

THE TWO BOONS

Vedic hymns echoed everywhere. For the ceremonial bath of Rama and Sita, the holy water of the Sarayu river was brought in pots of gold by attendants. Pundits recited hymns calling down benediction on them..The recitation was most heartening and pleasant to the ear.

While Manthara, the maid of Kaikeyi, was returning the previous night, she witnessed the excitement of the populace and asked someone the reason. She came to know about the imminent Coronation of Ramachandra, which was the cause of all the joy and exultation. She also saw the maids of the Palaces of Kausalya and Sumitra dressed in jasmine-white saris and bedecked in costly jewels, hurrying hither and thither. She could not bear the sight any longer. She had creeps all over her body like scorpion stings in

plenty. She ran towards the palace of Kaikeyi, and finding that the queen had already retired into the inner apartments, she neared the door and shrieked, “Mother! Mother! Open the door! A very urgent matter, now! Your life itself is in mortal danger! An earthquake is afoot.” Hearing her excited announcement in words that rolled one over the other, the Queen hastily opened the door and enquired in fear, “Why? What has happened? What is the calamity? Has anything caved in? Why all this anxiety and pain?” “No, nothing of mine is destroyed. Your life is being destroyed, that is all. You have to live henceforward as a crazy careworn woman,” Manthara said. All in tears, she elaborated the pitiable state that awaited the queen and with many a gesture and groan, she lamented, loud and long.

Kaikeyi could not make out why. “The Maharaja is quite well, isn’t he? And Rama, Lakshmana? Kausalya? Sumitra? There is nothing the matter with them? Well! If these are quite well, and no danger threatens them, I am not worried at all. What can happen to me? Has any danger come to them, tell me, Manthara! Tell me soon,” the Queen insisted. She turned the maid’s head towards her, held her chin in endearing appeal and pleaded for an answer.

Manthara replied, “Nothing evil has happened to those whom you mention! But they have decided to wring the neck of your son!” and she broke into a pathetic wail. At this, Kaikeyi retorted “You are committing a mistake, Manthara! The Maharaja is not such a person; nor is Rama,

or Lakshmana, or my sisters, Kausalya and Sumitra! These my sisters love my son even more than their own sons. Your statement reveals your warped mind, that is all. It is not the truth! Well, you have not told me yet what the matter really is. Come on, tell me the full story.”

Manthara answered, “Matter? At dawn tomorrow, Ramachandra is to be crowned Yuvaraja! The Senior Queen, her mind full of unrestrained joy, is giving away costly silk saris and jewels to her maids. She is asking Rama to give away gold and cows in plenty. Engaged in all these activities of celebration, they are neglecting you! I cannot bear this in silence. I cannot tolerate it. You are unable yet to understand the implications. You revel in the empty boast that there is none so fortunate. Your fortune is drying up fast. For your husband and co-wives, you have become a negligible person. Before long, you will be reduced to the despicable status of a maid. Be advised to be a little alert ere that humiliation overtakes you. Awake from sleep. Plan your course of action with full awareness of the consequences. Decide upon the means by which you can escape from the calamity that yawns before you. It is approaching you fast.

“When Rama becomes Yuvaraja the entire empire will be held in the grasp of Kausalya, remember! Just as everyone else, you too will have to dance to her tune.” Manthara was acting her role and shedding false tears to reinforce her wily stratagem.

Kaikeyi was impressed by her loyalty, but she was not convinced of the rightness of her arguments. She said, “Manthara! What has happened to you? Have you become insane? Why do you talk like mad! Rama becoming the Yuvaraja is the happiest augury for the entire empire. Here, take this necklace of mine, as a reward, a gift, for bringing me this great good news first! Be happy, be full of joy! The coronation of Rama as Yuvaraja gives me even more joy than perhaps to Kausalya. My joy at this good news is boundless. Ramachandra too loves me more than he does even his mother. He reveres me more. I will not listen to such imputations against such a pure, loving person. You seem to have lost your wits. Your reason has taken leave of you.” Kaikeyi reprimanded Manthara sharply.

Manthara became even more demonstratively aggrieved. She got more excited and clamorous. “My reason is clear and fresh. It is yours that has suffered!” she ejaculated. “You are not concerned about the evil fate that awaits you. You hug blindly your old faith and fond attachment. I am anxious and worried for the sake of your happiness and self-respect. The others are all playacting and pretending, just to deceive you. They have no respect for you in their hearts. The Maharaja has no love towards his other Queens: he is enamoured only of the Senior Queen, Kausalya. Just to please you, he might use endearing words now and then, that is all; but, He has no love in his heart towards you. Consider this. These people did not inform you. They did not consult you about this proposal, for they

have no regard or respect for you. Have they spoken to you about it even once, on one single day? Consider how many months they usually deliberate and plan in order to come to such a decision. You cannot have a Coronation so suddenly. It doesn't drop from the sky one fine day on its own—can it? But they have decided silently and secretly.”

“The whole thing is the intrigue of Kausalya,” asserted Manthara. Kaikeyi could not suffer it any longer. She burst out: “Stop that stuff, Manthara! My sister is incapable of intrigue. She will never descend so low. It can never be. And the Maharaja? He is much nobler, more righteous than even my sisters! You cannot find in him a trace of subterfuge or meanness. They must have resolved upon the Coronation quickly, for good reason. The wedding celebration of Rama which would have involved months of preparation took place at short notice, didn't it? So too, the Coronation of Rama might have been decided at short notice. Why should it not be? The Maharaja himself will reveal to me the special reason that induced him to arrange it so. You have not cared to know the truth. You have conjured up all kinds of absurd reasons and baseless fears and cast doubts on the motives of innocent persons! In a few minutes, things will be clarified; have patience.” Kaikeyi admonished the maid severely.

