

GLOOM OVER AYODHYA

Meanwhile, the Ruler of the Nishadas who was returning to his kingdom after accompanying Rama for some distance into the forest, saw the Minister Sumantra sitting in his chariot on the bank of the Ganga, the horses having been tied by their reins to a shady tree. Guha found Sumantra weeping and wailing inconsolably, alone. Guha himself could not control any longer the anguish he had restrained so long. He cried out, “Rama,” and ran towards Sumantra. He embraced the old man and both sobbed aloud in agony, unable to put their grief into words. They stood under the tree together, but fell on the ground as if they were themselves trees felled by an axe. They lamented the fate of Sita, Rama and Lakshmana and poured abuse on Kaikeyi, the cause of the calamities.

The horses stopped grazing, and desisted from drinking water. Tears rolled from their eyes. Whenever they

heard Sumantra and Guha utter the names of Sita or Rama or Lakshmana, they raised their heads aloft, and peered into the distance, anxious to catch a glimpse of those whom they adored and loved with as much zeal as the two men in the agony of separation. Sumantra noted the grief which was tormenting the animals and his anguish became even greater.

Some hours must have passed by in this heartrending way. At last, Guha managed to recover a little. He mustered some courage, as needs someone must. He addressed Sumantra thus: “Ah, Minister! You are profoundly intelligent, steadfast in morality and a person who has identified the Reality behind all this passing show. Fate plays strange tricks, and so, one has to learn to put up with them. Rise! Return to Ayodhya! Convey the news to Kausalya and Sumitra, who are yearning to see you and to listen to your account.” He raised Sumantra forcibly from where he had fallen. He seated him in the chariot. He brought the horses and yoked them to the central pole.

Sumantra realised that what Guha was insisting on was the correct step. Moved by a spurt of blind courage, the old man signed to the horses to move forward. His body lost strength as a result of the anguish of separation from Rama. Therefore, however much he tried he could not drive the chariot as of old. He rolled down inside the chariot and rose in his seat many times in a few minutes. And the horses? They too would not move. They were set on turning back and straining their necks to see the road behind.

Sumantra cursed himself and his fate. “Fie on me,” he said. “May this horrid life of mine be ended. This body has to be burnt into ash some day. Far better it were if, instead of dying through some disease or some worldly calamity, it died as a result of unbearable agony at separation from Rama. That would have made my life worthwhile. That would have made my fame everlasting; earning that fame is enough compensation for all the ills of life.” “No, Sumantra,” he said to himself. “Had you the good luck, you would have stuck to Rama. When bad luck haunts you, what else can you do than come away and be alive? Of what use is it now to pine and blame yourself?” Sumantra chided himself most mercilessly, in this strain.

He started again the dialogue with himself. “With what face am I to present myself in Ayodhya? When the citizens ask me where Rama is, what can I answer? When they ask me, ‘how could you come away leaving Rama in the jungle.’ what can I tell them? Will I not be overcome by shame and sorrow? Oh, my heart has become stone. Else, why has it not split into fragments at all that I have gone through?” Sumantra was disgusted at his own meanness. He wrung his hands in despair. He decided that he could not enter the City during the hours of sunlight, when people would be moving about. It would be less humiliating, he felt, to enter the City at night, after everyone had gone to bed and was fast asleep.

But soon, his inner voice told him, “What! Can the people of Ayodhya ever sleep? No, no. They cannot. It is

just my foolishness and ignorance that make me imagine they do. They would be awake, awaiting news of the return of Rama or, at least, any news about him. I cannot escape the humiliation and the shame, whether I enter the city at night or during day. Well! For me, who did not deserve the grace of Rama, this ill fate is the proper meed. It is best I go through it and bear the burden of that blame.” Thus, Sumantra wended his way slowly and haltingly, spending time in framing questions to himself and presenting answers to them.

At last, he reached the bank of the Thamasa River. So, he decided to spend a few hours there, allowing the horses to graze a bit and himself preparing for the entry into the City after nightfall, when the people would not be about the streets, but would be safe in bed. Finally, the chariot rolled into the gate of the City and began to move through thoroughfares.

Sumantra took extra care to ensure silence from wheel and hoof. The chariot moved at the pace of a snail. But who could silence the agony of the horses? They recognised the streets through which they had taken Rama. They groaned aloud at their present fate, when their dear Rama was far, far away.

The populace of the City heard this pathetic neigh. Their ears were set to hear this piteous cry. They told each other that Sumantra had returned with an empty chariot.

They ran into the streets and stood pathetically on both sides to witness the sad spectacle.

Sumantra bent his head low when he saw the crowds. Seeing him in this pitiable posture, they guessed that Rama had not returned, and swooned on the spot, falling wherever they stood. Many wept aloud. The residents of the palaces of the Queens, when they heard the neighs of the grief-stricken steeds, sent maids in haste to enquire why. They hurried in groups towards Sumantra and showered questions on him. He sat dejected and crestfallen, like a mute person, unable to find words to tell them the answers. He sat unmoved like a broken pillar, as if he was deaf and could not hear what they were so earnestly asking him.

From his behaviour, the maids inferred that Rama had rejected all importunities to return. They lamented, “Oh Minister! Have you left Sita in the terror-striking forest, and come back yourself, alone?” and broke into a sudden sharp wail.

One maid was more courageous than the rest. She told Sumantra that Kausalya had ordered that he should come straight to the palace where she was.

There Sumantra found the Emperor prostrate on the floor, exhausted without sleep or food, in dishevelled clothes. Sumantra mastered the surge of sorrow within him, and uttering the words “Jai! Jai,” which are traditionally to

be pronounced first in the imperial presence, he stood by, shaking head to foot. Recognising that voice, Dasaratha sat up quickly, and plaintively asked him, “Sumantra! Where is my Rama?”

