

## Chapter 14. Into the Forest

Dasaratha said, “Sumanthra, my Ramachandra is an unshakeable hero; he will not turn back. His resolution cannot be shaken or suppressed by anyone. Efforts made for modifying it will be futile, and we will only be causing him distress by our attempts. Besides, Rama is an unswerving adherent of truth. Don’t delay, for if even a little time is spent in getting the chariot ready, you may miss his trail. My subjects cannot bear the sight of Rama walking along the royal roads of Ayodhya. Go, go!”

The emperor hurried him out with the words, “Carry with you in that chariot a few hampers of food and a few weapons and give them over. Sumanthra! I forgot to tell you this. Plead as strongly as you can, mention also that I told you to pray for Sita to be directed to return to Ayodhya. Take them into the chariot and let them go with you some distance toward the forest. Go into the forest with them, for if Sita is frightened at the sight of the jungle, and you become aware of her fear, you can immediately ask Rama for orders and pray for Sita, the tender princess of Mithila, to return to Ayodhya, bringing to her mind that it is also my wish. Tell her that, if she can’t agree to stay in Ayodhya, I will arrange to send her to her father, Janaka.” Dasaratha repeated these words often; laden with grief at the pictures they evoked, he lost consciousness and rolled on the ground.

Rising soon, he exclaimed, in great distress, “Sumanthra! Why waste words and time? Bring my Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita before me now; let me look at all three. Decide on doing that, and make me happy.”

Then, he plaintively requested Sumanthra, “Go fast, don’t delay, take the chariot to where they are and drive the vehicle as far as it is possible for it to proceed, to the spot beyond which it cannot go. Perhaps, it may be possible to journey in a chariot for three or four days. At the end of that period, let them alight; stand there watching them until they move beyond the reach of your eyes, before you turn back to bring me the news of their health and safety. Now, go. Don’t stay near me. Go.” Dasaratha asked the minister to hasten.

Bowing his head in acceptance of the emperor’s order, Sumanthra fell at his feet and got the chariot ready. He caught up with Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana, who were going along the city roads on foot. He told them what the Emperor had said. He had them seated inside the chariot; then, he drove off in the direction of the forest.

On both sides of the royal road, masses of citizens were weeping and wailing, and Sumanthra tried to exhort them to control their emotions and be calm. They crossed the city limits and moved a little distance further. The populace from the capital ran behind the chariot, all in one panic-stricken mass, raising clouds of dust that reached the high heavens. There was no sign of road or ground; it was one vast plain of distraught humanity. Old men, women, men young and strong, *brahmins*, all with one voice screamed amidst sobs, “Rama! Rama! Take us with you! Don’t leave us behind!” The streets of Ayodhya were empty; the city was as silent as a city in sleep. Darkness fell, like a heavy weight, on every roof.

Some men and women who couldn’t travel stood like stumps, helpless on the road. Many bolted doors and spent the days suffering utmost anguish; avoiding food and drink, rolling on the floor, in whatever place they were when Rama left. Some awaited the return of Rama at nightfall, hoping he might be induced by compassion to come back to his beloved people.

Meanwhile, Dasaratha had himself seated in a chariot! He shouted aloud, “Rama! Rama! ... Sumanthra! Sumanthra! Stop that chariot! I will look at the treasure of my love, just once.” He quickened the pace of the

horses and came faster and faster. The mass of citizens following Rama were caught between his chariot and the chariot of the emperor, and many of them were so exhausted that they fell on the ground. When they saw a chariot passing by with speed, they raised their heads to find out whether Rama was returning seated in it; they rose and tried to stop it, to have a glimpse of Rama, their beloved prince. But, when the groans of Dasaratha fell on their ears, they too broke into sobs and allowed the chariot to pass, pleading pathetically, “O King! Go soon, go and bring back our Ramachandra!”

Dasaratha saw Rama’s chariot speeding along the sand dunes outside the city. He cried out, “Sumanthra! Sumanthra! Rein in. Stop!” and himself commanded his charioteer to speed up. Sumanthra looked back and saw the chariot following his. He told Rama, “Ramachandra! Father Dasaratha is behind us; let’s stop and find out what his orders are.”

Rama also saw the huge mass of citizens and the chariot carrying his father, fast hastening behind him. He knew that if he stopped now, they would surround him and break into uncontrollable grief, that those who sat exhausted on the sides of the road would rise and race, impelled by a new hope, which would be giving them hopes without any benefit. It would also injure the realisation of his promise. If the subjects witnessed the wailing of Dasaratha, it would bring him down in their estimation. Weighing all these considerations, he told Sumanthra, his charioteer, that there was no need to stop—it was best to drive on even faster.

