

Chapter 13. Exile for Sita

An unheard-of event in Ayodhya

It was the practice for messengers from the court to travel through cities and villages all over the empire and report personally to the ruler the information they had gathered during their secret wanderings. Rama listened to these communications, as his predecessors used to do.

One day, a messenger who had come on this duty approached Rama with strange hesitation; he prostrated before Him, and, rising up, stood mute and trembling on one side. Soon, he recovered confidence and courage and addressed Rama. “*Maharaja!* Listen to my words! Pardon me for bringing these words to you. A washerman was quarrelling with his wife. He was heard admonishing her. “Fie on you!”, he shouted. “Do you take me to be Rama? Get out of my house. How can I accept you? You lived for a long time in another person’s house; get out of here!”.

These words struck Rama’s heart like an arrow. He couldn’t sleep that night. Toward midnight, he sat up on his bed and thought within himself. “It is now one full era (*yuga*) since I started ruling this land. I have to continue for a few years more.”

The subtle and gross Sita split

Then, sunk in a sad reverie, that ocean of compassion thought, “Alas! I have to forsake Sita. I have to uphold the *Vedic* path.” He went to Sita and spoke to her pleasantly. He had a smile on his face when he told her, “Janaki! You haven’t asked a boon from me so far; yet, I shall grant you one. Go to your holy home.”

That very moment, Sita fell at Rama’s feet and went to Vishnu’s heavenly abode (Vaikunta) in her subtle body. No being, anywhere, nothing, was aware of this fact. Sita, but only in her gross physical frame, was standing before Rama on earth.

Rama asked the Earth-Sita (*Maya Sita*) “Pray for a boon.”

Sita replied, “Lord! I want to spend some happy days in the hermitages of ascetics (*munis*).”

Rama said, “So be it. Start your journey tomorrow morning.”

Sita collected and packed many articles of clothing and utensils for the daughters and wives of ascetics of the hermitages.

The brothers agonize over Rama’s orders

Rama woke up early. Servitors and favour-seekers were singing praises of his virtues and excellences. His lotus-like face bloomed. His brothers paid homage to him, prostrating at his feet. But Rama didn’t converse with his brothers. He kept silent. His face was flushed with emotion. His body showed signs of tension. Every limb was shivering with excitement. The three brothers were lost in fear and anxiety, not knowing the reason for his grief. They shuddered at the sight of Rama’s sadness. They couldn’t fathom the feelings that agitated him.

At last, Rama found words to express his wish. Between sighs, he said, “Brothers! Don’t say no. Take Sita

into the forest, leave her there, and return.”

The brothers were stunned. They were caught in the flames of despair. Their hearts were scorched. They doubted whether Rama was serious or was only joking. Satrugna sobbed aloud, and Lakshmana and Bharatha stood motionless, tears streaming from their eyes. They were speechless. Their lips quivered; their hands shivered.

At last, with folded hands, Satrugna prayed thus, “Your words pierced our hearts. Janaki is the Mother of all beings (*Lokamatha*). You live in the hearts of all living beings. You are the embodiment of being-awareness-bliss (*satchidananda*). Why does Sita have to be discarded now? She is eternally pure, in thought, word, and deed, isn’t she? O, destroyer of the demon (*rakshasa*) race! She is now pregnant and, at this time, in this condition, is it right to forsake her alone?” Satrugna could not say more; the sorrow surging within him flowed in tears and loud wails.

Rama said, “Brothers! Listen! If you disregard my word, breath cannot survive in this body. May it be well with you. Brothers! As I have ordered, take Janaki into the forest this very morning.” He continued sitting with his head bent, silent, as if he was sad at the turn of events.

Bharatha could not restrain his feelings when he heard the words, so shocking to the ear. “Lord! I am very low in intelligence. Yet, please give heed to my prayer. Our solar dynasty has earned fame and renown in the world. Our father, Dasaratha, your mother Kausalya and you yourself—master of the Three Worlds— have won great fame. Your glory is sung by the *Vedas* and by the thousand-tongued divine serpent (*sesha*). Janaki is the repository of all that is beneficent. Her name will destroy all traces of inauspiciousness; it will confer all things beneficent. She is the soul of holiness. By her blessings, women can attain the supreme goal. How can this Janaki live separate from you and exist happily in the forest? Can she live even for a moment apart from you? How can a fish live without water? She is the embodiment of wisdom and the personification of all the virtues. She cannot lead a solitary life.”