Sumantra clasped the Emperor in his arms. The Emperor clung to him as a drowning man clings to a blade of grass. Seeing both of them weeping on account of immeasurable sorrow, Kausalya was submerged in grief. She could scarce breathe. She gasped and was pitifully suffocating with agony. The maids noticed this and themselves loudly lamenting the misfortune that had overtaken all, they struggled to console the queen and restore her.

Meanwhile, Dasaratha pulled himself up a little. He made Sumantra sit right in front of him. He asked him, “Sumantra! Tell me about my Sita and Rama. Tell me all about them. How is Lakshmana? Alas, tender Sita must indeed be very much tired. Where are they now? Tell me.” Noting that Sumantra was not eager to reply, he shook him by the shoulders and pleaded most piteously.

Sumantra was too full of shame to look the Emperor in the face. He bent his looks towards the floor, and with eyes streaming with tears, he scarce could speak. Dasaratha continued his sobs. He said, “Oh Rama! My breath is still lingering on in this frame, even though a son like you left me. The world has no sinner equal to me in heinousness.

Sumantra! Where exactly are my Sita, Rama and Lakshmana, at present? Take me without delay to the place where they are. Do me this good turn. Fulfil this desire of mine. Without seeing them, I cannot live a second longer.”

And like a person infatuated and desperate, he shouted in pain, “Rama! Oh Rama! Let me see you at least once. Won’t you give me the chance to see you?”

The maids standing outside the hall where he was lying could not sleep or take food, since they were sunk in sorrow at the Emperor’s plight. Sumantra replied, “Imperial Monarch! Rajadhiraja! You are extremely wise. You are made in heroic mould. Your abilities are profound. Your lineage is divine. You have always served ascetics and saints. You know that as night follows day and day follows night, wealth and want, happiness and misery, nearness and separation come one after the other, with a certain inevitability. Only fools are carried off their feet in joy when happiness comes and are dispirited, downhearted when misery comes. Learned men like you should not be affected by either. They should be full of equanimity, whatever might happen. I have no credentials to advise you to face this situation courageously for you know the need for courage very much more. Oh Benefactor of the World! Heed my prayers. Give up this grief. I shall describe the details of my journey with them now. Please listen calmly.” At this, Kausalya struggled to raise herself up, with the help of the maids. She leaned on them and made herself ready to listen to what Sumantra had to say.

Sumantra began, “Oh Master! The first day we journeyed up to the bank of the Thamasa. Sita, Rama and Lakshmana bathed in the river and after drinking water, they rested under a spreading tree. The next day, we reached the Ganga River. Darkness was invading from all sides. I stopped the chariot according to the command of Rama. All three bathed and rested on a stretch of sand. When dawn broke Rama asked Lakshmana to bring him the juice of the banyan tree, and when he did so, Rama applied it on his hair and matted it, so that he could wear it on the crown of his head. Meanwhile the ruler of the Nishada tribe, a friend of Rama, brought a boat. Sita was made to get into the boat first. After her Rama sat in it. Later honouring the order of Rama, Lakshmana entered the boat, carrying the bow and arrows. Ere he sat in the boat, Lakshmana came to me and asked me to convey prostrations and homage to the parents, and his prayer for blessings. He also directed me to request you to put up with things boldly and wisely.”

Sumantra continued his account of what Rama had asked him to announce at Ayodhya. “Master,” he told Dasaratha, “Rama said, ‘Communicate my homage to the Preceptor. Advise my father not to grieve over what has happened.’ After this, Rama called me near him, and directed me thus, ‘Call together the Ministers and Citizens of Ayodhya, and the kinsmen of the Royal Family and tell them of this request, specially made by me: only those among them who help to make my father’s life happy are dear to me.’ Rama said, ‘On Bharatha’s arrival, convey my

blessings to him, and direct him to accept the burden of ruling over the empire, and to conserve and to promote justice and integrity, fostering the welfare of the people through means that are pure in thought, word and deed. Tell him that I desire him to serve the parents so well that they will forget their agony at separation from me.’

“While Rama was engaged in commissioning me thus, Sita too approached and told me to inform you she was happily spending time with Rama with nothing wanting. She wanted me to offer her prostrations at the feet of her father-in-law and mothers-in-law. She wanted me to tell them not to be anxious about her and to be assured that she was happy with her lord, and eagerly expecting them to bless her always. She requested me to tell them that she enquired often of their health and welfare.

“Meanwhile, the boatman realised that it was Rama’s wish that he should not delay any longer. So he started to dip the oar in the river. Soon, Rama moved off. I was looking on at the receding boat, with my heart literally petrified. I must have spent a long time standing there on the river bank. I had to return perforce to this place to carry out the orders of Rama; or else, I certainly would have drowned myself in the Ganga, I had become so desperate. I had to continue my life, just for this purpose—to convey to you the message from Rama. This Ayodhya which has no Rama in it appears to me forlorn and fearful as a forest.”

Listening to the words of Sumantra and the soft sweet messages from Rama and Sita, Dasaratha could not restrain

his anguish. He could not forget all that had happened. He fell in a faint.

The Emperor’s breath was suffocated, like a fish which struggles to wriggle out of the dense slush into which it has fallen. Seeing his plight, the queens burst into heartrending wails. Words cannot describe that moment of desperate distress. Seeing their sorrow, even sorrow could not restrain its own sorrow. The agony of the queens, the agony of the Emperor, the agony of the maids of the palace, spread confusion and consternation over the entire City. The residents of the Capital scattered in terror, just like birds of the forest, frightened at midnight by a sudden thunderbolt.

