

Chapter 11. Lakshmana Goes with Rama

Within the palace, Rama's companions, elated and happy, ready with bright countenances and splendid robes, were waiting to accompany him to the Festival Hall. Sumanthra 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.

Sumanthra, in a hurry, could no brook delay. "Rama! Mother Kaika and your father asked me to bring you quickly to her palace; they sent me here on that mission, and I hurried for that same purpose."

Rama turned toward Sita. "Sita! This is a sign of some obstacle, and of nothing else. I'm 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, Sumanthra's heart 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, "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. Don't hesitate even a little; go immediately. We will be equally happy whether the coronation takes place or not. Mother Kaika has inordinate affection toward you; anything she directs us to do, any order she gives us, will be for our good beyond doubt. No one here on earth is as solicitous for our welfare as mother Kaika. When father and such a mother send word that you should hasten toward them, how happy we should be!" 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 of the past, the days around us, and the days yet to come are all the same. I welcome each day with full joy. I'm prepared to do anything to uphold father's reputation. I'm prepared to go anywhere. I'm immensely happy that you share my feeling and second my resolve."

Rama moved out, accompanied by Sumanthra. When they ascended the chariot waiting on the road in front of the palace, people raised shouts of "Hurrah, hurrah! Ramachandra, dear Lord." The acclamation shook the skies.

Sumanthra announced to the populace, "Now the chariot is not taking Rama to the Coronation Hall but to the Emperor. So allow the chariot to go as fast as it should. Rama will return in a few moments, so wait here." Sumanthra explained the reason for the hurry and drove in hot haste. As Rama drove along the city streets to Kaika's palace in his divine chariot, those seeing him cheered like lions. Minstrels and courtiers started paeans of praise. The strains of many instruments of music filled the sky. Acclamations of "hurrah, hurrah" rose from the thick masses of people on both sides of the road. Women in their best clothes and bedecked with jewels thronged the terraces of the houses and filled the windows, eager to wave lamps when Rama passed by.

Rama talks to Kaika

As he approached the palace, they showered floral petals and waved sacred lamps. They gazed upon the Prince until he passed beyond reach of the eye; then, they relished with joy the picture of "Rama in the chariot" that 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 Dasaratha's palace, named Vardhamana and as imposing as Mount Kailas itself. It passed through the three quadrangles guarded by vigilant bowmen.

Rama alighted from the vehicle and moved through two more quadrangles on foot. While walking, 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 disheveled, and he was wearing clothes of 'yesterday'. He was lying on the bed without any regard to propriety. Rama was astonished at the spectacle. Kaika 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, and 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 do you lament so? What's the cause? I'll try to confer joy on you in the best manner possible. I'll dedicate my very life to restoring your bliss (*ananda*). Tell me what has caused this grief; don't weep," he pleaded.

Dasaratha exclaimed, "Rama!" and broke into tears again, unable to continue. He lost consciousness. Rama tried to revive and console him, but he fell deeper into grief and could not be pacified.

Rama mustered courage and took his father to task, "Father! what is all this? You have to instil courage in young people like me; instead, you are weeping and wailing and filling us with fear! No. This is not right. This is the occasion to be happy. 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 removed in a trice all signs of those troubles and made you beam with spiritual bliss (*ananda*). You used to gain peace 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 too makes my grief more painful. Can't you 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 and I shall do it without fail. I shall correct myself, if you tell me my faults. Don't grieve; don't doubt or hesitate; tell me with the authority of affection what I have to do, and I will bow to the order. Father! Your being plunged in grief is not good augury for you, for me, as well as for the empire."

Rama turned toward Kaika. 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 doesn't even look at me! Why? He doesn't utter a word; he keeps his face turned away from me!

"If 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 Satrugna, sent bad news? They are well, aren't they? Mother Kausalya and Sumitra are well, I hope!

"I'm overcome with grief, since I'm unable to understand the reason for father's agony! I'll do whatever is needed to bring joy back to him, however hard it may be. However painful, I'll discharge his command 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 happened.

