

## Chapter 16. Gloom over Ayodhya

### Sumanthra reaches home

Meanwhile, the ruler of the Nishadas, who was returning to his kingdom after accompanying Rama for some distance into the forest, saw Minister Sumanthra sitting in his chariot on the bank of the Ganga, the horses having been tied to a shady tree. Sumanthra was alone, weeping and wailing inconsolably. Guha himself couldn't control any longer the anguish he had restrained so long. "Rama!" he cried out, and ran toward Sumanthra. 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 Kaika, who was the cause of the calamities.

The horses stopped grazing and drinking water. Tears rolled from their eyes. Whenever they heard Sumanthra and Guha utter the names of Sita, 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. Sumanthra noted the grief that tormented the animals, and his anguish became even greater.

Some hours passed in this heart-rending way. At last, Guha managed to recover a little; he mustered some courage, as needs someone must; and addressed Sumanthra. "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, 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 listen to your account." He raised Sumanthra forcibly from where he had fallen and seated him in the chariot. He brought the horses and yoked them to the central pole.

Sumanthra realised that Guha was correct. 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, so 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, straining their necks to see the road behind.

Sumanthra cursed himself and his fate. "Fie on me," he said. "May this horrid life of mine be ended. This body has to be burned to ash some day. Far better 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, Sumanthra," he said to himself. "Had you good luck, you would have stuck to Rama; when bad luck haunts you, what else can you do than come away and be alive? What use is it to pine and blame yourself?" Sumanthra chided himself most mercilessly in this strain.

He started a dialogue with himself again. "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? Won't I be overcome with shame and sorrow? O, my heart has become stone. Else, why hasn't it split into fragments at all that I have gone through?" Sumanthra was disgusted at his own meanness. He wrung his hands in despair. He decided that he couldn't enter the city during 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 can’t. It’s just my foolishness and ignorance that make me imagine they do. They would be awake, awaiting news of Rama’s return or, at least, any news about him. I can’t escape the humiliation and shame, whether I enter the city at night or during the day. Well! For me, who did not deserve the grace of Rama, this ill fate is the proper meed. I better go through it and bear the burden of the blame.” Sumanthra wended his way slowly and haltingly, spending time in framing questions to himself and answering them.

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

Sumanthra 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 and 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 Sumanthra had returned with an empty chariot; they ran into the streets and stood pathetically on both sides to witness the sad spectacle.

When he saw the crowds, Sumanthra bent his head low. 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 ask why; they hurried in groups toward Sumanthra and showered questions on him. He sat dejected and crestfallen, like a mute person, unable to find words to answer them. 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! Did you leave Sita in the terror-striking forest and come back alone?” and broke into a sudden sharp wail.

One maid was more courageous than the rest. Kausalya, she told the minister, had ordered him to come straight to her palace.

### **Sumanthra describes his journey**

There, Sumanthra found the emperor prostrate on the floor, in disheveled clothes, exhausted for lack of sleep and food. Sumanthra mastered the surge of sorrow within him and, uttering the words “Victory! Victory (*jai, jai*),” which are traditionally to be pronounced first in the imperial presence, stood by, shaking head to foot. Recognising his voice, Dasaratha sat up quick and plaintively asked him, “Sumanthra! Where is my Rama?”

Sumanthra clasped the emperor in his arms; the emperor clung to him as a drowning person clings to a blade of grass. Seeing them weeping with immeasurable sorrow, Kausalya was submerged in grief. She could scarcely breathe; she gasped and was pitifully suffocating with agony. The maids noticed this and lamented loudly the misfortune that had overtaken all, and they struggled to console the queen and restore her.

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

Sumanthra was too full of shame to look the emperor in the face; he bent his looks toward the floor. With eyes streaming with tears, he could scarcely speak. Dasaratha continued his sobs. “O 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. Sumanthra! Where exactly are my Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana? Take me without delay to them. Do me this good turn. Fulfil this desire of mine. Without seeing them, I can’t live a second longer.”

And, like a person infatuated and desperate, he shouted in pain, “Rama! O Rama! Let me see you at least once! Won’t you give me the chance to see you?” The maids standing outside the hall were so sunk in sorrow at the emperor’s plight that they couldn’t eat or sleep.

Sumanthra replied, “Imperial monarch!! 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 and down-hearted when misery comes. Learned people 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. O benefactor of the world! Heed my prayers. Give up this grief. I will 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 Sumanthra had to say.

