

Chapter 10. Kaika's Two Boons

Manthara schemes

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

While Manthara, Kaika's maid, was returning the previous night, she saw the excitement of the populace and asked someone the reason. She came to know about the cause of all the joy and exultation: the imminent coronation of Ramachandra. 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 couldn't bear the sight any longer. She had creeps all over her body, like scorpion stings in plenty. She ran toward Kaika's palace and, finding that the queen had already retired into the inner apartments, neared the door and shrieked, "Mother! Mother! Open the door! A very urgent matter! Your life is in mortal danger! An earthquake is afoot."

The queen hastily opened the door and asked in fear, "Why? What happened? What's the calamity? Has anything caved in? Why this anxiety and pain?"

"No, nothing of mine is destroyed. Your life is being destroyed, that's all. You have to live from now on as a crazy careworn woman," Manthara said. In tears, she elaborated the pitiable state that awaited the queen, and with many a gesture and groan, she lamented loud and long.

Kaika 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 they are quite well and no danger threatens them, I'm not worried at all. What can happen to me? Has any danger come to them, tell me, Manthara! Tell me soon!" She turned the maid's head toward her, held her chin in endearing appeal, and pleaded for an answer.

Manthara replied, "Nothing evil has happened to the ones you mention! But, they have decided ...to wring the neck of your son!" She broke into a pathetic wail.

Kaika retorted "You're making a mistake, Manthara! The *Maharaja* is not such a person; nor is Rama, Lakshmana, or my sisters Kausalya and Sumitra! 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 haven't told me yet what the matter really is; come on, tell me the full story."

Manthara said, "Matter? At dawn tomorrow, Ramachandra is to be crowned heir-apparent (*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 can't bear this in silence; I can't tolerate it.

"You are unable 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 before 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 heir-apparent the entire empire will be held in Kausalya’s grasp, remember! Just as everyone else, you will also have to dance to her tune.” Manthara was acting her role and shedding false tears to reinforce her wily stratagem.

Kaika was impressed by her loyalty but was not convinced by her arguments. “Manthara! What happened to you? Have you become insane? Why do you talk madly! Rama becoming the heir-apparent 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 heir-apparent gives me even more joy than perhaps Kausalya. My joy at this good news is boundless. Rama 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.” Kaika reprimanded Manthara sharply.

Manthara became more demonstratively aggrieved. She got more excited and clamorous. “My reason is clear and fresh, but yours has suffered!” she ejaculated. “You are not concerned about the evil fate that awaits you. You hug your old faith and fond attachment blindly. I’m anxious and worried for your happiness and self-respect. The others are play-acting and pretending, just to deceive you. They have no respect for you in their hearts. The Maharaja has no love toward his other queens: he is enamoured only of the senior queen, Kausalya. He might use endearing words now and then just to please you, but he has no love in his heart toward you.

“Consider this. These people didn’t inform or consult you about this proposal. Have they spoken to you about it even once? 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 Kausalya’s intrigue.”

Kaika could not suffer it any longer. She burst out, “Stop that stuff, Manthara! My sister is incapable of intrigue and would never descend so low. It could never be. And the *Maharaja*? He is much nobler, more righteous than even my sisters! You cannot find a trace of subterfuge or meanness in him. They must have resolved upon the coronation quickly, for good reason. Rama’s wedding celebration, which would have involved months of preparation, took place at short notice, didn’t it? Rama’s coronation could also have been decided at short notice —why not? The *Maharaja* himself will reveal to me what induced him to arrange it so. You haven’t cared to know the truth; you’ve 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.” Kaika admonished the maid severely.

Manthara feared that her stratagem would fail ignominiously, so she stooped to even worse tactics of persuasion. “Dear Mother! Ponder the matter a little more deeply. I listened to many things while moving about, outside the palace. In fact, this coronation affair was decided upon months ago. That is why Bharatha and Satrugna were packed out of the capital. They apprehended that their presence here would cause complications. And there must be good ground for such fears, or else who would arrange for the coronation when they are away? Have you become incapable of asking yourself this simple question?

