

## Chapter 17. The Brothers Meet

**B**haratha and Satrugna 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.

Bharatha fell at the preceptor's feet. "Divine Master! I tell you my honest intention; please believe my sincerity, for I'm not hiding anything. I'm 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 hard-hearted Kaika, I'm indeed even more hard-hearted. Or else, how can you explain that I'm still alive, despite the fact that Rama is far away from me?"

Kaika sent Sita and Lakshmana into the forest and her husband into heaven, plunging the subjects of this vast empire into sorrow and anxiety and bringing eternal infamy on her son. And you demand that I rule over the empire and cover myself with lasting disgrace. I'm not in the least happy over this; I don't deserve this at all. Won't 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 would bring only harm to the people, for my accession itself would be immoral and unrighteous. And who would deign to honour a 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 an 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.

"My mother's evil design has become transformed into an agonising headache for me. I can't 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 and have decided to proceed at dawn tomorrow to Rama. My sins, however plentiful they might be, will be reduced to ashes the moment Rama's eyes fall on me. Even if Rama doesn't speak to me, I will always be happy at the sight of the Lord, 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 sight of Rama. Ministers! Give me permission to go to him. I'm the slave of Lord Rama. He is the Lord for all of us."

No one in the assembly among the ministers, feudatories, and leaders of the people, could raise a 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 had wound round him.

The chief of the elders rose from his seat. "Lord! We'll come with you. We too find separation from Rama an insufferable agony. We don't care what happens to our lives after we get one chance to see the Lord." He asked for this permission on behalf of everyone gathered there.

Others responded to the suggestion whole-heartedly 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? That day, no one among the huge population of Ayod-

hya was so cruel as to prevent others from proceeding to Rama, to see the Lord. Kausalya and Sumitra also set out on the journey with their maids.

Meanwhile, Kaika, overcome with repentance for her errors and sins, communicated with Kausalya and prayed that she too be allowed to accompany the queens. She pleaded for permission to pray for pardon and join the others in attempting 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 for Kaika to join her.

Bharatha was informed that the entire city was on the move. He told the ministers that at least a few had to stay behind in order to guard the city, so some were left behind. During the night, vehicles were made ready before every house, so that the inmates could join the trek at an early hour. Practically everything on wheels was commandeered for the purpose. Food and drink for the entire mass of people were arranged. Like chakravaka birds, the men and women of Ayodhya awaited the heralding of the dawn, so that they might journey toward their dearly beloved Lord. It was a night of ecstatic anticipation for the citizens; they spent it in contemplating the sight of the Lord, which 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 to keep on reciting auspicious hymns and 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 the palanquin for Queen Kausalya were brought before the palace. Bharatha ordered everyone to occupy their chariot or vehicle. Allowing his empty chariot to move on, Bharatha and Satrughna walked 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 couldn't tolerate this. "Son! I can't suffer the sight of your walking. Sit in the chariot at least for some time."

Bharatha replied, "Mother, this is only to make amends for the sins I am burdened with. Do I suffer while walking on the road at least a fraction of what Rama and Sita are suffering in the forest, walking 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; let me walk as I am doing now."

Meanwhile, the royal preceptor, Vasishta, and his consort Arundathi, who were seated in the preceding chariot, stopped their vehicle. Witnessing Bharatha's determination, they prayed to him at least to sit in their chariot and act as their charioteer. But Bharatha was adamant. He said, "I'm Rama's servant, and I'm bound only to his chariot. Until I get the precious chance to act as his charioteer, I won't ride in any chariot or hold the reins of any other steed. This is my vow." Vasishta desisted from any further persuasion; he was genuinely delighted at Bharatha's love and reverence toward Rama.

### **Guha, chief of the Nishadas**

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 aged; and 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 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 as darkness fell. The king of the Nishadas saw the huge concourse and the army on the march. He was perturbed and 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 pondered 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 Bharatha’s plans; 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.

