

## THE CALL AND THE FIRST VICTORY

**D**uring those days in the region east of Ayodhya, the royal city, the sage Viswamitra was engaged in rigorous asceticism. He resolved upon a holy rite, known as Yajna. But however often he inaugurated it, the demons desecrated the rite and fouled its sanctity. They showered pieces of flesh on the sacred area and made it unfit for such Vedic ceremonies. In many other ways, too, they cast obstacles and halted the holy mission. Viswamitra was at his wits' end. He went to the capital city of the empire, Ayodhya, to meet the Ruler himself.

When reports arrived of the coming of the sage, the King sent his ministers to bring him with due honours into the Palace. They welcomed him at the City Gate and accompanied him right up to the Palace door. At the Palace, Brahmins recited Vedic hymns, while Dasaratha washed

his feet, and as laid down in the sacred texts and as is customary in receptions of sages, he sprinkled upon his own head drops of the water so sanctified. Viswamitra was led into the inner apartments and seated on a high chair, with the members of the royal court standing reverentially round him. "This is indeed a great day!" exclaimed Dasaratha. He expressed his joy at the unexpected arrival of the holy personage and the opportunity he gained to serve and honour him. Viswamitra directed the King and the ministers to sit and they obeyed.

The sage graciously enquired about the health and welfare of the King and royal family, and about the peace and prosperity of the kingdom. He asked him whether his reign was marked by strength and security and whether his government was ensuring the continued progress of his subjects. Dasaratha replied that, as a result of the Grace of God and the blessings of saints and sages, his subjects were dutifully and gladly engaged in their several tasks without fear of failure and that the administration had before it the steady promotion of the welfare of the people. He said that his government was serving the people in many ways to promote and preserve their happiness and security. Dasaratha yearned to know the reason for the sage's arrival. He assured him that he was ever ready to fulfil his least desire. He declared with great devotion that he will discharge earnestly any duty that the sage may cast on him. He was only waiting to know what he could do for him. Viswamitra nodded his head in approval.

He turned towards Dasaratha and said, “I shall not declare now, before you, that you are a very righteous ruler, that you revere guests and supplicants, and that you are the embodiment of faith and devotion; the fact that the empire is happy under your rule is enough evidence of this. The welfare of the subjects depends on the character of the rulers. People will have peace or will suffer anxiety, when the rulers are either good or bad. Wherever I have enquired, I am told it is only in Ayodhya that we have a people full of love and loyalty to the sovereign and a sovereign full of affection and regard to his people. In every nook and corner of your kingdom, I hear this heartening news! Therefore, I know that your words come straight from the heart. I have not the least doubt. You will not deviate from your promise. You will adhere to the word once given.”

These words of the sage moved Dasaratha deeply. “Great men will engage themselves only in activities that help the world. And whatever they do, they will not stray from the injunctions of the scriptures. There must be a good reason for whatever they contemplate, they are prompted by the Divine Will in every act of theirs. So, I am ever willing, with all the resources at my command, to serve you and fulfil your slightest wish,” he replied. Dasaratha vowed again and again that he would carry out the sage’s command.

This made the sage very glad. “Yes! As you said, we do not emerge from our hermitages without reason. I have

come to you on a high purpose! Listening to your enthusiastic response, I am doubly happy! I am filled with joy that my errand has borne fruit. You will stand by your promise, will you not?” asked Viswamitra. Dasaratha replied without delay. “Master! You should, perhaps ask others such a question; but, Dasaratha is not the person to break the pledged word! He will give up his life rather than bring dishonour on himself, going back on his promise. What greater treasure can a monarch have than morality and integrity? They alone stand by him as sources of strength while discharging his manifold responsibilities. If these two are lost, the kingdom becomes a mansion without light, a wilderness beset with apish vagaries and factional fights. It will be torn by anarchy and terror. In the end, the king will meet with disaster. I am certain that such a calamity can never overwhelm my dynasty for ages to come. Therefore, without entertaining any shadow of doubt, tell me the mission that brought you to Ayodhya, and accept the service that this devoted servant is ready to offer.”

Viswamitra said, “No, no! I had no doubt in my mind. I simply uttered those words in order to hear this assertion of your steady adherence to truth! I know that the Ikshvaku rulers are intensely wedded to the duty of fulfilling the spoken word. Well! I require from you only one thing now. It is neither wealth nor vehicles, neither cows nor gold, nor regiments nor attendants. I need only two of your sons, Rama and Lakshmana, to accompany me. What do you say to this?” the sage asked.

At this, Dasaratha lost balance. He fell back and could not recover soon. Regaining his composure after some time, he gasped for courage to utter a few words. He said, “Master! Of what use will those boys be for you? The mission on which you intend to take those boys can be better fulfilled by me, don’t you think so? Give me the chance. Let me make my life worthwhile. Tell me what it is. I shall derive joy there from.” The sage replied, “My firm belief is that the task which these boys can fulfill can be undertaken by no one else. They alone can accomplish this task. Neither your millions nor even you can carry it out! Boys such as these have not been born before! Nor will such be born again! This is my conviction.”

“Listen! I resolved upon the performance of a celebrated Yajna (sacrificial rite). But as soon as I enter upon its preliminaries, evil spirits and demons assemble from nowhere and cause sacrilegious obstruction. They cause interruptions and pile hindrances. I want these boys to ward off those demons and save the Yajna from these abominations, so that I can bring it to a successful conclusion. This is my purpose, my desire. What do you say now?” asked Viswamitra, in a serious voice.

The King replied, “Master! These tender little boys, how can they perform such a tremendous task? I am here, most willing and most ready. I shall come with my chariotry, infantry, cavalry and elephantry and guard the area of the sacrifice and your hermitage. I shall see that the Yajna is

conducted with full success without the least interruption. I have some experience in fighting against these demoniac forces, since, as you know, I fought for the Gods against them and brought them victory. I can do it quite easily. I shall make arrangements to accompany you even now. Permit me to do so,” he appealed.