“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 would never behave like that. And, Sumitra? I am more certain about her. She would not at all act so. And father would certainly not lament so distressingly, even if either of them acted so foolishly. There must be some very serious reason for his plight. If father is reluctant to tell me what it is, at least you can tell me about it and console my grief.”

Looking at Rama, who was so pathetically praying to her, Kaika gave up all sense of mercy and moderation, all consideration for the husband who might be plunged in deeper misery when he heard her words spoken in utter disregard of the calamities they were sure to usher in. She didn't stop to ask whether the words could be uttered or were better left unspoken. She didn't 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.

“Rama! Listen! Years ago, during the battle between gods and demons (*devas* and *asuras*) your father was wounded by demonic arrows and suffered unbearable pain. I nursed him back to health and happiness. He appreciated my sacrifice and service and promised to grant me two boons. At the time, the only thing I craved was his recovery and victory, so I replied, ‘I don't desire my boon now, I will ask you for the promised boons when I feel the urge later.’ Your father said, ‘Right! Whenever you like, ask me for two boons, and I will 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 will 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 hub-bub! Why elaborate further? I won't modify or 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 doesn't like to send you into exile; he's reluctant to ask you to go. He apprehends you may take it amiss; that is the reason for his grief. Rama! No other calamity or deluge has happened. 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. Otherwise, if he who vowed and he who is his son both neglect it, then the father has to meet the doom of eternal downfall. You are not unaware of this.”

Rama was not at all affected by these words uttered with such deliberate hard-heartedness. 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 Kaika.

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 toward Kaika. “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, 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'll accept it without demur and with equal joy and satisfaction. Father always wishes the best for me. He blesses me always and desires that I progress ever. He is a great seer; for me, he is not only the father but the preceptor who teaches the highest path.

“What responsibility and duty have I other than conferring joy on him, who is both father and teacher? This is my dearest duty, my *dharma*. I will derive immense spiritual bliss (*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 does father hesitate to tell me about the 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 will offer it with spiritual bliss; I’m not one who waits to be told to do so.

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

When Kaika heard these words from Rama, she was filled with happiness (*ananda*) and apprehension. She feared what might happen if Bharatha arrived while Rama was still in the city and concluded that it was best to insist on Rama leaving for the forest that very day. She replied, “Rama! It’s possible to make arrangements to get Bharatha to Ayodhya, but there is no need for you to stay here until he arrives. Since you have decided to start the hermit life, why should you delay your departure? The longer the start is delayed, the longer your return is delayed! 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 leave, the sooner he will recover from agony. Until you leave, I’m afraid, he won’t take food or bathe. So, if you yearn to restore his happiness, the sooner you depart the better.”

Dasaratha, lying prostrate on the bed, heard Kaika’s heart-piercing words and couldn’t contain his anger and sorrow. He burst into indistinct fury, “Fie on you, traitorous demon!” Turning to Rama, he cried “Rama” twice, and 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 spoke to Kaika. “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 will leave as directed.

“Mother! I have one little wish, which I hope you will fulfil. When Bharatha rules the empire, see that he

obeys father's orders in every way and that he contributes to father's joy and satisfaction by his acts. For me, for Bharatha, indeed for every son, there is nothing more holy and fruitful than the vow of filling the heart of the father with contentment and happiness. Service of the father is the son's eternal duty (*sanathana dharma*).”

Rama fell prostrate and touched Kaika's feet. Dasaratha, who heard his son, writhed as if the *dharma* that Rama expounded and the equanimity that he revealed aroused his love even more and thus aggravated his sorrow beyond control. Knowing that Rama would not stay in Ayodhya any longer, he lost all sense of propriety and status. He shouted “Rama!” and slumped on the hard floor. Women in their quarters 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.