The king of the Nishadas stood ready to attack with his bow and arrow, willing to sacrifice his life in the cause of his beloved Rama, in spite of the fact that Bharatha’s forces 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, to discover whether he had come as a foe or 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 pure (*sathwic*) food; if he preferred them, he must be reckoned a friend. The flesh of slain animals is passionate (*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 slothful (*thamasic*).

Guha, the chieftain of the Nishadas, took these offerings to Bharatha. Good omens greeted him at the very first step. His eyes fell on the sage Vasishtha. He ran forward and fell at his feet, announcing himself by name. The preceptor recognised him as Rama’s companion. He blessed the chieftain and, calling Bharatha to his side, spoke to him of Guha as Rama’s “friend”.

When these words fell on his ears, Bharatha embraced Guha warmly and showered questions on him about his health and welfare. Bharatha asked 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 self-same 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.

Guha was all praise and adoration for Rama. He showed Bharatha the thatched hut he had prepared so that Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana could rest; he told him of the conversation he had with Lakshmana during the night. On hearing all this, Bharatha and Satrugna 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 toward Rama and that there was no trace of hostility in them. He was struck by their devotion and the sincerity of their dedication.

Bharatha looked closely at the huts constructed for the use of Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana; he wanted them tended with due care so that they would 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 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 Satrugna prostrated before the holy spot. Bharatha lamented, “Alas! Accustomed to sleep on a thick soft silken bed, how could my Lord 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 asked to be shown the places that Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana had rendered holy by treading on them. Guha took them to an *ashoka* tree, under whose shade they sat for some time eating a frugal meal of fruits. There also the brothers fell on the ground reverentially, knowing it to be holy ground.

While moving round the places sanctified by Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana, the two brothers suffered indescribable agony. Their humility, reverence, and devotion touched the heart of the Nishada chieftain.

Bharatha couldn't contain his anguish when he contemplated the discomforts endured by Sita —Goddess *Maha-Lakshmi* herself— the dearly beloved daughter of Emperor Janaka, the daughter-in-law of Emperor Dasaratha, and the consort of Rama the Mighty. 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. He explained that he had come with his following and the inhabitants to be in 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, toward the jungle where Rama was. He opened his heart to Bharatha and begged his pardon for doubting his intentions. Bharatha said that his fears were natural and that he had committed no wrong. The truth was that he, Bharatha, was indeed a wicked barbarian! “I am the reason for Rama's exile,” 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 Ganga, and the subjects hurried in groups to honour Rama's brothers. They fed their eyes on the brothers' beauty and majesty and praised them to their hearts' content; they prostrated reverentially before them. They also roundly reprimanded Queen Kaika. They blamed the god of destiny, Brahma, for being so cruel. They shed profuse tears and extolled Rama through manifold forms of praise. They (every man, woman, child) prayed to Bharatha and Satrugna to bring Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana back.

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 Rama's grace. I am but a slave; who am I to exert pressure on Rama? Join me in prayer; pray from the depths of your hearts for Rama to 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 won't 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, and Bharatha asked Guha 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, and the mothers also finished their bath. Everyone got ready to continue the journey. Guha, the chieftain of the Nishadas, collected enough craft to row over the large mass of people, chariots, 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.

### **The hermitage of Bharadwaja**

After making sure that all had been transported across, Guha moved forward into the jungle, showing Bharatha the way. The *brahmins* and the preceptor Vasishta walked as one group; the people of Ayodhya followed in one vast mass; units of the army followed behind. Journeying thus, in the afternoon Bharatha reached the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers, the sacred Prayag. He had never walked so much, and his soles were sore and hurt with a burning sensation. Yet, he plodded on, for he felt his pain as recompense for the pain inflicted on Rama. He ignored the pain, for he was conscious only of the pain Rama was undergoing at that very moment.

Prayag is known as *Triveni*, for the river Saraswathi also enters the twin rivers there. 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 said among themselves, “O! 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 learned of the coming of the brothers with 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.