Hearing these words, the sage said, “Oh King! I am not satisfied in spite of all that you say. I assert once again, you cannot accomplish this assignment. Can you not realise that it is beyond even me who is acclaimed as well-nigh omnipotent and omniscient? How then can you take up this task and succeed? You consider these boys just ordinary children. This is a mistake resulting from the affection you have as the father. I know full well that they are the Divine Might Itself in human Form. Do not hesitate. Keep your word so solemnly given and send them this very moment with me. Or else, accept that you are not true to your word. I shall depart. Do either of these, quickly! This is no occasion for wavering and delay!” The King was frightened by the sharpness of the sage’s voice. He was overwhelmed by fear. In despair, Dasaratha wanted that his preceptor be invited to court. Vashishta came in and on seeing Viswamitra, they exchanged smiles and words of mutual respect. Vashishta heard from the King an account of all that had happened. Of course, Vashishta knew quite well the Divine Reality of the boys; so, he decided to advise the King not to have the least worry, but entrust the boys gladly to the loving custody of the sage.

Dasaratha pleaded that the boys were not keeping good health for some months and that they did not have even the physical stamina to engage in battle with the demons. “We are concerned since long about their health and now this demand for them has come like a jab on a painful sore. My mind does not agree in the least to send them forth to encounter the demons. I shall guard my children even at the risk of my own life,” lamented the King.

Viswamitra intervened and said, “King! Why do you foolishly lament in this manner? You should have desisted from making promises which you could not fulfil. It is an act of dark sin when a ruler makes a promise without considering the pros and cons and then, when he is asked to execute it, to delay, retract and even to go counter to the promise. This is most unworthy of kings like you. I spurn the help you offer, sorrowfully. Help rendered, however small, if it comes from the deeper urges of service welling in the heart is as good as the offer of life itself. Half-hearted and hesitating help, however great, is deplorable. I have no desire to cause pain and extract help from you. Well! Be happy with yourself and your sin, I am leaving.” Viswamitra rose and attempted to move off. The King fell at his feet and prayed for more light and more time. He asked that he may be taught his duty. He pleaded with the sage to convince him of the fairness of his demand, so that he could fulfil his plan.

At this, Vashishta called Dasaratha to his side and counselled him. He said, “King! You are coming in the way

of an imminent cosmic revelation, a mighty fulfilment. Since your heart is affected by parental affection, the truth is veiled before you. Your sons will come to no harm. No, never. There is no height of heroism that is beyond them. Formidable Divine Forces have taken these human forms for the very purpose of destroying demons and demoniac powers. So, without further delay, send for the boys. You should not calculate now their physical strength or the measure of their intelligence. Calculate rather the Divine that is bubbling up from them every minute of their lives. There is no strength which can stand up to that, remember!” After some more advice on these lines, Vashishta sent for the Princes, Rama and Lakshmana. As soon as they heard that the sages Viswamitra and Vashishta wanted them, both of them rushed along and entering the hall, bowed in reverence. First, they fell at the feet of the father, then at the feet of Vashishta, the family Preceptor, and next, at the feet of Viswamitra. With a smile playing on his lips, Viswamitra addressed the boys when they rose and stood reverentially on one side. He said, “Boys! Will you come with me?” The boys were elated at the prospect.

On hearing this, Dasaratha was further disheartened. His face turned pale. Rama saw his father sorrowing over his approval. He approached him softly and said, “Father! Why are you sad when I am going with the great Sage? Is there any better way of utilising this body than putting it at the service of others? This body has been given to us for that very purpose. And to share in the holy tasks of ascetics

and to be able to grant them some relief from harassment, is this not high use? There is nothing impossible for us, is there? We will destroy the demons (the Rakshasas), however fierce they may be and bring peace to the sages. If permitted, we are ready to start off this very minute.” These words charged with courage served to reduce, to some extent, the anxiety of Dasaratha.

But the King was still struggling. He could not decide what to say. He drew Rama to himself and told him, “Son! The Rakshasas are no ordinary foes! Reports say that among them are Sunda, Upasunda, Maricha, Subahu, etc. These are atrociously cruel. Their physical appearance is indescribably horrid. You have had no occasion yet to look upon such terrifying forms. I cannot contemplate the moment when you come face to face with them. How can you battle with those tricksters who are adepts at camouflage and physical transformations? You have not so far heard even the word ‘battle’! Nor have you seen actual combat on the field. And you are now suddenly called to fight such formidable foes! Alas! Destiny is indeed very cruel! Alas! Have my sons to face on the very threshold of their lives this monstrous ordeal?”

With these thoughts revolving in his mind, Dasaratha shed profuse tears out of the anguish of his heart. Lakshmana noticed his father’s mental weakness. He said, “Father! Why these tears! We are not timid girls! The battlefield is our legitimate arena. War is our rightful duty,

the safeguarding of righteousness is our genuine responsibility. The service of sages and the maintenance of moral codes are our very breath. I am surprised you are sad that we go on such a glorious errand! The world will laugh at you for this display of weakness. Send us with your love and blessings. I too will accompany my brother and return with the glory of Victory.”

Rama saw his father overpowered by affection for him. He moved towards the throne and held his hand lovingly. He said, “Father! It appears you have forgotten who you are. Bring into your memory who you are, in which royal family immortalised by which forefathers you were born, and how much fame they had attained. Then, you will not weep as you are doing now. You took birth in the Ikshvaku dynasty. Till this day, you have spent your years, as the very embodiment of Dharma. The three worlds have acclaimed you as the dutiful observer of vows, as the guardian and practitioner of Dharma, and as the most redoubtable hero on the battlefield, as well as elsewhere. You are aware that there is no greater sin than retracting the word once given. Going back on the word you have given to the sage will tarnish your fair fame. Your sons cannot tolerate this ill fame. When you cannot act according to your word, you can have no share in the merit of the sacrifices performed by you or even of the beneficial acts done by you like digging wells, and planting trees. Why dilate? We, your sons feel that it is a mark of disgrace, for which we have to bend our heads, even to listen to the talk

that Dasaratha broke his plighted word. This is an indelible blot on the reputation of the dynasty itself. Your affection for your sons is blind. It is not based on discrimination. It will bring on us punishment, not protection. If really you are moved by affection towards us, you should pay attention to the promotion of our fame, shouldn't you? Of course, we are in no position to advise you. You know all this. Your affection has drawn you into this miasma of ignorance. It has made it difficult for you to recognise your duty. As for us, we have not the slightest shred of fear. The Bride of Victory will certainly espouse us. Do not hesitate, bless us and entrust us to the sage." Rama pleaded thus, and bending his head low, he touched the feet of his father.