Like a lotus stalk which, plucked and thrown out of the water, fades fast, the Emperor was fast leaving the body. Words could not emerge from the throat, the tongue became dry. The senses turned dull and ineffective. Kausalya watched the Emperor and denoted that the Sun of the Solar Dynasty was setting.

She mustered courage and stepping near, she placed the head of her lord on her lap and tried to make him listen to a few words of consolation and comfort. She said, “Lord! Sita, Rama and Lakshmana will be arriving soon and seeing you. Hear my words; take courage; strengthen yourself.” When she so compassionately prayed into his ear, Dasaratha opened his eyes, and muttered audibly, “Kausalya! Where is my Rama? Show me, show me, where is he? Take me to

him. Alas! My sweet and tender daughter-in-law is not here now. And Lakshmana, where is he that I don't see him here."

Dasaratha bent his head, unable to hold it up any more. The burden of grief was so heavy. A few minutes later, the Emperor remembered the curse that was pronounced on him by the blind hermit, the father of Sravana. He sat up with a struggle, and began telling Kausalya in feeble accents, the story of that curse.

"Kausalya! On one occasion, I had gone into the forest on a hunting expedition. A large number of soldiers and huntsmen followed me thither. We could not meet any wild animal the whole day. But I felt that I should not return to the Capital with empty hands, with nothing bagged. We entered the forest in the night, and waited and watched for some luck. The dawn was about to break into the darkness around us on the brink of a vast lake, when something moved on the edge of the water. I could also hear the sound of the movement.

"I inferred that it was a big beast of the jungle, and since I could shoot the arrow straight at the sound and effect a kill, I drew my bow and let go the sharp, sure arrow. It flew fast and furious and hit that animal already on the move. Suddenly! I heard the cry of pain, 'Ah,' emanating from the place where it fell. I ran forward with the soldiers and lo, I found it was not a beast I had killed. It was the young son of a hermit! I bent by his side and prayed that he

should pardon me for the tragic error. The son of the hermit told me: 'Emperor! Do not grieve. Fulfil this request of mine, the request I shall presently tell you, that will be enough requital for the sin you have perpetrated. My name is Sravana. My father and mother are both blind. I was spending the days of my life serving them both. That service was granting me all the happiness I needed. I was blessed with even the highest knowledge, the Realisation of the Reality. They are now suffering from excruciating thirst. I came here to this lake to take some water to them. You shot at me imagining me to be an animal of the forest. Who can avoid the decrees of destiny? My present condition is such that I can no longer walk with this water to my parents. Therefore, take this vessel of water with you to them. Go in the northerly direction, until you come to a lonely thatched hut; and after they have slaked their thirst, describe what has happened to me here. Do not tell them anything about me before they slake their thirst.'" Saying this, he placed the vessel in my hands, and passed away.

"Kausalya! Oh, how pathetically anxious he was for his parents! He never worried about his life which was fast ebbing away. He did not speak a harsh word to me. Those soft sweet loving words he uttered are still echoing in my ears. With his last breath, he repeated the sacred Pranava, Om, Om, Om, clearly three times. Seeing him and his calm courageous death, I decided that I should make amends for my sin by fulfilling his last desire. I hurried to the hut he had mentioned, and gave the vessel into their hands, without

uttering a single word. But those parents started asking many questions. They enquired, ‘Son! Why did you take so much time? Why this delay?’ They moved their hands forward and waved them about, so that they may touch him, and feel his presence before them. I stepped back a little. Meanwhile the aged couple wailed, ‘Son! Why is it that today you are not speaking to us? We shall not drink the water that you have brought unless you talk to us and answer our queries!’

“I had directed, that the body of Sravana be brought behind me by the soldiers to the parents’ hut. They arrived at this time with the corpse. I placed the body within reach of the mother. She wept most pathetically over the body; I could not look on. Sometime later, the mother established some little mastery over her grief and told me, ‘Emperor! There is no use extending our lives hereafter, since our son has left us. We have grown old. Who will serve us and foster us? Kill us too, as you killed him. Or else, erect a pyre, so that we can immolate ourselves with our son.’ I bowed my head, and accepted their command. I heaped dry wood and piled up a pyre. The son’s corpse was placed on it. They sat on it and by sheer exercise of Yogic power, they created fire in themselves and burnt themselves.

“Before they immolated themselves, they addressed me and spoke a few words. Their holy curse is proving true today.” At this point, Dasaratha stopped some time, in order to take rest, and to compose the agitation of his mind.

Kausalya pacified him, and gave him consolation and mental calm. She said, “Lord! What did the parents say? Tell me, I am anxious to hear.” Dasaratha stayed silent for a while and replied, “Kausalya! What can I say? How can I repeat those words? Those old people, the aged couple spoke thus: ‘You will end your life, as we are doing now, out of unbearable agony at separation from your son.’ And then, they breathed their last, amidst the rising flames.

“At that time, I had no son. I wondered how their curse would affect me. How could their word come true, I thought within myself. But I also thought, that being the words of an aged sage, they cannot but become true. That meant I must have sons, so that I may be separated from them. You know how sad we were, for we had no sons then. I felt that the curse might prove a blessing. I prayed it may come true, so that, even though I may have to be separated from them, I might have sons. I could not tell you this secret till now. Now, I understand that the words of that holy hermit represented genuine truth. The agony of separation from Rama is bringing about my end. I have recalled to memory the tragedy of Sravana. My courage is spent. I cannot muster it any more.”

Dasaratha was lost in the contemplation of the incidents of the past. “Rama! Rama! Rama!” he cried thrice, and leaned back on Kausalya. Kausalya noticed the change that had come over him, and screamed. The attendants and maids gathered around. They found that the Emperor had

drawn his last breath. The city was turned into a vale of tears, a seething pool of grief. Crowds surged into the palace. The streets became fast-moving torrents of weeping humanity. People cast curses on Kaikeyi, for they felt that the city had lost its Eyes as a result of her machinations.