Sumanthra prayed with folded palms, “Rama! I was ordered to be with you for only four days. Then I have to return to Ayodhya, don’t I? On seeing me, the emperor will certainly reprimand me for not stopping the chariot, as commanded by him. What shall I tell him in reply? Kindly keep me with you, throughout all the years of exile in the forest. I will deem my life well and happily lived if I am allowed to be in the forest with you. If you agree, I won’t stop; I will drive as fast as you wish. Kindly communicate your order on this.”

Rama thought about the problem presented by Sumanthra and its implications. “Sumanthra! He who ordered you to get into the chariot and take us in it into the forest, as far as it could negotiate, was your own master, the emperor. He who now follows this chariot, weeping and pleading with you to stop, is Dasaratha. You have to listen to and obey the command of the emperor, not the orders of Dasaratha. You are the minister of the country, of its ruler, and of an individual named Dasaratha. As individuals, between us, there is the body of affection that ties the son to his father. But, as emperor, he has imperial authority over you and me, equally. Your loyalty and my loyalty toward him are the same. You have to carry out your duty. When Dasaratha chastises you for not giving ear to the request he is now making, tell him that you did not hear him; it is not wrong to say so.” Rama asked him to drive faster, without caring to stop the chariot.

Sumanthra drank in with avidity the nectar of moral analysis that Rama had vouchsafed to convince him. When Dasaratha saw that Rama was driving on, he stopped his vehicle and turned back toward Ayodhya, moaning his lot and wailing aloud.

The people, however, followed the chariot undaunted by physical exhaustion, urged on by their determination to hold on to their beloved Rama. Some of them who were ready to sacrifice their lives for him and die in their effort to reach him trudged along, breathless and broken, their feet devotedly stepping on the track left by the chariot in which he sat. Rama saw them trekking behind him, drawn by the love they bore him, and was filled with compassion. He stopped the chariot and spoke to them sweet and soft words that touched their hearts. He discoursed on the various moral aspects of the situation and pleaded with them to return to Ayodhya.

They replied that separation from him was unbearable agony, that they couldn't reside even for a moment in an Ayodhya without Rama and that they were prepared to die in the forest rather than live in Ayodhya! While many among them asserted thus, the younger among them declared that a city from which the divinity of *dharmā* had disappeared was more horrible than the jungle and that they could not live in such a frightful place. The forest where you reside is the Ayodhya for us, they said. Don't be worried in the least about our exhaustion or travail. Observe your vow, your duty, as you have resolved; we too will observe our vow. You have decided to honour the wish of your father as a sacred duty; we too have a sacred duty, to honour the wish of the Rama in our hearts, the *Atmarama*, our master, the authority we loyally revere. We will not falter in our resolution. We won't return. Death alone can defeat us," they said, amidst sobs and tears of despair.

Rama's compassionate heart melted at those words of love and loyalty. Sita shed tears in streams. Lakshmana watched the upsurge of devotion rising from the common people of the realm. His eyes turned red with anger, his tongue was tied with emotion, when he thought of Kaika, the step-mother, who did not have even an iota of this sentiment toward Rama. He sat on the ground, his head heavy with sad thoughts.

Rama felt it was best to persuade them, by whatever means, to return home. He consoled them, sympathised with them, and reminded them of the rites and rituals they had to perform every day and the consequences of non-observance. He described the horrors of forest life and the handicaps they would encounter when trying to live there as hitherto. He advised them to perform rites and rituals correctly and without break, so that his years of exile might pass off quick and smooth and he could return to Ayodhya at the proper time, fresh and fine. They would be helping him to spend his exile in peace and joy.

The *brahmin* youths weren't convinced by this argument! Rama pleaded with them. "Your aged parents will miss your devoted service; it is wrong to leave them unaided and alone."

At this, they said, "Rama! Our aged parents are weak and dispirited that they cannot follow you to the very forest; they came thus far and turned back, pouring their mental anguish in streams of tears. They directed us to follow you and be with you. 'We are too weak,' they said, 'you are strong and young; Go! Serve Rama on our behalf.' Those aged people are distressed more because you are away from Ayodhya than because we are away from them. They will be happy if their sons are with Rama, a fortune they could not enjoy. Take us with you for this reason at least, to shower joy on those aged people." Praying thus, they fell at Rama's feet and wept.

Rama was struck silent at this sincere expression of love and reverence. He was thrilled by the spirit of renunciation of these young men, which he felt was grander even than his own renunciation of the throne. His joy was not unmixed with a sense of pride at being surpassed by his subjects in filial piety. Darkness descended on the Earth while the pleadings and rejections were going on. So, Rama asked them to take rest and refreshment for the night, rather than trek back in the darkness.