Manthara feared that her stratagem will fail ignominiously. So, she stooped to even worse tactics of

persuasion. “Dear Mother! Ponder over the matter a little more deeply. I have listened to many things while moving about, outside the palace. In fact, this Coronation affair has been decided upon, months ago. That is the reason why Bharatha and Satrughna were packed out of the capital. They were apprehending that their presence here will cause complications. And there must be good ground for such fears; or else, who will arrange for the Coronation when they are away? Have you become incapable of asking yourself this simple question? Formerly, when you were accepted in marriage, Dasaratha had promised and given his plighted word that the son born of you will be crowned king of this realm. You might forget it, but I refuse to. It is the fear that the presence of Bharatha here at the present juncture might rouse the memory of that promise and prove an obstacle to their plan, which made them keep Bharatha out of the way, by sending him to his grandfather's place. When once the Coronation is accomplished, nothing can be done to reverse it. To promote this mean trick, they kept the idea secret and kept it from you so long. Think about this for awhile, the inner design. You do not spend any thought on such matters. You believe ‘all that is white is milk!’ Your foolishness and innocence are taken advantage of by others. You simply exult in your love for Rama and recite ‘Rama, Rama,’ in your infatuation. Well, leave everything else aside. Did that Rama, whom you love so greatly, did he at least inform you of this great good fortune happening to him?”

The crooked-minded Manthara used many a specious and cunning argument to cloud and poison the pure unselfish mind of Kaikeyi.

She said, “Mother, who is there in this City of Ayodhya willing to pay some little regard to us? Who treats you here as worthy of count? They are all one, united against you. You are a stranger here. They might even throw you out of Ayodhya shortly. They will not desist from even such meanness. The Emperor is a crafty trickster, a clever juggler. When he approaches you, he speaks soft endearment to satisfy his whims, and then he departs triumphant! You do not realise the fault in you which is preventing you from attaining the high status you deserve. Mother! You may remember, the kings are ever ruled by lust, and not by love. Your father knew this fact, and so he did not agree to give you in marriage to this aged suitor. After prolonged negotiations and confabulations, through the intercession of sage Garga, when it was decided that you be given in marriage, the suitor was compelled to agree to many conditions.

“This day, those agreements have been cast into flames and your son has been cheated. All the while, they are quietly playing their merry drama! Else, why should they take advantage of this chance of your son being away? Why should they be in such a hurry that no ruler can attend the Coronation from any State beyond the bounds of the empire? Consider how their low mentality reveals itself! How full of mischief and deceit are they!

“When neighbouring Rulers are invited, your father will certainly not miss the opportunity to attend. Naturally, he will then bring to the notice of all the promise made to him. So, the plan is to get through the Coronation without informing anyone; and once that is over, they know, nothing can be done to undo it. This conspiracy is hatched by the wily with this objective; so, be warned in time. Once this moment is missed, your fate will be as contemptible as that of a dog. Therefore, do not delay. Ponder deeply, decide upon some method of preventing the Coronation from taking place.” Manthara fanned the flames of anger and hatred. Kaikeyi succumbed to her machinations at last! She said, “Hearing your words I feel that each statement is more convincing than the previous one! Yes, indeed! This is no matter that can wait. What has to be done next? If you can indicate the step I have to take, I shall put it into action.”

When Kaikeyi gave this clear sign of having been won over by her wiles, Manthara was overwhelmed with pride and joy. She spoke with greater assurance now. “Mother! There is no need to spend further thought. The arguments that can support your demand are ready and strong. That day, when the Emperor thankfully accepted your timely help, did he not offer you two boons, any two you might demand of him? And did you not tell him that since you had no need then for anything, you would reserve the gift and ask for the two boons when the need arose? This day, these two will serve a thousand purposes! You can demand that he grant them now, can’t you?” When Manthara spoke

thus, plainly and emphatically, Kaikeyi raised her head as if she was startled, and said, “Oh Manthara, how clever you are! Though in appearance you are an ugly hunchback, in resourcefulness and intelligence, you are extremely charming. Though wanting in beauty of body, you make up by being an expert in intellectual attainments. Tell me how I am to secure these two boons, and what those boons are to be.”

Manthara replied, “Mother! One boon shall be that your son shall be crowned Yuvaraja. The second can well be that Rama shall not stay in the empire.” Listening to her suggestions, given on the spot, without a moment’s thought, Kaikeyi fell into a trough of reflection. She said, after recovering herself, “Manthara! It may be a just demand that my son should be crowned, but my mind will not agree to send Rama out of the kingdom. I am pained at the very thought.” With that, she dropped into a seat. Manthara saw that she must act quickly. “Mother! This is no occasion for sentimental qualms. Procrastination turns even ambrosia into poison. You have to be a little firm or else, we cannot succeed in our plan. For the cruel wrong done by them this is no adequate reprisal. If you desire that your son must rule as King and that you should have the status of the Queen Mother, then act this way; or, I shall end my life by taking poison. I cannot bear to see you suffer while I am alive.” Manthara wept aloud, as if she was carried away by intense love and attachment towards Kaikeyi.

She was the nurse who brought up Kaikeyi from childhood. She had petted her, played with her and fondled her, all these years. Towards Manthara, Kaikeyi had great affection and regard. She raised no further objection. She started to calm her sorrow instead. “Manthara! Rest assured! I shall, without fail, act in such a way that you are pleased. Tell me how shall I act now?” she said.

Manthara replied, “When I suggested you should ask that Rama be sent into exile into the forests beyond the realm, do not imagine, I had not weighed the consequences. I did it only after due deliberation.” Since Kaikeyi was a child in political affairs and legal lore, she said, “The law declares that unhampered possession and enjoyment of usufruct for twelve continuous years give the person ownership of the property. So, it is better to fix a length of years for the exile, say, fourteen years. When he returns after that period, he cannot claim the kingdom. It becomes the unquestioned property of your son.” Manthara noticed that the Queen had accepted the proposal to ask for the two promised boons in the form suggested by her. So, she said, “Mother! Don’t delay further! If you beg him for the boons, just as you are now, the Emperor will not be persuaded to yield. You must work up a wave of rage. Scatter the pillows and sheets in your bedroom. Throw off your jewels into the corners. Loosen the hair and make it wild and dishevelled. Act as if you have resolved to give up your life! Go and lie down on the floor of the Hall of Anger, the room where queens who are overcome by anger and grief

retire, so that they may be discovered and consoled. You cannot just go to him as you are and straight away ask for the boons. Pretend that you are in desperate agony and that only the grant of the boons can save you from death. Then only will your demand be worthy of consideration and acceptance. Rise! Take the first step for the work ahead!”

