

## WINNING SITA

**M**eanwhile, one young student-disciple ran in with a bundle of palm leaf scripts and placed it in the hands of Viswamitra. He turned over a few leaves and passed it on to a reverend old hermit sitting by his side. The Master asked the old man to read it aloud, so that all might hear.

He read that Emperor Janaka of Mithila had resolved to perform a celebrated Yajna, expressive of the highest glory of Righteousness, and that he was praying Viswamitra to give him joy by his gracious Presence with his disciples. When they heard this, all exclaimed, “*Subham, Subham.*” (May it attain fulfilment). Viswamitra said, “Sons! Now that we can travel through the forests free from fear of demonic gangs, I have decided to start on the journey to Mithila with all the residents of the Asram tomorrow itself.”

When he heard this, Rama said, “Master! It is really a source of delight. Since there is nothing more that you need us for, we shall return to Ayodhya if you permit us to do so. Please allow us to leave.” At this, Viswamitra said, “I have given word to Dasaratha for a few more things; I have to keep these words too! I have promised him that I would myself bring you back to him and so, you cannot return without me! A unique Yajna is taking place in Mithila city. There is not enough time for me to take you to Ayodhya and then reach Mithila on the day the Yajna begins. If you two accompany me to Mithila, you can witness the Yajna and proceed to Ayodhya with me from there itself.”

Hearing these words which had no trace of hesitation or doubt, Rama too answered decisively, without weighing pros and cons, “Master! Since my chief vow is obedience of the orders of my father, I have to submit a prayer before you.” Viswamitra asked, “Come! Tell me, what is the prayer?” Rama replied, “My father directed me to guard the Yajna of Viswamitra from defilement and sacrilege, and make the great sage happy. He asked us to return victorious. He has not directed us to attend Yajnas elsewhere. Should I not receive special permission from my father before moving on to Mithila?”

At this Viswamitra said, “Rama! Dasaratha did not stop with that only! No! He said, ‘Go and obey all that the sage commands you to do. Do not transgress his command by even the width of a grain.’ He told me, ‘Master, you

must yourself assume full responsibility for my children; you must yourself bring them back to me.' You have listened to what he said when we left Ayodhya. So, follow my word now. Come with me to Mithila, and from there we shall go to Ayodhya, I and you and all my disciples." Rama realised the truth that was inherent in this plan and he nodded in agreement saying, "We shall do as you desire."

Instructions went forth that everyone must get ready before daybreak for the journey to Mithila. Viswamitra rose early and led the boys to the river for ablutions. He was thrilled at the chance of telling them of the hardships he encountered from the demons whenever he attempted to celebrate Yajnas in the past. He related to them how all his counter-measures failed to achieve their object. He expressed his gratitude for the destruction of the demons which had ensured safety for the hermitage as well as the surrounding regions. He described how the people were now happily relieved of fear and have unalloyed peace and joy.

The place was silent, calm, comforting. Sitting on the soft sands the sage Viswamitra was relating the special features and significance of the Yajna contemplated by Emperor Janaka, to the two brothers he had drawn close to him.

During the description he referred to a precious bow that Janaka had in his possession, a bow that was uniquely

potent, and shone with rare splendour. He declared that they must not miss seeing it. At this, Rama asked how the bow happened to reach Janaka and Viswamitra answered. "Listen son! Years ago, the Emperor of Mithila named Devaratha celebrated a great Yajna the like of which no mortal could dare to perform, a Yajna which can confer vast spiritual benefits, a Yajna which pleased the Gods so highly that they gifted him this divine bow, as a mark of appreciation. It is the Bow of Siva. It is being worshipped with due rites by Janaka every day. He offers flowers and sandal paste, and waves camphor flame and incense in its honour. He places eatables and fruits before the Divine Presence in the bow, in reverential homage. The bow is so loaded with divinity that no one can raise it and string it, be he god, demon, angel or spirit. Many princes who attempted to string it have met with disgraceful disappointment. Rama! you are worthy heroes. You can examine it. During this coming Yajna, the Bow will most probably be on show; so, this is a good chance, certainly." Viswamitra went on describing the wonderful potency of the bow. Lakshmana turned his eyes as if searching for the direction in which Mithila was. Meanwhile Rama said, with delight "Certainly! We must see it. We shall come with you tomorrow." Hearing this, Viswamitra was elated.

Darkness fell and everyone rose and moved towards Siddhasram. Viswamitra called together the residents of the Asram and ordered that they should get ready to leave for Mithila as soon as the hour of dawn struck. Then, some of

them asked, “Master! How can the routine of the Asram be observed without interruption if there is none left here?” The sage replied, “If each one carries on his duties wherever he is, that itself is the proper observance of the Asram routine. There is no special routine for the Asram apart from the Asramites. Those who seek *Asraya* (support) make up the Asram; without the *Asrithas* (dependants) there can be no Asram. When the *Asrithas* are with me, why worry about the Asram and the routine? The disciples are those to be cared for, those that have to observe the disciplines. Moreover, since the place has now become free from the fear of demons, the Asram cannot come to harm. The Creator of All is our *Asrayam* (Refuge) and when we depend on Him, He will foster all.” Viswamitra spoke in this rather unfamiliar strain and continued, “Take with you the things needed for your daily rites as well as all the tools and vessels belonging to the Asram. There is no need to leave anything here.”

Some noviciates queried, “Master! After what interval of time do we return to this place? If you tell us that, we can select as many articles as will suffice for that period of absence; why burden ourselves with more than what is essential?”

Viswamitra replied, “Time is no servant of the body; the body is the servant of Time. Therefore, one can never say when! Will I come here again or no? I doubt!” When they heard this the hearts of all the residents suffered a

shock. The clothes, vessels and tools they held in their hands slipped and fell on the ground. They could not find words to speak in reply. They could not protest, nor could they muster courage to question the Master. So, they bundled up kusa grass, sacred sticks for the sacrificial fire, ceremonial ladles and vessels, as much as they could carry. The meaning of Viswamitra’s words was a mystery and so each of them interpreted them in his own way.

The night rolled by and dawn broke. Everyone was ready; when the doors were being closed and bolted behind them Viswamitra said, “Do not fasten the doors! Leave them open. This is not ours, anyone who comes can enter. This Asram must welcome all who arrive at all times. This day, the bond between us and this Asram has snapped. Grow in happiness hereafter, ye patron gods of this holy area. I have achieved success in my endeavour; accept my grateful appreciation in return. You will no more be troubled by demon hordes. You can now live in peace, with ample progeny, prosperous and happy. I am going out of the Siddhasram, renouncing it. I have resolved to take residence in the region of the Himalayas, lying north of the sacred Ganga River.” Viswamitra prostrated on the ground as a mark of respect for the forest deities.

Then, he started on his journey, with Rama and Lakshmana and the senior monks of the Asram. The residents of the hermitage realised that their place was where Viswamitra was, and not the forest or huts where they had

lived so long. They felt that the Himalayan region was equally suitable for them. So, they too offered gratitude and reverence to the forest deities and the grass-thatched dwellings and walked on behind the sage.

While they were thus proceeding in the northerly direction, they saw behind them, following their trail, thousands of deer, peacocks, birds and beasts of the jungle, running with raised tails, in eager haste of yearning. Viswamitra stopped and turning towards them he said, “Oh denizens of the jungle! The places to which I am going are not congenial for your style of living, for your safety and security. This forest is your natural habitat. Do not be sad at the separation. Do not follow us; remain here itself. God will grant you peace and joy.” He took leave of them too, before he resumed the journey.

The day’s journey brought them to the bank of the Sona River. They had perforce to spend the night at that place itself. They took their bath in the river and finished the evening ablutions. Then they gathered around the Master eager to listen to his tales. Rama asked: “Revered Sir, this region appears rich and prosperous. What is its name and history, I would like to know.” Viswamitra replied, “Rama! Brahma had a son through sheer Will. He was named Kasu. He was a great ascetic, steadfast and strict in vows, heroic in spiritual adventure, learned in the science of morals. He wedded the daughter of the noble ruler of Vidarbha. The two lived in the awareness and practice of the four ends of

human life, Righteousness, Prosperity, Affection and Liberation. They had four sons—Kusamba, Kusanabha, Adhoortharajaka and Vasu—each one, equal to the father in virtue, and highly evolved in righteousness, integrity and other excellences of the warrior caste.