Bharadwaja noticed Bharatha sitting with his head bent in shame and fear, lest his share in Rama’s exile be revealed through questions that might be asked. Bharadwaja discovered the reason for his silence and nervousness. He said, “Bharatha! You need have no apprehension; I am aware of all that happened. No one can control or direct the path of destiny. Why pine over the boons demanded by mother? No trace of wrong can be attributed to her for this. The will of God induced her to ask such boons. Kaika, I know, loves Rama as her very breath, so the reason for the turn of her mind is to be sought not in any human field of thought and reason but only in the divine plan. As the world judges events, Kaika did wrong; as the *Vedas* lay down, the Goddess Saraswathi, who presides over the tongue, did wrong; know that what 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 you to 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 it. Now your mother is repenting pitifully 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 your mission here is laudable indeed. Your purpose is highly commendable. For devotion to Rama’s lotus feet 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 Rama’s dearly beloved younger brother. Rama sanctified this, our ashram, while on his way to the forest. That night, until midnight, Rama talked to me mostly of you and your virtues. They went 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 Satrugna the day he left Ayodhya. I can’t measure the love that Rama has toward 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. To me, what you feel as a blemish on your name is a lesson, an example, an inspiration. Bharatha! Don’t 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 for you to do so.

“The sight of Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana is truly the treasure all spiritual aspirants seek. I secured that fortune; I feasted my eyes on them. I spoke with them. I was in their presence and I touched them, also. I had the privilege and pleasure of being their host. Perhaps there was some balance of fortune still awaiting me, for I now have the pleasure of seeing you too. Ecstasy has filled my heart. I am truly blessed. Rama exiled himself into the forest for our sake, ascetics living therein, so that our yearnings might be fulfilled and our holiness heightened. We are indeed blessed.”

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 love (*prema*); they felt fortunate indeed to be his brothers, but the joy was extinguished at the thought that they themselves had been exiled from the presence of that embodiment of love. They were plunged in gloom, 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 future. You spoke the very truth. You are master of the highest truth. Rama is unbeatable in skill and power. I have resolved to utter only the truth in your presence. Rama knows the workings of people’s minds and what is agitating them. At present, I have no grief over the wrong committed by my mother. I have no fear that the people will 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 earned high renown; though dead, his fame has spread over the entire world. The very instance that his beloved son, Rama, left his presence with Lakshmana, he gave up the bubble breath. He couldn’t survive the bolt of that tragedy. Therefore, there is no need to be anxious anymore about him. But Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana are moving about bare-footed. Donning the robes of ascetics, they sit on mats of kusha grass and 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, aren’t I the sole cause of all these hardships? This sad fact is eating me throughout the day and night. Food refuses to enter my stomach; sleep refuses to close my eyelids. The crookedness of my mother’s

mind has become a dagger sticking in my heart. The stratagem she devised to install me 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 can destroy this agony.”

The monks who had gathered were delighted to hear these words from the prince. Bharadwaja told him, “Son! Don’t grieve any more. The moment your eyes fall on Rama’s lotus feet, the burden of grief that torments you is certain to disintegrate and disappear.” The ascetics also consoled and comforted him in various ways.

Meanwhile, Bharadwaja beckoned to a pupil and directed him to bring roots, tubers, and fruits for Bharatha and Satrughna. He also ordered his pupil to arrange for the supply of food to the aides, minister, courtiers, and citizens of Ayodhya, all of whom had borne uncomplainingly many a hardship on the way in their eagerness to have the sight (*darshan*) 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 all the guests. For the princes, Bharatha and Satrughna, their families, the ministers and courtiers, the pundits and *brahmins*, hospitality was arranged on an elaborate festive scale. Everything was produced plentifully and perfectly, through the ascetic’s mysterious will-power 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 a 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 entered the place that was covered and cordoned off for their sake. Bending under the weight of sorrow, they too complied with the sage’s command.

Then the bright-faced disciples of the sage brought in 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. The brothers 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, not to us. We have no right to them. In this holy hermitage, only those two, goddess Lakshmi and Narayana, have the title to sit on lion thrones. We are their servants. Permit us to serve them thus.”