In order to encourage them to do so, Rama bathed in the Thamasa river, which flowed by, partook of a meal of roots, tubers, and fruits, and rested awhile. The people who had followed him over long distances were so tired physically that, after the meal, they fell into deep undisturbable sleep.

Rama knew that, on waking, they would all insist on accompanying him, so he woke Sumanthra up and directed him to get the chariot ready without the least noise and drive the vehicle so that its track could not be recognised. Sumanthra recognised that there was no other way. He drove so that the tracks were confusingly complex and even gave faint indications that the chariot had turned toward Ayodhya itself! After skillfully laying

these tracks, he drove forward in the direction of the forest.

The day dawned, and the citizens of Ayodhya rose and looked around. There were no signs of the royal chariot, Sita, Rama, or Lakshmana! They were thrust into deep agony; they aroused the sleeping; they sought to trace the wheel marks on the ground. They ran wildly in all directions, seeking to spot the vehicle.

One among them said, “Brothers! Rama saw how tired we were, how we were sleeping out of sheer exhaustion, so He left this place without taking us with Him.” Then they started blaming each other, for showing signs of exhaustion and inducing Rama to leave them and go alone. Others condemned themselves as inferior to fish. “Fish can’t live without water, but we are alive, though Rama has left us stranded. Fie, fie, on our lives,” they cursed. “We brought this separation from the person dearest to us on ourselves. Why aren’t we bringing death on ourselves to end sorrow?” they moaned.

But soon, they felt that since the Self (*Atma*) in them was Rama, the act of self-destruction was unthinkable. It was also not a meritorious act. And suicide can succeed only when one’s destiny is to die by one’s own hand! So, another among them suggested that they could pray to destiny to sanction that kind of end for them all.

They got involved in these pathetic discussions and doubts. They were anxious to decide on the next step to take. Before long, someone announced that the tracks left by the wheels were traced. It was good news indeed! For the tracks showed that the chariot had proceeded toward Ayodhya! They followed the track for some distance, but soon it could not be seen any longer; it had faded out. It became impossible to guess what had happened, so they returned to the city, their thoughts all in a mess.

Many consoled themselves, saying that Rama would certainly return to the palace, for he had seen their plight and his heart was full of compassion toward the broken-hearted. Rama would return within two or three days, they said. The women entered on various vows and types of worship in order to propitiate the gods to persuade Rama to return to his subjects.

People lived thereafter like chakravaka birds that have no lotuses to live on, since the sun is absent and lotuses would not bloom without its warmth.

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

While the people were suffering, Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana reached the outskirts of the town of Sringerivera. Rama noticed the river Ganga and immediately directed Minister Sumanthra to stop the chariot. He alighted and prostrated on the bare ground before the stream of holiness. Sita and Lakshmana, as well as Sumanthra, did likewise. Rama told the others that Ganga was the source of all wealth and prosperity, all the peace and plenty that shone around. Ganga gave all beings supreme bliss and the highest spiritual boons. They decided to bathe in the holy waters.

Rama asked Lakshmana to find a place where Sita could get down from the bank to where she could safely take a bath. The banks of the river were soft and slushy in the jungle area, so Lakshmana chose a spot, which he reinforced by placing stones and rocks so that she could descend safely and ascend in comfort after her ablutions. He prayed to Sita, the mother, to use this temporary *ghat* for her bath. She took great care while stepping down, and before she entered the river, she too prostrated to the goddess Ganga. Lakshmana went into the jungle to gather some edible fruits so that Rama and Sita could recoup with some food after bath. He offered them reverentially, and they partook of them.

Meanwhile, a few boatmen had gathered. Their eyes fell on the royal chariot, as well as on the princely forms of Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana. They inferred that they must have come on a picnic, so they hastened to their chieftain, Guha, and told him that some royal visitors were near. Guha sent a messenger to enquire and ascertain who they were and what their purpose was, in the forest, by the shore of the Ganga.

He brought back the information that they were none other than the sons of Emperor Dasaratha, that the princess was Sita herself, and that they were accompanied by the royal minister, Sumanthra. Guha felt that the supremely delightful moments should not be enjoyed alone! He informed his kinsmen and comrades and friends that the great Prince, Rama, had come to the Ganga with his brother and wife. He collected fruits and flowers in plenty, and the entire party proceeded in reverential humility toward the Ganga. Guha placed the fruit and flower offerings at the feet of the royal visitors and fell at Rama's feet, as did his kinsmen and friends.