Kasu divided the world into four parts and assigned one part to each of them, directing them thus: “Sons! Rule over the part assigned to each of you and prosper!” Thereafter, they entered upon their new duties and carried out their father’s command. Each of them started constructing a capital city for the kingdom—Kusamba built Kausambi, Kusanabha built Mahodaya, Adhoortharajaka built Dharmaranya and Vasu built Girivraja. Rama! This area is part of the kingdom of Vasu. We have all around us five hills, and so, this City is called Girivraja (Collection of Hills). This auspicious Sona river is also known as Sumagadhi, so that this region is named Magadha. The Magadhi flows from east to west here, like a jasmine garland placed among the mountain valleys. The majesty of Vasu has blessed the land on both banks of this river to be ever green and plentiful.

The second son, Kusanabha, was well established in Dharma. He was a pillar of Righteousness. He had a number of daughters, but, no son. He taught them right conduct and behaviour according to the rules and disciplines laid down in the scriptures. He emphasised that forbearance is the grandest gift one can give another. It is the most prolific

fruit-bearing Yajna, the most beneficial way of being honest and the root of all right thought and action. He gave them this lesson even from the days when they were fed at the mother's breast. They were later given in marriage—all of them—to the ruler of Kampilya City, Brahmadata by name. When they left for that City, his house became empty and barren.

“Alas,” he moaned, “This house which was so bright and resonant with wit and laughter has today become dark and dumb, dull and deep in gloom. Daughters, however many you may have, have to leave the parental home rendering it drab and dreary. If only I had a son, this calamity would not have overpowered me.” Thus He entertained the longing for a son.

Just then, his father, Kasa, happened to visit him and he enquired the reason why he looked sad and full of concern. The son laid bare before him his mind and its anxieties. Kasu chided him for becoming so worried for this particular reason. He blessed him that he get a son soon. And as he blessed, so it happened. The son born was named Gaadhi. He grew up a very devoted virtuous prince. Since he was born in the lineage of Kasu, he was known as Kousika.

His sisters lost their husbands after some time and as dutiful wives, they immolated themselves and gained heaven. They were born on the Himalayas as sacred rivers

which joined together to form the famous Kousiki river. Kousika was attached very much to the eldest of the sisters, Sathyavathi by name and so, he took residence on the bank of this river, and established himself at Siddha Asram, and celebrated the Yajna he had resolved upon with ceremonial rectitude.

Rama! Through your immeasurable heroism, the Yajna I had resolved upon has come to its successful conclusion. It has borne fruit. My rigorous vows have been fulfilled.”

At this, the monks who had gathered around the sage exclaimed, “Oh, how wonderful! Really, we are fortunate that we could listen to the story of the hoary ancestors of our Master! Oh, what a great source of joy the story is! The Kasa line is indeed consecrated. Those born in it are equal to Brahma Himself in sanctity. How lucky we are that we have this singular chance to serve the one visible embodiment of all that the line represents, the sage Viswamitra. This chance must be the fruit of merit accumulated through many lives in the past.”

Viswamitra interrupted them and said, “I would not have dwelt on all this, but Rama! your question prompted me to reply. I do not give details regarding this body and its antecedents. It is already night, let us rest. Delay in going to sleep might slacken the speed of our journey tomorrow. Rama! See! The Moon is peeping through the branches of yonder tree to catch a glimpse of you! It sends down cool

rays to refresh the earth that has suffered long the hot rays of the sun.” That night, everyone was ruminating over the tales of the forefathers of the Master.

They awoke from sleep pretty early and finished the morning ablutions. They performed the daily rituals too and got ready in time to continue the journey. They came near Viswamitra, and fell at his feet. Then, they stood one behind the other on one side, awaiting orders. Rama said, “Master! The river Sona is not deep at this place. The water is clear, we can wade across. No boat is needed!” Viswamitra replied, “Son! You are strange to this place and so, you do not know the exact place where we can wade across. I shall go first; you will follow me.” The sage walked into the riverbed and moved on. Everyone had his bundle slung on his shoulder. The pace was slow and it was noon when they reached the river Jahnavi.

The first intimation they had about the river was sweet “kuhoo” notes of swans, parrots and other birds on the bank. Every heart was filled with delight at the entrancing beauty of the scene. They bathed in the pure pellucid stream, and aware of the hallowed story of the river, they offered oblations to departed ancestors and gods. They lit the sacred fire on the bank and performed ritual sacrifices enjoined by the Sastras. Then, they collected edible fruits from the trees around and after assuaging hunger with them, they drank the nectarine water of the Jahnavi to slake their thirst.

Rama and Lakshmana walked towards the tree under whose shade Viswamitra was reclining and sat beside him, reverentially. Rama asked him, “Master! Why is it said that the Ganga flows as three streams in the three worlds? How does the Ganga reach the Ocean, which is the Lord of every stream and river throughout the world! Please tell me and make me glad!” Viswamitra said, “Son! The Himalayan range is the basis of all this world: it is the home for all animals and all herbs. It has two daughters, Ganga and Uma. Ganga is the elder of the two. Both these are being adored by the entire world. The gods asked that Ganga be given to them so that they might have prosperity. So, Himavaan (the Deity of the Himalayas) gifted Ganga to the gods in order to secure their blessings, and benefit the three worlds.

“The younger daughter, Uma entered upon a life of extreme asceticism. She immersed herself in hard spiritual discipline, prompted by supreme detachment from everything worldly. So, Himavaan sought to settle her in the world as a wife. In spite of strenuous endeavour, he could not succeed in this for long. At last, he persuaded Rudra to agree to wed her. Thus, she too became entitled to the adoration of the three worlds.

“The Ganga you see here is the Ganga that the gods took with them, and that has come down to Earth and that has three steps, one in heaven, one on earth and another subterranean.”

The Sage Viswamitra was journeying towards the city of Mithila with Rama and Lakshmana, as well as a few of his disciples, regaling them throughout the day and far into the night with picturesque descriptions of his own previous history, the historical events connected with the places through which they passed, and the annals of the various dynasties which ruled over the regions which they crossed.

That evening, he was seated on the sands of the bed of the Ganga, after the ablutions and rites. Rama reminded him that they will be happy to know about the origin of that holy stream. Viswamitra responded and said, “Ramachandra! Your ancestors are responsible for Ganga coming down on earth. As a result of their good deeds, the peoples of the earth are sanctifying themselves, bathing in the sacred waters and performing morning and evening ceremonial rites and ablutions therein. The Ganga is the supreme stream of Divine purity. The nectarine waters can confer immortality. She was dwelling in the matted locks on Siva’s Head. For that reason, she is most auspicious. She grants all that is beneficial.” Hearing Viswamitra extol the river in such superlative terms, Ramachandra said, “How did my ancestors manage to lead down to earth a river with such amazing attributes of power and purity? If you can describe to us the story, we can derive great joy therefrom.”

When Viswamitra heard this request, presented with such humility, he said, “Rama! Listen! In ancient times, Ayodhya was ruled by an emperor named Sagara. He was a

righteous ruler and valiant hero. Fascinated by his qualities of head and heart, the king of Vidarbha gave him his beloved daughter, Kesini, in marriage. She too was a strict follower of Dharma. She never wavered from the path of Truth.

“But since even after the lapse of many years, they were not blessed with progeny, Sagara married the charming daughter of Arishtanemi, named Sumathi, as his second wife, with the concurrence of Kesini. She too proved barren and so, the king decided to spend the rest of his life in asceticism. He went to the bank of a stream by the side of which the sage Bhrigu was having his hermitage, and with his two wives, he plunged into the most severe disciplines of the anchorites.