Vashishta, the Royal Preceptor, arrived at the Hall, where the body of the Emperor lay. He spoke appropriate counsel and tried to assuage the sorrow of the queens. He consoled Kausalya and Sumitra, telling them about the deceased forefathers and how they too could not escape death, in spite of their might and majesty. Since there was no one present who could officiate during the obsequies, the body was, according to the instructions given by Vashishta, kept immersed in oil so that it might not disintegrate. Vashishta beckoned a courier, and told him. "Here! Go quickly to Bharatha. Do not tell him a word about the death of the Emperor. Tell him only this—the Preceptor wants that you and your brother should return immediately to the Capital City." The courier fell at the feet of the Preceptor, and took leave of the Minister, before he started on the long journey in a fleet chariot.

Ever since Ayodhya was plunged in sorrow, Bharatha was experiencing various premonitions in the form of ominous dreams. He was awakened by the terror and turmoil which the dreams presented before him. Many nights Bharatha had not even a wink of sleep. He sat up in bed, in an eerie state of expectation. He feared that some bad news

was coming fast towards him. He moved out even before dawn; and, after an early bath, he engaged himself in various rites and ceremonies in order to propitiate the Gods and avert the expected calamity. He sat long in the shrine, praying for relief. In spite of all this, he was haunted by a mysterious fear.

The dreams were persisting for fourteen days and so Bharatha had reached the very bottom of his courage and faith. Meanwhile the courier from Ayodhya managed to reach the City of Kekaya, where Bharatha was, on the fifteenth day of his long journey. When Bharatha was informed of his arrival at the main entrance to the Palace, Bharatha ordered that he be brought in immediately, so that he might know what had brought him.

The courier prostrated before Bharatha and prayed that he and his brother start without the least delay, according to the command of the Preceptor, to Ayodhya. Bharatha enquired about the welfare of people in Ayodhya, plying the courier with a variety of questions. He replied that there was nothing special to report, except that the Preceptor wanted them to return soon, without delay. This was the task on which he had come and he had nothing more to say. Nor did he know anything more.

Bharatha knew that couriers would not speak more than a few words before their royal masters and the royal masters too should not keep on talking to them intimately

for long. Etiquette demanded that he should not converse with him for more than a few minutes. The courier too had his code of discipline. So, he rose and left the chamber.

That very moment, Bharatha entered the inner apartments, and took leave of his maternal uncle. Along with his brother, Satrughna, he got into the waiting chariot, and hurried it to move forward faster and faster. Like an arrow from an intrepid bow, the chariot flew over mountain paths, hill tracks and jungle roads. Grief was surging from Bharatha's heart, as fast as the chariot itself. He could not explain why or wherefore. Some inexplicable agony afflicted him. Bharatha did not wish to delay on the road for food or even for a gulp of water to assuage his thirst.

Satrughna noticed the sense of alarm and anxiety that had overcome his brother. He suggested a few times that a halt could be made for food and drink; but, Bharatha did not heed. He stayed silent. Moreover, they observed a series of bad omens encountering them as they drove along. Crows cawed raucously from positions and directions foreboding evil. Dogs howled piteously, in an eerie tone. These signs of calamity ruffled the calmness which Satrughna had heroically maintained until then.

When they arrived at the main gate of the City of Ayodhya, and looked up, the fear was confirmed; for, the festoons of mango leaves had not been renewed for days. Only dried leaves were hanging across the moaning

gateway. They were beating against the wind, as if gnashing in anger and sorrow. Why were green leaves not hung across? What had happened to the City? Why this neglect, this sign of distress? The brothers guessed that some terrible bolt of sorrow had fallen on the Capital.

They entered the City and drove on. The Royal Stables for horses and elephants were at the very entrance. When Bharatha's eyes fell on them, his heart broke. He lost control over himself. For, he found the animals standing without moving a muscle, heads bent and eyes streaming tears. The mahouts and grooms stood with a heavy load of grief, unable to lift their heads. When they drove further into the City, they found the doors of all the mansions on both sides of the road closed, as if the people inside declined to welcome anyone in. The roads themselves were dusty and unswept. The few citizens who were up and moving suddenly turned their gaze away when they saw the chariot that was coming in. When they recognised Bharatha, they shed tears.

The diamond bazaar was closed, so were all shops all over. Bharatha could not find the tongue to enquire from anyone the reason for the pall of gloom that hung over the City. He was petrified at the unforeseen signs of distress. The chariot entered the Royal Palace. The guards received them silently, with no acclamation of joy, the traditional shouts of Jai, Jai. They stood mute and bent. They could not raise their eyes, for there were tears overflowing. The brothers were now convinced that some unspeakable

calamity had overtaken the city. They alighted from the chariot and ran into the palace.

Kaikeyi had noted that her son had come. She went forward with great joy to receive him. The bevy of maids who rose with her and walked behind her were groaning in sorrow. Bharatha looked at their faces and stood stunned where he stood, unable to speak even a single word. But Kaikeyi started to speak. She said, “Son! Is your uncle well?” Bharatha gave some indistinct reply to that question and pressed forward with his own query, “How is father? How is my eldest brother? How is my other brother? How are my aunts, the queens?”

At this, Kaikeyi was rendered mute. Tears gathered in the eyes of the maids who stood around. He realised that some terrible news was being hidden from him. He asked, “Mother, where is father?” At this, the maids burst into sobs and tears. Seeing them, Kaikeyi too sensed that she should not delay any longer. She too shed tears and acted the role of a grief-stricken woman. Bharatha could not unravel the mystery unaided. He prayed to his mother to explain to him what had happened to whom, and why everyone was so overcome with sorrow.