Sumanthra began, “O 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, 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 Rama’s command. 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 to 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 got into it first; then Rama; and then, honouring Rama’s order and carrying the bow and arrows, Lakshmana. Before he sat in the boat, Lakshmana asked me to convey prostrations and homage to the parents and his prayer for blessings. He also asked me to ask you to put up with things boldly and wisely.”

Sumanthra continued his account of what Rama had asked him to announce at Ayodhya. “Master, 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, to conserve and promote justice and integrity, and to foster the welfare of the people through means that are pure in thought, word, and deed. Tell him that I want him

to serve the parents so well that they forget their agony at separation from me.’

“While Rama was engaged in commissioning me thus, Sita 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, 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 after their health and welfare.

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

### **The curse on Dasaratha**

Listening to Sumanthra’s words and the soft sweet messages from Rama and Sita, Dasaratha couldn’t restrain his anguish; he couldn’t forget all that had happened, and he fell in a faint.

The Emperor’s breath was suffocated, like a fish that 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 that, plucked and thrown out of the water, fades fast, the emperor was fast leaving the body. Words couldn’t emerge from his throat, and his tongue became dry. The senses turned dull and ineffective. Kausalya watched the emperor and noted that the sun of the solar dynasty was setting.

She mustered courage and, stepping near, placed her lord’s head 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 arrive soon and see you. Hear me; take courage; strengthen yourself.” When she prayed so compassionately into his ear, he 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 isn’t here. And Lakshmana, where is he that I don’t see him?”

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 pronounced on him by the blind hermit, Sravana’s father. 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 there. We couldn’t find a wild animal the whole day, but I felt that I shouldn’t return to the capital empty handed, with nothing bagged. We entered the forest in the night and waited and watched for some luck. The dawn was about to break 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 an 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 hit, but the young son of a hermit!

“I bent by his side and prayed for his pardon for the tragic error. He told me; ‘Emperor! Don’t grieve. Fulfill my request, which I will presently tell you, and 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 me, imagining me to be an animal of the forest. Who can avoid the decrees of destiny?

“In my present condition, I can no longer walk with this water to my parents. Therefore, take this vessel of water to them; go in the northerly direction until you come to a lonely thatched hut. After they have slaked their thirst, describe what happened to me here. Don’t tell them anything about me before they slake their thirst.” Saying this, he placed the vessel in my hands, and passed away.

“Kausalya! O, how pathetically anxious he was for his parents! He never worried about his life, which was fast ebbing away; he didn’t 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 sound (*pranava*) ‘*Om, Om, Om*’ clearly, three times. Seeing him and his calm courageous death, I decided to 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 asked, ‘Son! Why did you take so much time? Why this delay?’ They moved their hands forward and waved them about, so that they might touch him and feel his presence before them. I stepped back a little. The aged couple wailed, ‘Son! Why aren’t you speaking to us today? We won’t drink the water you brought unless you talk to us and answer our queries!’

“I had directed the soldiers to bring Sravana’s body to the parents’ hut, and 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. Some time 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, and 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 burned 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 his agitation.

Kausalya pacified him, giving him consolation and mental calm. “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.’ Then, they breathed their last, amidst the rising flames.

“At that time, I had no son, and I wondered how their curse would affect me. How could their word come true? But I also thought that being the words of an aged sage, they had to become true. That meant I must have

sons, so that I could 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 might come true so that, even though I may have to be separated from them, I would have sons. I couldn't 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 can't muster it any more."

### **Dasaratha passes away**

Dasaratha was lost in contemplation of the incidents of the past. "Rama! Rama! Rama!" he cried, and leaned back on Kausalya, who 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 Kaika, for they felt that the city had lost its eyes as a result of her machinations.

### **Bharatha and Satrughna return**

Vasishta, the royal preceptor, arrived at the hall where the emperor's body 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 couldn't escape death, in spite of their might and majesty. Since no one was present who could officiate during the obsequies, the body was, according to instructions given by Vasishta, immersed in oil to keep it from disintegrating. Vasishta beckoned a courier and told him. "Here! Go quickly to Bharatha; don't tell him a word about the emperor's death; but tell him only this: the preceptor wants you and your brother to return immediately to the capital." The courier fell at the preceptor's feet and took leave of the minister, before starting on the long journey in a fleet chariot.