Rama listened calmly and then replied, “O Bharatha! You’ve spoken words that are consonant with ordinary ideas of morality. But the ruler has to foster *dharma* and welfare according to the dictates of morality. In carrying out his duties of guarding and guiding his people, he shouldn’t cause any crisis or revolution; he has to protect them with great affection.”

Rama disclosed the information that the messenger had communicated to him. “Brothers! Our dynasty has suffered great infamy. Its name has been tarnished. This dynasty had a series of kings and emperors each one more famous than the others. Their might and majesty are known all over the world. There is none who won greater renown than they. They were ready to give up their lives, but they never acted contrary to their plighted word.

“Our dynasty has no taint attached to it. When there was a likelihood of its being tainted, he who hesitated to give up his life was certainly vile. Understand this well.”

The brothers cried, “Lord! Janaki surely has no trace of taint. She has come out of the blazing fire. Gods or saints will not impute the slightest fault in her, even in dreams. Not knowing this, if anyone calls her a sinner, he will suffer the torture of hell for billions and billions of years.” Bharatha couldn’t control his resentment at the very mention of this possibility.

Rama became visibly angry, and his eyes reddened. Lakshmana noticed it and, unable to withstand it, hid himself behind Bharatha.

But Rama addressed Lakshmana directly, “Lakshmana!” he began, “Grasp the implications of what the people are saying; give up the foolish pose of sadness. If you disobey my command and begin arguing with me, you will have to rue it until death. Take Janaki in a chariot, leave her to herself in a deserted place with no human habitation on the bank of the Ganga, and then return.”

Lakshmana takes Sita away

Lakshmana heard the command of the Lord; he prepared himself even for death, if it encountered him while carrying out that command. He got ready for the journey. Stocking the chariot with provisions and clothing, he made Janaki sit in it and drove off. Rama’s faithful consort was elated at the prospect of spending some time in hermitages; she was full of delight and gratitude. But Lakshmana’s crestfallen face saddened her. She became mute and dispirited. Like the cobra that had lost its crest-gem, she suffered unseen, in her depths.

They reached the bank of the Ganga. The forest was frightful indeed, and they got terror in their hearts. Seeing Lakshmana’s fear, Sita was frightened more. Of course, she knew that she was only acting the part and that her real Self was not there. Still, to make her role successful before the world, she acted her part well. She wailed, “O Lakshmana! Where have you brought me? No hermitage is visible here. Don’t wild beasts and poisonous snakes roam about in this forest? No sign of human habitation can be seen here, Lakshmana! I’m afraid.”

When Sita lamented, Lakshmana was overcome with sympathy. He said to himself, “Rama! What have you done!” Gathering some courage, he looked at Sita, but a fatal thirst overcame him, and he suffered much. Sita was torn with anxiety at his condition and his struggles.

Realising that he was determined to leave Sita there and return, the deities of the forest spoke from the sky, “Lakshmana! Leave Janaki here and go back. Sita, the embodiment of fortune shall live.”

These words from the unseen planted courage in Lakshmana’s heart. He folded his palms in reverence and said, “Mother! What can I do? I have to carry out brother’s command. I have no courage to overstep it even to the slightest. I am the vilest villain. Brother has ordered me to leave you in this thick jungle and return.”

Saying so, he turned the chariot back. His looks were fixed on the track he was leaving behind. He could hear Sita lamenting in the distance. “Lakshmana! Are you abandoning me in the forest and leaving me alone? Who will protect me here?” She wailed like any common woman. Her cries pierced Lakshmana’s ears, but, remembering his duty to follow Rama’s commands, he made his heart as hard as rock and drove fast until he reached the city.