Rama talks to Kausalya

Lakshmana was standing at the door, listening to the words spoken inside the room. He was in tears; he was furious with Kaika and angry with father. He found it impossible to give expression to his feelings, so he followed Rama with arms folded, head bent low, and eyes on the ground. 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, Sumanthra 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 not be used for him. He declared that he did not deserve the silver chariot anymore. Sumanthra lost strength of body and will. His worst fears were confirmed.

Rama didn't 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 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 didn't go directly to Sita's apartments. Instead, he walked to Kausalya's palace, which was resplendent with flags and festoons and other marks of jubilation. The women and other attendants of the palace got intimation of the approach of Rama and Lakshmana; they readied lamps on plates and arranged themselves in rows to welcome them. Old and trusted guards at the main entrance rose sharply when they espied the brothers, and exclaimed, “Victory! May it be victory to you!” They bowed low and offered homage.

When Rama entered the second square inside, the *brahmins* who had gathered there showered their blessing on him. On entering the third square, the young maids in attendance rushed in, carrying the happy tidings that Rama and his younger brother were arriving to offer reverence to the mother. They themselves were delighted at the sight of the princes. From the outer door right up to the mother's room, 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, preparing 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 had been celebrating her joy by means of several rites and by giving away plentiful gifts. She had fasted and kept vigil; spiritual bliss (*ananda*) was enough food for her, the bliss she shared with all.

She ran forward to clasp Rama in her arms; she caressed the curls on his head and 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 as she was, she wore the white sari of purity and, with the sacred silk cord tied round her wrist, she was gratefully engaged in worship of the gods. Looking at Rama's face, she noticed an added splendour illumining it. So she could not contain within herself her bliss (*ananda*).

“Son!” she said, “your forefathers were all royal sages. They were strong upholders of right and were super-souls (*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 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.” 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 that she had made ready for him.

Rama was thrilled by the spiritual bliss 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. To give 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'm awaiting your blessing, for I have to go in exile to the Dandaka Forest. I came to you to take leave.”

Kausalya couldn't understand a word 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 can't make sense of what you say.” She thought her son was teasing her with a joke. “Son! In this auspicious hour, even in fun you shouldn't 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 bliss, Lakshmana's eyes were spontaneously filled with tears.

Kausalya noted it, turned to him, and asked, “Lakshmana! Why are you sad?” She hurried toward him and tried to caress him, but Lakshmana couldn't suppress his grief any longer. He wept aloud and sobbed. The queen stood aghast, not knowing why he sobbed. Rama's words and Lakshmana's grief confused her much.

Rama interceded, “Mother! If you promise not to grieve, I will tell you one thing.” He held her hands in his, very firmly. “This will endow me, 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. Doesn't it give you great joy for me to 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 fourteen years. I have bowed to his command, and I came to take your leave.”

Kausalya shrieked, “Rama,” and fell on the floor. “What turn of events is this? Is my tender child 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 trying to explain to herself and consoling herself, the happenings at Kaika’s palace had spread throughout the zenana (women’s quarters), and the noise of wailing and lamentation rose from maids and attendants everywhere. All faces streamed with tears in great sorrow. Cries of “Rama! Don’t leave us” were heard on all sides. Grief-stricken groups hurried to Kausalya’s palace. Kausalya 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 longed to understand what had really happened to cause this universal agony.

She drew Rama onto her lap. 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 Kaika 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.”

Kausalya exclaimed, “Rama! Did Kaika really demand such boons? Kaika had unbounded love and affection toward you. She would not have wished for these things any day. Let that rest. Even if she has, I’m sure it must be only to test the king! For this simple thing, why should there be so much confusion and anxiety? Or, assuming she asked for the boons; would your father agree to grant them? I refuse to believe this. Would your father, who cannot tolerate your absence from his presence for a single moment, send you away to the forest for fourteen years? This plunges me into more confusion.”