Ever since Ayodhya was plunged in sorrow, Bharatha had experienced various premonitions in the form of ominous dreams. He was awakened by the terror and turmoil that the dreams presented before him. Many nights, Bharatha hadn't even a wink of sleep. He sat up in bed in an eerie state of expectation, fearing that some bad news was coming fast toward him. He got up even before dawn and, after an early bath, performed various rites and ceremonies in order to propitiate the gods and avert the expected calamity. He sat long in the shrine, praying for relief. Nevertheless, he was haunted by a mysterious fear.

The dreams persisted for fourteen days, and Bharatha had reached the very bottom of his courage and faith. The courier from Ayodhya managed to reach the city of Kekaya, where Bharatha was, on the fifteenth day of his long journey. Upon being informed of his arrival, Bharatha ordered him to be brought in immediately.

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 asked 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 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 speak only few words before their royal masters and that the royal masters also should not keep on talking to them intimately for long. Etiquette demanded that he 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 in Bharatha's heart, as fast as the chariot itself. He couldn't explain why or wherefore. Some inexplicable agony afflicted him. Bharatha didn't 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; a few times, he suggested making a halt for food and drink, but Bharatha paid no heed and he remained 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 that Satrughna had heroically maintained until then.

When they arrived at the main gate of Ayodhya and looked up, the fear was confirmed, for the festoons of mango leaves hadn't been renewed for days. Only dried leaves hung across the moaning gateway, beating against the wind as if gnashing in anger and sorrow. Why weren't green leaves hung across? What had happened to the city? Why this neglect, this sign of distress? They 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 entrance, and when Bharatha's saw them, his heart broke and he lost control over himself. For the animals were standing without moving a muscle, heads bent and eyes streaming tears. The trainers and grooms stood with heavy loads of grief, unable to lift their heads. Driving further into the city, they found the doors of all the mansions 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. Recognising Bharatha, they shed tears.

The diamond bazaar was closed, as were all the shops. Bharatha couldn't find the tongue to ask 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, no traditional shouts of Hurrah! Hurrah! They stood mute and bent and couldn't raise their eyes, for there were tears overflowing. Convinced that some unspeakable calamity had overtaken the city, the brothers alighted from the chariot and ran into the palace.

### **Bharatha learns of Dasaratha's death**

Kaika noted her son's arrival and 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, unable to speak even a single word. But Kaika began speaking. "Son! Is your uncle well?" Bharatha gave some indistinct reply and pressed forward with his own query, "How is father? How is my eldest brother, my other brother? How are my aunts, the queens?"

At this, Kaika 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. "Mother, where is father?" At this, the maids burst into sobs and tears. Seeing them, Kaika too sensed that she should not delay any longer; she too shed tears and acted the role of a grief-stricken woman. Bharatha couldn't unravel the mystery unaided; he asked his mother to explain what had

happened to whom and why everyone was so overcome with sorrow.

At this, Kaika 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.” Kaika started sobbing aloud.

As soon as these words fall on his ear, 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 also 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. O! what great sinners are we? Of the four sons, all four could not reap the same merit. And this Bharatha and 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 will go to Rama and find out what message father left for us. Mother! Tell us where Rama is.” Bharatha stood up, ready to go, waiting only for his mother’s reply.

Kaika 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. “Mother, Rama is my very breath. Where has he gone?” Bharatha was on the brink of collapse.

Kaika replied quick and fast: “Where to? Do you ask where he has gone? Well, to the forest.”

“Perhaps,” Bharatha intervened, “But, why hasn’t he returned yet?”

Kaika’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 learned 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 followed Rama into the forest. They won’t return to this city for fourteen years. Thus did your father command.” Kaika delivered this statement with a firm, hard voice.

Kaika saw that Bharatha was rendered increasingly desperate and distressed by her statements, so she drew her him near and, stroking his head, started consoling him saying, “Son! There is no need to lament over your father. While alive, he engaged continuously in meritorious activities, so his soul would have attained heaven. Your duty is to follow the ideal he 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.” Kaika endeavoured to heal the lacerated heart of her son by these and similar words.