At this, Kaikeyi replied, “Son! What shall I say? I was very happy that with the help of Manthara, I was able to achieve all that I desired. But with the very first step, my success has broken into bits. The Gods cast an unpropitious

eye on it. The Emperor, your dearly beloved father, has left for Heaven.” Kaikeyi started sobbing aloud. No sooner did these words fall on his ear, than Bharatha rolled on the ground like a she-elephant at the roar of a lion. He cried out, “Alas, Father!” as he fell. Like a plantain tree cut asunder, Satrugna too fell flat on the floor. Their agony was indescribable, immeasurable. Bharatha sat up pressing his head with both hands and wept aloud. He cried out, “Father! We could not be present round your bed when you drew your last breath. Oh! what great sinners are we? Of the four sons, all the four could not reap the same merit. And this Bharatha and this Satrugna are the worst, the most unfortunate. During the last moments, you would have talked so lovingly to us. You would have given us invaluable blessings and directions for life. Well, we must be grateful that Rama was there with you. You would certainly have told him what you wished to convey to us. Brother! Rise. Come with me. We shall go to Rama and find out what father has left as message for us. Mother! Tell us where Rama is now.” Bharatha stood up, ready to go. He was waiting only for his mother’s reply.

Kaikeyi said, “Son! If Rama were here, your father would not have breathed his last, don’t you realise that? Rama is not in the City, don’t you know?” This was like pouring poison into a wound. Bharatha was shocked by the new blow. Bharatha asked, “Mother, Rama is my very breath. Where has Rama gone?” Bharatha was on the brink of collapse, Kaikeyi replied quick and fast: “Whereto? Do

you ask where he has gone? Well, to the forest.” “That may be,” Bharatha intervened, “But why has Rama who has gone to the forest not returned yet?”

Kaikeyi’s answer was delivered calmly and with deliberation. She said, “Son! We have no time to relate and listen to that long story. First, busy yourself in arranging for the last obsequies of your father!” From this, Bharatha learnt that his mother was trying to hide some unpleasant secret from him. So, he asked the whereabouts of Sita and Lakshmana, one after the other. The mother replied, “They both have followed Rama into the forest. They will not be returning to this City until after fourteen years. Thus did your father command.” Kaikeyi delivered this statement, with a firm, hard voice.

Kaikeyi saw that Bharatha was rendered increasingly desperate and distressed by her statements; so, she drew her son near and, stroking his head, she started consoling him saying, “Son! There is no need to lament over your father. He was, while alive, engaging himself continuously in a series of meritorious activities, and so his soul would have attained heaven. Your duty now is to follow the ideal he has set before you, to earn similar fame by meritorious deeds and rule over the Empire happily. Increase his fame and renown by your own wise and merciful rule and maintain the great name of the dynasty.” Kaikeyi endeavoured to heal the lacerated heart of her son by these and similar words.

But they struck his heart like a dagger thrust. Each word hit him like a hammer stroke. Satrughna developed a burning sensation all over his body, as he listened to her. But he kept quiet. He did not scream. Bharatha, however, rose suddenly, deciding to discover the truth, for, he felt that his mother was deceiving him by her words, keeping some facts away from him and talking in riddles. He drew Satrughna along and rushed out of the room towards the apartments of Kausalya, the eldest queen and the mother of Rama.

And what did he see there! Kausalya was rolling on the floor, in her dust-ridden clothes, lamenting aloud, “Oh Lord! Lord, Rama, Rama!” Her maids themselves sunk in sorrow, were nursing her into some sort of courage. Bharatha could not restrain himself. Crying out “Mother! Mother!” he collapsed on the floor at her feet. Queen Sumitra too was there, with Kausalya. Both of them recognised Bharatha and Satrughna, and they suddenly fainted away. Recovering, they clasped each other in a fit of agony and wept aloud. It was a scene that would have melted the hardest stone. The brothers could not bear the weight of sorrow. They fell on the floor.

“Mother! Take me to father. Tell me the reason why he passed away. Why did my dear brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, proceed to the forest, with Sita? It is all a mystery to me. Save me from this agony, tell me why.” Bharatha pleaded pitifully, clasping the feet of Kausalya.

Kausalya embraced him tenderly and replied, “With your return, my son, I am consoled a little. Seeing you, I can forget the pang of separation from dear Rama. You are as much as Rama to me. I make no distinction.” Even while saying so, she interrupted her words, with sobs and groans, and the cry, “Ah! Rama! Can I keep alive for fourteen long years, while you spend them in the forest? Have you resolved that I should be reduced to ashes by the sorrow of separation, just as your father was? Alas how unfortunate am I?” Bharatha suffered even more at these outbursts. His imagination pictured all kinds of tragedies and miseries, for, he was not yet aware of the truth. He prayed: “Mother! Do not keep fact away from me. Trust me. Tell me why Rama went away into the forest, and why father breathed his last. Tell me and save me from this tangle of confusion.”

Kausalya was ever simple and straightforward and very compassionate by nature. She took Bharatha to be Rama himself returned. She drew Bharatha near her, and wiping her tears off, she said, “Son! Bharatha! Be bold. Do not grieve over the past. Such grief is useless. Strange things do happen when times are not propitious and circumstances so conspire. Of what benefit is it to lay the blame on someone? No one should be found fault with. It is my destiny to live on with this load of sorrow. This cannot be avoided. It must be endured by me. But you are young. You are like the sun at the hour of early dawn. Remember that.