Watching the joy that thrilled them, Rama called Guha near and asked him how they fared and whether they were all happy and peaceful. He asked the chieftain how far his administration was helping the community to prosper. Guha answered, "Lord, Ramachandra! We have all derived limitless spiritual bliss (*ananda*) from beholding your feet. We achieved this great good luck only through merit accumulated by us, by good deeds in the past. Or else, could we, who spend our days in this inaccessible forest, ever hope to be blessed by your visit and the sight (*darshan*) of your lotus feet? From now on, this region is certain to enjoy plenty and peace, for your feet have trodden this soil. There can be no doubt about this, the transformation is bound to happen."

Lakshmana, Sita, and Sumanthra noted the sincere expression of his joy and the tears of spiritual bliss. They were astonished at his devotion, humility, and wisdom. Guha held fast to Rama's feet and said, "Lord! All this is yours; all the riches, territory, and authority that I have as chieftain, as well as all my subjects, are yours. They are awaiting your commands; they are at your disposal, usable for your purposes, your services. I am your servant. Accept me as such, accept all that I am offering and enter the city where we dwell."

Rama smiled and replied, "Guha! you are a staunch devotee. You are deeply virtuous. Your heart is very pure. But listen, I have to roam the forest as an exile, wearing the habiliments of a hermit, in obedience to the command of my father. I should not step into a town or city. I must take only the food prescribed for monks engaged in austerities. I have to live in accordance with regulations laid down for ascetics doing penance. For these reasons, I can't fulfil your wish."

Guha was stricken with sorrow. The large gathering of people who had come from the city, Sringeri, whispered among themselves about the divine charm of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana. One of them wondered how the parents of those lovely brothers and that angelic lady could exile them into the forest. "How could their tongue ever pronounce such a sentence?" At this, another retorted, "Keep quiet, you fool! Those parents have really done good. Had they not spoken that sentence, we couldn't have feasted our eyes on their divine forms. This day, our eyes are enjoying a rare festival." This filled many with satisfaction and joy. The Nishada tribesmen who comprised the gathering spoke among themselves words of worshipful admiration of the royal visitors. They extolled the beauty, tenderness, and soft sweet natures of Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana.

Guha was immersed in sorrow that he had lost the fortune of welcoming Rama to the capital city of the Nishadas, whose chieftain he was. He felt that even if the city was "seen" by Rama, even if his eyes glanced at it once, it would be blessed with peace and prosperity forever. So he suggested that Rama walk up toward a gigantic but gorgeous shimsupa tree that grew nearby. Rama agreed. Guha knew that Rama's eye had fallen on the city

from that spot. He was pleased at the thought. Rama was also happy when he saw the city from a distance. He allowed the Nishadas to touch his feet and directed them to return to their homes, since nightfall was imminent.

Then Rama went through the holy rites that had to be observed at dusk. Meanwhile, Guha gathered quantities of soft grass and tender leaves and prepared soft beds. He sent his subjects to collect tubers and fruit, tasty and fresh, from the trees and creepers of the forest and to bring them packed in leaves, to be offered to the distinguished visitors. Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana as well as Sumanthra, ate the frugal meal and retired for rest and sleep.

Sita slept on the soft bed of grass. Lakshmana sat at Rama's feet in order to massage them tenderly, to relieve the tension of exertion. Rama realised that Lakshmana would continue the service as long as he appeared to be awake, so he pretended to go into deep sleep. Lakshmana feared that any further pressing of the feet might disturb his sleep, and he quietly slipped into the distance. There, he sat in the "hero" posture, so that he could gaze intently at the four directions and recognise at once any wild animal approaching the spot, or any demon or demonic person bent upon disturbing Rama's sleep; he was all attention and vigilance.

Seeing this, Guha instructed his faithful lieutenants to guard the area and ensure that nothing happened to disturb Rama's sleep. He put a pouch of arrows on his shoulder and, holding the bow in readiness, sat near Lakshmana, eager to share his vigil.

Guha, his eyes filled with tears, held his palms folded before him and asked, "Lakshmana! Emperor Dasaratha's palace is, I guess, grander and more magnificent than the divine mansion of the ruler of the Gods, Indra. In that palace, everything is charming and beautiful; everywhere there is fragrance and sweetness; soft feather beds and lamps embossed with precious gems add to the grandeur and comfort of the palace. The beds have sheets light and white like froth on fresh milk, and pillows to match. Sita and Rama, who used to sleep on such luxurious beds, are now lying on a grassy heap with no coverlet or pillow, sleeping through sheer physical exertion! It is insufferable agony for me to contemplate this scene. There, his father and mother, his aids and maids were looking after his needs and comforts in various ways. Sita and Rama, who lived royally until yesterday, are now lying on the ground! Alas, my heart is torn to pieces by grief.