“A long time elapsed thus. One day, at break of dawn, the sage Bhrigu, staunch upholder of Truth, appeared before him and said, ‘Oh King! End this tormenting of the body, this asceticism. You will earn unparalleled renown in this world. Before long, you will be endowed with the bliss of having a son born unto you!’ As soon as these words of compassion and grace fell upon his ear, Sagara opened his eyes and saw the sage standing before him. Immediately, he fell at his feet, and signed to the wives too to do likewise. He prayed that the sage may bless them directly.

The senior queen, Kesini, bowed her head low and fell at his feet, with many an adulatory hymn emerging from her lips. Bhrigu asked her, ‘Mother! Do you desire a single

son, so that the thread of continuity be not broken, or do you desire for a large number of sons, who will be endowed with enormous physical valour and vast renown?’ She replied that a single son will satisfy her, and prayed that her wish may be gratified. Bhrigu accepted her request and blessed her likewise.

When the second queen Sumathi prostrated before him he asked her the same question. She craved for strong, brave, celebrated sons in plenty, and so, the sage granted that desire and blessed that it be fulfilled.

Elated by the blessings of the sage, Sagara returned to his capital city, accompanied by his wives. They fixed their minds on the boons they received and spent their time happily. Within a few months, both queens conceived and awaited the happy event. When the nine months had passed, Kesini delivered a son and Sumathi gave birth to many.

As the days sped by, the sons romped about and played excitedly with children of the same age and later, started moving out beyond the palace in search of companions and for the sake of games. The son of Kesini, Aswamanja by name, took them to the sands of the Sarayu river; he used to take delight in throwing the children into the river and laughed outright in glee, when the child was drowned! Soon, he earned an infamous reputation, as the worst criminal in the kingdom!

When they emerged out of their teens, Sagara selected suitable royal brides for each of them and had the marriages celebrated. Aswamanja continued his wickedness, however, and the residents of Ayodhya had heartrending grief as a result of his incorrigible viciousness. One day they approached Sagara and amidst loud wailing, represented to him the atrocious acts of his eldest son. At this, the king ordered that Aswamanja should immediately leave the city and that he must be exiled into the forests. Aswamanja had a son born to him by then. So, he had to leave behind his wife and son, besides his parents.

Years passed. Aswamanja’s son Amsumanta grew up, won renown throughout the world as loveable, virtuous and valiant. Once, Sagara decided on the performance of the great *Aswamedha* (Horse Sacrifice), and fixed an auspicious moment for starting the rites.” While Viswamitra was at this point in his narration, Rama put in a question: “Master! Was the Horse Sacrifice performed in Ayodhya, or did he choose some holy river bank for the purpose?” Viswamitra smiled, and replied, “Rama! I am realising how earnest you are about sacrifices and how reverent your attitude towards sages is! I shall describe it in detail as you desire. Listen! There is a holy range facing the Himalayas from a distance, called the Vindhya range. The region in between is sacred for all yajnas and yagas. The Horse Sacrifice was done in that region. Experts in the recitation of Vedic hymns gathered there and the mountains echoed and re-echoed to the loud and correct recital of the prescribed ritual formulae.

Thousands were watching with great joy the unique ceremonial. Just then, the beautifully caparisoned horse was led in and worshipped. Later it was left to roam where it willed. In order to overcome and defeat any opposition to its free movement (indicative of an ambition on the part of the ruler who so opposes to be free from the domination of their suzerain, Sagara) Amsumanta followed its footsteps, with his army fully equipped to meet all contingencies. After an unopposed round of the entire country, the horse was led back. The exact moment when the sacrifice had to be done in orthodox Vedic style approached, the people went to bring the animal in.

But the horse was nowhere to be seen! It is laid down that the loss of the sacrificial animal and its non-availability at the auspicious moment bodes ill for the organisers of the Yajna! So, Sagara was naturally upset. He sent the numerous sons of his second wife, armed and equipped, to discover the horse and bring it back to the sacrificial altar. They sought the help of the gods and the demons, and searched everywhere and even dug the earth up, to see whether the horse was kept hidden below by the captors. But they had to return and report that their mission had failed.

Sagara was enraged at this. ‘Of what avail is this numerous progeny, if you announce to me only your incompetence? Why stand before me with faces darkened with disgrace? Go and do not come to me, until you recover the horse.’

The sons reacted sharply to these angry words. They went back into the world determined to leave no spot unexamined. Mountains, hills, lakes, rivers, caves, towns and villages, forests and deserts—why lengthen the list, they looked closely at every yard, every foot of ground. While they were proceeding thus they found in one place, a hermit, deeply immersed in Dhyana; the horse was there, near him, calmly nibbling grass!

They were overcome by delight when they saw the horse, and by anger, when their eyes fell on the hermit. They were tossed between two conflicting emotions. They lost their sanity, as a result of the irrepressible feelings. Their reason failed. Their hearts were petrified. They shouted in the ear of the hermit, ‘Villainous brute! You have stolen our horse and hidden it in your backyard’! The sage Kapila slowly opened his eyes and looked around. The sons of Sagara stood around him and poured abuses on his head; some even got ready to give him a heavy thrashing!

Kapila saw that words and arguments were futile weapons to meet those bullies. He decided that he must deal with them differently. He burnt them into ash merely by casting his eye on them. Greatly distressed at the inordinate delay caused by their failure to return, Sagara was much agitated. How could he stop the sacrifice that he had half gone through? How could he continue and finish it? Seeing his plight, the grandson, Amsumanta fell at his grandfather’s feet and offered to search for the horse and

his uncles, and bring news about them, if only he was sent on that mission. Sagara blessed him and sent him on that errand. Amsumanta was at his job, day and night. At last he was rewarded by success. He saw signs of his uncles having been reduced into a heap of ashes! He was anxious to perform obsequies for the departed souls. But he could not see any well, tank, lake or stream. This was essential for depositing the funeral offerings. Heavily laden with sorrow, he moved some distance forward. A reverend old man came across his path and told him, 'Do not allow grief to overpower you, dear son! Your uncles were reduced to ashes by sage Kapila with the welfare of the world also in view! Do not be content to offer the ritual obligations in mundane waters. Get the holy water of the Celestial Ganga. Bring the Ganga down to earth and let the sacred waters flow over the ashes. Then, the manes will be saved. But first, take the horse along with you and perform the sacrifice unto its glorious conclusion. Thereafter, you can think of ways and means to bring the heavenly Ganga to the Earth.' Amsumanta fell at the feet of the hermit and hurried to his grandfather, where the yajna was being held up for want of the consecrated animal."

Sagara was awaiting its arrival, with sleepless anxiety, both night and day, and so, when the horse was brought, he and the rithwiks (the Vedic scholars who officiated as priests) were filled with delight. Amsumanta felt that it would not be proper to announce, during the auspicious festival, that his uncles had an untimely death through the

sage's curse. So, he allowed the Valedictory Rite to come to an end. The priests and guests were given their share of votive gifts.

Then Amsumanta gave a detailed account of what had happened to the uncles and exhorted his grandfather to bring the heavenly river of unique sanctity down to the place where the ashes were lying. Sagara was delighted at the suggestion. He engaged himself in many ascetic disciplines and ritual ceremonies, which, according to the advice of elders, would induce Ganga to give him the boon he wanted. But he could not succeed. He waned in health day by day as a result of grief at the loss of his sons, and the failure of his attempt to ensure a bright future for them. At last, he cast off his body, a disappointed man.

Rama! The ministers then crowned Amsumanta, after consulting the will of the people. He ruled over the kingdom without the slightest error or fault, for he was strong in morality and spiritual excellence. The people were fostered as if they were children born from his own loins. When old age crept on him, he offered the throne to Dileepa, his son, and proceeded to the Himalayas for the ascetic disciplines he wanted to impose on himself. His aim was not only self-realisation; he sought to bring down the Ganga for the sake of the salvation of the departed uncles. But he too had to give up his body without fulfilling the desire.

Dileepa was also moved by the same wish for, he knew how deeply his father and grandfather had longed for the

consummation, bringing the Ganga down on earth! He tried various means. He performed many abstruse yajnas on the advice of sages. Pangs of sorrow that he could not fulfil the family ideal invaded him and he became chronically ill. Seeing that physical strength and mental stamina were declining, he placed his son Bhagiratha on the throne. He entrusted to him the mission that was beyond his grasp, namely, bringing the Ganga down. Soon after, Dilepa too left the earth.