When Manthara pressed her thus, Kaikeyi yielded to her persuasion, and after carrying out her directions, she entered the Anger Hall and lamented her fate and the impending calamity. Manthara flopped on the floor outside the door of that Hall, after drawing the doors together, as if she was unaware of what was causing all the furore inside.

Meanwhile, the Emperor had finished making all arrangements for the Coronation Ceremony, and when he emerged from the Durbar Hall, he felt that, instead of proceeding to the apartments of Kausalya, he should communicate the happy tidings to Kaikeyi first. So, he hurried towards her palace. The maids who stood at attention all along the passage appeared upset with anxiety. The Emperor argued within himself that they had not heard the good news; for, it would have lit up their faces! He pitied them that they did not know that Rama was to be crowned the next day! He directed his steps to the bedroom where he expected the Queen to be.

There his eyes fell on the scattered jewels, the unkempt bed, the heaps on the floor and the general state of untidiness and distraction. He was surprised at all this and searched

for the Queen in the room peeping into the corners. A maid-in-waiting announced, “Maharaja! Her Highness Kaikeyi Devi is now in the Hall of Anger.” Hearing this, he was gravely upset. He turned his steps in that direction. Kaikeyi was sprawling on the floor in the blinding darkness of the room, wailing and weeping. He said, “Kaikeyi! What ugly scene is this! Why are you so angry? Who caused you so much sorrow? Tell me, I shall kill them this very moment, I shall confer joy on you. You have only to tell me what you desire. I am ever ready to fulfil your wish. Your joy is my joy. Don’t you know that I have nothing in this world higher and dearer than you? Come, do not test me further.” The Emperor sat by her side and, caressing her head, he consoled her in various ways, and questioned her about the reason for her anger and grief.

Kaikeyi was in a fit of rage. She gnashed her teeth noisily. She threw aside the hands of the Emperor when he tried to fondle her. She said angrily: “Enough of this false pretence! I put faith in you so long, and this is the degradation I have brought on myself! I do not trust you any more. I could not believe that you are capable of this hypocritical game. Is this the punishment for putting faith in you? Go, go to your favourites, why sit here by my side? You mortgage your mind in one place and your tongue in another. Give your tongue to the place where you have given your mind. I am not in a mood hereafter to place faith in your words. Do not inflict more sorrow on me, but go back the way you came. What do you care what happens to me?”

Better to die as a queen than drag on as a slave! This day is the last day of my life.”

These wailings heard between the sobs and sighs conveyed no meaning to Dasaratha. He was utterly confused, and tried to console her and assuage her anger. “Kaikeyi!” he began, “What do these words mean! I do not understand. I never use false hypocritical words, nor can I ever use them. My mind and my tongue act in unison. They will ever be the same. Where my love is, there my sweet expressions will be. My tongue will not falsify my mind. It is impossible for it so to behave. I do not know how it has happened, how you have not been able to know me and my sincerity in spite of the lapse of many years. Without telling me plainly what has actually happened to give you so much grief and pain, do not torture me like this. Tell me what has happened. Why are you behaving like this? What has caused you this agony?”

Dasaratha pleaded piteously for a long time, but with no effect! The Queen only retorted sharply, brushed aside with effrontery, ridiculed sarcastically and turned a deaf ear to the importunities of the Emperor. She pretended as if she treated his words as of no worth. Dasaratha was wounded very deep in his heart. Not knowing what to do, he called Manthara in. She rushed in, playacting her conspiratorial role, shrieking for help for the queen, her mistress. “Oh King! Save my mother!” she cried and clasped the feet of the Emperor.

The Emperor was really the embodiment of innocence. He had no trace of duplicity in him. So, he could not see through the drama they were enacting. He feared that some calamity must have happened to make his beloved so perverse and stern. So, he asked Manthara again to tell him what exactly had taken place. Manthara said, “Maharaja! What can I tell you? I am not aware of the least bit of what happened. Mother does not divulge the reason for her anger to anyone. All of a sudden she hastened from the bedroom into this Hall of Anger. Noticing this, I came hither. People prayed and pleaded in various way, but she does not disclose the reason. She does not confide even in you. Will she then reveal it to poor me? We see her suffering and in agony. It is unbearable. We cannot simply look on any longer! We are afraid of what might happen to her, and so, we have been waiting for your arrival. Unless you comfort her and bring joy into her mind, her condition might become critical. She has suffered too deeply and too long. Her condition is growing worse every moment. We will retire now.”

Manthara left the Hall with the other maids, saying: “Please find out from her the reason for her grief and anger and pacify her soon by appropriate remedies.” Manthara only added to the mystery and Dasaratha was even more confused by her statements. He sat by the side of the disconsolate Queen and said, “Kaikeyi! Why do you keep me in the dark?” He gently lifted the head of the Queen from the bare floor and placed it on his lap, and sought to persuade her to reveal to him the reason for her inconsolable

suffering. After some time, Kaikeyi shook off her silence, and began to speak. “Maharaja! You haven’t forgotten, have you, the two boons you promised to confer on me, that day, during the battle between the Devas and the Asuras?” Dasaratha was relieved. He said, “Kaikeyi! Why have you put yourself into all this temper and pain for the sake of this simple thing? I will not forget the promise of the two boons so long as there is life in me. That promise is as dear to me as Kaikeyi herself; you are the breath of my life, and the promise too is as the breath.

“Queen! Has anyone harmed you? Or, is your health affected adversely? Or has any wicked person dared act against your will? Speak! For your sake, I shall face even mortal injury, and punish them so that happiness may be restored to you. Do not doubt me. Oh, embodiment of charm! Why do you suffer thus? Are you unaware that the entire Empire is at your beck and call? Whatever you wish to have, from any region, you have only to tell me, I shall secure them for you and bring you joy. Inform me, what is it that you fear, what has brought this sorrow; do not withhold anything, or hesitate to speak out! As the sun scatters the mist, I shall shatter the grief that smothers you.” Dasaratha fondled and flattered the Queen, and tried various means of consoling her and restoring her spirits.