Dasaratha drew Rama to himself and fondled his head. He said, "Son! All you have said is true. They are gems of great worth. I am not a fool to deny them. I shall proceed this moment with my four-winged army and protect the sacrificial ceremony of this sage at the cost of all that I possess. But my mind does not accept the proposal to send you, just now being trained in the arts of war and weaponry, into the arms of those demoniac Rakshasas. No father will knowingly offer into the tiger's paw the sons he has borne. And is it right for you too to plunge us into the flames of grief? We gained you through austerity, and fostered you as the very breath of our lives. Alas! What can anyone do when destiny itself is against us? I shall not blame you or anyone else. It is the consequence of the sins I have myself committed."

Dasaratha bewailed thus, with his hand upon his head. At this, Rama broke into a smile. He said, "Father! What is this weakness? You speak of thrusting us into the tiger's mouth. Haven't you realised yet that we are not goats to be so offered? Believe us to be lion cubs, send us on this sacred task with your blessings. Kings must not delay sacred tasks!" Hearing these rather sharp remarks of Rama, Vashishta rose, saying, "Excellent! Dasaratha! Did you hear the lion's roar? Why the jackal howl hereafter? Arise! Send the message to the mothers and fetch them. Place your sokns at the service of Viswamitra." Hearing these words, Dasaratha felt he could not do anything else than obey. He sent word that the Queens should come into the presence.

The Queens put in their appearance with veils over their heads. They touched the feet of the sages and of Dasaratha and afterwards, they moved towards the children and stood by their side, fondling with loving fingers the crown of their heads. Vashishta spoke to them first. He said, "Mother! Our Rama and Lakshmana are ready to leave with Viswamitra in order to guard his Yajna rite from interference and obstruction by demoniac hordes. Bless them before they leave." As soon as she heard this, Kausalya raised her head in surprise saying: "What is this I hear? Are these saplings to guard and protect the Yajna which the great Sage is celebrating? I have heard that the Manthras themselves with their Divine potency will be the best armour. How can mere man dare take upon himself the burden of saving the Yajna from harm. The responsibility for the successful conclusion

of the Yajna lies on the rectitude of the participating priesthood.”

This appeared to Vashishta as correct; but yet, he thought it best to shed a little more light on the situation. “Kausalya! Mother! The Yajna of Viswamitra is no ordinary rite! Many obstacles are affecting it and creating anxiety.” Vashishta was continuing with his explanation when Kausalya intervened and said, “I am really amazed to hear that anxiety overshadows the Yajnas performed by sages and rishis. I believe that no power can stand against any sacred resolve. The sage is nursing this desire and craving for its fulfilment in order to manifest the Supreme Light and Peace; that is my surmise. He might have put forward this request in order to test the King’s attachment to his children. Or else, how can we believe that these tiny sprouts of tenderness will guard from harm the Yajna that this sage, endowed with all mystic and mysterious powers, is proposing to celebrate?”

While Kausalya was saying this, her hand caressing the head of Rama, Dasaratha who was listening to her talk, suddenly realised the truth in a flash and arrived at a bold decision. He said, “Yes! The words of Kausalya convey authentic truth. This is but a plan to test me. I am certain about it. Master! How can I, a weakling, encounter your test? I shall abide by your wish, whatever it is!” With these words, Dasaratha fell at the feet of Vashishta. Vashishta looked at him and said, “Maharaja! You have proved

yourself worthy. These boys are not of common stamp. Their skills and capacities are limitless. We know this. Others do not know. This occasion is but the inauguration of their triumphal march. It is the prologue to the history of their victorious career. It is the taking on by them of the vow of *Dharmarakshana*, the Guardianship of Righteousness. They will return soon with the Bride of Victory. Therefore, without further thought, hand them over gladly to Viswamitra.”

Vashishta called the boys to his side, and placing his auspicious palm on their heads, he recited some hymns pronouncing his Blessings on them. The boys fell at the feet of the mothers and received their blessings. They stood ready to depart.

Dasaratha noticed the glow of joy and courage on their faces. He suppressed the grief that was surging within him. He placed his hands on the shoulders of the boys and came near Viswamitra. He fell at his feet and said, “These two, Oh Master, are from this day your sons; their health and happiness are dependent on you; if you order that a few personal guards may be sent with them, I shall gladly comply.”

At this, Viswamitra burst into laughter. “Oh! King, you are really insane! Is there anyone who can guard them, these heroes who are coming to free the Yajna from obstruction? Do they need any? They are out to guard the

Yajna which we cannot guard. Do such mighty heroes need someone to protect them? Of course, your affection has blinded you. King! I shall bring them with me to you when the task for which I am taking them is accomplished. Do not worry. Rule over the kingdom without injustice or interruption.”

Viswamitra rose from the seat. Everyone offered reverential obeisance to the great sage. He walked out of the hall first, and the two princes followed him. As soon as they reached the main gate of the palace, people heard heavenly drums and clarions resounding from the sky. A shower of flowers rained upon them. As they moved along, the music of conches rose from every doorstep. The peal of trumpets was heard from every few yards of the road. They appeared to men, women and children, to the citizens of all ages, as two cubs trotting behind an elderly lion. No one knew why the princes were walking barefoot and leaving the palace with the celebrated sage; so, each one started asking his neighbour what the mission was on which they were bound. The ministers, courtiers and citizens accompanied them only as far as the City Gate, for, that was the royal command. There they bade farewell to the princes and turned back.