Bhagiratha, bright with spiritual splendour, vowed that he must succeed in the task allotted to him by his father. Though he ruled the kingdom very satisfactorily, he was sad that he had no children to maintain the line. This, as well as the supreme task of getting the Ganga, forced him to hand over the reins of government to the ministers and retire into the silence of the famous Gokarna Kshetra. He stood there practising austere penance like bearing the heat of the sun and taking food only once a month! At last appreciating his austerity, God appeared before him and said, ‘Son! Bhagiratha! Ask any boon you wish for, it shall be granted.’

Bhagiratha had the Vision of the One with the brilliance of a thousand Suns. He fell prostrate, overwhelmed with gratitude and devotion. He prayed, ‘Lord! Cause the Celestial Ganga to flow on earth, so that my great-grandfathers might be saved from perdition, and be restored to Heaven. And favour me with children, so

that the Ikshvaku Royal Line might not be rendered extinct, with me as its last representative. May the dynasty continue and flourish.’ He held fast the Feet of the Lord and submitted his supplication.

The Lord replied, ‘Son! The first of your wishes is very hard to fulfil. Nevertheless, I shall grant you that one. The boon for the royal line? Yes you will have a noble son and your dynasty will continue and flourish. Arise!’ At this, Bhagiratha rose and the Lord continued, ‘Bhagiratha! Ganga is swollen and swift. When it falls from heaven, the earth will not be able to bear the impact. So, as Ruler of the Earth, you have to ponder over the problem and discover means by which dire disaster can be avoided. When the Ganga descends upon the earth, the effect will be calamitous. So, the river must be made to fall first on the head of Siva. From there, the waters may be led on to earth with lessened impact. This is the best course, from the point of view of the inhabitants of the earth. Consider this well.’ After saying this, the Lord withdrew.

From thence, Bhagiratha began austerities to propitiate Siva and at last, he succeeded in winning His favour and His consent to receive Ganga direct on His Head, when it descends from Heaven. And so it happened that the Ganga fell on Siva and flowed down from His Head onto the earth, in seven distinct streams—Hladini, Nalini and Pavani flowed east, Subhikshu, Sitha and Sindhu flowed west, and the seventh stream followed the footsteps of Bhagiratha to

where he led it, namely, the place where the ashes of his great-grandfathers lay in heaps, awaiting rescue from hell.

It flowed along the route that Bhagiratha took and all along the route, men benefited from the sacred stream and sanctified themselves. They were released from the effects of the sins, by the cleansing influence of the celestial Ganga. The great-grandfathers too were redeemed by the performance of obsequies on the bank of the thrice-holy stream, and with its waters.

Since Bhagiratha brought the Ganga to earth, the river got the name, Bhagirathi! After the ceremonies for the manes were over, Bhagiratha returned to Ayodhya. Happy that he could fulfil through Divine Grace the keenest wishes of his father and grandfather, he ruled over the empire for many years, receiving the spontaneous homage of his contented subjects. At last, he too left the body.”

When Viswamitra narrated the story of Rama’s forefathers thus, Rama and Lakshmana were all attention. They were enraptured with the incidents. But the Sage said it was already midnight and they could all go to bed and sleep. So, they prostrated before the Preceptor and laid themselves on the thick sands of the river itself. Rama and Lakshmana could not sleep. They reclined on the sands, only in obedience to the order of their preceptor, not because they needed rest! They lay picturing to themselves the wonderful story of the descent of Ganga from heaven to

earth, till they found that morning had arrived! There they performed the ablutions and morning rituals in the river and prepared soon for the journey ahead. As soon as some teenage disciples announced that the ferryboat was ready, all moved towards it and took their seats and crossed the holy river. They reached the northern bank and started on the further stages of their journey, admiring the heartening forest scenery through which they passed.

When they had covered some distance, they came upon a vast city full of beautiful buildings. Rama turned to Viswamitra, and asked him, “Master! We are seeing from here in this exquisite forest a vast city. To what kingdom does it belong?” The sage replied, “Rama! It appears to be near, but in fact, it will take quite some time for us to reach it! Perhaps, we may arrive there in the evening hours. I shall tell you the story of that city’s origin and fortunes when we actually reach it. Meanwhile, let us proceed.” Rama heard these words which the sage spoke with a twinkle in the eye and a smile on the lips. He grasped the meaning of his directive and walked on without a word in reply.

When they descended into the valley there was no sign of any city or human habitation; but, on rising to the heights, the city could be seen very near! Moving forward like this, they found that though evening drew near they could not reach the City. As Viswamitra had already indicated the City was still far away! As evening fell they halted; and

after bath, they performed the evening rituals as laid down in the Sastras. While resting, Rama returned to the question he had already asked. “Master! Will you kindly tell us about the city!” At this, Viswamitra said, “Rama! I too was just now thinking about that matter! Though I know that you are aware of the working of every mind, still, the veil of Maya (taking the appearance as real) hides the fact and precipitates men into misleading tracks. All cannot be masters of the mind. When persons like me find it impossible to keep it under control, there is no need to dilate on the fate of ordinary men! The very moment the thought flashes in my mind that you had forgotten to ask about the story of the City, you questioned me about it. No further proof is wanted to show that you are the All-knowing!

Rama! In ancient times, Kasyapa had two wives, Aditi and Diti. The sons of Diti were repositories of physical might and the sons of Aditi, of moral grandeur. They grew up mightier and mightier with each passing day. The parents derived great joy, watching them grow up so fair and fast.

One day, the sons of both Diti and Aditi gathered together and entered into a discussion on means of avoiding old age. Finally, they came to the conclusion that the *Amrith* or Nectar that can be secured by churning the Ocean of Milk will prevent the physical calamities of disease, senility, and death. Soon, they set about that task. The Mandara Peak was plucked and placed in the Ocean as the churning rod. The serpent Vasuki was chosen as the rope, to be wound round

the rod so that the rope might rotate quick and fast. While the churning continued for a long time, the serpent Vasuki began vomiting its poison. It was enraged so much as a result of the pain that its fangs struck against the rocks of the mountain peak. The poisonous fume raged as a huge fire!

Seeing this, the sons of Diti and Aditi became mortally afraid. They felt they would be burnt into ashes in that holocaust! They prayed for succour of the Lord. When Lord Vishnu appeared before them, the sons of Diti pleaded pathetically, ‘Lord! Save us! Put an end to this dread disaster.’ and the Lord changed into Siva and said, ‘Dear Ones! I am the eldest of the Gods, and so, I am entitled to receive the first fruit of this churning process.’ Declaring thus, He drank off, without delay, the Halahala poison that was causing the panic.

Thereafter, the sons of Diti and Aditi continued the churning of the Ocean. Another calamity threatened them now. The Mandara Peak started sinking! So, they prayed again to the Lord Vishnu. He appeared again and assured them, ‘Darling children! Do not become frightened.’ The Lord assumed the Form of a Tortoise, and getting underneath the mountain peak raised it on His back and kept it safe on the hard shell so long as the churning lasted. The sons of Kasyapa were immensely grateful and happy. They extolled the Lord in profusion.

From out of the Ocean of Milk, there emerged a God with a *Danda* (Stick) and *Kamandalu* (Water pot) in His

Hands! His name was Dhanvantari. Even as the sons of Diti and Aditi were looking at Him, there emerged again from the Ocean thick sweet juice or *Rasa*, which got rolled into a ball, which, in turn, soon swelled and broke, disclosing a bevy of maidens. Since they were born of *Rasa*, they are named *Apsaras*. They tried in many ways to persuade the sons of Diti and Aditi to wed them. They prayed and petitioned; but all their efforts were of no avail. So, they lived without being wedded, free and fickle. Then, from out of the waves rose the daughter of the watergod, *Varuni* and she had a chalice full of intoxicating liquor! The sons of Diti refused to have anything to do with the liquor. The sons of Aditi quaffed it. Those who did not accept the *Sura* (liquor) were known as *Asuras*, and those who accepted it, as *Suras*.

