort of

the Ocean of Wisdom, Emperor Janaka. Who dare convey counsel to you! We prattle away in our ignorance. Yet, I pray you might tell the Emperor Janaka at the earliest, when he is in a mood to listen, these words of mine, namely, ‘Persuade Rama and make him agree to have Bharatha for some time with him. Since Lakshmana has already spent some time in his presence, let Lakshmana be sent to Ayodhya to oversee the activities and administration there, and Satrugna be directed to assist Lakshmana in his duties at Ayodhya.’ If only Rama agrees, the rest of the problems would set themselves right quickly. It is only the condition of Bharatha that gives me anxiety. His attachment and love for Rama are deep-rooted and delicate. The Emperor has passed away. Rama will not return from the forest. If Bharatha finds separation from Rama unbearable, it might lead to his death. Then, the empire would be reduced to a living corpse! My heart is torn by fear and anxiety when I picture the future, and the calamities that are in store.” Kausalya held fast in her hands the two hands of Queen Sunayana, and appealed to her to fulfil this mission, achieve this end, and confer Ananda on them all.

Sunayana was touched by the affection that filled the heart of the Queen and her adherence to the path of righteousness. She said, “Mother! Humility and virtue are innate in you. They are natural expression of your goodness and nobility, as smoke on fire and beds of grass on mountain peaks. Of course, the Emperor Janaka is ever ready to serve you by word, deed, and thought. He is ever eager to help. But can a lamp illumine the Sun? Rama has come into the

forest to accomplish the task of the Gods. After finishing that assignment, he will surely return to Ayodhya and reign over the Empire. The might of his arms will ensure the attainment by subman, man and superman, of all their dearest wishes. These tidings were long ago revealed by the Sage Yajnavalkya. His words can never be falsified.”

With these words, Sunayana fell at the feet of Queen Kausalya. Taking leave of her, and preparing to leave the place, she proceeded towards the cottage where Sita was. When she entered and saw Sita, she was overwhelmed with grief. She could not control her tears. She ran towards Sita and caught her arms. Sita consoled her mother by various means. She counselled courage and faith. She prostrated at the feet of the mother. She stood before her mother in her anchorite robes, appearing like Parvathi the Consort of Siva, during the days when she did thapas. The mother could not contain within herself the question: “Child! Are you really my Sita, or are you Parvathi?” She looked at her long and leisurely from head to foot, and was filled with wonder and joy.

At last, she said, “Oh Sita! Through you, two families have been consecrated, the family of your parents and the family of your parents-in-law. Your fame will reach the farthest horizons. The flood of your renown will flow as a river in full flow between its two banks, the two royal lines of Mithila and Ayodhya. The Ganga has but three sacred spots on it—Haridwar, Prayag and the Sagarasangama,

where it joins the Sea. May the stream of your pure fame enter and sanctify each one into a holy temple.”

Hearing these words of truth that flowed from the affection of her mother, Sita blushed and bent her head, as if she was overcome with a sense of shame. She said, “Mother! What words are these? What is the relevance? What comparison can be found between me and the holy Ganga?” Saying this, she went through the gesture of prostration directed towards the Ganga, with a prayer for pardon.

Sunayana embraced her daughter, and stroked her head in tender affection. “Sita! Your virtues are examples for all women who are mistresses of families to follow and emulate.” Sita intercepted her, and said, “Mother! If I spend much time with you, the service of Rama might be delayed. Therefore, please permit me to go into his presence.” The mother too realised that her desire lay in that direction and so, she felt that she should not be an obstacle in her way. She fondled and caressed Sita profusely and said at last, “Child! Go and serve Rama as you wish.” Sita fell at her feet and left the place, for serving Rama.

Sunayana pondered long over the reverential devotion that Sita had towards her husband, and her other virtues. She never took her eyes off of Sita until she disappeared from view. She stood at the same spot, watching her and admiring her. She was awakened from the reverie by her

maid who came near her and said, “Mother! Sita has gone in. It is best we now return to our residence.” Suddenly, Sunayana turned back, wiping the stream of tears from her eyes. Her unwilling steps took her to the cottage allotted to her.

The Sun set just at this time. So, Rama and Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrughna proceeded to the river for evening sacraments like bath and ritual worship of the Gods at dusk. The pundits, the members of the Brahmin caste, the ministers and others also accompanied them. After finishing these, they partook of fruits and tubers, and laid themselves to bed under trees allotted to each group. When dawn broke, after the morning sacraments were gone through, all of them gathered around the cottage of thatch where Rama was. Rama came out with a bewitching smile, and passed through that thick crowd inquiring of each lovingly about health and welfare.

Bharatha fell at the feet of Rama when He came near him. He said, “Lord! A desire has arisen in my heart. I am unable to express it before you on account of fear and shame.” Rama stroked the head of his dear brother, saying as he did so, “Why do you hesitate to tell me? Come. Tell me what it is.” At this, Bharatha said, “Brother! I have a great desire to see the hermitages, the sanctifying bathing ghats on the banks of the river, the glens of these thick forests, the wild animals that roam therein, the lakes and streams, the waterfalls around this Chitrakuta peak. They

have all been rendered holy by the imprint of your Lotus Feet. The residents of Ayodhya are overpowered by the urge to see those meritorious spots.”

Rama replied, “Bharatha! Your desire is highly commendable. You can gladly explore this region, with the permission of the Sage Atri.” Hearing this, Bharatha was very happy. He fell at the feet of the sage as well as of Rama, and then proceeded to the interior of the forest, visiting on the way, with Satrughna and the people from Ayodhya, many hermitages and other holy spots.

On the way, he saw a well by the side of the mountain. It had in it holy waters from all the sacred rivers and lakes. Bharatha sprinkled its waters reverentially on his head. He prostrated before that sacred seat of sacredness. He cleaned the water by removing with his own hand some dry leaves and dirt that had fallen on the water. It is this well that is honoured even today as Bharathakupa or Bharatha’s Well, all over the world.