Thereafter, they continued their journey, Viswamitra leading the way, Rama close behind him and Lakshmana bringing up the rear. They saw the lines of charming trees on both sides of the track. They filled themselves with the

beauty of Nature that revealed itself before their eyes. When they had trekked some distance, they entered a jungle devoid of human habitation. Viswamitra ordered that they should wear from then on, wrist guards and finger guards of leather; he asked them to take on hand the bows slung on the shoulder and hold them in readiness. Thus equipped, they moved along the silent terror-striking forest, through the tangled bushes, fearless and effulgent, as if they were the monarchs of the region. Soon, they reached the river Sarayu. The sun was preparing to set; so, Viswamitra called Rama and Lakshmana near him and spoke to them soft and sweet words, “Darlings! Go to the river without further delay and have the ceremonial washing of hands and feet. I shall now impart to you two mystic formulae, (Manthra), which form the crown jewels of all Manthras. They are named *Bala* and *Athi Bala* (strength and super strength). They are both charged with tremendous power. They will restore freshness to you, however exhausted you may be. They will prevent exhaustion however heavily you exert yourselves. They will not allow illness to approach you. They will save you from demonic forces. Again, whenever you are journeying, they will, if you recollect them, keep away hunger and thirst, bestow exhilarating health and shower joy and enthusiasm. They will strengthen limbs and minds. Rama! These two Manthras are supreme over all other Manthras. They are more effulgent and efficacious than the rest.” Viswamitra expatiated upon the potency of the Manthras for a long while. Rama had no need to be told of them. He listened with apparent surprise and with wonder-filled eyes.

Lakshmana, meanwhile, was watching both the Sage and Rama, laughing within himself!

This incident is a good lesson for the world, wherein Rama had come to revive Dharma. It is a lesson Rama taught by his behaviour, rather than by words. “Maya is inescapable for anyone however great. It will turn them upside down in a moment, it will not loosen its grasp so long as the victim is engrossed in the belief that he is the ‘body.’ It will not be frightened by the name or fame, the skill or intelligence of the person it seeks to possess. Only when the individual discards name and form, releases himself from body consciousness and establishes himself in the Atma, can he escape from the misconception that Maya inflicts.” This was that lesson! For, note this! Viswamitra had these two powerful Manthras in his control. He had accumulated a great store of spiritual treasure. He had realised, in spite of his own far-famed resources, that Rama alone had the might needed to outwit and destroy the demonic hordes intent on disrupting the Yajna he was set on celebrating. He had counselled Dasaratha against overaffection towards the son, blinding him to the divine majesty of Rama. He had announced that Rama was the guardian of the entire world. He believed that there was no height of heroism that Rama could not reach. Yet he was preparing to initiate those very princes into some mystic Manthras, as if they were children of common stock. Surely, Viswamitra was shackled by Maya! He had yielded to the delusion of judging by apparent attributes; Rama laid bare the strength of the stranglehold

of Maya on the sage. For, it was He who had shrouded Viswamitra’s mind and made him enter proudly upon these initiations rites! Rama and Lakshmana finished their ablutions in the river, as directed by Viswamitra. The sage came to Rama and initiated Him into the two Manthras. Rama pronounced the formulae after the teacher, and nodded his head as a novice should do, when a mantra is taught. Lakshmana too did the same. They bowed their heads as if they had agreed to be the “disciples” of Viswamitra. Soon it became dark and the brothers arranged for themselves, as beds, the grass which grew thick on the ground. After they laid themselves down, Viswamitra sat by their side and related tales of olden times. Soon the boys appeared as if they had gone to sleep, as a result apparently of the exhaustion of tramping long distances on foot. Viswamitra stopped his story and was lost in thought about his own destiny and destination.

Meanwhile, daylight broke across the land. Multicoloured birds flitted from branch to branch on the tree, under which the two brothers were sleeping, singing sweetly, as if they were intent on awakening Rama and Lakshmana! It was to the ear the music of aerial minstrels. But they could not rouse the sleepers! So, Viswamitra accosted Rama and announced that dawn had arrived. “Awake,” he said. Rama sat up. He awakened Lakshmana who was in bed by his side, and both fell at the feet of the sage. They finished their morning ablutions in the Sarayu river. They took the sacred water in their palms and let it

down again uttering hymns in praise of the Goddess of the River. Then, they bathed in the river and performed thereafter the Sandhya rite, involving the recitation of the Gayathri mantra. Soon they got ready for the journey and stood before the sage with arms folded. Viswamitra asked, “Dear ones! Now we can move towards our hermitage, can’t we?” And Rama replied, “We await your command!” So, they started walking, with the sage in front and the brothers behind. Soon, they reached the confluence of the Saruya with the Ganga. The brothers prostrated before the holy river, and cast their eyes all around the holy spot. They saw a hermitage, with heavenly vibrations pervading the surroundings. It struck them as very ancient and full of hoary associations. Lakshmana questioned the sage, “Master! Who lives in that holy hermitage? What is the name of the great personage who dwells there?” The sage smiled at the inquiry. He said, “Dear ones! God Siva had come here long ago with His divine attendants, to engage in austerities prior to His wedding Parvathi. While He was fulfilling His Divine obligations from here, Manmatha (the God of Love) obstructed the spiritual practices and caused anger to sprout in the Divine Heart. He opened His Third Eye, which threw such searing flames that Manmatha was burnt to ash. His body was destroyed and so, he is known now as ‘limbless,’ Ananga. The word for a limb is *anga*; since Manmatha lost his angas here, in this region, this part of the country is known ever after as Anga! This is a rich region. This hermitage was used by Siva and it is being used since, by generations of His devotees, each of whom has merged in

Him as the fruit of arduous asceticism. This hermitage will accept as residents only strict followers of the Dharmic Path. If you so desire, we shall spend the night here and start out again, after a bath in the Ganga.” Rama and Lakshmana could not contain their delight when Viswamitra came forward with this proposal. They said, “We are very happy” and accepted the idea. They bathed in the holy Ganga. Meanwhile, the news that Viswamitra was available near their residences and that he had with him two heroic sons of the Emperor spread wide and many rushed to welcome them and receive them in their own hermitages.

That night, the Sage and the Princes stayed at the Asram of Siva. They fed on fruits and roots. They watched with interest the activities of the hermitage. The Princes listened to the stories narrated by Viswamitra. Time floated fast in that flood of Bliss. As soon as day dawned they had their bath and ablutions and lovingly took leave of the hermits. Then they walked on, the two disciples following the Guru. They had to cross the Ganga River and so, some people of that area rowed them across and set them on the other bank. Thereafter, they reverentially bade farewell and fell at the feet of Viswamitra, before they returned. Viswamitra was gratified at this act of hospitality; he appreciated the depth of their devotion and their sense of surrender; he allowed them to depart, loaded with blessings.