Valmiki to the rescue

Sita fainted in despair. Of course, it was all play-acting. She recovered consciousness after a little while, sat up, and poured out her grief in words. “O *Ramachandra*! From birth, my life has been filled with sorrow. Alas! Life clings to my body, however much I am invaded by grief.” She cried out like this for a long time, bewailing her fate.

That moment, the sage Valmiki was passing through the forest on his way to his hermitage from the Ganga, where he had gone for his ritual bath. He was surprised to hear woman’s voice calling for help from the recesses of the forest, and he followed the voice to its source, searching all round, and, at last, came to her very presence.

She recognised him and told him all that had happened. “O monarch of monks,” she appealed, “I am Em-

peror Janaka's daughter and the *Sri Ramachandra*'s wife. The whole world knows this. I don't know why Rama has deserted me and cast me away. Can the dictates of destiny be escaped from? Great among sages! Lakshmana brought me here and left. He didn't tell me why he had to do so."

Valmiki listened to her tale of woe; he consoled her and comforted her. "O daughter! Your father, the emperor of Mithila, Janaka, is my friend, my disciple. He has reverence and faith in me. Dear one! Don't worry at all. Feel that my hermitage is your paternal home. All will be well with you. You will certainly rejoin Rama. You'll achieve that desire." Taking Sita as his own daughter, he told her to take a bath in the Ganga and return.

After the cleansing bath, she prostrated before Valmiki, and the sage led her to the hermitage, giving her affectionate assurances. He offered her food and pressed her to eat. She couldn't refuse the pleadings of the great elder. Thereafter, Sita spent her days at the hermitage, in constant meditation on Rama and his glory and in sharing peacefully with Valmiki's pupils and disciples the tasks incidental to the upkeep and maintenance of that spiritual household. The residents of the hermitage, as well as Valmiki, regaled her with interesting and wondrous stories and entertained her with humorous anecdotes and incidents.

The city grieves for Sita

Lakshmana reached the city with his eyes swollen with sorrow and his heart heavy with grief. He told the sad tale to the three mothers. They broke into inconsolable sorrow and sobbed at the calamity that had overtaken Sita. They praised Sita's virtues and lamented that a lady of such sterling character should be subjected to this disaster. They blamed Rama for harshness. The capital and palace were sunk in sorrow; no one was free from grief. Only the sound of wailing could be heard. All asked in sorrow, "Could such a mother ever be punished thus?"

Rama heard the wailing and weeping. He retreated into the shrine with Lakshmana as his sole companion and spent the day away from the sight of others. Later, he went to the women's apartments, consoled the queens, and counseled them along the path of spiritual wisdom (*jnana*). He also explained to the people that the true ruler considers only his people as his kith and kin and treats only them as his friends. This, he said, is the code of Rama. He said that the ruler should give up his own kith and kin when need arises, since his real kith and kin are the subjects over which he is placed.

The three mothers were so affected by separation from Sita that they became weaker and weaker with every passing day. Finally, it resulted in their death. They manifested through *yoga* the fire latent in them and allowed the fire to reduce their bodies into ashes. Thus they attained the highest state of bliss.

The brothers grieved over the loss and performed the funeral rites as laid down in the scriptures; they gave away the sixteen great charities as prescribed therein. Then, the four brothers engaged in the administrative problems and assignments set apart for them, in conformity with the wishes of the people and to their full satisfaction.

Preparations for a horse sacrifice

Rama announced that he wanted to celebrate the horse sacrifice (*aswamedha*), which would ensure the destruction of all varieties of grief. He sent information to Angada and others. He went to the residence of the royal preceptor, accompanied by his brothers and the ministers of the realm. They fell at the feet of the *guru*, who received them with respect. He inquired about their health and the welfare of the empire, in sweet soft words. He gave them valuable counsel, quoting stories from *Puranas* and incidents from the epics.

Rama addressed him, “Master! I have one wish in my mind. You have to help me realise it.” Then, he fell at the feet of the *guru*.

Vasishta, the *guru*, asked him what that wish was, and Rama replied, “I have decided on a sacrifice (*yaga*). The people of Ayodhya will be happy, filled with joy, when it takes place. I want to perform the horse sacrifice. The city can be rendered calm if it is done. The people also want it to be performed. Bharatha hesitated to inform you of this, since he is afraid of your reaction. So I felt I must myself approach you and communicate this wish to you. We will abide by your decision and gladly act accordingly.”