"Sita is the beloved daughter of the world-renowned Emperor Janaka; yet, she is now lying on a dry grass. What a strange turn of fate is this! Are Sita and Rama fit for life in the forest? Oh, it is now being proved true that the consequences of one's acts are binding, in spite of everything else.

"Kaika is the daughter of the King of Kekaya state. No one can believe that she is capable of this atrociously sinful act. These two are at a period of their lives when they have to be happy together. What a reprehensible act it is to inflict this hard sentence on them! Such a fate should not overtake even one's worst enemy.

"The Kekaya Princess has proved herself to be the axe that would cut asunder the very roots of the tree of the solar dynasty. Her selfish greed has sunk the world in sorrow. Ah! My horrid eyes are destined to look on this pathetic sight! What despicable sin did I indulge in to deserve this punishment? Whose happy life caused my eyes in the past to become red with envy, that I had to see my beloved Rama in this plight?"

Guha wailed; unable to stop the onrush of the surging waves of grief. He kept his mouth shut and sat with head bowed in irrepressible agony. At this, Lakshmana was also plunged in gloom.

Lakshmana gathered courage and said, "O! chieftain of the Nishadas! One doesn't get happiness through

another or become miserable through another. One can't get good fortune or bad fortune through another. There is no possibility for such indirect means to succeed. Nor can one really be either happy or miserable.

Each one comes for some purpose, urged by the potentiality of his acts in previous birth or by some sovereign will and resolution. In the course of fulfilling that purpose, they appear to be happy or miserable, that is all. A beggar dreams he is a king; a king dreams he is a beggar. When they awake, they find that happiness and misery were unreal and short-lived. So too, the world is a dream, unreal, illusory. It is a mixture of truth and falsehood (*mithya*).

You feel sorrow because Rama is in this plight, but Rama is above and beyond grief and joy. For those who watch him, according to good fortune or misfortune as decided by the merit or demerit acquired and accumulated, he may appear to be happy or miserable; what you see as joy or grief in Rama is only the reflection of your own mental state." At this Guha calmed himself and gave up his rage against Kaika of a little while ago. He understood that it wasn't proper to find fault with another and assign blame.

"People are all laid up in the sleep of delusion, and they are engaged in witnessing a variety of dreams. This is the way they spend the night called 'life'. Only *yogis*, self-mastered people, keep awake in the night without being caught up in or enchanted by dreams. They have no use for the world and its contents. They have turned away from all sensual pleasures and entanglements. Until this stage is reached, people cannot refer to themselves as 'awake'. When wisdom (*jnana*) is attained and the reality is realised, then the bonds of delusion fall off and love is fixed on the lotus feet of Sai Rama." Guha's thoughts ran on in this strain. He was comforted and strengthened by them. Guha and Lakshmana spent the rest of the night telling each other the super-human attributes of Rama and the fullness of the glory that was latent in Him.

### **Sumanthra is sent back to Ayodha**

Dawn came. While one of them stood guard where Rama slept, the other finished his morning ablutions and returned. Soon Rama moved his limbs, rubbed his eyes, and, sitting up, looked at the four quarters. He awakened Sita, and both wended their way to the river Ganga. After bathing and completing the morning rites, they came back to Guha and Lakshmana. Rama asked Lakshmana to bring a quantity of the milky juice of the ficus tree. Lakshmana moved off without murmur into the forest nearby and, without much delay, brought with him a leaf-bowl full of the juice. Rama applied the juice to the locks of hair on his head, which turned into a thick matted lump, the like of which is generally worn by hermits.

Looking on at this act, Sumanthra could not restrain his sobs. He was shocked that the head that had to wear the jewelled crown was now carrying the burden of matted hair. He lamented that his eyes were destined ever to see this tragic sight. His heart was scorched by agony. "I can't be with you any longer in the forest; it has become impossible. I have accomplished the orders of the emperor. Fate is cutting short my stay in your presence. He ordered me to take you in the chariot until we arrived on the banks of a holy river and then leave you there and return. I have to inform you of this fact; now, it is your turn to tell me what I have to do," said Sumanthra, standing before Rama with head bent in sorrow, in humility, tears flowing freely from his eyes.

"Don't grieve," Rama said, "Accomplishing the emperor's orders is your duty, and mine too. I am very happy that you carried out the orders he gave you. Thenceforward, I will carry out the order he has given me. I will follow his directions with the greatest reverence, and in scrupulous detail. Don't delay; return to Ayodhya.

My parents will be awaiting your arrival with unbounded anxiety. They are longing to hear your description of your journey so far. So take the chariot back and proceed fast,”

Sumanthra pictured to himself the place he had to go back to. He pleaded pathetically, “O Ramachandra! Don’t let Ayodhya become an orphan city. The emperor will find it difficult to hold himself together in your absence. Bharatha will find it impossible to reign.” Sumanthra fell at Rama’s feet, unable to bear his sorrow.