The ascetics and the entire assembly were thrilled with joyous appreciation. They extolled among themselves the immense depth of devotion of the brothers 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 to the thrones, picturing them as being occupied by the charming figures of Sita and Rama. A little while after, they broke off small particles from the offered dishes and, placing

them adoringly on their eyelids, ate them as sacramental food.

The elders, ministers, aides, and residents of Ayodhya craved pardon from the sage Bharadwaja for not eating, 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 only the sight of Rama could give them the sense of contentment. That was the nectarine feast for which they yearned. They were plunged in 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 finally had to accede to their wish to be left alone; he could not prevail upon them to sit down at the feast.

### **On to Chitrakuta Hill**

Everyone got ready to start for the forest, even as early as the first intimations of dawn. They prostrated before the sage and secured his blessings and his permission before leaving the hermitage. The servants walked in advance, showing them the way, and 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 allowed no one to bring him footwear. He had no umbrella to guard against the scorching sun; he allowed no one to hold one above him. But the earth took pity on him and made his path 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 at evening. Throughout the 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, prostrated before the holy river in reverential gratitude, and proceeded forward.

Thenceforward, Bharatha and Satrugna 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 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 walking toward the river for water placed their pots on the ground and stood stunned, looking at the brothers without even blinking their eyes for a moment. They wondered who they were and concluded that they were the same two brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, passing through again, this time without Sita but accompanied by armed forces, chariots, elephants, horses, and foot soldiers. They wondered where Sita was. They searched for her amidst the moving mass, with eager curiosity, and they shared their disappointment with their friends in sad whispers.

“The other day, when we saw Rama and Lakshmana, the brothers, shone with the splendour of physical charm, youth, virtue and intelligence. But now some sadness clouds their faces, 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 Rama's brothers going to where Rama was to see the Lord. 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 sight of his brother, Rama, accompanied by the armed forces! Has he no sense of shame?”



Another woman interrupted her. “Sister, don’t talk so. Our Emperor Dasaratha’s children could never have hearts so hard. He must be going to Rama with the various units of the armed forces to pray to Rama and persuade him to return to Ayodhya, to take him back with imperial honours.”

A third woman agreed with this interpretation. “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 all we know. But Rama is the firm adherent of truth. He won’t return to Ayodhya until the full fourteen years are 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 reported the conversation of these village women to Bharatha and Satrugna. They were delighted to know that those unsophisticated women from the rural regions had grasped Rama’s greatness 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. Every moment, their minds were fixed only on Rama.

They encountered many *brahmins*, ascetics, monks, and other holy men as they walked on. And all were engaged in the pleasant task of extolling Rama and his virtues. On seeing them, Bharatha prostrated before them and asked 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 seeing Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana, the brothers fell flat on the ground before them and rose with tears of joy streaming down their cheeks.

They said, “O! How fortunate you are! Tell us, how far away are they? Where are they?” They asked about the health and welfare of those holy men; learning from them that they had to continue the journey for some distance more, they decided to spend the night where they were.

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

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

### **The brothers meet**

That day, Rama had risen from sleep even before dawn. He told Sita that his father was coming into his consciousness more often than on other days. Sita replied, “Lord! You know that I don’t get any dreams. But this night I had a very wonderful dream! I can even say it wasn’t really a dream. I dreamed that Bharatha and Satrugna had become frail and weak as a result of separation from you; finding it impossible to be in Ayodhya for a single moment without you, they were coming to us, with not only the people of Ayodhya but also the Queens Kausalya, Sumitra, and Kaika.” Tears gathered in her eyes while she described the experience.

Rama called Lakshmana and told him, “Brother, you heard, didn’t you, about 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 associa-

tion or relation with the rest of them. This strikes me as a bad omen. Come! It is best we take a bath.” And the three of them went to the river for the bath.

Just then, birds flew across the sky in flocks and 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. Rama told him that it was Sita’s dream coming true! He advised that the best course would be to return quickly to the “thatch” —the *parnasala*.

Meanwhile, the *Bhils*, *Kirathas*, and other tribesmen of the jungle ran to Rama and gasped out the news that a regular military force was advancing toward 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. They had no more doubt on that point.

