

fourteen years' life in forest. The king fainted when he heard the demand. But, Śrī Rāma, on hearing about it, put on an anchorite's apparel and got ready to start for the forest. Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa also got ready to follow Rāma into the forest. While the entire population of Ayodhyā stood there weeping, Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā wearing the forest-dwellers' garb started for the forest.

11) *Death of Daśaratha and Bharata's decision.* As soon as Sumantra, who had accompanied Rāma and others returned to Ayodhyā, Daśaratha expired on account of unbearable grief caused by Rāma's exile. Messengers brought to Ayodhyā Bharata and Śatrughna from Kekaya where they were put up with their uncle Yudhājit at the time of their father's death. But, they were kept in the dark of all that had happened in their absence till their arrival at the palace. Bharata, who heard of everything from his mother was greatly upset and got ready to go to Rāma in the forest. Śatrughna too got ready to accompany him. Arundhatī and Vasiṣṭha in a chariot in the fore-front, Kausalyā and Sumitrā in another chariot just behind the first one, Bharata and Śatrughna behind them—in this manner the great journey into the forest started. Leaving all others behind him, Bharata went forward and prostrated before Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa at Citrakūṭa. Śrī Rāma broke into tears on hearing about the death of their father. But in spite of Bharata's pressing request Rāma refused to return to Ayodhyā. At last Bharata yielded to Rāma's injunction and returned to Ayodhyā with the latter's sandals. But he did not enter the palace; instead he built an āśrama at Nandigrāma and worshipping Rāma's sandals lived there.

12) *Trip to Pañcavaṭī.* From Mount Citrakūṭa Śrī Rāma and others started towards the forest. When they continued their journey after visiting the Sage Atri's āśrama a Rākṣasa called Virādha ran away carrying off Sītā. Rāma killed Virādha and regained Sītā. Then they visited the āśrama of sage Śarabhaṅga in the Kumuda forest. Therefrom they went to the Mrkaṇḍu forest where they visited maharṣi Agastya, and there Rāma took the vow to kill Rāvaṇa and other evil Rākṣasas and thus render the land safe for sages to perform tapas. Agastya presented to Rāma a Vaiṣṇava bow, a Brāhma arrow and a Śaiva quiver. Rāma kept them with Agastya himself to be given to him when required. Then Agastya gave Rāma a divine ornament such as was not available in all the three worlds. Rāma tied it round Sītā's neck. Taking leave of Agastya, Rāma and others went to the Daṇḍaka forest. It was on a high peak of Mount Mahākrauñca in the forest that Jaṭāyu, brother of Sampātī and a very close friend of Rāma lived. Rāma and Jaṭāyu renewed their old friendship and decided to be of mutual service in future. After that Rāma and others rested themselves on the banks of the near-by Godāvarī.

13) *Stay at Pañcavaṭī.* Pañcavaṭī was on the southern bank of the Godāvarī. Five vaṭas (peepal trees) of the same size stood there in a circle, and so the place was called Pañcavaṭī. (See under Pañcavaṭī). Śrī Rāma decided to build his āśrama at the centre of those trees. Lakṣmaṇa cut down an ebony tree there to put up a parṇaśālā (hut). At once the log disappeared and the dead body of a Rākṣasa youth was found there. It was the corpse of Śambhukumāra, son of Śūrpaṇakhā. He

was performing tapas there to propitiate Śiva when he was overcome by the beauty of Sītā and to look at her from a hidden spot he had assumed the form of the ebony tree. It was him that Lakṣmaṇa had cut down. Śrī Rāma understood the situation and explained to his wife and brother about the trickeries of the Rākṣasas. Then the parṇaśālā was constructed and they lived there. Hearing about the coming of Rāma all the sages of the Daṇḍaka forest visited them. They lived in Pañcavaṭī for thirteen years.

14) *Test by Parameśvara (Śiva) and Pārvatī.* Parameśvara and Pārvatī, who knew that many tricky changes would occur in the thirteenth year of the life of Rāma and Sītā there, decided to submit them to a test. The object of the test was to see whether Rāma and Sītā would recognise each other under all circumstances. When Sītā one day entered the river Godāvarī to fetch water, she saw two swans enjoying themselves in a lotus pool in the middle of a sand-shoal in the river. When Sītā went near the pool she saw Rāma bathing in it. But on a closer look she recognised that it was not Rāma, but Śiva, in the guise of Rāma, who was bathing there. To befool Sītā Śiva, who was disguised as Rāma, told her :—Dear one ! Please come to me quickly. Why were you so late ?

Sītā :—Oh, Deva ! salutations. Why did you alone come to the bath ?

Rāma :—I had to come alone as Devī did not come with me at once and was late in coming.

Sītā :—Why did not the Devī come ? You two are unique. Devī might be alone at Kailāsa just now. It was not good that you did not bring her also with you.

Śiva : Oh great Devī ! salutations to your divine greatness. Let me return to Kailāsa after saluting Śrī Rāma. Hail unto thee.

Meanwhile Śrī Rāma was waiting impatiently for Sītā to return. Then Sītā approached him looking into a lotus flower she held in her hand and also throwing, off and on, amorous glances at him. (She was in fact Pārvatī in the guise of Sītā). And she told Rāma :—My Lord ! you would excuse my delay in returning. The delay was due to my tarrying there to look at the play of two swans. Śrī Rāma looked closely and recognised that it was not Sītā and replied as follows :—Oh Devī ! my salutations. Did you come alone ? Where is Deva ? How is it that you are separated from him ? Mahādeva and Mahādevī are one and inseparable. Then how this separation ? Sītā (Pārvatī) :—Salutations. Thou art omniscient and omnipotent. I return to the presence of Śiva.

15) *The incident of Śūrpaṇakhā.* Śūrpaṇakhā was the wife of a Rākṣasa called Vidyujjihva. Once in a war which Rāvaṇa, Vidyujjihva and other Rākṣasas fought at Devaloka Vidyujjihva was killed by mistake. Rāvaṇa, therefore, permitted Śūrpaṇakhā to choose whomsoever she liked as her husband, and she went about the world in search of a suitable husband. She liked some persons, but they did not like her, and vice versa. Thus she was roaming about discontented. She was also on the look-out for an opportunity to take vengeance on Lakṣmaṇa for killing her son, Śambhukumāra.

Śūrpaṇakhā, who heard about the beauty of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa came to Pañcavaṭī disguised as Lalitā. Śrī Rāma alone was there in the āśrama at the time and she told him that she was love-sick. Śrī Rāma rejected her prayer on the plea that he was already married.