Rama lifted him up and, holding him by the shoulder, consoled him. “Sumanthra! No principle of righteousness is higher than truth. The *Vedas*, the *Puranas*, the epics, all assert and proclaim this, as you know. Now, I have been assigned the task of following this supreme principle of righteousness! What great good fortune this is! If I miss this chance and lose this fortune, I and my dynasty will earn eternal infamy in all three worlds. Infamy will burn the righteous more excruciatingly than a million deaths and cremations. Go, fall at my father’s feet and make clear to him my determination and joy. You must be vigilant to see that my father is not worried about me, Sita, and Lakshmana.”

Guha and his followers heard Rama’s words and were visibly affected by them. Without being aware of it, they started shedding tears. Lakshmana couldn’t bear the anguish and uttered a few words of anger and bitterness against those who had caused this tragedy. But Rama realised his temper and stopped him forthwith. Then, he turned to Minister Sumanthra.

“Sumanthra! Lakshmana is a stripling; don’t attach importance to his words. Don’t communicate them to father. Lakshmana’s mind is undergoing such suffering because he has great affection for me and because he is affected by the troubles that afflict Sita. He gave vent to such expressions, for he has a mistaken notion about those who sent me to the forest in exile. By nature, Lakshmana is endowed with very good qualities.” And Rama began to describe the virtues of his brother.

Sumanthra raised his head and pleaded with Rama. “Lord! Sita is tender and soft-natured. She cannot brave the travails of forest life. Advise her to return to the city, and convince her that it is the proper thing to do. She’s the life-breath of Ayodhya. She’s the goddess of prosperity for the empire. If she can’t come to Ayodhya, the inhabitants will suffer like fish in a dry tank. Let her return and reside, as she desires, with her mother-in-law or her parents. The emperor commanded me, again and again, to tell you this in these very words. When you return to Ayodhya at the end of the fourteen years, Sita could be brought from her father’s palace.”

While Sumanthra was importuning in this manner, Rama signed to Sita, as if to draw her attention to his yearning and prayer. When Sumanthra had concluded, Rama addressed Sita, “Sita! Did you listen to father’s message? Go home and let my parents forget at least a part of the agony they feel at my separation. In their old age, they are too weak to put up with this terrible situation. So you must go back with the minister to Ayodhya.” Rama used various other arguments to persuade her to accept the request of father.

Sita replied, “Lord! You are omniscient. You know the ideal moral conduct prescribed for each section of mankind. I don’t need to remind you. Please listen for awhile to my prayer. The shadow has to follow the substance. Can it be away from it? Solar rays cannot exist separate from the sun. Moonlight cannot exist separate from the moon. Similarly, this Sita shadow cannot live and exist after leaving Ramachandra, the Rama-moon.”

She turned to Sumanthra. “Sumanthra! To me, you are as venerable as my father and father-in-law. You are my well-wisher. Please consider this: I don’t seek any other refuge except the lotus feet of my Lord. The world knows that the daughter-in-law who is brought into the family cannot be any nearer than the son born in the fam-



ily. The statement that they will forget their agony at the separation of the son, if the daughter-in-law return, has no meaning. Regarding the wealth and comfort of my father's palace, I have enjoyed them enough in my childhood days. Now, they appear to me as dry and as cheap as grass, without my Lord being with me. I have no other path, except the path that he treads. Therefore, without misunderstanding me, please agree to my words; drop your attempt to take me back to Ayodhya. Forget it.

“Convey my prostrations to my parents-in-law and assure them that there is no cause for anxiety about us. Tell them that Sita is happy, many thousand times happier than when she was in Ayodhya or Mithila. I am with the Lord of my heart, with the great hero, the best of warriors, his brother, Lakshmana; so, I pass these days in the forest happily, undisturbed by fear, anxiety or agitation of mind. Tell them I am not tired in the least by the journey, that I am very happy, that I consider this exile a great piece of good fortune.”

Sumanthra was so overwhelmed with admiration and grief that he couldn't look up at Sita's face; he couldn't listen any more to such profoundly moving words; he couldn't himself find words to speak to her. He reflected on her virtues, pure feelings, and steadfastness; he deplored the fate that deprived Ayodhya of the presence and inspiration of a lady of such supreme character.

He spoke to Rama: “Rama! In that case, accept one prayer. Keep me with you in the forest and allow me to serve you for the fourteen years.”