At last, from that Ocean of Milk arose the *Amrith* (Nectar). Who were to drink the *Amrith*? There arose a huge conflict between the sons of Diti and Aditi. In the terrible fight that ensued, the sons of Aditi began destroying the sons of Diti. The battle threatened to become a battle of extinction. The earth shook under the thrust and counter thrust of weaponry in that battle. Fear and anxiety spread their dark clouds over the world. Suddenly, *Vishnu* appeared before the contending parties as an entrancingly charming damsel, who captivated the hearts of all and led their minds away from the combat into which they had plunged! She charmed everyone and during her appearance the precious *Amrith* disappeared! The sons of Diti had all died. The grief

of the mother was beyond consolation. *Kasyapa* failed to bring her to the state of normalcy. His attempts to teach her the evanescence of things failed to convince her. She wailed aloud and lamented most excruciatingly as if the end of the world had come.

At last Diti brought herself round. She approached *Kasyapa* and submerging her agony deep into her mind, she said, ‘Lord! Is this just? We both had children by you. Now I have been made childless. Is this fair, must I grieve eternally thus? Not even one of my sons is alive. Rather than have many short-lived sons, one long living one is most desirable isn’t it?’ When she wept aloud in this manner, *Kasyapa* consoled her and told her to enter on *Thapas* (the discipline of austerities to propitiate the Gods) so that she might have a son who will live long. He advised her to give up her grief which could never fulfil her desire. Encouraged by him and seeking his blessings she left immediately and started *Thapas*, with the professed aim of securing the boon from the Gods, of a son who will be able to defeat the Lord of Gods, *Indra* Himself!

*Kasyapa* told her, ‘*Thapas* is no easy discipline. One has to be pure until the very end. One has to observe the vows and fasts, without the least infringement. Then only will the Gods be pleased and grant the boon.’

Diti reached the region known as *Kusaplava* and entered upon rigorous asceticism. Knowing her resolve,

Indra desired to test her and came to her in the guise of her attendant. Diti's prayer was answered. She became pregnant with child through Divine Grace. Days passed, months rolled by, Indra was beside her, as attendant! One day, in the hot hours of noon, overcome by sleep, she lay on the bed with her hair loose and her head placed where the feet were usually placed. This was against the strict rules of ceremonial purity, which she had to observe with tenacity. So, Indra got his chance. He noted that her posture was heterodox and contrary to Sastric injunctions. So He punished her, by fragmenting the foetus in her womb. The fragments started weeping inside the womb for their limbs and segments which had broken away. The attendant, Indra spoke softly to them, '*Maa ruda*' 'Don't weep'! Diti had terrible bouts of bleeding, she lamented her fate and wept most pitifully.

Indra stood before her with folded palms and pleaded, 'Mother; pardon me. You acted contrary to the rules of ceremonial purity and so, broke the vow. Your hair was unbound and loose, and your head was on the bed where the feet are normally kept. When you slept thus, your Thapas was defiled. When the enemy who is waiting for a chance to foil your fortune gets such an opportunity, will he keep quiet? I am Indra come in this form. You prayed for a son who would kill me, didn't you? The foetus in the womb was to destroy me and so I took that chance to foil my foe. And I did not destroy him through condemnable tactics. You know that strict observance of the vow was essential

for the success of your plan. You had to ensure that you did not violate the code. The foetus has been cut into seven fragments and I have spoken '*Maa ruda*' to them. So they will be born as the seven Godly *Maruthas*, (Wind Gods); I am conferring on you this boon,' Indra said thus and returned to Heaven.

Rama! This is the place where Indra and Diti had this dialogue and this compromise. Here, Ikshvaku had a son, by Alamba Devi, who was named Visala. This kingdom is called Visala after him. Visala begot Hemachandra, the mighty. He begot Subhadra, and he had a son, Doomraswa, whose son was called Srnjaya. Srnjaya's son was Sahadeva.

Sahadeva was very rich and prosperous. He was a strong pillar of morality and righteousness. He was a valiant ruler of the kingdom for a very long period. His son Somadatta had Kakustha born to him. Sumathi was the son of that heroic monarch. He too was a very upright virtuous ruler; in purity and holiness he was equal to the Gods. Rama! This day, we shall enter this Visala City and sleep there. We shall reach the city of Emperor Janaka tomorrow."

When they heard these words all were happy. The news of the arrival of Viswamitra was communicated to Sumathi by messengers and he rushed forward to the Sage, with a retinue of courtiers, ministers, scholars and priests, praying that he should enter the City and sanctify the Royal palace by his stay.

Viswamitra was pleased with his humility and reverence. He enquired sweetly about his health and happiness, as well as about his kingdom. They were engaged in conversation for some time on the affairs of the kingdom and dynasty when Sumathi's eyes fell on the brothers, Rama and Lakshmana. He was so enchanted by their charm and dignity that he asked Viswamitra, who these 'lion cubs' were. Viswamitra replied, 'Sumathi! That is a long story I have no time now to tell you. I shall relate to you the whole story on reaching your place.' He then directed the monks and ascetics who had accompanied him, as well as the two brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, to proceed to the City of Visala. He too rose and walked, Sumathi talking with him all the while on matters pertaining to the kingdom. On their reaching the City gate music from many voices and instruments rent the air. Brahmins recited hymns of welcome and good wishes from the scriptures.

After partaking of the Reception feast arranged by the King of Visala, Viswamitra described to the gathering of royal kinsmen, priests and pundits, his own Siddhasram and the Yajna that he had celebrated therein, as well as the heroic way in which Rama and Lakshmana stood guard to defend the sacrificial precincts from marauding demons. All those who listened to the skill and courage of the princes were struck with wonder and boundless Ananda. They looked on them with admiration, and felt that they are Nara-Narayana come again. They prostrated before them, overcome by feelings of reverence.

Since it was already late, Rama and Lakshmana fell at the feet of Viswamitra and, taking his permission, they went over to the house that was specially set apart for their rest. Even before dawn, they rose, went through the morning ablutions, performed the matinal rites, and came to their Preceptor, in good time to proceed on the next stage of the journey. They expressed gratitude to King Sumathi, and moved on towards Mithila.

Sumathi accompanied them for some distance and then took leave of the sage and others. Viswamitra walked on with his disciples and the Princes. By noon they reached an expansive park. It appeared as if it could have boasted of a number of hermitages inside it years ago, but now the dwellings had crumbled. One could see also altars once maintained with loving attention, and spots where the sacred fire was once lit and fed. Rama noted that it was a place sanctified by ascetics and sages and he drew the attention of Viswamitra to his surmise. Viswamitra smiled, and said, "Rama! How correctly you have observed! I am very glad. I shall inform you why the great personage who resided in this place left it and went away. Listen!

Even the gods used to acclaim this Hermitage. This is the hermitage of Gauthama Maharishi. For many years, he resided here with his wife, Ahalya. He gladly underwent the most severe austerities. He did many elaborate Yajnas. This park was resplendent with spiritual grandeur. It was bright and full of peace and joy. Every day was a holy day

for the people here. Ahalya, the wife of the sage, was a woman of great virtue, and a perfect paragon of beauty. There was no one equal to her in personal beauty and charm. So, Gauthama was keeping her ever under watch, and guarding her with vigilant care. One day, while Gauthama was absent from the Asram, Indra, the chief of the Gods came into the hermitage in the guise of Gauthama himself! The virtuous spouse took Him to be her Lord. She served him reverentially, but the real Gauthama entered and discovered her apparent faithlessness. He recognised Indra, in spite of his disguise, and became terribly enraged. ‘Evil-minded fellow’ he shouted; but Indra had suddenly disappeared.

He turned towards Ahalya in his anger and roared, ‘You have vowed to destroy this hermitage by indulging in vice, is it? I shall not be here a minute longer. I cannot tolerate the sight of your face. Be prostrate behind some bush, living as a sprite on air, with no food or drink. I am off.’ Gauthama hated the place that had been desecrated by deceit.