“My dearly loved darling, Rama, in obedience to father’s order, wore apparels of fibre, tied his matted hair into a topknot, and is now moving about in the jungle. Sita, who cannot live away from him even for a moment, is with him, clothed in a bark garment. Lakshmana attempted to prevent Rama from going into the forest, but his efforts were of no avail. He declared that Ayodhya without Rama was a jungle for him, he followed Rama. All this happened before my very eyes. Oh! What a sinful soul should I be that I still live!

“I could not go with them, nor would my life depart, when they left. How shall I describe my miserable plight? My heart is really carved out of adamant stone. Oh tender-hearted Rama! you suffer so much now, since you were born of me. Or else, why should you? Alas! Rama! How much suffering you have to endure, living on fruits and roots, and wandering about in the terror striking recesses of the jungles!” She groaned aloud once and fell in a faint on the floor.

Bharatha saw all this and listened to what was told him, but the puzzle still remained unsolved. He was struggling in fear and anxiety, unable to delve into the mystery. Meanwhile, a message was brought by Minister Sumantra that the royal preceptor, Sage Vashishta, had asked that Bharatha should go to him. Sumantra too burst into tears when his eyes fell on the brothers. He clasped Bharatha to his breast. The brothers too could not control their grief.

Bharatha hoped that Sumantra at least would throw light on the mystery hanging over the tragic events in the Capital. He tried various means to draw Sumantra to giving him an account of the happenings. But Sumantra did not like to speak on them. He thought Bharatha and Satrughna had already been told what had happened by those whom they had met before his arrival.

They went to the Preceptor together. Bharatha and Satrughna fell at the feet of Vashishta and wept aloud. He raised them up, with affection and sympathy, and taught them many a moral and philosophical lesson, in the process of consoling them. "Already, there has been much delay. It is not advisable to delay any further," he said, and directed Bharatha to prepare himself for performing the funeral rites of his father. Bharatha was lost in thought for a long while. Then, he pleaded with the Preceptor Vashishta, "Master! This is a duty that has to be carried out by the eldest son, and Rama is the eldest of us four. Now you are proposing that I should carry it out. Is this just? Is this right? You have preserved the body all these days; keep it so for two or three days more. We shall proceed to where Rama is, Satrughna and I, and bring him back with us. Please give us permission to do so."

Vashishta replied, "Son! You are a simpleton! Rama would not like to return earlier than the period which has been fixed. He honours the word, when once given. However much you might plead, Rama will not enter

Ayodhya until the fourteen years are over. Therefore, give up that plan of yours. Perform the obsequies of your father, and later you can do whatever you desire." Vashishta spoke in this strain again and again to convince Bharatha of the futility of his idea.

Bharatha found that he could not avoid obeying the Preceptor. He agreed. The father's body was bathed, and the rites laid down in the Vedas preliminary to cremation were duly gone through. Meanwhile urged by an irrepressible yearning, Bharatha went straight into the apartments of Kausalya and Sumitra, and falling at their feet, he prayed, "Mothers! No. You must desist from immolating yourselves in the funeral pyre of father. If you try to do so, I will not perform the last rites for him."

He secured from them the promise that they would not. Both of them were much impressed by his love and affection. They could not but comply with this request. They said, "Son! We shall act in accordance with your desire."

Then the body was taken and placed on the pyre of sandalwood piled on the bank of the Sarayu River. Bharatha performed the last rites with scrupulous correctitude, evincing a faith in the Vedas which was a thousand times more than what Vashishta expected and foresaw. He gave away in charity, in the name of his father, the sixteen prescribed articles, in plenty. He gave cows, lands, gold, houses, clothes, food, horses, elephants, coins, and other

valuables. The recipients extolled throughout his generosity and filial piety.

But the feudatory kings, the scholars and priests, and the common people could not reconcile themselves to the absence of Rama. That sorrow gnawed their hearts. That agony of separation caused pangs of pain every moment. They knew they were helpless. There was no way out. Rama would never give up the plighted word. He would not return, whatever the inducement. He would not come back to Ayodhya until the fourteen-year period was over. They had to accept that fact. So they steeled their hearts to bear with the agony and decided to keep alive, awaiting his return, hoping to rejoice when the term of exile ends.

Meanwhile, Vashishta, the Royal Preceptor, gathered the feudatory rulers, the vassal kings, the ministers, sages and monks, the wise men of the Empire, and leaders among the people, and held a Conference. First he administered words of advice according to the Dharmasastra, the canons of moral law, on the duties and obligations of rulers. He narrated, in the beginning, the entire series of events from the plot woven by Kaikeyi to the day when Rama left for the forest. When Vashishta dilated upon the high qualities of the deceased Emperor—his adherence to Truth, his elevated standards of conduct, his high spiritual attainments, his regal splendour, and his loyalty to Vedic injunctions, which made him a generous patron of countless Yajnas, Yagas and other ceremonial rites. Vashishta then went on

with the narration of the attempt made by the Emperor to celebrate the Coronation of Rama and the obstacles that came in his way, which resulted in the exile of Rama and the death of the Emperor himself through grief at the separation from his dearly beloved son.

Bharatha and Satrugna, who were unaware of these tragic developments at the Capital now being described by their Preceptor, were overwhelmed with anger, as well as sorrow and a sense of shame. They bent their heads. Their hearts were filled with contrition. Streams of tears flowed down their cheeks. The persons assembled before them could scarce lift their eyes towards them. Even Vashishta wiped his eyes which were fast filling with tears. The hall was saturated with gloom. A silence fell over the assembly. All men sat like stone images.

Bharatha and Satrugna could not any longer listen to what Vashishta was narrating. They were too full of anger at Kaikeyi for her nefarious conduct. Bharatha cursed himself that he was born of such a mother. He was so ashamed at this consequence of his own evil deeds in past lives that he could not lift his head or look anyone in the face. They were anxious to leave the hall and get away.