Rama replied: “Sumanthra! You are well-versed in law and the rules of morality. You are the minister of Emperor Dasaratha, not a minister under me. It was he who commanded you to come back, so how can I permit you to stay? Even otherwise, it is not desirable for you to stay away from the emperor right now. You are as his right hand. Don't pay attention to your own happiness (*ananda*) and try to keep away from him; go, go to him, without further delay. Going soon would give me and my parents a great deal of consolation and assurance.” Rama persuaded him to go, using various other argument and examples. Finding it impossible to resist, Sumanthra wept aloud and prostrated before the three; his steps were heavy and hesitant when he turned back; both his mind and his body were unwilling.

Rama caught his hand and helped him to walk to the chariot and ascend to his seat. Rama spoke sweetly and softly to him, as well as to the horses of the chariot, to induce them to proceed toward Ayodhya.

Sumanthra drove back to Ayodhya. The horses were reluctant to retrace their steps; they turned back toward Rama, longing to be with him and loath to move away. Despite prodding and persuading, they could scarcely move on. They neighed pathetically in protest, and they stopped off and on, craning their necks to catch a glimpse of Rama.

Sumanthra too was turning back in unbearable sorrow; he wiped the stream of tears that flowed down his cheeks; he kept his head hanging as if unwilling to show his face to people. After sending the aged minister back, Rama proceeded to the Ganga with his wife and brother.

When Guha saw Sumanthra's plight, he was so overpowered with agony that he leaned on a tree, sobbing, with his head pressed against its trunk. He thought, “When even dumb animals find it impossible to live away from Rama, what can be said of the anguish suffered by his parents, who bore him and brought him up lovingly and with such great hope, and by the subjects of the realm, who adored him with loyalty and love. Alas! Who can measure the grief that harrowed Queen Kausalya's heart?” The sorrow seared Guha's soul.

## The boatman's ecstasy

Guha's eyes soon fell on Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana walking toward the Ganga, so he hurried toward them. Realising they wanted to cross the river, he shouted to the boatman on the opposite bank to bring the boat. The boatman hastened across, and, within moments, the boat was ready where Rama awaited its arrival.

Guha called the boatman aside and told him to clean the boat and make it fit for the Prince of Ayodhya, son of Emperor Dasaratha, and his consort and brother, who were crossing the Ganga on their way to the forest where they intended to spend some years. The boatman had heard from his Nishada brothers the sad tale of the exile of the heir-apparent to the throne, so he had lost no time in coming over.

But he had a disturbing doubt that had to be resolved. He had come to know that Rama had placed his foot on a rock and that it was suddenly transformed into a woman; was this the same Rama, or was he a different person? That was the question he asked Guha.

Guha said, "My dear boatman, what a strong memory you have! I am glad you remembered that incident, which happened long ago, and have reminded me too of it!" He turned to Rama and said, with great exultation, "Rama! Listen! This man, my tribesman, has treasured your majesty and glory in his mind; he has brought back to my memory how you released Ahalya, the wife of Sage Gautama, from the stone into which she was cursed. My subjects were very much agitated over the terrible curse that was inflicted on that lady and were delighted when they knew of your divine power that liberated her. Oh, how fortunate are my people to be aware of your divinity!" Guha described the faith and devotion of his boatman with great joy.

Rama moved toward the boat, and the boatman stood before Rama with folded palms and said, "Ramachandra! All the years of my life have become worthwhile with the good fortune that has come to me today. Today I am able to look upon the Rama of whom I had heard long ago. That I could row you, your consort, and your brother across the Ganga is the reward I have earned by accumulating merit through many previous lives. Let me pray for one blessing; allow me to sprinkle on my head the water sanctified by washing your feet, before I row you across."

Guha had not realised that his servant, the boatman, was so deep in devotion to Rama. He was surprised at the request he had so humbly laid before Rama; he was supremely delighted that the man had prayed so. "Listen to me, brother! Let Rama take his seat in the boat; then you can wash his feet with the waters of the Ganga taken in a vessel, it is not good manners to wash them while he is standing on the bank." Guha reprimanded him for his obstinacy and simplicity.

But the boatman wouldn't yield. He pleaded, "Lord! You possess vast wealth. I'm helplessly poor. I'm scraping together the wherewithal to maintain my family through the fees I get ferrying people across. I find my daily income insufficient even for running my little family. How could I be happy if even this income is lost? Therefore, please don't misunderstand me. Let me wash your feet, even before you step into the boat."