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

And what did he see there! Kausalya was rolling on the floor, in her dust-ridden clothes, lamenting aloud, “O Lord! Lord! Rama, Rama!” Her maids, 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 was also there, with Kausalya. Both of them recognised Bharatha and Satrughna and fainted. Recovering, they clasped each other in a fit of agony and wept aloud; the scene 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 why he passed away. Why did my dear brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, go to the forest with Sita? It’s all a mystery to me; tell me why and save me from this agony.” Bharatha pleaded pitifully, clasping Kausalya’s feet.

Kausalya embraced him tenderly. “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! Don’t keep fact away from me. Trust me. Tell me why Rama went into the forest and why father breathed his last; tell me and save me from this tangle of confusion.”

Kausalya was 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, said, “Son! Bharatha! Be bold. Don’t grieve over the past, for such grief is useless. Strange things do happen when times are not propitious and circumstances so conspire. What good 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 beloved 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 tried to stop Rama from going into the forest, but his efforts were of no avail. Declaring that Ayodhya without Rama was a jungle for him, he followed Rama. All this happened before my very eyes. O! What a sinful soul should I be that I still live!

“I couldn’t 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. O 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 and listened to all this, 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 Sumanthra that the royal preceptor, Sage Vasishta, had asked for Bharatha to go to him. Sumanthra also burst into tears when his eyes fell on the brothers, and he clasped Bharatha to his breast. The brothers also could not control their grief. Bharatha hoped that Sumanthra, at least, would throw light on the mystery hanging over the tragic events in the capital, and he tried various means to draw Sumanthra into giving him an account of the happenings. But Sumanthra did not like to speak about them; he thought Bharatha and Shatrughna had already been told what had happened by those who met them before his arrival.

## Dasaratha's body is cremated

They went to the preceptor. Bharatha and Shatrughna fell at Vasishta's feet 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 Vasishta, "Master! This duty has to be carried out by the eldest son, and Rama is the eldest of us four. Now you propose that I 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 will go to Rama, Satrugna and I, and bring him back with us. Please give us permission to do so."

Vasishta replied, "Son! You are a simpleton! Rama wouldn't like to return earlier than the fixed period. He honours his word, when once given. However much you might plead, Rama will not enter Ayodhya until the fourteen years are over. Therefore, give up this idea; perform the obsequies of your father; later, you can do what you want." Vasishta spoke in this strain again and again to convince Bharatha of the futility of his idea.

Bharatha 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. Falling at their feet, he prayed, "Mothers! You must desist from immolating yourselves in the funeral pyre of father. If you try to do so, I won't 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 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* that was a thousand times more than what Vasishta expected and foresaw. He gave in charity, in his father's name, the sixteen prescribed articles in plenty. He gave cows, lands, gold, houses, food, horses, clothes, elephants, coins, and other valuables. The recipients extolled his generosity and filial piety.

## Bharatha learns the full truth

But the feudatory kings, the scholars and priests, and the common people could not reconcile themselves to Rama's absence. 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, 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 ended.

Meanwhile, Vasishta, the royal preceptor, gathered the feudatory rulers, vassal kings, ministers, sages, monks, wise people of the empire, and leaders among the people and held a conference. First he administered words of advice according to the *Dharma-sastras*, the canons of moral law, on the duties and obligations of rulers. He narrated the entire series of events from the plot woven by Kaika to the day when Rama left for the forest. Then, Vasishta 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, all of which made him a generous patron of countless rites, sacrifices, and other ceremonial rites.

Vasishta went on with the narration of the Emperor's attempt to celebrate Rama's coronation and the obstacles that came in his way, which resulted in Rama's exile and the Emperor's death through grief at the separation from his dearly beloved son.

Bharatha and Satrugna, who had been unaware of these tragic developments, were overwhelmed with anger, sorrow, and a sense of shame. They bent their heads; their hearts were filled with contrition. Streams of tears flowed down their cheeks. The people assembled before them could scarcely lift their eyes toward them. Even Vasishta wiped his eyes, which were fast filling with tears. The hall was saturated with gloom; a silence fell over the assembly; everyone sat like stone images.

Bharatha and Satrugna couldn't listen anymore to Vasishta's narration, for they were too full of anger at Kaika 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.

Vasishta knew their feelings and went to them with comforting counsel. "Son, there's 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 granted you authority to rule over this empire. It's 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 toward Rama. Without a doubt, he died in order to redeem his promise. 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 also 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. You share that splendour. You 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 all your undertakings. I ventured to advise you thus only because of the affection and compassion I have toward 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. Don't hesitate or doubt. Accept the charge."