Vashishta knew what their feelings were. He went near them with comforting counsel. “Son,” he said “there is no use lamenting over the past. What has happened has happened. Now, we must think and resolve upon what has

to be done. Your father, I must say, was fortunate in all respects. Why grieve over him? Listen to me. Bow your head to his command. He has granted you the authority to rule over this Empire. It is right that you accept his grant and honour his order. Your father agreed to be separated from Rama, since he could not bring himself to breaking his own plighted word. He gave up his life, since he had immense love and affection towards Rama. He died in order to redeem his promise, there is no doubt about that. He knew that honouring a promise once made is more valuable than life itself. That is why he was ready to face death itself rather than go back on his word. And consider, Rama too went into exile in the forest with his wife in order to honour his word!

“It is the glory of the Ikshvaku royal line that everyone belonging to it would sacrifice anything for the sake of keeping the word once given. That is the splendour which you share. You too must now act according to your father’s word and accept the responsibility of administering the kingdom. May you attain all auspiciousness in the task. May success and prosperity attend on all your undertakings. I have ventured to advise you thus, only because of the affection and compassion I have towards you; or else, I would not have laid on your shoulder this heavy responsibility. I know you can maintain the fair name of your father. You have the administrative ability, the skill, and the courage needed for taking up this burden. Do not hesitate or doubt. Accept the charge.”

Vashishta patted Bharatha on his back and blessed him. Bharatha took his loving advice and when the Preceptor finished, he rose quickly from his seat, and fell prostrate at his feet. He struggled to speak, for he was in inconsolable grief. His lips were quivering. His throat was unclear. Words could hardly shape themselves on his tongue. He said, “Master! Are these words of yours really an indication of your love and compassion? No, in fact, you have no love, no compassion towards me. For, if you had, you would have never agreed to place all this burden on me. You are sentencing me to this punishment without the least compassion. This Empire that drove the holiest and purest person into the jungles, this Empire that plunged the entire population into years of incessant tears, this Empire that has lost its most righteous ruler, this Empire that has brought eternal infamy to its ruling dynasty, the Ikshvaku Line, this Empire that has brought about the pathetic state of widowhood on mothers Kausalya, Sumitra and the rest, this Empire that has degraded itself in so many ways—you are now entrusting to me!

“Alas, this is the consequence of the sins I have committed, the consequence of this unfortunate fellow being born from the womb of that embodiment of cruelty and hatred, Kaikeyi. Instead of inflicting this punishment on me, please earn some spiritual merit by sending me to where Rama is. I can make my life worthwhile and save myself, by engaging in the task of sweeping the paths ahead of them, to make them soft for his feet. I cannot remain in this place a moment longer.”

Bharatha fell at Vashishta's feet and prayed for permission to leave for the forest. At this, the Ministers of the State rose with folded hands and said, "Lord! It is not proper to continue this state of affairs long. We have no ruler now. You cannot escape the responsibility which the Preceptor is imposing on you. After Rama returns, you can act in the way you prefer, but now, please accept our prayers. Protect the realm and promote the prosperity of the people. Take up the reins."

Bharatha did not reply to their importunities. Instead, he wanted leave to go to mother Kausalya and see her for awhile. Vashishta readily agreed. Bharatha and Satrugna moved out of the Assembly, and made their way straight to the palace of Kausalya. They fell at her feet and Bharatha told her, "Mother! Pray pardon this unlucky Bharatha who has been the cause of all this calamity, having been born from the womb of that wicked woman, Kaikeyi. This cursed fellow is the source of miseries of the realm. Give me permission to leave for the forest. I cannot walk or move about even a moment in this city of Ayodhya with head erect, after my master and lord, Rama has left it on account of me. This Empire belongs as of right to the eldest son. This insignificant fellow has no right over it. I do not need this burden. I shall not bear it. Bless me, so that I can leave immediately." Bharatha stood waiting, filled with grief.

Kausalya mustered courage and started to comfort Bharatha. She said, "Bharatha! Consider the circumstances

and give up your grief. This is no time for wavering. Rama is out there in the midst of the forest region. Your father is in Heaven. Your mothers, kith and kin, your friends and well-wishers, and the subjects are sunk in deep sorrow. All are now looking forward to you as their sole refuge and resort. Realise that all this has happened because the times were not propitious and so deeds of men became crooked and shocking; take courage and decide. Obey the directions of your father. Bow your head to the command of the Guru, Vashishta. Honour the petitions of the people. Act as the ministers are praying you should."

Kausalya was holding his hands fondly in hers, while she was trying to persuade him to accept the authority of the monarch of the realm. Her words touched him with a strange softness, as if they were cool sandal paste over a burning heart. They were sweet to the ear, and very appealing to hear. For, Kausalya had no word of condemnation for his mother who had caused this string of disasters. She entertained not even the least doubt regarding his loyalty. Bharatha felt immensely happy and relieved when he listened to her words. He was delighted beyond measure when he noted how broad her heart was and how sincere her affection towards him. He had not calculated even in his wildest dream that Kausalya would treat him like this, when her own son was an exile for fourteen years in the forest, and also pour out such plentiful affection on him, who was the son of another wife of her husband! What a difference, he wondered, between his own mother,

Kaikeyi, and Kausalya. He could not gauge it by any unit of measurement. He found in Kausalya the completion and fulfilment of the love that should fill the heart.