Seeing his mother doubt the truth of the incidents that actually took place, Rama again held her hands in his and pleaded, “Mother! Believe me! Father had already promised to grant her whichever two boons she desired. After she asked for these two, he had no inclination to break his plighted word. Nor could his mind agree to order me into the forest and be without me. He is suffering great mental distress. I can’t bear the sight of his affliction. I just returned from that palace. He is stricken unconscious and in terrible anguish. This is the truth. I’m not so cruel as to cause such anxiety in you over a light laughable matter, believe me. I accepted father’s order, I came for your permission.” Rama fell at her feet.

Kausalya lifted him tenderly. “Rama, what strange behaviour! However barbarian a person may be, will he demand these horrible boons? Can any human being ever think of sending you, who is to be crowned in a few minutes, to the forest 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; 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? Would any mother agree to send her son into the jungle? Alas, what sin did I commit in the past? In which of my precious lives did I keep a mother apart from her son?

“Since the day you were initiated into *Vedic* studies, every moment I derived happiness from the thought of your coronation 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? O! What a big sinner am I? Why hasn’t my heart broken on hearing this news?

“Perhaps, I have to hear and bear many more heart-breaking news! Death doesn’t 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 has no mercy toward me. I’m undeserving of even the realm of death. O 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 couldn’t quietly look on the scene. The wailing of the maids, who gathered around blasted his ears like thunderbolts.

Rama didn’t utter a single word. He sat near his mother and stroked her forehead, caressing her hair and consoling her. He brushed away the dust that covered her clothes. 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 going to the court hall to be crowned ruler of a great empire!

Kausalya knew that Rama would never swerve from his path of duty, that he 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! 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’ll come with you; take me with you.” She attempted to rise on her feet. The maids held her and seated her leaning against the wall. They spoke softly and sweetly to bring her round.

Lakshmana enters the argument

Lakshmana watched Kausalya’s anguish and listened. He couldn’t control his emotions. He was bursting with anger. Holding his hands tight over his chest, he said, “O revered Mother! I’ll never accept this. Is Rama to leave the kingdom and betake himself to the forest, yielding to the prattle of a woman? I can’t tolerate it. Father has become too old and his mind is unsteady. He’s entangled in sensual pursuits and has become a slave to Kaika’s enticements; he’s pitifully uxorious and has no sense of discrimination about the consequences of his actions. He’s 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 Rama’s cruellest enemy (if he has any), or even the most hard-hearted barbarian suffering punishment for his crimes, can’t point his finger at the slightest slur on his behaviour or action. No king on earth has the authority to drive a person of such unquestioned innocence, purity of intentions, and holy sanctity into the forest as an exile. 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 toward Rama, clasping his hands in reverence. "Rama! Pardon me! Assume the rulership of the realm before news of this spreads and becomes known to all. I will be by your side, with my bow. Whoever stands up against you will have to meet arrows from this bow. Of course, there is no such in Ayodhya or elsewhere. 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 or anyone on his behalf opposes, I will destroy him, root and branch. I don't care. Even if Dasaratha stands forth as Kaika's supporter in this struggle, I'll 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. "Lakshmana! Your words are crossing the bounds. No one can deny me what I wish. None can change the march of my will. My exile in the forest cannot be avoided. You talking is prompted by your love toward me and the desire to prevent your separation from me. Forbear! That will save you against all anxiety and fear. Be patient. Don't get agitated. Don't entertain ideas of hatred against either father or brother Bharatha. They are pure, holy persons.

"Kaika is also highly venerable and is to be honoured and worshiped. The boons she asked are also blameless. She loved me, caressed me, fondled me, nursed me, played with me, derived more joy from me 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 will await what happens next."

Lakshmana fell at Rama's feet. "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 that the eldest has not? You are obeying this absurd, unjust order because of father; but I won't approve of it, whatever you may say in justification."