Lakshmana started quaking with anger. When coming to have the sight (*darshan*) 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. “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 Bharatha’s motives and mind, Rama succeeded in quietening Lakshmana’s upsurge of anger.

Very soon, Bharatha himself sent word through some forest dwellers that he was seeking the sight 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. Torn by agony, he shouted distressingly and in extreme agony, “Rama.” He fell flat on Rama’s feet and sobbed aloud. When Lakshmana saw Bharatha’s anguish 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. While he was so engaged, the queens Kausalya, Sumitra, and Kaika and the ministers, the royal preceptor Vasishta, the pundits and citizens, and the members of the armed forces came near and were overcome by both grief and joy when they saw Rama. Their sorrow when they saw Rama in hermits’ robes by the side of the lowly hut could not be wiped out by the joy of setting their eyes on their dearly beloved prince. They wailed and wept, shedding tears of grief and gratitude. The cry, “Rama! Rama!” rose from their torn hearts and sped over the vast expanse of earth and sky.

Rama spoke to them softly and sweetly and persuaded them to control their emotions. Then, he walked to-

ward the mothers, but he 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 for Lakshmana to be informed more fully, he asked Sumanthra, the loyal minister of the line, to relate to him the details regarding the administration of Ayodhya.

Sumanthra fell down, unable to bear his 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 people, 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.

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 gave expression to many a moral maxim, until both 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 toward her mothers-in-law and touched their feet in great reverence. She also prostrated before the feet of the royal preceptor’s wife. 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 women from Ayodhya saw the plight of their charming young princess and 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 couldn’t 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 long at the turn that events had taken. That day, no one took either food or drink; they had no mind for either. The entire day and night were spent in sorrow.

When the sun rose, Vasishta told Rama to perform the obsequies for the departed father. They were carried out in strict conformity with scriptural injunctions. Since Rama Himself uttered the *mantra* 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.

### **Discussions about returning to Ayodha**

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 two days, Rama approached the preceptor, “Master! The citizens and residents of Ayodhya are suffering very much here, drinking nothing but water and eating nothing but roots and tubers. Looking at Bharatha, Satrughna, and also 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.” And Rama fell at Vasishta’s feet.

Vasishta 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 asked them to return, they felt tossed into fear and despair, as a boat caught in a hurricane in midsea. But when they heard Vasishtha pleading on their behalf, they sailed smoothly, as a 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 filling their ears with Rama’s edifying and exquisite words.

Sita was engaged in serving the mothers-in-law, anticipating their needs and over-eager 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 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 hers.

Bharatha didn’t sleep a wink at night or have a pang of hunger during the day. While the people were happy, looking at Rama, looking at Rama filled Bharatha and Satrugna with misery. They couldn’t bear it any longer; they fell at Vasishtha’s feet and asked 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. “Rama! Listen to the prayers of Bharatha. Conduct yourself in accordance with the wishes of good people, the interests of the people, the principles of politics, and the directives of the *Vedas*.”

Rama recognised the preceptor’s affection toward Bharatha, which 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 responded softly and sweetly to the sage’s proposal with a few auspicious sentences. “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 for him; that is his great treasure. He is younger than me, so I hate to praise him in his presence. My opinion now is that Bharatha should speak his mind.” Rama prostrated before Vasishtha and took his seat.

Vasishtha turned toward Bharatha, for he couldn’t reply directly to Rama. He knew that Bharatha was to be “ruler”. “Give up all hesitations and doubts. Rama, your elder brother, has immeasurable compassion. Open your heart to him; tell him all that you have in mind.”

Hearing the sage’s words, Bharatha felt that Vasishtha had probed Rama’s mind and that both of them were inclined to favour him and grant his desire. So he was glad at the turn of events. He 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 my Rama’s nature. 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 don’t feel content, however long they fix their gaze on him. God couldn’t tolerate my affection toward Rama. He couldn’t bear to see so much love between brothers. 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 brings me no respect for me to 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 hesitate to declare, because of my doubts, that my mother is feeble-minded 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 to escape my grief, along any of the four quarters. I see now that there is one and only one way out.