“When you married, Dasaratha promised and gave his plighted word that your son would be crowned king. You might forget it, but I refuse to. The fear that Bharatha’s presence at this juncture might rouse the memory of that promise and prove an obstacle to their plan made them keep Bharatha out of the way, by sending him to his grandfather.

“Once the coronation is accomplished, it can’t be undone. To promote this mean trick, they kept the idea secret and kept it from you so long. Think about this for a while, the inner design. You don’t spend any thought on such matters; you believe ‘all that is white is milk!’ Others take advantage of your foolishness and innocence. You simply exult in your love for Rama and recite ‘Rama, Rama’ in your infatuation. Well, leave everything else aside. Did Rama, whom you love so greatly, at least inform you of this great good fortune happening to him?”

The crooked-minded Manthara used many specious and cunning arguments to cloud and poison the pure unselfish mind of Kaika.

She said, “Mother, who in Ayodhya is willing to pay us a little regard? Who treats you 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 won’t 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 don’t realise the fault in you that is preventing you from attaining the high status you deserve. Mother! You may remember that kings are ever ruled by lust, and not by love. Your father knew this fact, 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 were to be given in marriage, the suitor was compelled to agree to many conditions.

“Today, those agreements have been cast into flames and your son has been cheated; all the while, they are quietly playing their merry drama! Why else should they take advantage of this chance of your son being away? Why should they be in such hurry that no ruler from any state beyond the bounds of the empire can attend the coronation? 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.

“Don’t delay; ponder deeply and decide on how to prevent the coronation from taking place.” Manthara fanned the flames of anger and hatred.

Kaika succumbs

Kaika succumbed to Manthara’s machinations at last! “Hearing your words, I feel that each statement is more convincing than the previous one! Yes, indeed! This matter can’t wait. What has to be done? If you can indicate the step I have to take, I will put it into action.”

When Kaika gave this clear sign of having been won over by her wiles, Manthara was overwhelmed with pride and joy. She spoke with greater assurance. “Mother! There is no need for further thought. The arguments that can support your demand are ready and strong. That day, when the emperor thankfully accepted your timely help, didn’t he offer you two boons, any two you might demand of him? And, didn’t you tell him that since you had no need 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 they be granted now, can’t you?”

When Manthara spoke thus, plainly and emphatically, Kaika raised her head as if startled. “O Manthara, how clever you are! Though in appearance you are an ugly hunchback, in resourcefulness and intelligence you are ex-

tremely charming. Though wanting in beauty of body, you make up by being an expert in intellectual attainments. Tell me how to secure these two boons and what the boons should be.”

“Mother! One boon should be that your son shall be crowned heir-apparent (*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, Kaika 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 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 can’t succeed in our plan. For the cruel wrong done by them this is no adequate reprisal. If you want your son to rule as king and want to have the status of queen mother, then act this way; otherwise, I will end my life by taking poison. I can’t bear to see you suffer while I am alive.” Manthara wept aloud, as if she was carried away by intense love and attachment toward Kaika.

She was the nurse who had brought up Kaika from childhood; she had petted her, played with her, and fondled her all these years. Toward Manthara, Kaika had great affection and regard; she raised no further objection; she started to calm her sorrow instead. “Manthara! Rest assured! I will, without fail, act in such a way that you’re pleased. Tell me what I should do now.”

Manthara replied, “When I suggested asking for Rama to be sent into exile into the forests beyond the realm, don’t imagine that I hadn’t weighed the consequences. I did it only after due deliberation.” Since Kaika 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 for the exile, say fourteen years. When he returns after that period, he can’t 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 your jewels into the corners; loosen your hair and make it wild and disheveled; 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 can’t just go to him as you are and straight away ask for the boons. Pretend that you are in desperate agony and that only granting 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!”