Kaikeyi kept in her mind the advice that Manthara had given her. She resolved that she must secure from her husband a promise on oath, before revealing her bitter

wishes to him. To induce it out of him, she displayed exaggerated and seductive love, and wiped the tears from her eyes. She held firm the hands of the King, so pitiably enslaved by her enchantments and so greatly enamoured of her charms. She said, “Lord! I have no resentment against anyone, nor has anyone done me any harm or dealt me any insult. I have no craving for anything from any distant region of the earth. But I have a long-nourished desire, I must admit. If you swear on oath that you will fulfil it, I shall tell you what it is.” She enticed him with a smile playing on her face. Dasaratha too smiled in response, and sidling a little towards her, said, “Oh, you foolish Queen! For this one simple affair, why was it necessary for you to put on so much of temper, and cause so much of anxiety and anguish? Hear this: Among women, you are the most dear to me; and among men, Rama is most dear to me. You are both my very breath. You know this well, don’t you? I cannot survive a single day without feasting my eyes on you and him. Therefore, I swear on Rama himself. Tell me what your wish is. I shall fulfil it without fail.” When he declared thus on oath, with both her hands in his, Kaikeyi was overwhelmed with joy! She rose and sat up. She demonstrated even more love towards him for she was glad he had changed into a well-wisher of hers.

She asked, “Oh King! You have sworn on Rama. He is the witness to the oath, is this genuine?” She made her position doubly secure, saying, “Lord! You are a Votary of Truth! You are the highest among the Righteous! You are

endowed with sovereign Might and Majesty! You must have in your memory the war between the Gods and the Demons; yet, let me remind you of that exploit once again. That day, when the Demon Sambara slaughtered all before him, you struggled desperately to defeat him. Had I not guarded you and nursed you into life, keeping myself vigilant and alert, you know what would have happened to you. You appreciated my devoted sacrifice and declared, ‘Kaikeyi! you rescued me from death itself. What can I give you in return! Whatever it may be, ask me two boons; I shall fulfil them, and repay the debt I owe you, the gratitude I have to evince.’ You desired that I should name the boons you offered to grant. But I felt then that your coming back to life was itself the most precious boon for me, and so, I replied, ‘Lord! I have no boon to ask from you now. I shall present my request for them sometime later. Keep them with you in reserve for me,’ I pleaded with you. You were elated at my attitude, and expressed your admiration! You said, you liked my renunciation, and declared that the boons will be kept on trust, so long as life lasts, and can be drawn upon with no objections raised. All this must be fresh in your consciousness, aren’t they. You are the monarch of the earth. You are faithful to the plighted word. Therefore, give me now the two boons of mine that you kept in abeyance on my behalf. Make me happy thereby. I do not demand any new boon from you. I ask only for what are really mine. I need not remind you. You know very well that it is a heinous sin to refuse to give back riches placed in trust in one’s hands for safe custody. If you say now that

you cannot grant them, you will be injuring me, with that breach of faith. I cannot bear the disappointment. Rather than live with that sense of defeat, I consider getting rid of life is more honourable. When the husband does not honour the word given to the wife, how can the wishes of the people in the kingdom be realised? An Emperor who stoops to deceiving his wife, making her believe him and then acting against that belief, does not deserve the position of protector of his subjects, does he? You know that the lawgiver sage Manu has laid down that such ungrateful prevaricators should not be treated as monarchs. Why should I dilate further on this point and repeat a thousand arguments? In case my boons are not granted this day, Kaikeyi will not be alive at dawn.”

Announcing thus, she burst into loud weeping and wailing. Dasaratha was rendered helpless and weak by her histrionics. Like an innocent deer that is drawn into the net spread for his capture by the imitative cries of the hunter, Dasaratha overcome by cooings of love and drawn by the entrancing gestures of the Queen fell into the trap, like an insane ineffective man. He vowed solemnly “I shall certainly give you the two boons,” holding her palms tightly in his.

No sooner were those words uttered than the eyes of Kaikeyi bloomed wide and bright. She watched the face of Dasaratha intently for some time, and said, “Oh King! This day I have realised how good you are! This day, you have

proved the genuineness of your claim that you will never break a promise once made.” She started extolling Dasaratha in this and other ways. The lovelorn Emperor was highly elated by her praise. He urged her on, with the prompting, “Kaikeyi: why do you delay further? Ask! Ask for the boons!” Kaikeyi hesitated; she stuttered: “With the arrangements made for the Coronation of Rama, perform the coronation of Bharatha, *my* son: this is the first boon I demand! Next, Rama, wearing matted hair and deerskin, and dressed in tree bark raiment, shall go into the Dandaka forest and remain there for fourteen years, as a forest dweller; this is the second boon I ask for. Bharatha must become the Heir-apparent, with no one obstructing his path. Rama must be sent out into the jungle before my very eyes. Grant these two boons and maintain the honour and dignity of your line untarnished; or else, assent to the extinction of Kaikeyi’s life this very moment.” Thus declaring, she stood up and stared wildly in a determined stance, like a demoness.

The Emperor was crushed by the cruel bolts that rained on him. Was it a dream? Could it be true? Was it Kaikeyi who asked for these boons? Or, was it a bloodthirsty monster? Could it be a terrible hallucination of his? Was it a vile trick played by some horrid illness? He could not gauge! So, he cried, “Kaikeyi! Is it you, there? Or is it some ogress who has assumed your form? Tell me first who you are.” Like a person who has lost control of his limbs, he tottered unable to mouth the words he wished to speak. He rolled listlessly from side to side like a madman, his eyes

looking wildly all around. Suddenly, sparks flew from his eyes as he gazed at Kaikeyi. He exclaimed in terrible anger, “Vile woman! What exactly is your aim? Is it to uproot the entire royal line? What injury has my dear son Rama done to you? He loves you even more than he does his own mother. How could your heart agree to send my Rama into the thick dark jungle? I took you so long to be a Princess; now, I find you are a venomous cobra. I allowed you to infest my home, out of sheer ignorance. How could such a sinful idea enter your head, when Rama, the very breath of my life, is being acclaimed by every being that breathes? If imperative, I am prepared to give up the empire or even my life; but, I cannot give up Rama; no. You crave that your son be hailed as Emperor. Well, have him so. I shall hie to the forest, with Kausalya, Sumitra and others, taking my Rama with me. But I can never send Rama alone into the jungle. That is impossible. Give up this atrociously sinful desire. Give up the hatred of Rama that you have cultivated. Kaikeyi! Tell me frankly do you really desire that these things take place? Or, is all this merely a stratagem to find out whether I have affection towards your son, Bharatha? If so, you can ask that Bharatha be crowned Yuvaraja; but there is no meaning in asking that Rama be exiled into the forest. Such a desire should not be entertained or expressed lightly. Kaikeyi! Rama is the firstborn son. He is the repository of all virtues. The years of his reign will be most glorious. You have told me often that you are looking forwards to the time when such golden dreams will come true. And now you want that this selfsame Rama should be