My preceptor is the great sage Vasishta; Sita and Rama are my sovereign rulers. Hence, I am certain all will be well with me. Lord! I don’t wish for anything else. Rama! Grant but this one wish of your servant. Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna 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. Thus far, you have borne the responsibility of obeying his commands. Now, it is our turn to bear the burden of exile. Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana must return to Ayodhya, and we two will be in the forest as exiles until the sentence lapses. Confer on us this boon and bless us.” Thus saying, Bharatha fell at Rama’s feet.

Vasishta shed tears of joy, but 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 didn’t accept even this prayer. “Bharatha! For me as well as for 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. My most appropriate action is to follow the orders issued to me; yours is to follow those issued to you. Let’s 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, which has been allotted to you, with them and rule them righteously. I will 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 were 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 why it has not broken, in spite of those blows.

“I look calmly at the very tragedy that was caused by me; 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 indulged in such self-torture that the citizens, queens, sages, and others who watched his grief, penitence, humility, reverence and fraternal affection were all stricken like lotus blooms fallen on ice. They reminded Bharatha of many incidents from the *Puranas* to help him recover from his depression.

Rama addressed Bharatha. “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 is committed only by those unfortunate enough not to be trained in the society of the virtuous or at the feet of preceptors. Bharatha! Your name will be long remembered, 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 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 you to dishonour the word of such a loving father. Therefore, don’t hesitate further. Tell me what you have to say, ask about things that you want 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! I don’t like to rule over the kingdom that you gave up, that brought on this disgrace of being the cause for your exile. I have no love toward it either. I can never go against your will, your command. I won’t do so, at any time. If you but cast your loving eye on me with no trace of anger, I 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 Lakshmana and Ayodhya 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 me this prayer; keep me with you; don’t refuse my request; don’t kick me from your presence.” Imploring piteously in this way, Bharatha clasped Rama’s feet.

“Or else,” continued Bharatha, “kindly return to Ayodhya with Sita and stay there. We three brothers will stay on in the forest. We will carry on our lives here in any manner that you prescribe. If you pile this royal burden on me, I can’t bear the weight and live.

“Keep me at your feet and pile on me a weight a thousand times heavier than the empire; I will 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’m opening my heart to your gaze and revealing my inmost feelings. I want only to promote the welfare of the world. Kindly decide on the best course for each of us; don’t doubt our intentions. Shower your grace and confer your commands on us. We will bow our heads in loyal reverence and carry them out without

hesitation.”

Bharatha gave the vast gathering great joy, and their hearts melted with compassion and gratitude. They extolled in manifold ways the affection and faith that Bharatha had placed in his brother. They were affected by the expression of his deep devotion. They all prayed with one voice, “Rama! Lord! Accept Bharatha’s prayer. With the passing away of Emperor Dasaratha, the long-established glory and happiness of the people have also passed away! The world has been pitiably orphaned. Ayodhya wails like a despairing waif. She is lamenting her lot like a chaste woman who has been deserted by her lord.”

### **Kaika pleads for forgiveness**

Meanwhile, Kaika, the forlorn queen —what shall we say about her! She stood 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 she could beg his pardon, but she couldn’t move. 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.

Kaika felt sure that by herself she would never be capable of inflicting harm on him; she guessed that the influence of some evil power had possessed her to bring about this sad series of events. But, she said to herself, the world would never pardon her, however strongly she asserted that it was none of her doing. Torn by these doubts and misgivings, Kaika was powerless to move toward Rama to speak to him, nor could she walk away, 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. Using an opportune moment, he moved toward her in order to fall at her feet and pay her his homage.

Kaika 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 don’t commit a wrong when I hold your feet in my hands. Come. Rule over Ayodhya. Pardon my sin. Only that can redeem me from the disgrace that 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 don’t know; I can’t tell.” She wept aloud in anguish, holding Rama’s feet fast in her clasp.

