

## Chapter 13. Entering into Exile

Thousands had gathered in the palace quadrangle. Their grief was immeasurable. Meanwhile, the minister went in and aroused the emperor, who had fallen unconscious on the floor. He made him sit up, placed him in position, and told him that Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana had come to talk with him. Rama already stood near his father, speaking words of soothing love. Dasaratha's grief knew no bounds when he saw Sita and Lakshmana. He embraced Rama closely and fell on the floor. Anguish choked his throat; he pressed his hands on his chest and tried to suppress the agony. Sita and Lakshmana couldn't look at the suffering emperor.

Lakshmana saw Kaika standing by with an air of authority. His eyes became red with rage, and he looked daggers at her, as if he would kill her on the spot. But he controlled his anger and cooled his emotion, watching Rama's serenely calm face. Kaika said, "Rama! You are plunging your father into deeper grief! The sooner you leave and reach the forest, the quicker your father will be relieved of anxiety. Don't delay any longer! Prostrate before your father and go."

Her words, so devoid of elementary kindness, seemed to split Dasaratha's heart. He suddenly shouted, "Demoness! Evil spirit! How hard and adamant your words are," and fell in a faint.

Just then Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana fell at his feet. Rama said, "Father! Bless us and permit us to leave. This is a time for rejoicing, not pining and grieving. Over-attachment brings infamy in its train." Rama pleaded for him to be courageous and give up the delusion that made him dote on him. Rama clasped his father's feet and then knelt on his knees, caressing and consoling.

Dasaratha opened his eyes and looked at his beloved son. He sat up with great difficulty and, holding Rama's hands, said, "O my darling Son! Listen to me! You have self-control and discrimination. You know what is right; it is proper for you to do only the right thing. But it's not right when one person does wrong for another to suffer from its consequences, is it? The play of fate is unpredictable, it's a riddle beyond solution." The emperor began to pile argument on argument in his innocence and love, to dissuade Rama from his resolve to go to the forest.

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

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

Dasaratha could well understand and appreciate Sita's yearning. He extolled her virtues with genuine enthusiasm, for the edification of Kaika, standing before him. Meanwhile, the wives of royal ministers and the wives

of royal preceptors who were in the room gathered around Sita; in turn, they too described the hardship inherent in forest life.

The court preceptor's spouse sought a cleverer ruse to dissuade her. "Sita! You weren't required to leave and go into the forest. It is your task to remain here and comfort your husband's parents, who are sunk in sorrow. You are half of Rama, aren't you? So, this half must stay in order to alleviate the sorrow caused by the departure of the other half. Moreover since you are half of the eldest son, the heir to the throne, you have the right to rule over the empire. If Rama moves into the forest and lives there to honour his father's word, stay and rule over the realm and uphold Rama's renown, filling his parents with delight. As Rama's wife, this is the correct step you should take; this is your legitimate duty."

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

Meanwhile, Kaika had secured hermit's robes of fibre as well as rosaries of tulsi; she held them before Rama and said, "The emperor holds you as dear as his very life, so he is bringing down eternal infamy on his head, unwilling to let you go. His affection for you is clouding the righteousness of the course. He won't utter the words 'Go into the forest,' at any time, under any circumstances. It is fruitless to await his agreement and his permission. So, decide on one of these two steps: Do you court infamy and dishonour and stay to rule over the empire? Or, do you leave for the forest and bring eternal glory to the Ikshvaku dynasty? Decide and act."

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

He wound one of the fibre robes his step-mother had brought around himself and gave the other to Sita. She stood holding it in her hands, with her head bent in embarrassment, for she didn't know how to wear it or fasten it around her. It looked too short. Rama, who already had his robe on, came near and spoke to her in a low voice. She was ashamed to confess that she didn't know how to wear the garment, which hermit women draped around themselves so elegantly. She whispered, "Besides, this is not like the ones we wear; it is too short and not wide enough!" Rama consoled her and, giving her courage, took her aside. Saying that it could be worn 'thus-wise,' he wound it round her himself. Seeing this, the wives of the hermits and other women of the palace shed tears of sympathy.

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

At this, Rama unwound the garment he had placed over her dress. But Sita came forward and fell at the sage's feet. "Master! Of course, my wearing that garment is not the direct consequence of mother Kaika's desire. Can't I follow the ways of my Lord? Would it be proper for me, would it bring credit to me, to live in the forest bedecked in jewels and costly silken garments when my Lord is wearing the garment of a hermit? Wouldn't it be

absurd for a dutiful wife to adopt this attitude? Give me permission to put these garments on, so I may maintain the wife's code of conduct and carry out my duty.”

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

Kaika was visibly affected by fear. But she was not unaware that Sita didn't want to exercise regal authority and power, however long Vasishtha elaborated on her rights and claims. Sita refused to pay attention to them; she was yearning for the chance to wear the fibre garment of the hermit in preference to the robes of imperial splendour. The wife of the royal preceptor felt that Sita would never retract from her resolve, so she and others took the garment and wound it round her, in correct hermitage style.

### **The journey begins**

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

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

Then he distributed largesses to the poor. He gifted houses as well as gold, lands, and cows to *brahmins*, so they could perform ritual worship and sacrifices without stint. He prayed to the sage to arrange for the performance of *Vedic* sacrifices on appropriate occasions. He stood with folded palms before him and said, “Holy sage and preceptor, for these, the people, and for my parents, you are the real parents. Advise the king, admonish the king to rule over the people as he would treat his own children.” When the people heard this prayer repeated on their behalf, they became sad, heart-broken. Some of them beat their breasts, cursing themselves for losing the fortune of being ruled by such a prince. Some inflicted injuries on their own heads. Some rolled on the ground and wailed aloud.

Rama turned again toward the mass of citizens and, with palms folded, spoke a few words to them. “My dear people, you are as dear to me as my very life. Our sovereign ruler has sent me to protect and foster the forest region. Do not entertain any animosity against him for this reason. Guard him and pray for him at all times. Adhere

to his commands; make him happy and be happy yourselves. Your love for me should not lead you to dislike the king. Never wish ill for him. Only those are dear to me who work for the happiness of the king, after I leave for the forest. Those are the people who are really devoted to me, who do what I really like. Fulfil this my desire; honour these words of mine; make me happy. My dear people! Being separated from me, my mother Queen Kausalya will naturally be immersed in grief. Every mother in a similar situation will have unbearable agony. I plead with you, since you are intelligent and full of sympathy, do your best to alleviate her sorrow and to comfort her.”

Then he called minister Sumanthra near and said, “O Sumanthra! Proceed now to father. Advise him and quiet him. That is the task with which you have to busy yourself.” Sumanthra was overcome with grief and stood silent, with tears streaming down his cheeks. He could not restrain his sorrow; he sobbed and wept aloud. Other ministers who were standing around him, as well as the aides in attendance, attempted to bring him round into a state of calmness and courage. But they were too sad to stand there, so they went into the palace, in accordance with the directive given by Rama. The entire city was sunk deep in a vast sea of sorrow.

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

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

Dasaratha opened his eyes. He saw Sumanthra by his side. Exclaiming “Rama!” in uncontrollable grief, he fell into the old minister’s lap and sobbed. He rose and groaned, “Sumanthra! Rama has gone into the forest, but my life has not gone out of this body! What can my life gain by sticking to this body?” Then, getting a little calmer, he said, “Here! Hasten behind Rama! Take a fast chariot and go. My daughter-in-law can never bear the heat of the sun. She will soon have blisters on those lotus petal soles! Go! Go with the chariot!”