sent into the forest! What is the deeper meaning of this request? Are you joking with me? If it is all a joke, why this scene in the Hall of Anger? Why this rolling on the hard stone floor? Jokes too have limits beyond which they become pitifully cruel. I cannot entertain the idea, even as a joke. No. I can never be separated from Rama. Kaikeyi! You have been behaving like an intelligent woman all these years. But now, your intelligence has become crooked and wicked. Such perversions are always harbingers of self-destruction. It is a heinous sin to injure the good. Of course, the good will not be affected by these tactics. The stratagems of the wicked will only promote the fame and glory of the good. They might appear hard to bear, only for some little time.

“Your wicked plans appear to me to be fraught with disaster to the Ikshvaku dynasty itself. For, until this moment, you have never spoken an unpleasant word or thought of an inauspicious act. I find it impossible to believe that it is the same one who is asking me such things today! Kaikeyi! you were all along afraid of transgressing the Codes of moral law. You were anxious to win the Grace of God by means of each little thought, word and deed. Where has that fear of unrighteousness gone now? What have you done with that devotion to God which kept you on the path of righteousness?

“What is the gain you look for when you want Rama to be sent to the forest for fourteen years? His body is soft

and tender, like the petal of a freshly blossomed flower. He is most charming to behold. Rama is so enticingly beautiful. Of what profit is it for you if he suffers unbearable pangs of pain in the forest? In this palace, there are many thousands attendants and maids. Can any one of them point a finger at him and say, that he is faulty in any respect? Well. Leave alone our palace. Can you bring from the capital city any single person, can you name anyone who blames Rama? He has discovered many a misery and relieved them with gifts and riches. He has shown great consideration for them. He has noticed many who are homeless and provided them with houses. By his love and care, he has won the affection of all people. That you should harbour hate against such a loveable son strikes me dumb. I cannot find words to describe your devilish cruelty.

“There are many who exploit their own subjects, and act only to foster their own selfish interests. Such demons are appearing in good numbers today. But in your eyes, due perhaps to the age, or your own past sins, persons who assuage the wrongs done to the poor and the distressed and foster their advancement, those who directly enquire into their difficulties and problems and afford relief, such good men appear bad, deserving exile and punishment!

“Everyone in this empire relishes listening to the virtues of Rama and takes great delight in recounting his goodness. While they feel exhausted in the fields, farmers and labourers sing songs of Rama and his charms, to make

their tasks lighter; when I came to know of this, I was filled with joy. How can your heart agree to inflict on such a compassionate soul this excruciating sentence? This very evening, when I placed before a gathering of sages, elders, ministers, leading citizens, scholars and many experts in statecraft, the proposal for the Coronation of Rama, no one raised a note of dissatisfaction or dissent. On the other hand, they praised Rama in countless ways, and declared that it was the fruit of the merit that they had accumulated in many past lives that they could now secure as Heir-apparent and lord a spiritual hero who had mastered his senses, an embodiment of selfless activity, intelligent detachment and unflinching loyalty to Truth. They indicated their joy by continuous Jai Jais. Is this treasure of my love, this favourite of my people, whom you seek to send into the forest? Whatever you may say, this is certain, I will not send my Rama into the forest. And listen to this also. The coronation of Rama *shall* take place tomorrow. It cannot be cancelled.” Dasaratha announced this, in an outburst of pride and courage.

At this, Kaikeyi assumed a terrific mien and retorted: “Maharaja! Remember, a few moments ago, you vowed under many oaths that you will grant me the boons I ask. And now you are going back on your word. Now, who is dragging the glory of the Ikshvaku Line in the dust, you or me? Ponder over this. It is the pride of the Ikshvaku Line that no one of that dynasty shall go back on his word once it is given. You are now soiling that fair fame. Without

weighing the pros and cons, you promised to grant without fail the boons I wanted. The mistake, if any, is yours, not mine. You gave me the boons; then, you promised to grant them today. You are the very person who gave your word twice. Consider your honour, your status, your dignity, when you deny the very words you spoke then and now.”

“It may be common usage for rulers to injure and insult the weak, and act contrary to promises solemnly made. But it cannot promote self-respect. Those who break their promises and cheat women are savages, not sovereigns. When rulers slide into this savagery, the subjects will naturally resent and revolt. The kingdom will fast become demondom!

“All these years, you have striven to acquire honour and renown; and you have won them to a large extent. Now the infamy of breaking the plighted word is on your head, not on mine. Recollect the careers of the kings of old. Take good care that you do not act counter to your vows and oaths. Ponder well. You are proceeding along a path that is atrociously bad! Beware! You are moving against the dictates of Dharma. Well, were you as intelligent as you are reputed to be, you should have first ascertained fully the nature of the boons I wanted before you gave the promise. You did not look before and after. You were enchanted by my words and you gave word that they shall be granted. And now, you blame me when I ask you to fulfil that promise! Consider how seriously you are mistaken

in this! How foolish you proclaim yourself to be! You accuse me for having given up my fear of the unrighteous act, my devotion to the Divine, and my counting this reprehensible cruelty. But what about you? You are acclaimed as *Dharmavratha* (a strict adherent of the vow to be righteous in word, thought and deed), and *Daivasamaana* (equal to a God); what name can you claim now when you are going back on your oath? Pronounce judgement on yourself. The cleverness that dives and discovers the faults of those before you isn't commendable. If one dives into one's own faults and failings and is vigilant that they do not lead him astray into wrong and sin, that way of using the intelligence is commendable. Kings and rulers are highly intelligent. They are taken to be all knowing. If such as you do not benefit by self-examination, but are concerned only with selfish interests, what right have you to blame us as selfish and narrow-minded? You granted the boons; it is a fact. You took an oath; it is a fact. You broke the oath; you went back on the given word, it is a fact. Reflect within yourself whether these three are true or not. You are deluded by attachment to the son. You are enslaved by fondness for the wife. So, you dump your promise into the waters! I am not the culprit. It is you who have done wrong. For, it is natural for a mother to be attached to her son. Every woman who is a mother will yearn that her son must rise to a position of the highest authority, that of the Monarch of the Realm. It is the prompting of Nature. It is her bounden duty to see that her plan is unassailed by others. It is only natural that she plans in advance to counteract all possible assailants. I

am only carrying out my natural duties and responsibilities, remember; there is nothing unnatural or wrong in my conduct.