Just then, a noise as of a rumbling subterranean flood sweeping over the land battered their ears. They saw the

waters of the river raging and rising, with long chains of white foam on the crest of the waves. Rama asked the sage, “Master! Why is it that all of a sudden the angry flood has filled the basin and how could they surge so fast and so high?” The sage replied, “Rama! The full and furious Sarayu falls into the calm quiet Ganga at this place; hence this reverberation and this rumbling!” The sage uttered these words coolly and casually. It was a familiar scene for him. He continued, “Rama! In ages gone by, on one occasion, Brahma willed and a great lake was immediately formed near Mount Kailas. This is known as Manasarovar; the word means the *sarovar* (lake) of *Manasa* (the mind). The gods named it so. When the snows melt and the rains fall, the lake gets overfull and the flow from out of the sarovar becomes the Sarayu river, running by the side of Ayodhya towards the Ganga. The Sarayu is a sacred river, because the waters rise from the lake willed by Brahma Himself.” They proceeded on their way listening to the thrilling stories that lighted every river and spot of land.

Now they entered a thick dark forest. It aroused a sense of terror. Rama asked the Master, “No sign of man having ever traversed this forest is seen!” Before he could get the answer, an eerie succession of roars from the angry throats of a huge herd of animals—tigers, lions, leopards and a host of lesser wild life—captured their attention. It appeared as if the earth was being torn asunder! They also saw wild animals engaged in mortal fight with others, some running into thickets, away from the scene of violent death. The

forest was the home of close-grown trees that reached the skies and spread their shades thick over the ground—the banyan, the deodar, the pine, the holy fig.

There was no path to guide the feet. They had to clear a track for progress. Lakshmana could not contain his curiosity; he asked Viswamitra, “Master! Who rules this fearful forest? What is its name?” The Master replied, “Lakshmana! Where this jungle has grown, there were formerly two little kingdoms, Malada and Karosa. They shone like the region of the gods. In fact, people spoke of the area as having been specially created and fostered by the gods. They relate a story about the place. When the God Indra killed Vritra, He suffered the contamination of sin and as a consequence, he was stricken with insatiable pain of hunger. Indra was brought in that pathetic condition by the sages to this region, and given a bath in the holy Ganga. After that immersion, they poured on His Head pots and pots of Ganga water, uttering all the while, holy hymns and formulae. With that, the sin (of killing a person of high caste) was washed away.

“Brahma was delighted that the contamination (*Mala*) as well as the cry (*Krosa*) of hunger ended. So, He named these kingdoms as Malada and Karosa. The kingdoms, too, rose to fame with his blessing. The gods willed that the two areas be resplendent with grain and gold, and all means of plenty and prosperity.

“Meanwhile, a cruel ogress named Thataki appeared in this region and she started laying waste the rich and peaceful land. She was a Yakshini who could transform herself into any form she liked. It is rumoured that even as she was born, she was endowed with the prowess of a thousand elephants! She brought forth a son named Maricha. He had the might and heroism of Indra himself. Mother and son jointly caused tremendous havoc and disaster. The jungle in which that vile ogress lives is at a distance of a *yojana* (nine miles) and a half from here. She reduced these two wealthy valleys Malada and Karosa into this dreaded wilderness. Out of fear the cultivators of its fertile fields fled in terror at her approach and so the jungle crept on and on. The thickly populated cities and villages were deserted and ruined, leaving no trace of human habitation. She could not be captured or destroyed, for, she could escape from all attempts to destroy her. No one has yet dared to put an end to her depredations. I cannot think of anyone except you (yes, my deepest intuition says so), no one except you can destroy this monster possessing such overwhelming might. These two, the vicious mother and son, lead and guide the demons to disrupt and pollute the Yajnas and sacred rituals of the hermits.”

The words of Viswamitra moved the feelings of Rama. He could not contain within himself the anger that surged up. With great humility and reverence, he said, “Oh great among ascetics! I have heard that the Yakshas are of poor might. Besides, this Thataki is a female; hers is the weaker

sex. How could she terrorise entire populations so? Wherefrom did she acquire all this power? How could she reduce this region to rack and ruin when it has been blessed by Brahma and the Gods? This is indeed astounding. It is something that is beyond the bounds of belief.” Viswamitra said, “Rama! I shall explain. Listen! There was, in the past, a Yaksha named Sukethu. He was as rich in virtues as in prowess. He had no child to succeed him and so, he practised severe austerities to propitiate the Gods and receive their blessings. At last, Brahma was pleased with his austerity. He appeared before him. He blessed him that He will get a daughter, with extraordinary strength, cleverness and skill. Sukethu was elated at this boon, though it was to be a daughter, not a son.

“Sukethu returned and a daughter was born to him, as anticipated. The child grew fast and strong. Though it was of the weaker sex, through the grace of Brahma, it had the might of a thousand elephants. She was moving about, with no law or limit, as if she owned all she saw! She was a very charming girl and so, Sukethu, sought far and wide for an equally charming groom. Finally, he secured one. His name was Sunda, and Sukethu gave her in marriage to him. Three years later, she gave birth to a son. He is Maricha, about whom I told you. Mother and son have become invincible in combat. Sunda started off on his demonic adventures and attempted to ruin the Yajnas of sages and so, he incurred the wrath of the great Agasthya. He hurled a curse on the vile fellow, which killed him and saved the sages from

further grief. In revenge, Thataki took her son along, and fell upon the hermitage of Agasthya. Agasthya had forewarning of this attack. So, he cursed them both to be reduced to the status of ogres. This enraged them more. They roared abuses and advanced frightfully with blood-red eyes against Agasthya! Agasthya felt that delay would be dangerous. He cursed Thataki that she should lose her charm and become an ugly fright! He willed that she become a cannibal! She was not subdued by the curse, but she continued the attack with renewed ferocity. So, Agasthya escaped from the ravage and went to a safer place. Angered by this disappointment, Thataki spent her ire on this region (Malada and Karosa) destroying crops and gardens and reducing it to a big jungle.”