Vasishta 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 quivered; his throat was unclear. Words could hardly shape themselves on his tongue.

He said, "Master! Are these words really an indication of your love and compassion? No, in fact, you have no love or compassion toward me. For if you had, you would never have agreed to place all this burden on me. You are sentencing me to this punishment without the least compassion. This empire, which drove the holiest and purest person into the jungles, which plunged the entire population into years of incessant tears, which has lost its most righteous ruler, which has brought eternal infamy to its ruling dynasty, the Ikshvaku line, which brought about the pathetic state of widowhood on mothers Kausalya, Sumitra, and the rest, which has degraded itself in

so many ways—you entrust this empire 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, Kaika. Instead of inflicting this punishment on me, please earn some spiritual merit by sending me to Rama. 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 can’t remain in this place a moment longer.”

Bharatha fell at Vasishta’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 isn’t proper to continue this state of affairs for long; we have no ruler now. You cannot escape the responsibility that 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 talks to Kausalya**

Bharatha didn’t reply. Instead, he wanted leave to go to mother Kausalya and see her for awhile. Vasishta readily agreed. Bharatha and Satrugna moved out of the assembly and made their way straight to Kausalya’s palace. 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, Kaika. 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 with head erect even a moment in Ayodhya, after my master and lord, Rama, has left it on account of me. This empire rightfully belongs to the eldest son; this insignificant fellow has no right over it. I don’t need this burden, I won’t bear it. Bless me, so that I can leave immediately.” Bharatha stood waiting, filled with grief.

Kausalya mustered courage and began comforting him. “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 looking forward to you as their sole refuge and resort. Realise that all this has happened because the times were not propitious, so men’s deeds became crooked and shocking; take courage and decide. Obey your father’s directions. Bow your head to the command of the *guru*, Vasishta. Honour the petitions of the people. Act as the ministers are praying you should.”

Kausalya held his hands fondly in hers while she tried 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 toward him. He hadn’t 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, that she would pour out such plentiful affection on him, the son of another wife of her husband! What a difference, he wondered, between his own mother, Kaika, and Kausalya. He could not gauge it by any unit of measurement. In Kausalya, he found 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. As Bharatha, born of Kaika, I have a crooked nature, inherited from her. I am mean, with no sense of shame. I am Rama's enemy. 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 speak 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 don't 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: Rama. I don't know of any other. Therefore, I will leave this very instant and, clasping his feet, pray to him. I will bring him back to Ayodhya. Grant me permission; bless me without further delay.” Bharatha prostrated before Kausalya and waited for the answer.

Bharatha's words soothed Kausalya's heart to a large extent. “Son! In you I find surging forth the self-same feelings my Rama has. Looking upon you, I can bear a little the agony of separation from him. So, if you also go 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*, Vasishta; we will 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. He fell at the feet of Kausalya and Sumitra and rose to go to Kaika's palace.

### **Kaika repents**

Bharatha walked first, and Satrugna followed. They were heavy with grief and resentment that Kaika, 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 Manthara herself at the entrance, elaborately bejewelled, waiting to receive them. Satrugna couldn't tolerate that sight; he dragged her down by the hair and rained blows on her. She bawled out, “*Ayyo, Ayyo.*” When the sound reached Kaika's ears, she ran to the spot and started berating Satrugna 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. Why didn't your heart break in two when this woman's disastrous counsel entered it? How could your tongue pronounce those baneful boons? Why didn't it 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?

“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 destroyed the dynasty and its glory and 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 would attain good fortune? Aren't the children of others as dear to them as yours are to you? Women who plan ill for other's children accomplish only evil for their own children. How did you miss this great truth? It must be due to sins you committed in previous lives.

“No. All this is due to me. Why else should the pure, the steadfast, the undefiled Rama, my loved brother, and the crown of chastity and goodness, mother Sita, wander about in the fearsome forest? O, 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. O, I wonder what dreadful sin I 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 people, people 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 the water out of the tank. I can't decide to laugh or weep at your banal stupidity.

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

Bharatha turned his back on her and started with his brother. Kaika ruminated on her erroneous action; she lamented the turn her plot had taken; she felt that wicked plans by anyone would grant only temporary happiness and were 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. She stood petrified and dumb.

Kaika was 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.