Lakshmana turned to Kausalya. "Revered mother! To tell you the truth, I am devoted to Rama. I speak this on oath; I can't exist even a single moment apart from Rama. If Rama has no desire for the kingdom and moves into the forest, I will follow him. I will walk in his footsteps, I will be his shadow. If he orders it, I will jump most joyously into the blazing fire. I will heed only his orders, no one else's. 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 his head, 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 won't 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 your love toward 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, *dharma*, is the very root. And, *dharma* is secure only on the foundation of truth.

“Truth (*sathya*) and righteousness (*dharma*) are interchangeable. One can’t exist without the other. Truth is goodness; goodness is truth. I am now achieving both truth and *dharma*, while acting in accordance with the command of father. No one dedicated to the good life should break the word plighted to the mother, father, or esteemed preceptor. Therefore, I won’t overstep father’s orders. That is certain.

“Kaika didn’t order me; she only communicated father’s command to me. And she did so in his very presence, so one has to bow in reverence to it. If it wasn’t father’s command when Kaika was telling me that it was, he could have declared that it wasn’t, couldn’t he? He didn’t; he simply bewailed and groaned. For this reason, it is as authentic as his own command. So I won’t deviate from any resolution. There is no possibility of my going back on it. Don’t allow your reason to slide into this terror-creating, warrior (*kshatriya*) mentality. Give up violence and cruelty and adopt my stand.”

Lakshmana was weighed down by anger and sorrow, and Rama stroked his back and spoke soft loving words to assuage his grief. Then, turning to his mother, Kausalya, Rama said, “Don’t obstruct my resolve and cause breach of my vow. Whatever may happen, my exile to the forest cannot be averted. Send me with your love; bless my vow, my resolution.” He fell at her feet and prayed for permission to leave.

She was shaken by the agony that was torturing her; she placed her hands on Rama’s back and wept aloud. Seeing her plight, Rama 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’ll spend these fourteen years with the largest measure of happiness and joy. I’ll come back and fall at these feet again. I’ll fulfil all your hopes about me. Mother! It is Dasaratha’s command! It is a command that not only I but you, Lakshmana, Sumitra, and Bharatha have to carry out to the very letter. This is the ancient and eternal law (*sanathana dharma*).

“Mother! I will 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 Bharatha’s coronation. Father has entrusted the forest region to me. It is best; it is in accordance with the highest *dharma*, that each should do the duty allotted to him. Trying to avoid one’s duty, as hard to accomplish, is to entertain the idea of difference between me and Bharatha. You have to bless us both, asking each to carry on successfully the responsibility entrusted to each.”

Listening to Rama, Kausalya couldn’t bear the grief that descended on her. She groaned in great pain. “O 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 half the body of the husband. When you say 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 also 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, ‘O, it is my father’s command. I must obey it at all costs.’ I won’t 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 superior, what benefit is it for me to secure heaven and live on divine nectar there? I would rather be in hell. I deem it heaven wherever my son is with me.

“Rama! What can I do here? I haven't 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 your father's other wives. I have had no relief from that battle, from that day to this. As a result, I don't know what merit in my previous life 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 that I could hold on to, to save myself. If you deny me that, what will happen to me? Your father won't suffer any feeling of loss from my absence. He has his bliss in Kaika; none else is needed by him. Therefore, instead of hanging on here, and broiling in agony and finally, giving up breath, I prefer looking at the charming face of my dear son. Though I may not have food and drink in the forest, I will sustain myself on that joy.”

Though Rama felt that there was some validity in her plea, he was forced by the need to obey his father's wishes and his promise that he would not fail in that duty.

Lakshmana intervened. “Brother! Mother's words are the highest truth. The mother deserves even more reverence than the father. The scripture has laid down ‘Let the mother be your God; Let the father be your God (*Mathru devo bhava, Pithru devo bhava*), thus placing the mother first and the father second. It's not proper for you to stick so firmly to your resolution and cause so much grief to mother.”

Rama turned to him and interrupted. “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 haven't understood the inner implication and meaning of that order.