Rama grasped the undertone of the boatman's strange request, smiled, and turned toward Sita, saying, "Did you notice the boatman's fear?" Guha could not understand what it all meant, and why Rama had smiled. He was perplexed at the fellow's behaviour. He said, "Hello, boatman! I don't understand what you are talking about. How is the cost of maintaining your family related to this present duty of yours —taking Rama across the Ganga so he can enter the forest and live there? Are you demanding more fees from Rama for this hereditary task? If so, you are only revealing your greed! If your earnings are not enough to support your family, I am ready to supplement it, as the chief of this realm. Don't yearn to get it from Ramachandra. Attend to your business and get the

boat ready.” Guha grew angry at his persistence.

The boatman said that he had heard people say that the feet of Rama had some peculiar power. They say when the feet contacted a stone, the stone turned into a woman. My boat is made by putting together many pieces of timber. If each piece becomes a woman, my Lord would leave them all to my care, for they were born from the parts of my boat! How can I bear the additional burden?

“But, if the feet are washed before he places them in the boat, I can be free from fear. Besides, when I sprinkle the wash on my head, my sins would vanish. So please permit me to have my wish fulfilled.”

Guha was lost in thought. But, Rama called the boatman near him and said, with a smile lighting up his face, “My dear man, come, wash my feet.” He placed his feet in the palms of the boatman! His joy knew no bounds. He kept the feet within his palms and washed them both very carefully and lovingly, not missing the space between the toes, using the sacred Ganga water. Then, he sprinkled the wash on his own head and over all parts of the boat, to guard them against malefic powers. He was immensely delighted at the success of his plan.

He held Rama’s hand as Rama placed his foot in the boat and got in. Rama helped Sita to board, holding her hand firm in his grip. He made Lakshmana sit beside him on one of the cross planks.

They spoke to each other of the devotion and childlike innocence of the boatman and enjoyed the movement of the boat over the waters. They conversed with Guha on various topics, and the time passed so quickly that they found themselves on the other bank without being aware of the journey. Rama pretended to be ashamed of himself when he found he didn’t have even a cowrie shell to offer the boatman, in lieu of the fees due him. Sita knew the feeling of her Lord’s heart, by instinct. She removed a ring from her finger and placed it in Rama’s hands. Rama hailed the boatman and said, “Here, boatman! This is your fee. Take it.”

The boatman fell at Rama’s feet. “O Rama! This day I achieved the gift of gifts. All my sins have been smashed into dust. I am liberated from the awful doom of birth and death. The pangs I endured for many lives on earth have borne fruit; my God has blessed me; my forefathers and my progeny have been freed from sin by this blessing. Lord! Enough for me if I receive and deserve your blessings. When you return, O Lord, come this way and confer on me the chance to do this service. That is the reward I value most in life.” He fell prostrate on the ground before Rama, with tears rolling down his cheeks.

Rama and Lakshmana consoled the boatman and tried to assuage his ecstasy. They tried to persuade him to accept the gift. But he protested, saying, “If I accept fees for taking you across this tiny stream, tell me how much you receive as wages for taking generations of my line, and billions of my fellowmen, across the vast and terrifying ocean of worldly existence (*samsara*), which involves all beings in the fast moving current of change. I have been immersed in bliss since I got this chance; please don’t bind me further by forcing me to accept wages for this lucky chance that fell my way.” These words touched Rama’s heart; he felt that it would not be good to pressure him. Rama blessed him most liberally and let him depart.

### **Guha pleads to stay with Rama**

Rama and Lakshmana placed their bows and arrows on clothes spread on the bank and stepped into the river for a bath. When they had finished, Sita also stepped into the sacred river and, after her bath, offered prayers to Ganga, vowing to return after spending fourteen happy years with her Lord and again sprinkle the sacred water on her head, in thankfulness for the end of the exile.

Rama called Guha near. “Dear friend! I have already used too much of your time for my own purpose. Now, go back to your town.”

When this command fell on his ear, Guha’s face fell. Tears flowed down the cheeks in streams. With palms folded, he prayed, “Rama. Please listen. I shall be with you for some time in the forest; I know all the paths of the jungle; I can give you useful information. I want to serve you this way. Please don’t say no.” Rama was happy with Guha’s love and devotion, and he took him with him. Walking some distance, they rested when evening fell, under the shade of a wide-spreading tree.

Guha and Lakshmana hurried to sweep the area clean and make it fit for Rama and Sita to rest. The fruits on that tree looked very eager to fall and be of service to the divine visitors; they turned red with excitement and joy. Guha and Lakshmana collected the fruits and placed them on broad leaves before Sita and Rama.

But Rama asked, “Lakshmana, can we eat these fruits without first performing the evening rites?” So, they went to Prayag, the confluence of the holy rivers, which was nearby, and had the holy sight before they took their bath; Rama described to them the glories of the spot, while returning from the river. He said that the efficacy of the waters at the confluence of the three holy rivers was so potent that it could cleanse people of all sins that tarnish their minds.