When this tale was told, Rama said, “Master! Since she was born as a consequence of Brahma’s boon, and as a gift for austerity, she had all these skills and strength. She misused them and drew upon herself the wrath and the curse. The sin of killing a woman is, as mentioned in the scriptures, very heinous, isn’t it? Agasthya must have let her off with the curse of ugliness, for this very reason. Or else could not the great sage, who caused the husband to die, kill the wife also? I have heard that warriors should not be so mean as to kill women. Tell me what I should do now. I am prepared to obey.”

Viswamitra was happy that Rama put these qualms dictated by Dharma. “I am not ignorant of the fact that the

killing of a woman is a heinous sin. Nevertheless, the protection of spiritually progressive men—the Brahmins, the virtuous, as well as cows—this is important. Dharma is intertwined with these three. There is no sin when the act is done for the promotion of Dharma and the removal of *Adharma*. Don’t you know the dictum, ‘*Dharmo rakshathi rakshithah*’; Dharma saves those who save it? This is not violence used for one’s aggrandisement. When violence is used for preserving the peace and prosperity and the world, I assure you, it cannot draw down any bad reaction. Moreover, creation, preservation and dissolution are expressions of Divine law. They happen according to the Divine will. They are not bound by the whims of man. You are Divine Manifestations. You have the authority and the duty. No dirt can stick to fire; so too, no sin can contaminate the Divine. The will that creates, the obligation that protects, can also carry out the duty to punish. The punishment that awaits the sins of the mother and her son cannot be avoided. It must be considered fortunate that Thataki ends her life at your hands today, before she adds to the heap of sins for which she has to suffer much. You will only be serving her best interests and the interests of the country. This is neither wrong nor sinful. If you entertain the feeling of compassion now, it would cause unlimited damage to the world. It would be promoting the decline of Dharma. It would help Thataki to indulge in more sins. Why should I dwell more on this point and relate to you a thousand arguments? I have seen all through my spiritual eye. You have incarnated in human form to destroy the Rakshasa brood. This is your mission,

your task. You have to carry it out today and throughout your career. The guardianship of Dharma, and the destruction of the Rakshasas, (people with demonic tendencies) are the very purposes which have persuaded you to take birth! I knew this truth, that is the reason why I rushed to you for help; or else, why should I seek your support and service? Hermits, anchorites, and those performing austerities in forest retreats, entreat the help of the rulers of the land for the sake, not of themselves, but of the whole world. They give up attachment, and sustain themselves on the roots and fruits gathered by them. After some months or years of the regimen, they harden their lives even more, so that they may lose the body-consciousness and merge in the Light. Why should such people worry over what happens to the world? But, the Wise, the Realised, besides saving themselves by the illumination of revelation, endeavour to tell others the path they have trodden, the glory of the goal they have reached, to persuade others to practise the disciplines that made them ready to receive the Truth. If the Wise care only for themselves and their liberation what is to happen to the world? People will descend further into iniquity, that is all. Dharma will be submerged. Hermits keep up relationship with the world for this reason, not for quenching any private craving of theirs. They live as the lotus on water. They may be entangled in the world, for all appearances; but, they have no attachment with the world. They will not allow the world to tarnish them. Their aim is one and one only: the

progress and welfare of the world. They attend only to the fostering of Dharma. They depend only on God.”

When Viswamitra bared the truth in these words, Rama responded as if he was a novice, unacquainted with all that he had heard. He said: “The world will not understand that the words of hermits and sages have holy significances embedded in them. I interrogated you on the morality of this act so that we may know how you elaborate on the justice of the act. Do not read any other meaning into my question. My father, Dasaratha, told me to obey Viswamitra the Sage and do what he commands. I wish to follow what my father orders. You are a great Rishi. You have undergone severe austerities. When such as you declare that Thataki can be killed without incurring sin and that the act is just and moral, I know I do not commit wrong. I am ready to carry out any task you impose on me for fostering Dharma and for promoting the welfare of the people.” So saying, he held the bow in his hand, and tested the tightness of the string, producing a sound that echoed and re-echoed from the ten directions. The entire jungle was awakened. Wild animals fled far and wide. Thataki was shocked by the unusually loud and awesome sound. She was inflamed with rage at this disturbing phenomenon. She rushed towards the place wherefrom it emanated! Rama saw the monster moving towards him like a mountain lurching or a huge wild elephant charging. He smiled and told Lakshmana, “Brother! Look at this mass of ugliness! Can common man survive the sight of this devilish personality? The very

appearance is terrible! What are we then to say of its might? And it is a woman! My mind does not fully cooperate with me when I resolve to kill it! I believe this monster will die if its hands and legs are cut apart, that may be enough to destroy it.”

Thataki was rushing towards Rama with outstretched arms, so that she could grasp him and put him into her mouth like a piece of cake! She was roaring wildly and in terror-striking excitement. Viswamitra was praying, with eyes closed, that the brothers may not suffer harm in this combat. Thataki moved nearer and nearer to Rama, but with greater and greater reluctance, for, in his presence, she felt a strange kind of shock. Once or twice, she went near Rama, but she had to retreat fast. She jumped about in fury, angry at herself! The dust kicked up by her rendered the area dark and suffocating. Rama, Lakshmana and Viswamitra stood silent and inactive for a while. Thataki was an adept in the art of delusion and destruction. She created a heavy rain of rocks. Rama now decided that the ogress should no longer be allowed to live on earth. She cannot be pardoned on the score of femininity! So, he drew his bow and shot an arrow at the body of the invisible Thataki identifying where exactly it was at the time. At this, she rushed once again at Rama. Her two arms were cut down by his arrows. She fell on the ground, crying in agony and pain. Lakshmana cut off her limbs, one by one. But, Thataki could adopt form after form, as she liked. So, she gave up one form and assumed another quickly and reappeared fresh and furious

before them! She pretended to be dead, but soon came up alive! She adopted a variety of forms at the same time and started her old trick of the shower of rocks. She exhibited her wicked talents and evil tricks. Rama and Lakshmana received a few injuries, however watchful they were. Seeing this, Viswamitra felt that there should be no more delay, and that she must be killed straightaway. He said, “Rama! Do not hesitate. This is not the moment to consider her womanhood and show concessions. Removal of her limbs will not benefit. So long as there is life these Rakshasas can adopt any number of forms. Therefore, kill her! When evening approaches, her dark rage will swell even more. After sunset, it becomes impossible to encounter Rakshasas, whoever might attempt to do so. She must be destroyed within the hour.” Saying this, Viswamitra uttered some sacred Manthras that ensure protection and great safety.