“Only *dharma* can ensure the other three goals: 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, through either desire for something, anger against somebody, or attachment with and love toward 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 bow my head in reverential homage. Regarding this, you might have a bit of doubt. Suppose 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. 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, but aren't you 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 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, heroic fighter, and a pillar of righteousness. And, he is struggling in agony to keep his plighted word! He wasn’t deluded by Kaika or blinded by lust! No. He was moved by the supreme need to abide by his promise, a promise he had solemnly made. He had told her that he would grant her two 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, and his heart does not agree to send me into the forest.

“Lakshmana! Father is a staunch supporter of *dharmā*, more staunch than his predecessors on the throne. His fame has echoed and re-echoed from every corner of the three worlds. Wouldn’t it be a bad example to humanity if his queen, the anointed queen, left him and accompanied her son, deserting the husband? Life is short; its span is limited. To lose one’s reputation forever by resorting to unrighteous acts is not good, either for me or for you.”

Then, turning toward the other, he pleaded pathetically, “Mother!” Before he could continue, Kausalya was numbed into stiffness by sorrow. She realised that her efforts to change Rama’s stand 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.

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 felt that it would not be proper to leave him in that state. Besides, Lakshmana might do something to 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 questioned 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 was so grossly insulted and dishonoured. But the path of truth and righteousness (*sathyā* and *dharmā*) 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.”

Lakshmana was startled into speech. “Brother! When Rama, my very breath, proceeds to the forest, whom am I to serve here, with this inert material physical object called the body? This Lakshmana has no desire to serve anyone except Rama. You value your *dharmā*, your sense of duty; I too have my sense of duty, and I value it equally. Therefore, I will come with you. I don’t need to await anyone’s order. I’m not included in the people bound to the boons claimed by Kaika. Even if I am involved with them, I won’t pay heed to her commands or to the directives of her henchmen.

“Only Rama has the authority to command me or issue directives about my movements or conduct. So, here and now, I will also 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 Lakshmana’s spontaneous devotion and dedicated loyalty. He went close to him and, placing his hand on 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 will also gain some peace of

mind. She is very much agitated by fear and doubt about how I will spend fourteen years in the forest, and whether I will return after the 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. Kaika will suffer from the welling doubt that I may not leave at all! Therefore, I will go to Sita and inform her; I will go to Kaika's palace, to take leave of father. Meanwhile, you go to your mother, Sumitra, and receive her consent to join me."

Rama went around 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 women's quarters, set up a loud wail, as if the deluge had come upon them. Kausalya bravely drew Rama toward her when he stood up awaiting her blessings. She embraced him and caressed his hair. 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 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 you owe your father by acting according to his command.

"As for me, I wish only one thing: return happy to Ayodhya. I will 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 would roll by, and I would 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, O, jewel of the Raghu dynasty! O, 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 will be propitiating the gods here these fourteen years and praying that no harm comes to you.

"The service you have offered to your mother, father, and preceptor will confer long life, health, and happiness on you. Your loyalty to truth will grant you impregnable courage. The mountains, rivers, bushes, anthills, 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 demons of the forest, intent on heinous acts of cruelty, will be drawn toward you, for your heart is full of cool comforting love, and they will surrender at your feet, accepting you as master."

Blessing Rama, Kausalya, with some effort, gulped down the sorrow that was overwhelming her and put on a calm brave face. She smelled the crown of Rama's head and she held him hard and close in loving embrace. She kissed his cheeks. Her lips quivered, when she spoke the parting words, "Rama! Proceed in joy and return safe."

Rama knew the depth of affection that the mother was bestowing on him. He touched her feet many times in reverential gratitude and said, "Mother! Don't grieve. Don't reduce sleep or food; Don't 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? If you want me to be happy there, you have to be happy here. And, with all your heart, you must bless me from here." Praying thus, he moved out of the place, averse to leave her thus, and 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 that Rama was leaving for the forest, and they were unable to believe it. 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 didn't raise his head to look at any of the faces around him. He proceeded to Sita's apartments.