Vasishta listened to these words, uttered with reverence and humility. He rejoiced at the idea. “Rama! Your wish shall be fulfilled. Bharatha! Rise and busy yourself with the preparations for the sacrifice.” This made the brothers and the ministers very happy. They extolled the preceptor and fell at his feet. Many *brahmins* well versed in the lore of sacrifices followed Bharatha into the city and palace.

Sumanthra invited leading citizens and called the officials and asked them to decorate the royal roads inside the city, as well as the bazaars and shopping centres. He wanted them to erect halls in many places. No sooner said than done; they executed the orders very soon, and the city was made ready for the big event. The city was excited and enthused into joyful activity. The elders of the city and officers reported to Rama that, as he had directed, information had been sent to the chiefs among sages and ascetics, and Vasishta had also been informed about what was being done.

Janaka and others visit for the sacrifice

Vasishta advised Rama thus: “Send the news of the sacrifice to Emperor Janaka; he will attend the sacrifice with his queen and kinsmen.” His advice was couched in persuasive and pleasant words. He also said, “Send invitations to the chief ascetics, *brahmins*, and sages.” When the *guru* agreed, Rama took him around Ayodhya to see the preparations; they were both very pleased at the decorations all over the city.

The official messengers visited kingdoms near and far and presented the invitations to the rulers of those lands. One messenger went to Mithila, Janaka’s capital city.

Jambavan, Angada, Sugriva, Nala, Nila, and other monkey leaders arrived. Ascetics and monks came to the city and were welcomed and accommodated with due regard to their spiritual eminence. Soon, Viswamitra arrived; Rama honoured him, and offered reverential hospitality. The great sage Agastya also came. He was given proper reception, and arrangements were made for his comfortable stay in the capital. They saw the sanctified hall where the sacrifice was to be held and were delighted.

When the citizens of Mithila saw the emissary from Ayodhya, they were happy. He informed Janaka, the emperor, of the sacrifice that Rama was to perform. As soon as he heard the news, Janaka rose from his throne. He was thrilled. His eyes streamed tears of bliss. He asked the emissary whether Rama and his brothers were well. The messenger replied that the letter he had brought would satisfy him on all scores, and he handed over the auspicious message. He couldn’t speak more.

And who could describe the condition of the emperor? His kinsmen were transported with delight. The city resounded with shouts of “Victory (*jai*)!”

The emperor read the message over and over and was overwhelmed with joy. He called a courier in and or-

dered him to, “Spread this news in cities, towns, and villages throughout the empire. Announce it with the play of the ten musical instruments.” Then, he called in the minister and handed him the message. The minister received it most respectfully and pressed it on his eyes before reading it for himself and being thrilled thereby. Bringing to mind Rama’s glory, he shed profuse tears of joy.

In front of every home in the city: the master of the house installed a pot of auspicious significance. The emperor gave away countless valuables in charity to celebrate his receiving the good news. The city of Janaka was swaying in ecstasy.

Janaka arrived at Ayodhya after the long journey from Mithila. On the way, he alighted to pay his respects to Sathananda, his preceptor. He blessed Janaka and told him to proceed fast to Ayodhya, accompanied by his entourage and army—the latter including all four fighting forces: chariotry, elephantry, infantry, and cavalry. Janaka left behind a section of the army to safeguard the city. He assigned a palanquin for his *guru*, Sathananda, and rode in another himself.

The earth quaked when the entire party left for Ayodhya. Who could count the number of generals, commanders and heroes that the army had in its ranks? Journeying thus, Janaka reached Ayodhya at the end of two days.

When he knew that Janaka was close to the city, Rama went forward to receive him, and they met in great mutual affection. A magnificent residence surrounded by a vast plain had been set apart for him. It was a charming heavenly residence, right on the bank of the Sarayu River. Rama had deputed his brothers to receive and render hospitality to the royal guests.