Rama too directed his own thoughts and through his power of guiding arrows in the direction from where the sound emanates he recognised where Thataki was and shot an arrow fast at that target. The arrow had the effect of binding her limbs and preventing her from making the slightest movement. At this, Thataki shrieked most ferociously, and putting out her terrible tongue, attempted to fall upon Rama and Lakshmana and crush them under her weight. On this, Rama decided that delay will invite worse consequences. He shot a fatally sharp arrow right into the chest. With that, she rolled on the ground and gave up her life.

The earth showed a huge crater where she fell. Trees were uprooted by the impact of the gigantic mass, when she rolled in agony. Her last gasp of breath was so weird and loud that the wild beasts of the forest fled. Herds of animals ran helter skelter. When the awful demoness fell dead, Viswamitra called Rama near, and stroking his hair lovingly, said, “Son, were you afraid? No! No! How can the saviour of all the worlds be afraid? This feat is the foundation stone. It ensures the stability of the mansion. Come, you are tired. The sun too has set. Perform the evening worship and rest awhile. Come with me.” He took them to the river, and later, he told them, “Children! We shall rest here for the night and we can proceed to our hermitage at dawn.” They spent the night listening to the stories that Viswamitra related. The Master also revealed to them their own faculties and latent majesty.

The dawn broke. The sage went through the morning ablutions, and approached the sleeping brothers with a benign smile. He spoke soft and sweet words to them. “Rama! I am delighted at your heroism! When you were overcoming that demoness Thataki, I comprehended the truth of your being the Absolute. Really, I am very fortunate.” Viswamitra shed tears of joy. He held forth all the mystic weapons he possessed, and the Manthras which shape and sustain them, and in a swift act of dedication he placed them all in the hands of Rama. “I have no authority to wield these weapons. Of what avail are they for me even if I have them in my possession? You are the master and

wielder of all weapons. They too will be most pleased when they are with you for they can fulfil their destiny best while with you. Note this! From this moment, all the weapons I commanded so far shall be your instruments, available for the mission on which you have come,” he said, pouring holy water with appropriate Manthras, indicative of an irrevocable surrender of their ownership.

Thus, he offered to Rama the *Dandachakra* (stick), the *Dharmachakra*, the *Kalachakra*, the *Indrastra*, the *Vajrastra*, the Siva-inspired *Trisula*, *Brahmasirastra*, *Aishikastra* and the most mighty and destructive of all, the *Brahmastra*. Then, he sat silent for a while, with eyes closed. He rose with the words, “Now, what have I to do with these two?” And he gave Rama two powerful maces, *Modak* and *Sikhar*. He said, “After reaching our Asram, I shall bring out other weapons too—the Agni missile, (*Agniastra*), the *Krauncha* missile, the *Narayana* missile, the *Vayu* missile and others.” “Son,” he said, “All these weapons are at the beck and call of the master; they are amazingly overpowering.” Thus saying, he whispered into Rama’s ear the mystic formulae which can materialise and activate them, and direct them towards the targets with incalculable fury. He asked him to recite the formulae under his supervision. Before long, Rama was able to visualise the deities presiding over each of the divine missiles and weapons and receive their grateful homage. Each deity presented itself before Rama and fell prostrate before him. Each one said, “Rama! We are your servants from this

moment. We all vow and affirm that we shall abide by your commands.” Then they disappeared, awaiting further summons.

Rama was glad at this development. He touched the Sage’s feet, saying, “Master, your heart is the treasure chest of renunciation. You are, I realise, the Divine embodiment of *Thyaga* (detachment) and *Yoga* (conquest of the senses). Or will anyone else renounce and gift away such an array of potent hard-won weapons? Master! Please delight me by counselling the manner in which I can withdraw the weapons after they have wrought the intended havoc. You have now taught me the formulae for unleashing them. I desire to know how I can recover them.” At this, Viswamitra felt elated. He said: “These forces and weapons like *Sathyakeerti*, *Drshita*, *Rabhasa*, *Pitrsomasa*, *Krsana*, *Virasya*, *Yougandha*, *Vidhootha*, *Karaveeraka Jrmbhaka*—are automatically recoverable by the exercise of the will of the bowman using them, expressed through Manthras, which I shall communicate to you now.” He then initiated him into those formulae also. When they were pronounced, the deities so propitiated, appeared and prostrated to their new Master. Rama told them that they have to be ready when called and that they could meanwhile be at ease.

Viswamitra then proposed to resume the journey and the three of them started footing their way along. A little distance later, they entered a region of high-peaked hills. Their eyes fell on a charming garden, the fragrance of which

welcomed them and refreshed their bodies and minds. The brothers were curious to know who owned that lovely spot. They asked the Sage to enlighten them. Viswamitra replied, “Son, this is the holy area which the gods choose when they come down on earth to practise austerity for the success of their desires. The great Kasyapa did penance here and won his goal. The place confers victory on all holy efforts. So it is named, Siddhasram, the Hermitage of Achievement! I have myself taken residence here, with the intention of cultivating Dedication and Surrender. This hermitage is the target of attack for demons who intercept and befoul every holy rite done here. You have to destroy them when they attempt their nefarious tactics.” So saying, Viswamitra entered that heart-warming seat of peace. He placed his arm on Rama’s shoulder caressingly and said, “This Asram is as much yours from today, as it was mine until now.” The hoary sage shed tears of gratification as he uttered those words. Even as they stepped into the Siddhasram, the residents ran forward with eager haste to wash the feet of the Master and offer water for ablutions to Rama and Lakshmana.