Ahalya wept her heart out, and pleaded that she was innocent of sin, that she was deceived by the disguise and activated by reverence towards her lord only, that she was carried away by the duty of loyalty to her husband. She held his feet and prayed for pardon. Gauthama melted a little at her importunities. The truth became clear to him. But since words once spoken could not be withdrawn, he

said, ‘Ahalya! You know that I have vowed never to go against the spoken word. Therefore, you have to lie in bush and briar, sad and starving, until Rama, son of Dasaratha, comes this way and seeing you, He will shower Grace on you, allowing you to touch His Feet, and He will speak with you in great compassion. The Darsan, *Sparsan* (Touching the holy feet) and *Sambhaashan* (conversation) will cleanse you, and you will shine forth in your real form and charm. I shall then rejoin you.’ So saying, Gauthama left this place and hastened to the Himalayan region. From that moment, Ahalya lost her name and form. She lives on air, and is deeply lost in austerity, eager to rejoin her lord. And this once lovely park suffered neglect.”

When Viswamitra narrated this tale, Ramachandra expressed great surprise, “What! You are telling me that she is waiting for me! Poor thing! If you can make me know where she is, deep in austerity...tell me where.” As Rama moved on Viswamitra and Lakshmana followed him at some distance. He passed through some tangled bushes and entered a hut, behind a bush of briar.

Ahalya was until that moment immersed in austerity. She was far away from the eyes of Gods, demons and men. She had forgotten her Name and lost her Form. She had no concern with food and sleep. She was merely existing as a piece of rock! She appeared like the orb of the Moon, well hidden by clouds; or the sacrificial fire, covered by thick curtains of smoke. As Rama neared her, his foot touched Ahalya.

Ahalya raised her head and seeing the Divinely charming Form of Rama, she held the Feet, exclaiming in ecstasy, “Ah! I am saved. Oh God come to save me from sin! Your heart is moved at last.” She poured out her gratitude in many hymns of praise. She rose, like the moon from behind the clouds, effulgent and fresh. At that moment Gauthama too who was a master of the mysteries of yoga, appeared before them for he knew that Rama had come and rescued his wife. He accepted her, purified by rigorous austerity, and blessed by Rama. Both husband and wife fell at the Feet of Rama and Lakshmana, who were both overwhelmed by the ananda they had. Gauthama offered reverence and homage to Viswamitra. The band of disciples was amazed at the wonder they had witnessed. They looked on at the brothers with the fixed gaze of wonder. Viswamitra took leave of Gauthama, and walked on, in the north-easterly direction, with Rama and Lakshmana by his side.

They neared a City, by evening. The sage pointed to the City from a distance saying, “That is Mithila, that vast concourse of magnificent buildings!” At this, the brothers as well as the disciples of the sage jumped with joy. They could not contain their happiness. From that spot, they walked faster. Forgetful of physical exhaustion, they quickly reached the main entrance of the City.

Wherever they turned, they saw ascetics and Brahmins engaged in the recitation of the Vedas. They saw many houses where sacrificial fires were fed with ritual offerings.

Under every tree sheltering in its shade, were groups of people around the bullock carts which had brought them from the country side. There were men and women, old and young, with children belonging to all castes and professions, persons, from all stages of life assembled at every corner. It was like moving in a stream of joy. The City was packed with eager people moving criss-cross on all the roads. The sage and his followers reached the embankment of a tank which was comparatively less crowded; for, they had to decide where they were to stay, and they were not yet quite sure where. The time for evening ablutions had drawn near, and so, they kept their belongings on the bank, took their bath and finished the rites prescribed.

Since the Yajna was imminent, courtiers and warriors from the palace were moving among the monks that were arriving every hour, trying to find out their names, the Gurus and hermitages to which they were affiliated, their spiritual status, and whether they had been specially invited for the occasion. Emperor Janaka was insisting that all such information was to be communicated to him without delay.

Meanwhile, Viswamitra had finished his ablutions and rites. He sat on the embankment with his disciples and the Brothers, who looked like twin stars fallen upon the Earth from Heaven. He was describing to them the glories of Mithila. Meanwhile, a courier from the court approached them very politely and enquired, “Master! Please tell me who you are. Where have you come from? We are

messengers from the king. We are only obeying orders and carrying out our duty. If you tell us your name, we can inform the King of your arrival.”

When the messenger hurried straight to the palace and told the Emperor Janaka that the Sage Viswamitra had arrived, he made arrangements appropriate for the reception of the great Sage and sent the chief Brahmins, Priests and Pundits of the Court under their leader, Sathananda, to where Viswamitra was.

The group from the palace approached the embankment reciting Vedic hymns of welcome and good wishes, and Viswamitra realised that they were coming to take them to the Emperor’s presence. He directed Rama and Lakshmana to prepare themselves for proceeding with him. Everyone made himself ready. Meanwhile, Sathananda honoured Viswamitra in true Vedic tradition, as befitted a great Master. He fell at his feet; he offered refreshments consecrated with Vedic formulae and announced with exemplary humility that he had come with others, under orders from the Emperor to accord him and all those who were with him, the most sincere welcome. They left a palanquin at the place to bring the bags and baggage of the party and took the Sage and others into the City preceded by bands of musicians, playing on their instruments.

As soon as they entered the Royal Road, Emperor Janaka himself moved towards them accompanied by

Ministers and courtiers and his nearest kinsmen. Janaka fell prostrate before Viswamitra saying, “Lord! I have realised today my greatest ambition. Mithila has acquired, with your arrival, a unique splendour.” He then enquired about the welfare of the Sage, his pupils and disciples. His eyes fell on the two boys, Rama and Lakshmana. They struck him as embodiments of solar effulgence. He could not find words for a few seconds. He knew not where he was at the time. With great effort, he recovered enough awareness of the surroundings to ask Viswamitra, “Master! Who are these? They strike me as the twin Gods, the Aswinidevas. It looks as if they have just come down from Heaven in order to confer Grace on me. They have the tender Divine charm of those Gods. Or, perhaps, they are the Sun and the Moon come upon the Earth. How did these juvenile embodiments of beauty happen to come, walking the distance as members of the group led by you? Or, did they develop acquaintance with you near here and come with you?” Janaka was pouring out one query after another, as if he was talking to himself, forgetful where he was or what he really wanted to know.

Viswamitra saw his plight and could not restrain his smile. He said, “These are the sons of Emperor Dasaratha of Ayodhya. Their names are Rama and Lakshmana. The valour and skill of these boys are amazing and miraculous.” The sage desired to say much more, but he thought it better to tell him all about them, after reaching the place where they were to stay. So, they walked on towards the quarters set apart for Viswamitra and his entourage.

It was a pretty little new temple-like structure situated in the centre of a lovely garden. It was tastefully decorated with greens and festoons. The place was heavy with silence. It was as if peace fell in heavy showers there from the wings of Grace from heaven itself. It was quite adjacent to the Royal Palace. Therefore, after showing them in, Janaka fell at the feet of the sage again, saying: “Your arrival has added unto me immeasurable strength and joy. I am sure this fortune came to me as a result of the merit earned in many lives. I shall now take leave. For the Yajna to begin, there is an interval of twelve days, according to the Rithwiks. Please therefore stay on in this Mithila city itself and bless me.” Viswamitra assured him that he had no objection to his proposal, and removed all apprehensions on that score from the mind of Janaka. Rama and Lakshmana looked at each other as if that was too long a time to be away!

Arrangements were made to give them rest and undisturbed sleep that night. Milk, fruits and other articles were provided for them from the palace. “I shall take your Darsan at dawn tomorrow,” said Janaka while leaving. “It is not proper to delay your rest any longer, for you had a long and tiresome journey.” Janaka returned to the palace, with the pundits, priests and scholars.

Rama and Lakshmana talked among themselves about the devotion and humility of the Emperor, and the Light of peace and joy that shone on his face. They sat by the side of the master and partook of the fruits and milk. Then they

departed, after receiving permission, to their apartment for rest.