Rama fell at Janaka’s feet and, rising, sat by his side. Janaka was overwhelmed by the joy that welled within him. He stroked Rama’s head and accosted him softly and sweetly. Rama replied with similar sentiments in felicitous language. He assigned aides to look after the comforts of Janaka and his entourage. He directed Bharatha to be at the service of the emperor.

Meanwhile, Vasishtha also arrived in Rama’s presence, accompanied by his disciples, ten thousand in number.

The golden idol of Sita

Vasishtha said, “*Ramachandra!* Listen! The *Vedas*, scriptures (*sastras*), *Puranas*—all of them, without exception, proclaim that a sacrifice performed without the duly wedded wife by the side of the celebrant will be barren of results. Great sages also declare the same. Therefore, arrange to bring Janaki back. She is very necessary during the sacrifice.”

Rama was surprised at these words spoken by the chief among sages. He kept silent, without explaining the truth or untruth of that belief. Finally, He said, “Chief among sages! You have to carry out my wish without causing a breach of my vow, and without bringing down the reputation of my dynasty. If Janaki is brought back, the reputation is bound to suffer. And, I won’t marry just to have a wife for the sacrifice.”

Vashishhta consulted many famed sages for a solution. They all held fast to the rule that Janaki must be brought; they said, it was an unavoidable prerequisite. But Rama, who was himself the master of all codes of morality, the embodiment of all the forms of God, and the essence of all the scriptures, thought it over for a while and announced that a golden idol set with gems be made of Sita and kept in Sita’s place. He said that all the scriptures

supported this view and that there could be no objection to this procedure on any score. The ascetics, sages, and scholars versed in all fields of knowledge couldn't contradict this opinion. They were all surprised at the validity of the solution offered. They admired his omniscience and acknowledged that he was the core of all codes.

The golden Sita was got ready in one single day; it was made more charming and realistic through jewels and garments. Everyone who saw it mistook it for the live Sita; it was so realistic. If Sita had seen it, she too would have been struck with wonder. When they saw the idol, many believed that Sita had returned. They praised the makers with a thousand tongues.

The horse sacrifice begins

Rama sat on the lion throne over a tiger skin spread over it. The golden Sita was placed by his side, where the wife had to take her position. The assembly was led to believe that Sita herself was there. All present prostrated in gratitude and joy.

Vasishta addressed the courtiers and asked them to extend hospitality to the assembled guests according to the rules in practice. "Give everyone what they wish for and make everyone happy and contented." They seated them in proper lines and in appropriate places, with the help of Bharatha, who supervised the arrangements. Each one of them congratulated himself on the grandeur of the reception accorded to him and praised the organisers for the care and consideration they showed.

The sacrifice (*yaga*) hall was guarded on the outside by 500 warriors and inside by 500 masters of the *Vedas*. The sacrifice began on the second day of the bright half of the month of *Magha*, after Rama had initiated himself with the necessary rites. Vasishta directed that the horse chosen for the sacrifice be brought so that it might be examined by experts for the prescribed auspicious marks.

Lakshmana prostrated before the *guru* and hurried to the stables of the palace to decorate the horse before leading it into the hall. A gem-set saddle was placed on its back. The horse was immaculately white—the horses of the sun would have felt ashamed to stand before it! When it was fully caparisoned, it was so charming that people thought the god of love and beauty had a hand in adorning it. It was an impossible task to describe its splendour. It could be said that the horse gave the impression that the sun-god (*Suryanarayanamurthi*) had turned into a horse and was prancing proudly. A peacock feather, with emerald gems shining in it, was placed on its forehead.

Like the stars shining in the sky, the feather shone brilliantly with its scintillating gems. Silk cords that shone like lightning flashes were placed round its neck and held by attendants. It was accompanied by 5000 great warriors—heroes of many a battle and fighters of invincible mettle—led by Lakshmana, all on horseback.