Kaika yielded to her persuasion. 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 the hall, after drawing the doors together, as if she were unaware of what was causing all the furor inside.

Kaika asks for the boons

Meanwhile, the emperor had finished making arrangements for the coronation. When he emerged from the court hall, he felt that, instead of going to Kausalya’s apartments, he should first communicate the happy tidings

to Kaika, so he hurried toward her palace. The maids standing at attention 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 went 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 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.”

Dasharatha was gravely upset and turned his steps in that direction. Kaika was sprawling on the floor in the blinding darkness of the room, wailing and weeping. He said, “Kaika! 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, consoled her in various ways and asked her for the reason for her anger and grief.

Kaika was in a fit of rage. She gnashed her teeth noisily and threw aside the Emperor’s hands when he tried to fondle her. She said angrily, “Enough of this false pretence! I put faith in you so long and brought this degradation on myself! I don’t 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’m not in a mood to place faith in your words any more. Don’t 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. “Kaika! What do these words mean! I don’t 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 don’t 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. Don’t torture me like this. Tell me what happened, why are you behaving like this? What has caused you this agony?”

Dasaratha pleaded piteously for a long time, 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, play-acting her conspiratorial role, shrieking for help for the queen, her mistress. “O 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.

“*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 ways, but she doesn’t disclose the reason. She

doesn't confide even in you; would 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, 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 grows worse every moment. We will retire now."

Manthara left 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's statements only added to the mystery and confused Dasaratha. He sat by the disconsolate queen's side. "Kaika! Why do you keep me in the dark?" He gently lifted the queen's head from the bare floor, placed it on his lap, and sought to persuade her to reveal the reason for her inconsolable suffering.

After some time, Kaika 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 gods (*devas*) and the demons (*asuras*)?"

Dasaratha was relieved. He said, "Kaika! 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 as long as there is life in me. That promise is as dear to me as Kaika herself; you are the breath of my life, and the promise too is as the breath.

"Queen! Has anyone harmed you? Is your health affected adversely? Or has any wicked person dared act against your will? Speak! For your sake, I will face even mortal injury and punish them so that happiness may be restored to you. Don't doubt me. O 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 will secure them for you and bring you joy. Inform me: what do you fear, what has brought this sorrow? Don't withhold anything or hesitate to speak out! As the sun scatters the mist, I will shatter the grief that smothers you." Dasaratha fondled and flattered her, trying various means of consoling her and restoring her spirits.

Kaika kept Manthara's advice in mind. She resolved to 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.

"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'll tell you what it is." She enticed him with a smile playing on her face.

Dasaratha too smiled in response and, sidling a little toward her, said, "O, 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 can't survive a single day without feasting my eyes on you and him. Therefore, I swear on Rama himself. Tell me your wish, and I will fulfil it without fail."

When he declared thus on oath, with both her hands in his, Kaika was overwhelmed with joy! She sat up and demonstrated even more love toward him, for she was glad he had changed into her well-wisher.

"O King! You swore 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 remember the war between the gods and the demons. But 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 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, ‘Kaika! 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 wanted me to 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, so I replied, ‘Lord! I have no boon to ask from you now; I will present my request for them some time 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 would be kept on trust as long as life lasts, and they could be drawn upon with no objections raised. All this must be fresh in your consciousness, right? You are the monarch of the earth. You are faithful to the plighted word. Therefore, give me my two boons, which you kept in abeyance on my behalf. Make me happy.

“I don’t demand any new boon from you. I ask only for what is really mine. I needn’t 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 can’t 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, doesn’t deserve the position of protector of his subjects, does he? You know that the law-giver 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, Kaika will not be alive at dawn.”

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, like an insane ineffective man, he was overcome by cooings of love and the entrancing gestures of the queen and fell into the trap. He vowed solemnly “I will certainly give you the two boons,” holding her palms tightly in his.