They scattered flowers along the path towards the Asram and led them to the door. They offered them fruits and sweet cool drink. They proposed to Rama and Lakshmana that they should take rest in a cottage specially allotted to them and made ready for their use. They did accordingly and after the rest, which refreshed them a great deal, they washed their feet and faces and came to the Sage

Viswamitra, to know his instructions. They stood before the Teacher with arms folded and said, “Master! Can Yajna which you have willed to perform be inaugurated tomorrow?” Viswamitra was elated at this query. He replied “Yes! Everything is ready! In this Siddhasram, it is so always. There is no need to wait for preparations to be completed. We are always ready. I shall take the prescribed vow, when dawn breaks tomorrow.” The news spread and everyone set about the task of collecting all that was necessary for the great event. Dawn broke. Viswamitra took the vow of initiation and the Yajna began. As Skanda and Visakha stood guard for the Gods, the two brothers, Rama and Lakshmana stood resolutely determined to encounter all who attempted to interfere with its due performance. Since it was improper to speak to Viswamitra who was engaged in the sacrificial ceremony, Rama gestured to the other participants to find out from them when the demon horde could be expected and from which direction. They could only answer, “It is not possible to say when and from where!” “The demons have no regular timings. Any moment they might pounce on us. Who can predict the time of their onslaught?” The hermits spoke to Rama about the demons, each according to his estimate of their character and habits.

Rama was delighted at the replies given by them. He decided that the wise course would be to be ever vigilant and ready to beat back the demon forces, who attempt to frustrate the sacred ceremonies of hermits. He alerted his brother too. They watched the four quarters very carefully

and paid attention to the slightest sound indicative of the approach of danger. Recognising their bravery and earnestness, the ascetics derived vast joy and wonder, for, they were of tender age and lovely complexion, barely out of the stage of boyish pranks!

For five days and nights, the brothers kept unremitting guard over the sacrificial site and the hermitage without a wink of sleep or a moment of rest. The sixth day too started on the same routine. Viswamitra was engaged in the Yajna, immersed in the ritual exactitude of each item of the ceremony. The *rithwiks* (reciters of hymns and other participants) were engaged in their tasks of recitation, oblations, and recitation.

Suddenly, they were astounded by a thunderous noise that broke from the sky, as if the firmament itself was exploding into fragments! Fire emanated from everything on the sacrificial platform—the kusa grass, the plates and cups, the holy vessels holding ritual objects, the dry sticks which had to be offered in the holy Yajna fire, the flowers, the kumkum and other auspicious articles collected for the sake of worshipping gods! The flames rose on all sides!

Very soon, the sky was overcast by dark fearsome clouds and the bright day became a night of pitch darkness. Mysterious evil fumes spread fast towards the place where the Yajna was being performed! The sinister clouds started raining blood, and the drops when they fell were welcomed

by tongues of flame which rose to receive them! Rama and Lakshmana sought to locate the enemy demons amidst the phantasmagoria of cruelty and hate. Rama, through His Divine Vision, knew where the leading ogres, Maricha and Subahu were, and he released the Manasa arrow in that direction. It struck the breast of Maricha, and stopped any further mischief from him. Next he shot the Agniastra (Fire weapon) at Subahu and it got lodged in the heart of Subahu. Rama understood that if their corpses dropped on the holy region the hermitage itself will be polluted. So to prevent that sinful contact, the arrows of Rama carried the vicious bodies hundreds of miles afar and cast them into the ocean! Maricha and Subahu shrieked and groaned in unbearable agony and struggled desperately amidst the waves; but they did not die. The other leaders of the demon hordes fled for their lives beyond the horizon. Lakshmana said that it was not advisable to allow any demon to survive however cowardly they might appear, for, they would soon return to their wicked practices. So, he prompted Rama to kill off the entire gang. The hermits who watched this great act of heroism were elated with admiration. They believed that the brothers were really Siva Himself, in His terror-striking boon-conferring Form. They bowed in reverence to them, in their own minds—for, they were too young to accept their homage.

The forest put on the vesture of brightness and joy, in a moment. Amidst all the distractions, Viswamitra continued steadily and without interruption the meditation on the

deities and the recitation of the holy hymns that were enjoined for the Yajna! He never made even the slightest movement of body or mind; such was the depth of his concentration. The Valedictory Offering in the Sacred Fire was fulfilled with correctitude and thankfulness. Then, Viswamitra came smiling to where Rama and Lakshmana were standing. “Oh praiseworthy heroes! You brought victory to my vow! Through you, I have realised my life’s desire. The name of this Asram has been justified. It has become truly the Hermitage of Achievement!” he said. The sage shed tears of joy. He fondled and caressed the boys. He proceeded towards the hermitage with his hands placed on the shoulders of Rama and Lakshmana. There, he gave them the share of the holy offerings made at the sacrificial fire. He asked them to retire and refresh themselves with a little rest.

Though the fulfilment of the purpose for which they had been brought was itself the most effective restorative for their limbs and minds, they felt that it would be improper to discard the command of the Master. So, they retired and slept soundly a long while. The Master removed himself to another thatched cottage, to ensure undisturbed sleep for them. He also instructed some men to keep guard so that no one unwittingly created noise which might awaken them. While the brothers were sleeping, Viswamitra was exalting over the successful conclusion of the Yajna and the Divine Prowess of Rama and Lakshmana. Meanwhile, Rama and Lakshmana woke up and after washing face, hands and feet,

they came out through the door, to find there the boys of the hermit families keeping guard, lest their sleep be disturbed! They were informed that the Master was conversing with the ascetics in another cottage. So, they moved thither and fell at the sage's feet. Rising, they stood with arms folded and said, "Great teacher! If these servants of yours have to do any other task, please inform us and we shall gladly carry it out." At this, one ascetic from the group stood up and addressed them thus, "With the destruction of the demons, all that has to be done has been accomplished. What else is there to be done? The desire entertained by the Master, since years, has been fulfilled. Nothing higher than this is needed. You two are of the form of Siva-Sakthi. That is how you appear to our eyes. You are no common mortals. It is our good fortune that has given us this chance to see you. Our gratitude knows no bounds." At this, the residents touched the feet of Rama and Lakshmana.