That night, they slept well. When daylight spread slowly over the City, the music of pipe and drum rose from their doorstep. Brahmins recited the Vedic hymns. Rama and Lakshmana rose and finished their bath and other rituals, and approached Viswamitra. The sage gave them cups of milk to drink and said, “Sons! Janaka will be here any time now. Take breakfast and be ready.” Soon, they as well as the younger pupils of the sage repaired to the apartments and partook of fruits and milk. They washed their hands and quietly gathered around their Preceptor, and reverentially sat near him.

Meanwhile, it became known that Emperor Janaka was arriving with the Royal Preceptor, in order to pay homage; for, the blowing of conches and the play of the traditional nine instruments heralded the approach of the ruler of the realm. Janaka entered with the auspicious sandal paste and rice grains in his hands, while Sathananda and the entourage entered the sacred residence. With the delight of gratitude he washed the feet of the sage.

Then, Janaka fell at the feet of Viswamitra and stood by the side of the high seat that had been placed in front of the pedestal for the sage. As soon as Viswamitra directed him, Janaka occupied his own seat. Rama and Lakshmana sat on the carpet laid to the right of their Master. Janaka

said, “Great sage! Now, what is your command? I am ready to accept and honour it. Please communicate it to me.” Janaka folded his palms in prayer. At this, Viswamitra smiled, and said, “Last night, since there was no time I could not tell you in detail. I shall tell now about these Princes, Rama and Lakshmana, since you desired to hear their story. If you have no leisure now, I can tell you some other time.” Janaka exclaimed, “Master! what more important work have I than experiencing the ecstasy of conversing with you? This chance can be the fruit only of age-long austerity. I am filled with Ananda at the expectation that you will tell me about them. I consider it great good fortune.”

Then, Viswamitra narrated the incidents that had taken place from his appearance at the court of Dasaratha, up to the Yajna and the heroic way in which the young boys had stood guard and foiled the attempts of the demons to desecrate the rituals. He described the bravery and skill of the boys in their battle against the demons and praised their achievements. During the narration, tears of joy and gratitude welled from the sage’s eyes and he had to frequently wipe them with the end of his garment.

Hearing these words and filling his eyes with his majesty and the charming loveliness of the boys, Janaka experienced supreme delight, the delight he often derived in *Samaadhi* (communion with Divinity)! He felt that the boys were actual embodiments of Divine Splendour.

Though he often tried to look somewhere else, his eyes thirsted only for the sight of those charming lotus-like faces which showered Brahmic illumination. Janaka suppressed with great difficulty the outward expression of his inner ecstasy and sat looking intently at them, in humility and reverence. He did not feel for a moment that he was an Emperor and that those boys were the Princes of another Imperial Monarch. He had an incredible impression that they had come down from Heaven to Earth. The feeling was strengthened and increased by the description of their superhuman might and skill. He realised that they were rare beings, akin to God himself, for they achieved successfully, even before reaching teenage, the guardianship of a Yajna, which the renowned Viswamitra could not carry through unimpaired. What a marvel! he wondered.

Then, the narrative was resumed by the Sage with the start of the journey towards Mithila. The stories related by the sage to the brothers were also explained to Janaka. When the story of the purification and liberation of Ahalya, the Consort of Sage Gautama at the hermitage which was near the Capital City, was related, Sathananda was surprised beyond measure. He ejaculated, “What! Has my mother been freed from the curse? Did these Divine personalities render my mother holy, and restore her to my father? Ah! Without doubt, they are Divine.” While streams of tears of gratitude and joy fell down his cheeks he became so overcome with emotion that he was unable to move, like a pillar. Viswamitra observed him and said, “Son! Do not be

so overwhelmed with the little events that have happened so far! In the coming days, many events vastly more amazing will happen. They will cause amazement and ecstasy, by their superhuman glory. Your parents too will arrive at Mithila City tomorrow or the day after. You can hear the marvellous story of Rama and Lakshmana direct from them. Calm yourself.”

At this Emperor Janaka said, “Master! How fortunate are the parents who have such Divinely endowed sons. Oh! How fortunate am I that they stepped into my house, when the thought spurred them.” He turned to Rama and Lakshmana and addressed them, “Darlings! Pardon me if the residence I have arranged for you is not quite to your liking or quite in keeping with your status. If you so desire, I am ever ready to arrange a more appropriate accommodation. If you like, I shall facilitate ‘sightseeing’ in the City for you are strangers to Mithila. Ask for anything you require, without reservation. I shall feel happy only when you so ask.” To those words spoken with exemplary goodness and humility, Rama replied in a manner that revealed the respect he liked to offer Janaka.

He said, “Maharaja! We are but boys. We do not feel anything wanting in the arrangements made. We are quite happy. There is no need to take trouble arranging somewhere else or something more, for us. If however, you have such great affection towards us, you can fulfil one wish that we have...” and without mentioning what it was,

he turned towards the Preceptor, Viswamitra. The sage then spoke, “Janaka, the mission on which these Princes came with me from Ayodhya was over when the Yajna I had resolved upon was accomplished without the least desecration. Rama and Lakshmana pleaded for permission to return home. Meanwhile, I received your invitation regarding the Yajna you have decided upon. So, I asked these boys also to accompany me to Mithila. Then, Rama pleaded that, since his father had deputed him only for safeguarding the Yajna at my Asram, he was reluctant to proceed further and be away from his father longer than permitted. But I spoke to them of many divine weapons you have, objects, which they are naturally eager to see and handle. I described the Bow that you have here, the Siva Bow, which deserves to be seen by them. I told them the story of that Bow. Then they agreed to accompany me hither, longing to see it. They have no yearning to go round the city or visit interesting places. Bows, arrows, weapons which can guard the right and punish the wicked—these claim first consideration for their attention.” Janaka felt he had no need to hear more. He said, “In that case, I shall make arrangements to have the Bow brought to the Yajna Hall soon,” and instructed that the preceptor, Sathananda be consulted about an auspicious hour when it could be brought there.

Meanwhile, Rama asked Janaka, “Maharaja! If you can tell us how that Divine Bow came into your possession, we can derive great joy.” Janaka gave the details with

evident joy. “Darlings: Six generations after Nimi, the great ancestor of my dynasty, the King named Devaratha ruled over this kingdom. The Gods placed this Bow of Lord Siva in trust in his palace. It had been with us since then. It is a weapon of the Gods and so, I assert it is no ordinary Bow! It weighed some thousands of tonnes! No one has held it in the erect position so far! For, who can lift that weight? Many times in the past, I tried to discover who could bend the Bow and use it or hold it for public gaze and invited people to try. But I have yet to see one who could do it. Every king and prince who attempted the feat failed and returned humiliated. They could neither bend the Bow nor even move it ever so slightly. One day, when I was turning the sod on the grounds where I had resolved to perform a yajna, a vessel was revealed to view, in the furrow. When I removed it and examined it, I found in it a charming female child. Since the child came to us from the furrow, (sita) we named her Sita, and brought her up as our own child. One day when she was playing with her companions, her toy rolled underneath the long box within which the Bow was kept. The more they tried to remove the ball with the help of various contrivances, the farther it rolled under the box! But our child, Sita, laughed at the discomfiture of her companions, and the palace guards. She pushed aside the box with her tender hand and recovered her toy to the astonishment of everyone! I heard about this, through the Queens who came to know of it from the wonder-struck group around Sita at the time.

“That day, I resolved to give Sita in marriage to the one who proves himself worthy to wed her, by stringing that Bow. Many a prince has since tried to lift and bend that bow, in order to win her, but all of them had to face ignominious defeat! They felt hurt and insulted. They said I had purposely humiliated them and in their resentment and despair, they grouped together and fell upon Mithila City with their combined forces. The siege lasted one full year. As a consequence, all my armoury was exhausted and I was concerned about the fate of the City. I had no other recourse but austerity to win the grace of the Gods. The Gods were pleased. They blessed me with additional reinforcements of infantry, cavalry, elephantry and chariotry. That is to say, help came to me from regions behind the besieging forces and when they were attacked from behind they were scattered. During these campaigns of vindictiveness, I was able to preserve the Bow. I guarded it like the apple of my eye. Its mysterious might is beyond description.