No sooner were these words uttered than Kaika’s eyes bloomed wide and bright. She watched his face intently for some time, and said, “O King! This day I realise how good you are! This day, you have proved the genuineness of your claim that you would never break a promise once made.” She started extolling Dasaratha in this and other ways.

The lovelorn Emperor was highly elated by her praise and urged her on with the prompting, “Kaika, why delay further? Ask! Ask for the boons!”

Kaika hesitated. She stuttered, “With the arrangements made for Rama’s coronation, perform Bharatha’s coronation: this is the first boon I demand! Next, Rama, wearing matted hair and deerskin, and dressed in treebark raiment, shall go to the Dandaka forest and remain there for fourteen years, as a forest dweller; this is the second boon I ask.

“Bharatha must become the heir-apparent, with no one obstructing his path. Rama must be sent 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 my life this very moment.” Thus declaring, she stood up and stared wildly in a determined stance, like a demoness.

Kaika and Dasaratha argue

The emperor was crushed by the cruel bolts that rained on him. Was it a dream? Could it be true? Was it Kaika who asked for these boons? Or was it a bloodthirsty monster? Could it be a terrible hallucination? Was it a vile trick played by some horrid illness? He couldn't gauge! He cried, “Kaika! Is it you, there? Or has some ogress assumed your form? Tell me first who you are.”

Like a person who has lost control of their limbs, he tottered, unable to mouth the words he wished to speak. He rolled listlessly from side to side like mad, his eyes looking wildly all around. Suddenly, sparks flew from his eyes as he gazed at Kaika. 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 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.

“Kaika! Tell me frankly, do you really want these things to take place? Or is all this merely a stratagem to find out whether I have affection toward your son, Bharatha? If so, you can ask for Bharatha to be crowned heir-apparent, but there is no meaning in asking for Rama to be exiled to the forest. Such a desire should not be entertained or expressed lightly.

“Kaika! Rama is the firstborn son. He is the repository of all virtues. The years of his reign will be most glorious; you told me often that you were looking forward to the time when such golden dreams would come true. Now you want this selfsame Rama to go 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 have limits beyond which they become pitifully cruel. I can't entertain the idea, even as a joke. No. I can never be separated from Rama.

“Kaika! 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, but only for some little time.

“Your wicked plans appear to me to be fraught with disaster to the Ikshvaku dynasty itself. Until this moment, you never spoke 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! Kaika! 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? What have you done with that devotion to God, which kept you on the path

of righteousness?

“What do you want to gain from sending Rama 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. What profit is there for you from him suffering unbearable pangs of pain in the forest? In this palace, there are many thousands of attendants and maids. Can one of them point a finger at a fault in him, in any respect? Well. Leave alone our palace. Can you bring from the capital city anyone, 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.

“Many exploit their own subjects and act only to foster their own selfish interests; such demons appear in good numbers today. But in your eyes, due perhaps to the age or your own past sins, people 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 people appear bad, deserving exile and punishment!

“Everyone in this empire relishes listening to Rama’s virtues and takes great delight in recounting his goodness. When they feel exhausted in the fields, farmers and labourers sing songs of Rama and his charms to make their tasks lighter; when I learned of this, I was filled with joy. How can your heart agree to inflict this excruciating sentence on such a compassionate soul?

“This very evening, when I placed the proposal for Rama’s coronation before a gathering of sages, elders, ministers, leading citizens, scholars, and many experts in statecraft, 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 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 cries of “hurrah, hurrah!”

“Is it 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. Rama’s coronation shall take place tomorrow; it cannot be canceled.” Dasaratha announced this in an outburst of pride and courage.

Kaika assumed a terrific mien and retorted: “*Maharaja!* Remember, a few moments ago, you vowed under many oaths that you would grant me the boons I ask. 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 this. It is the pride of the Ikshvaku line that no one of that dynasty would go back on his word, once given. You are 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 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, and 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 an atrociously bad path! Beware! You are moving against the dictates of *dharmā*.