“When Rama is crowned as Heir-apparent, his mother Kausalya, will become the Rajamatha, the Queen Mother. My son will stand with folded arms, awaiting the command of Rama, ready to run errands for him. He will fall at the feet of Rama, while reporting to him about the task he has accomplished for him; it may be, he will be reprimanded. No, I cannot be a witness to such scenes. I will be so humiliated that I cannot live a day longer. Better far to drink poison now and die than look on at the shameful condition of my son. I am declaring this, as a solemn oath, taken in the name of my son Bharatha, whom I value as much as my breath. I shall not be satisfied with anything less than exiling Rama to the forest.”

With these agonisingly harsh words, Kaikeyi fell on the floor, and started sobbing and groaning in a fit of heartrending sorrow.

Dasaratha beat his head in despair. He said, “Kaikeyi! Has anyone advised you that this calamity will benefit you? Or, has some evil spirit possessed you, and forced you to utter these desires? What is this absurdity, this ridiculous madness, sending Rama into the forest and crowning Bharatha? Why not wish well for me, your husband, for Bharatha, your son, and this Kingdom of Ayodhya? Give

up this desire fraught with certain calamity. Think deeply over the consequences. Or else, you and I, and your son, all three, will become targets for the direst infamy. It will not end with that. The entire kingdom will be ruined, and many more tragedies are bound to take place. Mean, degraded woman! Can we ever believe that Bharatha will agree to get himself crowned even if I now accept your request and promise to do so? Bharatha is a true adherent to Dharma. He is intelligent and a model of rectitude. He will not agree either to exiling Rama into the forest or to himself becoming the Heir-apparent. Not he alone, but the Ministers, the courtiers, the Vassals, the Allies, the Sages, the Commons, the Citizens—everyone will oppose your desire. How can you be happy when so many are unhappy?

“Consider the situation you are responsible for! The elders and sages endorsed it. They were all of one mind. This evening, at the Grand Assembly of Citizens, I announced that I shall celebrate the Coronation of Rama. If I act counter to that Announcement, I will be counted as a coward who runs back from the battlefield at the sight of the enemy. All arrangements have been completed for the Coronation. All have been informed about the festival. The people have started preparing the City for the Celebration. The streets are already packed with happy throngs, with faces shining in expectant joy. At this moment, if I send Rama into the forest, will not the people laugh at me, saying, ‘What! This man has finished three chapters—the Coronation, the Rulership of the Realm and the Exile—all

in one single night!’ In what manner can I explain my action to them, after what I had publicly declared in the midst of the mammoth gathering of the populace? How harshly the people will blame me, feeling that their king is such a big fool. I ruled over them all these long years and won their applause as a consistent adherent of Dharma, as an embodiment of high virtues and as a redoubtable hero, brave and full of courage. But now, how can I bear the dishonour of being talked about as a fool, who plunged into this low level of conduct?”

Dasaratha spoke in this strain, reminding her of the hard blow that his fair name and unblemished fame will receive if he acts according to her desire. Nevertheless, Kaikeyi transformed herself into a Demoness of Destruction, and brushed aside Dasaratha’s importunities, as if they were empty words and she did not attach any value to them. She refused to yield or loosen her hold. On the other hand, her grip became tighter every moment, her greed more deep-rooted. She spoke quite contrary to the appeals of the Maharaja and insisted on reminding him only of the promise from which he threatened to resile. So, Dasaratha said, “Kaikeyi! If it happens that Rama goes to the forest, I will not be able to live a moment longer. And I need not tell you what will happen to Kausalya. She will draw her last breath that very moment. And Sita? She will be mortally shocked. She cannot live even a second away from Rama. Will the people look upon all this with equanimity? When the great hero, the paragon of wisdom,

Rama, is being sent as an exile into the forest, can Lakshmana keep quiet? Why detail a thousand things. The very next moment, Lakshmana will cast off his body. This is the bare truth. Thus, our Kingdom will have to suffer all these catastrophes and calamities. You too are aware of this string of tragedies; but I cannot understand why you are attempting with eyes open, to win a widow's role? Oh, wicked, vile soul! I was deceived by your charms. It was like cutting one's own throat while charmed by a sword of gold. I drank the cup of milk, unaware that it had poison in it. You cheated me, with many a winsome trick. At last, you have planned to consign to the dust my dynasty itself. Shame on me! What a fool I am! I secured this son, after performing a scriptural Yaga (Sacrifice). Divine Grace gave him unto me. Am I to barter away his fortune and his future for the paltry pleasure a woman gave me? Is this worthy of His Majesty, Emperor Dasaratha? Will not the meanest being in my kingdom hurl stones at me, in derision? Alas! Is this to be the fate of Dasaratha in his last days? I clasped a thing round my own neck, not realising that it was a rope that strangles. I never knew that it was the Deity of Death with whom I dallied and diverted myself so long. Alas! I flirted with Death and fondled it on my breast. I treated her as my favourite, comrade and companion. It is surely the weight of my sins recoiling on me now. Or else, was there anywhere, at any time, a father, who, for the sake of a woman's bed drives his son into the fearful forest, as an exile?

“Ah! What strange behaviour is this, of a human being! I am unable to believe this, in spite of everything, Kaikeyi! Change your foolish thought. Rama will not go against any word of mine. The mere report of these happenings is enough. He will prepare himself to move into the forest! He will not even ask the question, why are you anxious to send me into the jungle! He is of such sterling virtue. Why mention only Rama! No one of my sons will disobey any of my commands.