When the cavalcade entered the hall, Viswamitra instructed Rama to worship the sacred sacrificial horse, which was to be sent out on its mission of conquest. He gave away the sixteen articles in charity; he performed the ritual purificatory bath. Then, he tied on its brow the gold plate with the inscriptional message to all rulers of the land. This was the writing it carried:

In the city of Ayodhya, there is a hero; he is the destroyer of enemies. Even the Lord of gods trembles at the sight of him. This horse is his sacrificial animal. The strong may lay hold of it; or they have to pay him tax and tribute; or if they cannot do either, they must flee into the jungles.

Rama inscribed thus on that gold plate and tied it on the brow of that horse.

The demon Lavana

Meanwhile, Bhargava and other sages came to Rama and related to him the atrocities perpetrated by the demon Lavana. The assembled sages were saddened at the news. Rama called to his presence Satrugna; he gave him an arrow-case full of the most powerful weapons. He told him, “Use these weapons with the appropriate *mantras* on the enemy. Go, achieve victory and return triumphant.”

Then, Rama wanted Vibhishana to come to him. He fell at Rama’s feet. Rama asked him, “Tell me all about this Lavana.” Vibhishana described all he knew about Lavana’s power and nature.

Vibhishana had a stepmother who had a daughter named Kumbhinas; she was given in marriage by Ravana to a member of the Danava clan, Madhu. Madhu accepted her and in the course of time, she gave birth to the demon Lavana. He underwent severe asceticism, praying to Lord Siva to bless him with boons. Siva was pleased at his austerities. He gave him a trident, describing its prowess thus, “Lavana! Whoever wields this trident shall not be easily overcome in battle by anyone.”

With the help of that trident, Lavana has been terrorising gods, men, demons, and serpents and parading his powers over the entire land. He was pursuing all living beings and ill-treating them. No living being was left unconquered by him.

Hearing this from Vibhishana, Rama gave vent to a peal of laughter. Of course, there was nothing he did not know. But since he was wearing a human vesture, he had to act as if he did not. He had given him the trident in the form of Siva, and he laughed at the stupidity of the recipient and the evil use he was making of it. He blessed Satrugna with a portion of his divine power and sent him on the mission of destroying Lavana, the demon.

Under Rama’s orders, 3,000 war drums beat in unison, and the “thump, thump” shook the earth. Horses and elephants cried out in joy, and the soldiers blew conches and marched on Lavana’s capital city. Lavana heard their war cries. He emerged from the fort with 64,000 soldiers. He roared like a lion, eager for the kill. He played several magic tricks to evade defeat and to confound the enemy. But his army was shattered to pieces. The sons of Lavana who entered the battle were killed by Satrugna’s son Subahu. They reached the heaven reserved for heroes who die fighting. At last, Satrugna shot an arrow invoking the name of Rama, and that arrow dealt a mortal wound to Lavana. He drew his last breath and ended his vicious career. The gods acclaimed the victory with a chorus of “victory (*jai*)” and showered blessings on Satrugna.

Kusa and Lava capture the horse

Satrugna moved on with his army and came to the banks of the Yamuna. He prostrated before the holy river and led his army further. While proceeding thus, venturing in the four directions along different routes and encountering different places, he happened to reach the hermitage of Valmiki. There, Janaki was living with her twin sons, each redoubtable in splendour like the sun.

The two boys saw the horse, read the golden plate tied around its brow and led it away, to be bound and kept at the hermitage. Then they came forward, eager to fight the guardians of the horse, with an arrow-case tied around their waists and bows and arrows in their hands. By that time, the warriors accompanying the horse reached the place. They saw the horse tied to a tree. Finding that it was done by the boys, they cooled down and said, “Sons!

Your parents are indeed blessed to have such charming children. Well. Let that horse loose and go home.”

But the little boys replied, “O ye heroes! You have come for battle and not for begging, we believe. When you beg the horse from us, you are tarnishing the fair name of warrior (*kshatriya*).”

Hearing this, the guardian soldiers said, “Brave boys! Yes. Don’t tarnish the fair name of warriors. That is why we ask you to be careful in speech.”

The boys only laughed at this repartee. They said, “Ah. How brave must be the person who sent this horse under the protection of people like you! If you have no strength to take it from us, you can go home.”