“Well. Were you as intelligent as you are reputed to be, you would 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 would be granted. 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 *Dharma-vratha* (a strict adherent of the vow to be righteous in word, thought, and deed), and *Daiva-samaana* (equal to a God); what name can you claim now when you retract your oath?

“Pronounce judgement on yourself. The cleverness that dives and discovers the faults of those before you isn’t commendable; diving into one’s own faults and failings and being vigilant that they do not lead one 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 and went back on your given word; it is a fact. Reflect within yourself whether these three are true. You are deluded by attachment to the son and enslaved by fondness for the wife, so you dump your promise into the waters!

“I’m not the culprit; it is you who have done wrong. It’s natural for a mother to be attached to her son. Every mother wants her son to rise to a position of highest authority, to 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 plan in advance to counteract all possible assailants. I am only carrying out my natural duties and responsibilities; there is nothing unnatural or wrong in my conduct.

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

With these agonisingly harsh words, Kaika fell on the floor, sobbing in a fit of heart-rending sorrow.

Dasaratha beat his head in despair. “Kaika! Has any one 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, 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 accept the crown 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 to the forest or to himself becoming the heir-apparent. Not he alone, but, the ministers, courtiers, vassals, allies, sages, and citizens —everyone will oppose your desire. How can you be happy when so many are unhappy?

“Consider the situation. The elders and sages endorsed it; they were all of one mind. This evening, at the Grand Assembly of Citizens, I announced that I would celebrate Rama’s coronation. 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, and all have been informed about the festival. The people have started preparing the city for the celebration, and the streets are already packed with happy throngs, with faces shining in expectant joy. If I send Rama into the forest now, won’t the people laugh at me, saying, ‘What! This man has finished three chapters all in a single night —the coronation, the rulership of the realm, and the exile!’

“How 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 would receive if he acted according to her desire. Nevertheless, Kaika transformed herself into a demoness of destruction, and she brushed aside Dasaratha’s importunities as if they were empty words that had no value for her. She refused to yield or loosen her hold. Indeed, her grip became tighter every moment, her greed more deep-rooted. She spoke quite contrary to his appeals and insisted on reminding him only of the promise from which he threatened to resile.

Dasaratha said, “Kaika! If 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 can’t 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. I cannot understand why you are attempting, with eyes open, to win a widow’s role. O, 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 my dynasty to the dust.

“Shame on me! What a fool I am! I secured this son, after performing a scriptural sacrifice (*yaga*). Divine grace gave him to 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. Surely, the weight of my sins are 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 this is for a human being! I don't believe this, in spite of everything. Kaika! Change your foolish thought. Rama will not go against any word of mine. The mere report of these happenings is enough. He will prepare to move into the forest! He won't even ask why are you anxious to send him into the jungle! He is of such sterling virtue. Why mention only Rama! None 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—he may exile himself into the forest and ask that Rama be crowned. He is of that stamp of goodness and rectitude. I wonder at your crooked intellect, which cannot grasp the workings of Bharatha's mind.

“Kaika! 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 bliss? Can you call it so? O 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, born of royalty; 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, on hearing of my oath and your desire, he may 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 won't stay away from Rama. Lakshmana cannot walk except along Rama's footsteps. Urmila too may proceed along with Lakshmana into exile. Then there will be none here to perform the funeral rites of this body, and days will elapse to get Bharatha and Satrugna from the Kekaya Kingdom. Till then, this body 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 not, 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. “Of course, I am sure you are ready to promise me that, for you are after the spiritual bliss you hope to derive from a widow's life. What do you hope for? Tell me, O vile viper! You have turned into a demon, at last! Are you undermining the Raghu clan, this royal line, and laying it under the earth? 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 his 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 Kaika and persuade her to accept Rama's coronation. He began to flatter her, in honeyed words. "O, 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. O, charming princess! I won't live many more years. Throughout my life, I was famed as a steady adherent of truth, and all people honoured me on that account. I have sworn at the public gathering that Rama would 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 will also 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 to 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 Kaika interrupted him, "King! Your words strike me as strange and meaningless. You're 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 your distress. Recollect the pronouncement of those who are masters of virtue (*dharma*) that truth (*sathya*) is the highest *dharma*. I too, based my request for the promised boons on the same principle of *dharma*, and, as befits a follower of *dharma*, you 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; then the truth you have maintained will itself wash off any related sin.