“Bharatha will be disgusted when he hears of your plan. He may even ignore the fact that you are his mother and behave quite inexplicably. He may be ready for any dire step. Rama is his very life, his vital breaths, all the five put together. He may do something to defeat your pet desire. That is to say, he may exile himself into the forest and ask that Rama be crowned. He is of that stamp of goodness and rectitude. I am wondering at your crooked intellect, which cannot grasp the workings of Bharatha's mind. Kaikeyi! Wicked designs are precursors of self-destruction, as the saying goes. This design has entered your head, presaging your ruination, remember. You are bringing on the fair name of the Ikshvaku Royal family an indelible blot. You are plunging so many into fathomless depths of grief. You are bringing about their end. Can so many lives be hurt for the sake of this fell desire? What happiness do you hope to have, after perpetrating all this?

“Even if you do achieve your goal, will that be ananda? Can you call it so? Oh shame! Those who exult over the

sorrows of others are in truth sinners of the darkest hue, of demonic brood. Those who strive to cause joy to others, those who yearn that others be happy, they are the holy ones. You are a Queen; you are a Princess, of Royalty born; yet, you are not conscious of this elementary truth. You are a disgrace to royal blood. One final word! Rama is my very life. Without him, I cannot hold on to life. No! I cannot continue to live. He will not disappoint you; so, though I may not order him by word of my own mouth to go into the forest, he may on hearing of my oath and your desire, himself proceed thereto, in order to make my word valid. He will brook no delay or debate. As soon as I hear news of that event, know that I draw my last breath. Lakshmana, Sita, and Kausalya may, in all likelihood follow Rama. Kausalya cannot exist alive, apart from Rama. Sita will not stay away from Rama. Lakshmana cannot walk except along the footsteps of Rama. Urmila too may proceed along with Lakshmana into exile. There will be none here then, to perform the funeral rites of this body, and days will elapse to get Bharatha and Satrughna from the Kekaya Kingdom. Till then, this will have to lie without the ceremonial. Perhaps, the people will rise against me for having descended to this low level of wickedness and condemn my body to be thrown as carrion for crows and vultures, since it does not deserve decent disposal. Perhaps, no; for, my subjects will wait until Bharatha arrives, embalming the corpse by some means or other. Bharatha will never agree to accept the throne and be King. Under such circumstances, he is not entitled to touch the body or

perform the funeral rites. Come! At least, promise me that you will have my funeral rites performed by him,” he pleaded. He said, “Of course, I am sure you are ready to promise me so; for, you are after the ananda you hope to derive from a widow’s life. What it is that you hope for, tell me, Oh vile viper! You have turned into a demon, at last! Are you undermining and laying under the earth, the Raghu Clan, this Royal Line? Is this the upsurge of your basic nature? Or, is it some mysterious Divine fate that dogs your thought and forces you to act against your will in this strange way? I find it beyond me to gauge the secret.”

While Dasaratha was being tortured in mind like this, the night rolled on into the third quarter. He groaned like a man in great pain afflicted with some mortal illness. He was caught in the coils of agony.

Dasaratha tried his best, now, to win the affections of Kaikeyi and persuade her to accept the coronation of Rama. He began to flatter her, in honeyed words. “Oh, Queen! You are the very embodiment of auspiciousness and prosperity. I treated you so long as my very breath. You too fostered and guarded me as if I was your very heart. Come, let us spend the remaining years without giving room for scandals about differences between us. Let us be peaceful and happy during the rest of our allotted lives. Oh, Charming Princess! I will not live many years more. Throughout my life, I was famed as a steady adherent of Truth, and all men honoured me on that account. I have sworn at the public

gathering that Rama will be crowned tomorrow as Heir-apparent. Consider how my subjects will despise me, if the function does not take place! Consider how they will cast insults at me! You saved me that day, during the battle between the Gods and the Demons. Are you giving me up now, when something worse is threatening me? This is not just or proper. Well, I shall endow on you this entire kingdom as dowry. Crown Rama, yourself, tomorrow. Bharatha too will be very happy if you do this. Not merely he; ministers, sages, elders, scholars, common citizens, the entire populace will appreciate and thank you for this. Your fame will last eternally on this earth. Instead if you create obstacles in the way of Rama's Coronation, the whole world will castigate and condemn you. Even your son will find fault with you and fall foul of you. Your cruel fancy will bring ruin on you; besides, it will cover this royal line with shame. You will become the target of the 'Fie' that the smallest of the land will fling at you. Reflect over these possibilities! Earn eternal renown. Stop the stratagem to prevent the coronation. Crown Rama with your own hands, tomorrow!"

Dasaratha described the joy she could derive from this generous act in sweet enticing words, artfully put together. He hoped to enrapture her at the prospect of herself crowning the Heir-apparent; but Kaikeyi interrupted him, and said, "King! Your words strike me as strange and meaningless. You are trying to slide back from the promise made on oath. To cover up your sin, you are spinning

fascinating yarns! No. A thousand such tricks will not induce me to change my stand. You said, on your own, 'Ask any boons you desire; I shall grant them,' and, now instead of acting on that promise, you exhibit a fine bunch of sighs and groans. This does not become you. You are, by your own conduct, undermining your reputation and honour. I am not in the least responsible for this distress of yours. Recollect the pronouncement of those who are masters of Dharma, that *Sathya* (Truth) is the *Parama* (Highest) Dharma (Principle of righteousness). I, too, have based my request for the promised boons on the same principle of Dharma, and as befits a follower of Dharma, you, too, agreed and said, 'Right! They shall be granted.' Nevertheless, you have started imputing motives to me, that I am thrusting you into unrighteousness, that I am set upon committing an unpardonable sin, that I am attempting to bring lasting infamy on your name! This is most improper. It is thoroughly unjustifiable.