He folded his palms and importuned, “Mother! Your words filled with tenderness and love are like a shower of cool rosewater on my lacerated heart. Perhaps you mistook me for Rama! But alas, I am not that pure-hearted Rama. Bharatha, born of Kaikeyi, I have a crooked nature, inherited from her. I am mean, with no sense of shame. I am the enemy of Rama. You have taken me to be Rama and spoken so kindly, so affectionately. Your heart is so set upon Rama that you address everyone as you address Rama himself. I am speaking the truth, mother! Listen to me, and pay heed to my prayer.

“Mother! Only those who are established in righteousness deserve to rule. When persons of devious intelligence and shady skills like me rule the realm, the earth will degenerate into an image of the nether regions. Selfish pushers, narrow-minded adventurers, greedy vultures, pomp-loving personalities, self-centred individuals, persons suffering from chronic envy, these do not deserve the right to rule. They harm the interests of the people whom they rule over. They undermine the foundations of righteousness. The kingdom will be ruined by them. Only those who tread the path of virtue and righteous conduct deserve to rule over others. I can discover only one such, and he is Rama. I do not know of any other.

Therefore, I shall leave this very instant, and clasping the feet of Rama, pray to him. I shall bring him back with me to Ayodhya. Grant me the permission. Bless me without further delay.” Bharatha prostrated before Kausalya and waited for the answer.

Bharatha’s words soothed the heart of Kausalya to a large extent. She said, “Son! In you I find surging forth the selfsame feelings my Rama has. Looking upon you, I can bear a little the agony of separation from him. So, if you too proceed to the forest, what is to happen to us? If you declare that your going is inevitable, then, take me too. For whom have I to spend my days with in this Ayodhya? Having lost the husband, and having become distant from the son, the wife has not yet dissolved herself in the agony of the loss. Go, secure the permission of the Guru, Vashishta. We shall enter the forest, and spend at least some time with Sita, Rama and Lakshmana. I can then end this life of mine.” When she spoke thus, Bharatha derived some consolation and peace of mind.

Thereupon, Bharatha fell at the feet of Kausalya and Sumitra, and rose to proceed towards the palace of Kaikeyi.

Bharatha walked first and Satrugna followed him. They were heavy with grief and resentment that Kaikeyi, putting her trust in Manthara, had brought about such havoc. They tried hard to suppress the anger that rose within them. At last, they entered the palace. They saw at the entrance

Manthara herself, elaborately bejewelled, waiting to receive them. Satrughna could not tolerate that sight. He dragged her down by the hair and rained blows on her. She bawled out, “Ayyo” “Ayyo” and when the sound reached the ears of Kaikeyi, she ran to the spot, and started berating Satrughna for his action.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, Bharatha let himself go, with uncontrolled indignation. He shouted at her, “Fie upon you, blackest sinner! You placed faith in this wicked woman’s words and committed despicable sin. How was it that your heart did not break in twain when this woman’s disastrous counsel entered it? How could your tongue pronounce those baneful boons? Did it not turn into ashes, when it uttered those abominable desires? With what face can you dare reside in this palace? Aren’t you ashamed to move within its precincts? Alas! How did the Emperor place his faith in the words of a person so evil as you are? Blinded by lust, he agreed to barter away the son, in order to win the wife. The conspiracy you hatched was mean and fraught with misery. You polluted the pure heart of the Emperor. You set the Kingdom on fire. You have destroyed the dynasty and its glory. You have brought eternal disgrace on the Royal Line of Raghu. Your crooked, poisonous heart has achieved all this ruin. To declare you as my mother is a dire sin. How could you decide that, when you harm another, your son will attain good fortune? Are not the children of others as dear to them as yours are to you? Women who plan ill for other’s children are only accomplishing evil for

their own children. How did you miss this great truth? It must be due to the sins you have committed in previous lives. No. All this is due to me. Or else, why should the pure, the steadfast, the undefiled Rama, my beloved brother, and the crown of chastity and goodness, Mother Sita, wander about in the fearsome forest? Oh, what a cruelty! How dreadful! Fie on you. That I have to speak to such a foul-hearted sinner is itself the result of sins I must have committed in my past lives. Oh, I wonder what dreadful sin I have committed to deserve this punishment, this disgrace, of being born of your womb. Sinners get only sinners as sharers and companions. How can they be associated with good men, men engaged in meritorious activity?

“This Solar dynasty is as holy, as pure, as the Celestial Swan, with no trace of blemish. But really speaking, you are like your mother; she had her husband killed in order to fulfil her ambition. You too have killed your husband, in order to realise your selfish wish. Can the younger son ever rule over the Empire, overstepping the eldest son contrary to the established practice of the Royal Line?

“You did not get this fatal idea now. It was there, latent, as a seed, since the very beginning, or else, it would not have manifested as a giant tree all of a sudden. Endowed with such a wicked nature, you could have smothered me dead as soon as I was born and saved me and this Empire from all this misery. Of what avail is it now to bewail what

is past? Alas! Your intelligence directed you to hew down the trunk and water the branches, your reasoning faculty instructed you to promote the lives of fish by bailing out the water from the tank. I am unable to decide whether I have to laugh or weep at your banal stupidity.

“Instead of fouling these minutes conversing with you, I would rather proceed to the presence of Rama, and pray to him to come back to Ayodhya so that I can return with him. In case, he declines to return, I am determined to stay with him as Lakshmana has done, and be happy serving him. I shall not look on your face again.”

Saying this, Bharatha turned his back on her, and started with his brother. Kaikeyi ruminated on her erroneous action. She lamented at the turn her plot had taken. She felt that wicked plans by whosoever entertained might grant only temporary happiness. But they are certain to pave the way to ultimate downfall. She found no means of escape. She could not find words to express her remorse and sorrow; so, she stood petrified and dumb.

Kaikeyi got disgusted with Manthara. She realised the truth. She felt delighted at the righteous stand taken by Rama. And she hung her head in shame at the recognition of her own sin.