"Don't you remember? Emperor Sibi sliced flesh from his own body as food for an eagle pursuing a dove for prey! So too, Emperor Alarka, a king of unique splendour, had pledged his word that he would give whatever was

asked from him; to keep 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 people, truth is the highest authority; the highest ideal. Truth is Brahman. Truth is the primeval sound. It is *dharmā*; 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. Don’t yield to delusive attachment to the son or deceptive sympathy for women. Don’t overrule the dictates of political idealism and royal obligation. Don’t 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; set on foot preparations to call Bharatha 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 Rama’s coronation, I am determined to end my life in full view of the thickly packed assembly. This is my vow; this shall happen.”

Dasaratha watched Kaika raging and swearing, angry and fearful. He could neither demonstrate nor suppress the rage that was surging within him. 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 *dharmā*. His eyes were dimmed with doubt and despair. His head became heavy on the shoulders. He fell on the floor.

At last, mustering up some courage, he shouted, “O sinful woman! If the coronation of Rama is canceled, 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 would rather give up my life; I cannot keep alive a moment, apart from you. O, vicious demon! How could your heart entertain this dark plan to send my lovely and tender Rama into the thick, dark, wild jungle? Horrid fury! What a monster have you become!” With that, Dasaratha swooned and soon lost consciousness.

Sumanthra is perplexed

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 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 Vasishta proceeded with his group of disciples to the Sarayu River for the ceremonial bath and returned 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, and 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 being recited by scholars along the streets echoed from the skies. Meanwhile, Vasishta beckoned Sumanthra, the minister, and said, “Go; the auspicious hour fixed for the rite of coronation is approaching; many preliminary ritu-

als have to be attended to; go and inform the *Maharaja* that his presence is urgently needed. Convey the message that Vasishtha is waiting for his arrival.”

Sumanthra, being an old faithful, had the freedom to enter any of the inner apartments of the palace, so he hurried to Queen Kaika’s chambers in search of the emperor. Entering the hall where the royal beds were, he was shocked out of his wits. He was aghast at the sight of the emperor on the floor! “Are my eyes seeing right,” 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 can’t understand why you’re 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 Vasishtha 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. “Sumanthra! Your adulation pierces my heart.”

Sumanthra could not take a step forward or 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 spiritual bliss (*ananda*), why this grief, this piteous weeping? What is the reason behind all this? It is beyond my understanding.”

When Sumanthra stood hopeless, sunk in sorrow, Kaika intervened. “O best of ministers! The emperor spent the entire night without sleep, in anxiety about Rama. If you go immediately and bring Rama with you here, the mystery will be unraveled. Do not misunderstand me, but bring Rama here quickly.”

Sumanthra took her instructions as the commands of the sovereign; he hastened to Rama’s residence. At the entrance of that palace, he saw long lines of attendants and maids on both sides, carrying huge plates containing gifts of silk, brocade, jewels and gems, garlands and bouquets, scents and sweets. It was a delight to the eye, but Sumanthra didn’t 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. His earlier joy had turned into sorrow.

Riding in his chariot toward Rama’s palace he had noticed how the hundreds of thousands of loyal subjects filling the streets talked among themselves that he was on his way to bring Rama to the Coronation Hall for the ceremony. He saw their faces blooming in joyous expectation; they scarcely winked their eyes, lest they miss some incident or facet of joy. At last, Sumanthra 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, Sumanthra glided through the corridors and halls of that palace!