"I am absolutely innocent of any wrong, in this affair. You made the solemn promise without a thought on the past or the future; and when that promise had to be put into action, you suddenly become confused and desperate. The fault is yours, not mine. Those who promise and are not willing to act accordingly, are sinners of great magnitude. Act as the promise directs you to; then, the Truth you have maintained will itself wash off any related sin. Don't you remember? In the past, Emperor Sibi sliced flesh from his own body as food for an eagle pursuing a dove for prey! So

too, Emperor Alarka had pledged his word that he would give whatever was asked from him. He was a king of unique splendour. And to keep up his promise, he plucked and gave a Brahmin his own two eyes! Look at the Ocean. It is the Lord of all the Rivers; yet, bound by Its Vow, It limits Itself between the shores, instead of transgressing them. Why repeat a thousand examples? For all things, for all men, Truth is the highest authority, the highest ideal. Truth is Brahman. Truth is the Primeval Sound. It is Dharma. Truth alone undergoes no change or diminution. Royal Majesties like you should not give up the Imperishable for the sake of the perishable. Hold fast to the promise you made, and ensure lasting fame and glory for yourself. That is the right thing to do. Do not yield to delusive attachment to the son; deceptive sympathy for women. Do not overrule the dictates of political idealism and royal obligation. Do not tarnish the Ikshvaku Dynasty with irredeemable dishonour!

“Don’t plan otherwise. Call Rama to your side and tell him to get ready to proceed to the forest, and set on foot preparations to call Bharatha from where he is now to this City. Instruct the Minister concerned to attend to these matters without delay. See! The eastern sky is getting bright. These two boons must be realised before dawn. However long you argue, I will be content with no less. If, on the other hand, you are adamant and you consummate the Coronation of Rama, I am determined to end my life in full view of the thickly packed Assembly. This is my vow. This shall happen.”

Dasaratha watched Kaikeyi raging and swearing, angry and fearful. He could neither demonstrate the rage that was surging within him, nor could he suppress it. He was like Emperor Bali who promised three feet of land to God (in the form of Vamana); but discovered that he could not fulfil that promise, for Vamana measured the entire earth with one foot, the entire sky with another foot, and stood asking for the third foot of land, that had been gifted to Him! Dasaratha dreaded the curse that awaited him, for breaking the rules of Dharma. His eyes were dimmed with doubt and despair. His head became heavy on the shoulders. He fell on the floor, where he stood. At last, mustering up some courage, he shouted, “Oh Sinful Woman! If the Coronation of Rama is cancelled, my death is a certainty. After that, you can rule over this kingdom, as a widow, as freely as you wish.” Giving vent to his anger in this strain, Dasaratha cried out, “Alas! Rama! Has it come to this that I have to send you, with my own consent, into the forest? No, I will not send you. I will rather give up my life. I cannot keep alive a moment, apart from you. Oh, vicious demon! How could your heart entertain this dark plan of sending my lovely and tender Rama into the thick, dark, wild jungle? Horrid Fury! What a Monster have you become!” And with that, Dasaratha swooned, and soon lost consciousness.

Night was melting before the brightening dawn. The Nine Instruments of Music at the Palace Gate heralded the Day of Joy. The roads started getting the showers of rosewater. The air was thick with fragrance and festive

noise. The sky was charged with hope and excitement. The constellation Pushya rose as the Star of the day. The sage Vashishta proceeded with his group of disciples to the Sarayu River for the ceremonial bath, and returned from there, with the Consecrated Water necessary for the Coronation Ablutions. He passed along the Royal road where the citizens had gathered to witness the sacred articles. The palace guards cleared the way for the holy group. At last, they entered the Royal Palace through the richly decorated Main Gate.

Even at that early hour, the open spaces inside the palace were filled with priests, vassal rulers, representatives of the people of the realm, and elders. They occupied the seats allotted to them. The rhythm of Vedic Hymns recited by scholars along the streets echoed from the skies. Meanwhile, Vashishta beckoned Sumantra, the Minister, and said, “Go, the auspicious hour fixed for the rite of Coronation is approaching. Many preliminary rituals have to be attended to. Go and inform the Maharaja that his presence is urgently needed. Convey the message that Vashishta is waiting for his arrival.”

Sumantra being an old faithful, had the freedom to enter any of the inner apartments of the palace. So he hurried into the chambers of Queen Kaikeyi, in search of the Emperor. Entering the Hall, where the Royal beds were, Sumantra was shocked out of his wits. He was aghast at the sight of the Emperor fallen on the floor! Are my eyes

seeing aright, he wondered. He lost his moorings. He went near the King, and said, “King! This morning must find you like the sea at moonrise, heaving with ecstasy. I cannot understand why you are lying prostrate on the ground. The auspicious hour is approaching. The great sages, learned in Vedic Lore, are ready in their roles, waiting your arrival at the Hall of Ceremonies. Rise and wear royal robes and jewels, and come into the Hall, accompanied by the Queens, in lustrous imperial splendour. The sage Vashishta bade me hither to bring you into the holy precincts of the Throne.”

Listening to his importunities, Dasaratha could not restrain the outbursts of his grief. He wept aloud, and spoke to the Minister between sobs thus: “Sumantra! Your adulation pierces my heart.” Sumantra could not take a step forward, nor could he move a step backward. He stood transfixed, where he was. He prayed with folded hands, “Maharaja! Why this turn of events? At a time when you have to be immersed in ananda, why this grief, this piteous weeping? What is the reason behind all this? It is beyond my understanding.”

When Sumantra stood hopeless, sunk in sorrow, Kaikeyi intervened and said, “Oh best of ministers! The Emperor spent the entire night without sleep, in anxiety about Rama. If you can go immediately and bring Rama with you here, the mystery will be unravelled. I am telling you this. Do not misunderstand me but bring Rama here quickly.”

Sumantra took her instructions as the commands of the Sovereign. He hastened to the Residence of Rama. At the entrance of that palace, he saw on both sides long lines of attendants and maids, carrying huge plates containing gifts of silk, brocade, jewels and gems, garlands and bouquets, scents and sweets. It was a delight of the eye, but Sumantra did not stop to cast a look at them. When he hurried into the palace, he felt something precious lacking in all this festivity. He was overwhelmed and nonplussed. The joy that he had felt earlier had turned into sorrow.

Riding in his chariot towards Rama's Palace he had noticed how the hundreds of thousands of loyal subjects who filled the streets talked among themselves that he was on his way to bring Rama into the Coronation Hall, for the ceremony. He saw their faces blooming in joyous expectation. They scarce winked their eyes, lest they miss some incident or facet of joy. At last, Sumantra stepped without any question asked, into all sections of that seven-storied mansion. As a fish dives noiselessly through the depths of a flooded river, Sumantra glided through the corridors and halls of that Palace!