When the boys, Kusa and Lava, spoke so sharply and sarcastically, the soldiers were provoked to fall upon them, in spite of the fact that they were but tender boys. Lava shot a succession of arrows at them, quite in a sportive manner, humming tunes within himself and rather carelessly as if engaged in a play. The bodies of the warriors were shot through in so many places that they were rendered meshy. They fell fainting on the ground; some of them ran to Satrugna’s camp and cried, “*Maharaja!* Two boys, evidently children of the hermits, have captured our horse and in the fight that ensued, they killed a large number of our soldiers.”

Satrugna was enraged at this effrontery; he gathered the four sections of his army and marched toward Kusa and Lava. When he confronted them and saw their handiwork on the field, proving their overwhelming prowess, he was shocked into shame. “How can I enter into battle with these two boys?” he hesitated.

Satrugna addressed them thus: “O ye children of hermits: Let the horse loose and go home. You are worthy of worship; it is not right to wage battle with you.”

The boys would not yield. They said, “King! What is your name? From which city do you come? Why are you moving through this forest at the head of an army? Why do you let this horse wander about as it likes? Why have you tied this gold plate round its brow? Well, if you have the strength and the courage, remove the plate from its brow, loosen the horse, and take it home.”

When Lava and Kusa spoke straight and sharp like this, Satrugna bowed his head in shame and ordered his men to take up arms and march forward.

The boys laughed among themselves. “Aha! This king is pretty powerful! But listen. Can a lion be frightened when you clap your hands?” They took up the bow and arrow, remembering their *guru*, the sage Valmiki. Their arrows shattered Satrugna’s chariot to pieces. They also entered his body in many places and made it a patchwork of holes. His veteran warriors fainted and fell. They called each veteran forward and shot arrows at them with fatal effect.

Rama sends Lakshmana to fight the twins

Soon, Rama was informed of the exploits of the two boys from the hermitage. Of course, he knew that they weren’t children of the hermitage, but he didn’t disclose that fact. He made them believe that what they said was true. He doubted for a moment how anyone could fight tender boys belonging to monks. At last, he said, “Fighting cannot be avoided. Take Lakshmana with you and go.” Those who had fled to Rama had to return. Rama also commanded, “Bring the boys here. Since they are from the hermitage, they don’t deserve death in any case.”

Lakshmana marched at the head of a fully equipped army. He reached the place where the engagement had already taken place. He saw the heroic warriors who had fainted and fallen. He was surprised at the audacity of

the ascetic boys. He addressed them. “Boys, I warn you, save yourselves. Flee from this place back to your homes. You are *brahmin* boys, and it would be harmful for us to fight you. It is against the injunctions of scripture. Get away from before my eyes.”

Kusa and Lava greeted these words with a peal of laughter. “O brave commander! See how your brother has fared; take refuge in your own home soon.”

Lakshmana heard them and, with one look at Satrugna, who had fallen in a faint, he took up his bow and arrow. But he doubted whether fighting the children of monks was right. He tried to persuade the boys. “Boys,” he said, “you have no reasoning faculty. You are mere boys. There is no profit in fighting you. Go, bring those who are supporting you in this adventure.”

Even while Lakshmana was importuning thus, Kusa, without paying the least attention to his suggestion, shot an arrow right against him. The earth shook in terror at the impact of that arrow. That arrow spread all over the sky. Its splendour was such that even the sun was rendered dim.

Unable to withstand the valour of Kusa and Lava, Lakshmana grew angry and fell on them with enormous violence. He placed his chariot before them and began attacking them with no dread of the consequences. The brothers broke his arrows into pieces; they fought most admirably, with many new stratagems. Lakshmana threw his mace at them, and when it hit Kusa, he suffered great pain. He rolled on the ground. Seeing this, Lava got enraged; he aimed an arrow at Lakshmana’s chest. Though it hit him straight, being a stronger and older hero, he didn’t fall.

Lava jumped on him, and they had a personal duel with fists. The contest was balanced, with no one winning; both of them used many holds and evasive tactics. Each fought using all his strength. Lava pounded Lakshmana with his thunderbolt hits. Lakshmana bore the brunt with pain and appreciated the little fellow’s mettle and skill.