Rama shed tears at her plight. He assuaged her with soft and sweet words. “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. People don’t try to know the truth; in their ignorance, they blabber as the whim dictates. You didn’t ask for those boons of your own free will, with full knowledge of the implications. All this happened because I willed it to happen. 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 committed no disservice.

“Mother! I repent very much for having made you plead with me so long instead of expressing at the very outset my gratitude for the help you did for my plan of action. Don’t grieve over what has happened, for that 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 her feet.

With this, Kaika recovered her mental peace a little. The other queens, Kausalya and Sumitra, heard the conversation, and when they realised that Kaika was only the innocent instrument of the divine will, they too consoled and comforted her. Nevertheless, Kaika stuck to her wish that Rama accept the throne and be installed as emperor of Ayodhya with Sita as the empress and that Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrugna 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.

### **Rama orders Bharatha to return to Ayodha**

Four days and nights were thus spent in the forest, praying, pleading, consoling, explaining, assuaging, weeping, and imparting solace. One wish ruled all their hearts: to persuade Rama to return to the capital. At last, Rama directed Vasishtha, 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, for them, the place where Rama was was as delightful as a million heavens put together, 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, “O what great fortune awaits us here! A bath in the holy Mandakini River, delicious fruits for appeasing hunger, the sight 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 to persuade Rama by every means to return with them, if they had to go at all. Each of them expressed their innermost wishes in words soaked in sweet love.

Finally, one wise old *brahmin* said, “Well. If we possessed the good fortune and merit to deserve the auspicious and happy company of Rama in this forest, he would certainly agree to keep us here. If that’s not our destiny, our evil fate itself will harden the heart of Rama, and he will drive us back to Ayodhya. If Rama doesn’t bestow grace, who else can? What does it matter where we spend our days if we can’t spend them in Rama’s presence? Away from Rama, we are only living corpses.” When he finished, all of them responded with the exclamation, “True! True! These words are absolutely true.”

### **Sunayana talks to the queens and Sita**

When Emperor Dasaratha had passed away, the family preceptor Vasishtha had sent a message to Janaka, and he and his queen, Sunayana, had come immediately to Ayodhya to console the bereaved. There, they learned about all developments. When Bharatha arrived and decided to proceed to Chitrakuta along with the mothers, the royal preceptor, and the leaders of the people, Janaka and his queen also accompanied them. They waited long for a favourable chance to meet Sita and Rama.

Meanwhile, Sita’s mother directed a maid to find out whether Kausalya and other queens were available for an audience, and she hurried toward 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.

On seeing the queens of Ayodhya, Queen Sunayana felt that even the hardest diamond would melt before their loving conversation, tender manners, and compassionate comradeship. She found that their bodies had be-



come emaciated and that their heads were bowed by sorrow. Their eyes were fixed on the ground below their feet, and they were shedding streams of tears. The three queens were extolling the virtues and excellences of Sita and Rama, but they could not stop the outflow of grief.

Queen Sunayana could find no words. 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, heavenly nectar (*amritha*), but we haven’t seen it. Yet, 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 swan Hamsa, which has lake Manasa-Sarovar (lake of the mind) 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 them, Sunayana herself could not restrain her tears.

Kausalya said, “Sunayana! This didn’t happen through the fault of one particular person. Happiness and misery, profit and loss, are all consequences of *karma*, of the deeds, words, and thoughts of the people themselves. Hasn’t it been declared, “Good or bad, whatever *karma* has been done, its consequences have willy-nilly to be suffered or enjoyed (*avasyam anubhokthavyam, krtham karma subha-asubham*)”? 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 that holds sway over the world from before its beginning be set aside for our sake? It is a mad hope.” Kausalya ended her attempt at consoling, with many a sigh.

Queen Sunayana spoke. “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. Without misery, one can’t identify happiness, right? (*Na sukham labhyathe sukham*). From happiness, no happiness can ensue.”

Kausalya said, amidst her sobs and in a grief-stricken voice, “If Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana live in the forest, many calamities will happen. I know that Bharatha can’t 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 Kaika agreed. They too were saddened at Bharatha’s condition.