Lakshmana took Rama’s name and aimed an arrow at Kusa. Kusa, who had raised himself up, fainted and fell again. He remembered Valmiki and Sita as he fell, so he could soon stand up. He recovered his bow and arrow and attacked Lakshmana. Though Lakshmana replied with an arrow that he had used against Meghanada, it couldn’t harm the boys. The boy cut it into pieces, and the pieces fell on the ground.

Lakshmana said to himself, “Ah. These calamities are happening to me since Sita was exiled. I can never have peace unless I discard this body.” Just then, Kusa fixed on his bow the Brahma arrow that Valmiki had taught him to use. At the very prospect of its release, the three worlds shook in fear. He aimed it straight at the heart of Lakshmana and let it go. Lakshmana was hit, and he lost consciousness.

Rama comes to the scene of the battle

Messengers carried the news to Rama. Bharatha was sunk in sorrow; he folded his hands and stood before Rama. “Lord!” he said, “We are experiencing the consequences of the wrong we committed when we exiled Sita.”

Rama told the brother, “What! Are you adopting this tactic because you are afraid of fighting in battle? Well, if that is so, I myself will go into the field. Get me the chariot. Adjourn further rites in the sacrifice (*yaga*); I shall go and find out the antecedents of those boys. Brother! Send word to our former allies and friends. Bring Hanuman to the battlefield.”

Rama reached the spot where the fighting was going on. He was surprised to see the streams of blood.

At that very moment, Kusa and Lava, the unbeatable warriors, also came to the place. The monkeys who accompanied Hanuman to the field were stricken with terror. But Hanuman addressed the brothers and said, “Boys! The parents who have given birth to such magnificent heroes as you are are really blessed.”

But Kusa declared, “O monkey! If you don’t have the strength to meet us in battle, go back! Don’t prate.”

At this, Bharatha developed much anger. He shouted to his men, “Well! Use your weapons!” When he said so, the monkeys cast trees, rocks, and mountain peaks on them. Lava pulverised all of them by means of a single arrow. In a short time, Rama’s forces were in complete rout. The field was full flood of blood. All the valiant soldiers lost their lives. At last, even Bharatha fell fainting.

Then, Rama came into the battle area, red with anger, at the head of a large army; he saw the two boys and, without letting arrows against them, he got near them and asked, “Boys! Who are your parents? Where are they living? Which is your native land? What are your names?”

In reply, Lava said, “O king! Of what use are these questions? You brothers, all four of you, have the same mannerism, I believe. Come, take up your bow and arrow and fight. Why do you bother about parents and native place; this is no parley, preliminary to marriage negotiations. This is serious business.”

But Rama insisted on continuing. He said, “Boys, your bodies are so tender. I won’t fight with you until I know your names and your lineage.”

“King. Our mother is a daughter of Emperor Janaka. Janaki is being fostered by the sage Valmiki. We do not know the name of our father; nor do we know the lineage to which we belong. Our names are Kusa and Lava. We reside in the forest,” they said.

Rama pretended to have discovered just then that they were his children and told them, “Boys! Give fight to the army that is coming behind me.” Saying this, he raised up Angada, Jambavan, Hanuman, and others from the fainting fit into which they had fallen. He also raised Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrugna, so that they might see the happenings of the future. Then, he addressed the soldiers. “Men of the army. Fight, so that fame and status might be protected and strengthened.” When the battle was renewed, Rama watched with immense delight the heroism of the boys with their bows and arrows and their superior skill and bravery.

The monkey heroes failed to find any means to overpower the boys, so they spoke to one another that no one in the fourteen worlds could gain victory over them. They couldn’t say or do anything more and had to keep silent.

Just then Kusa fell upon Rama. The impact forced Rama to faint and fall. Kusa pulled down the decorative ropes and chains on Rama’s chariot and horses, and the twins bound Hanuman with them. They led Hanuman at the end of the rope and took him home. They also took other monkeys and a few bears, all with bright coloured clothes and decorations on them. And, the sacrificial horse was among the possessions they paraded. With these, they approached the mother, Janaki. They prostrated before her and offered the booty acquired as homage to her.