Sumitra spoke. “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 Rama’s brother and claimed something from him. But now he is demanding that he should fulfil his wishes, in a pure (*sathwic*), highly righteous manner. Even the goddess of speech, Saraswathi, will hesitate to accept the assignment of describing the virtues that mark Bharatha as a great person —humility, large-heartedness, fraternal attachment, steadfastness of faith, courage, and the inflexibility of that courage. Can the ocean be measured by means of a snail shell? At all times, under all conditions, Bharatha is the effulgent lamp of the royal line, but 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 now, for our reason is 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 to herself, “These queens are really very great, one greater than the other, in nobility. They don’t 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. Look how they describe and appreciate sons born to the other wives of their husband! They don’t distinguish between their sons and the sons of the other queens —what ideal housewives for the whole world. Ah! What large-heartedness! What purity and perfection in the feeling of love!”

Mustering a little courage, Kausalya addressed Sunayana. “Queen of Mithila! You are the consort of the ocean of wisdom, Emperor Janaka. Who could dare give you counsel! We prattle away in our ignorance. Yet, I pray you might tell 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 with him for some time. Since Lakshmana has already spent some time in his presence, let Lakshmana be sent to Ayodhya to oversee the activities and administration there, and let Satrughna be directed to assist Lakshmana in his duties at Ayodhya.’

“If only Rama would agree, the rest of the problems would set themselves right quickly. It is only Bharatha’s condition that gives me anxiety. His attachment and love for Rama are deep-rooted and delicate. The emperor has passed away, and Rama won’t 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 Queen Sunayana’s hands and appealed to her to fulfil this mission, achieve this end, and confer spiritual bliss (*ananda*) on them all.

Sunayana was touched by the affection that filled the queen’s heart and her adherence to the path of righteousness. “Mother!” she said, “Humility and virtue are innate in you. They are a natural expression of your goodness and nobility, as smoke in fire and beds of grass on mountain peaks. Of course, Emperor Janaka is ever ready to serve you by thought, word, deed. He is ever eager to help. But, can a lamp illumine the sun? Rama came to the forest to accomplish the task of the Gods. After finishing it, 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 Queen Kausalya’s feet. Taking leave of her and preparing to leave the place, she went to Sita’s cottage. When she entered and saw Sita, she was overwhelmed with grief. She could not control her tears; she ran toward Sita and caught her arms. Sita consoled her mother by various means; she counseled courage and faith; she prostrated at her mother’s feet. She stood before her mother in her anchorite robes, appearing like Parvathi, Siva’s consort, during the days when she did penance. 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 place where it joins the ocean. 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 overcome with a sense of shame. “Mother! What words are these? What is the relevance? What comparison can be found between me and the holy Ganga?” And she went through the gesture of prostration directed toward 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 mistresses of families to follow and emulate.”

Sita intercepted her. “Mother! If I spend much time with you, the service of Rama might be delayed. Please let me to go to him.”

The mother realised that her desire also lay in that direction, and she felt that she should not be an obstacle. 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 to go serve Rama.

Sunayana pondered long over Sita’s reverential devotion toward her husband and her other virtues. She didn’t take her eyes off 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 and said, “Mother! Sita has gone in; we should 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.

### **Bharatha’s Well**

The sun set just at this time, so Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrugna went to the river for evening sacraments, like bath and ritual worship of the gods at dusk. The pundits, members of the *brahmin* caste, ministers, and others accompanied them. After finishing, they ate fruits and tubers and lay down to sleep under trees allotted to each group. When dawn broke, after the morning sacraments were done, they all gathered around the cottage of thatch where Rama was. Rama came out with a bewitching smile and passed through the thick crowd, lovingly asking each about health and welfare.

Bharatha fell at Rama’s feet when He came near. “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.”

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 permission of the sage Athri.” Hearing this, Bharatha was very happy. He fell at the feet of the sage as well as of Rama and then proceeded with Satrugna and the people from Ayodhya to the interior of the forest, visiting on the way 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 and 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 *Bharatha-kupa*, or Bharatha's Well, all over the world.