Rama! Ramachandra! I shall not deny you the fulfilment of your wish. If you but agree, the Bow shall be brought to the Yajna enclosure. I shall also announce that any onewho dare lift and bend it can try to do so.” When Janaka spoke so authoritatively, Rama and Lakshmana looked at each other but did not reply, for they were waiting for instructions from the Master whom they had followed so far.

Just then, Viswamitra, who knew the skill and strength of the brothers, said that what Janaka proposed could be done, and that he need not apprehend any obstacle coming his way. Janaka also announced that he would give Sita in marriage to whosoever lifted the bow and strung it, for he had vowed that Sita will be wedded only to such a one. Viswamitra approved that procedure too.

Janaka took leave of the sage and returned to the palace. He set upon the task of taking the Bow into the Yajna Hall. A proclamation was issued that the Bow will be exposed to view and communicated to as many kings and princes as possible. The eight-wheeled vehicle containing the box with the Bow was pulled and pushed into the enclosure by a large band of hefty heavyweights; but they could not even move it a step. So, more men of gigantic mould had to be called in to lend their hands, dragging the heavy chains attached to the vehicle and pushing it from behind. When at last the Bow moved into the sacred enclosure, the priests recited hymns of auspicious welcome.

Day dawned. The nine traditional musical instruments raised a paean of harmony that rose to the vaults of heaven. Conches were blown in peals. The auspiciousness of the day was declared through song and ritual. Emperor Janaka entered the enclosure, accompanied by a group of priests and with attendants carrying materials for ceremonial worship of the Divine Bow. Long before that moment, the

enclosure was filled with kings, princes, ministers, courtiers, sages and Vedic scholars. As soon as Janaka came in, the entire gathering stood up in order to render honour to the Ruler of the Realm. The Vedic pundits declaimed aloud hymns invoking the Gods to shower Grace. Their voices rose up to heaven in exclamatory unison. Others recited passages from the Vedas. All were so filled with expectancy that they looked on in wonder, without even a wink.

Janaka walked in reverence around the vehicle with the Bow, and offered floral homage to it, while chants were recited to propitiate it. He bowed before the Divine Bow, and then turned to the distinguished assembly. He announced: “Prostrations to the sages! I welcome all who have come to this assembly! Since many years, my forefathers as well as many other monarchs have been, as you all know, worshipping this Divine Bow. Besides, it is already well known that no one, be he a God or Demon, Yaksha, Rakshasa, Garuda or Gandharva, Kinnara or Mahoraga, no one has so far been able to lift the Bow, hold it and string it! All who attempted have turned back, humiliated. In spite of this, this day, I have again resolved to bring the Bow into the sacred enclosure. Whoever among you assembled here does lift this bow or lifting, strings it, or stringing it, fixes an arrow onto it, or who can hold the weight of the Bow in his hands can come forward and take this chance; the Bow is before you.” With these words, Janaka bowed before the gathering with his palms folded, and sat on the Lion Throne.

Viswamitra cast a glance, with a smile, at Rama. Rama quickly approached the vehicle and lifted up the iron cover with his left arm. And with his right, he raised with no concern or exertion, the Bow from its box! Holding the Bow erect he looked around, while amazement was on every face! The thousands who witnessed the wonder—citizens, kings and princes, sages and elders—raised such an applause that the sky echoed the exultation! Soon Rama strung the magnificent Bow! With delightful ease he fixed an arrow! And he drew the string back up to the ear, in order to release it. But the Bow snapped!

Everyone around was shocked into confusion and fear by the strange, unexpected explosion. Many fainted; some cried out in terror; some fled in panic. The sages uttered prayers to God. Why dilate further? The entire gathering, barring Janaka, Viswamitra and the brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, was plunged in inexplicable inconsolable dread!

Meanwhile, Janaka rose from his seat, fell prostrate before Viswamitra, and said, “Master! There is no one on earth who can claim greater strength than Rama. Such strength is not of the earth. I shall fulfil my word. I shall give Sita in marriage to him who lifted, bent and broke this Bow.”

Viswamitra replied, “Janaka! It will be good if this news is communicated to Emperor Dasaratha and the

auspicious event celebrated after he comes. This is my desire. Rama is such a deeply dutiful son that he will not agree to the marriage until Dasaratha gives his approval!” So, Janaka had the Brahmins of the court called to his presence, along with some Ministers. He set them on the journey to Ayodhya as soon as day dawned. They sped on in their chariots, drawn by swift horses, for three days and nights, and reached Ayodhya on the morning of the fourth day. They halted the chariots right before the main entrance of the Imperial Palace, so that there could be no delay in taking the news they had brought to the Emperor. When the guards enquired their names and the purpose of their arrival, the Ministers required them to announce to the Emperor the fact of their coming from Mithila to see him. They informed Dasaratha immediately and they were immediately called into the palace and the Presence.

In spite of old age, Dasaratha looked a Divinely splendourous figure, when the Brahmins and Ministers of Mithila saw him on his throne. When they stood before that bright venerable face, they fell at his feet without any hesitation or reservation. They stood up and said, “Maharaja! We are messengers from the Emperor Janaka of Mithila. He has commissioned us to enquire and learn from you about your welfare and the welfare of your realm. We have been sent with the approval of sage Viswamitra, and with the consent of the Royal Preceptor, the great Sathananda, by Maharaja Janaka to communicate to you an important message.”

Dasaratha's face was brightened by smiles. His assurance was unshaken. He was struck by the humility and good manners of the envoys from Mithila. He said, "Oh greatest among Brahmins! Oh ministers of the Mithila court! There is no deficiency in the administration of the kingdom of Ayodhya, no obstruction anywhere for rituals like Agnihotra, no diminution in the happiness of any of my subjects, no obstacle from any quarter in the path of their moral and spiritual advance. My subjects are prosperous. They are progressing steadily towards the highest goal. I am glad to tell you this. I wish to know about the health and welfare of Janaka, the Emperor of Mithila, about the uninterrupted performance, in his kingdom, of the religious rites prescribed in the Vedas. You can communicate to me without any reservation the message you have brought with you. I am eager to hear it."

When Dasaratha granted permission so softly and sweetly the Ministers signed to Brahmins to speak out. The Chief Priest rose from his seat and delivered the message thus: "Great Sovereign Ruler! Our Maharaja Janaka has vowed that his daughter Sita Devi will be given in marriage only to heroic might. No doubt you must be aware of this, you might also be knowing that many princes have tried to prove their prowess and returned humiliated from Mithila. By Divine Will, your two sons Rama and Lakshmana accompanied the Sage Viswamitra, eager to see the great Yajna which our Maharaja is celebrating. It happened that your eldest son Rama won Sita Devi by means of his

incomparable valour! Maharaja! What shall we say? How shall we describe it? In full view of the distinguished gathering of sages, kings and princes, Rama, who has attained the highest pinnacle of valour, lifted and held the Bow of Siva by its middle, kept it erect and strung it! More than this, he broke, as if in play, the indomitable sacred Bow into two pieces! Since Sita Devi is to be given in marriage to him who lifts the Bow of Siva, the sages who had assembled, as well as our Maharaja have decided to give her hand to Rama.

"We have been sent to request and receive your assent, to offer you cordial welcome, to invite you, with the preceptor, priests, ministers, courtiers and kith and kin, and attendants and followers, to the City of Mithila. Our Maharaja desires to celebrate the marriage of his daughter after receiving your Darsan. We are sent by him to your presence, in order to inform you of this."

The priests and ministers stood with folded hands, reverentially awaiting the reply from Dasaratha. But Dasaratha rolled it over in his mind with earnest care and sent for the sages Vashishta, Vamadeva and others, for consultations, before speaking a word in reply. He also invited the foremost among the Brahmins of the court. When they all arrived, he asked the party from Mithila to repeat the message they had brought. When they had listened to the news, he wanted their comments. But first, Dasaratha fell prostrate before sage Vashishta and prayed that he

should give his approval. Vashishta, Vamadeva and others responded with joyous acclamations, “Most auspicious!” “Most auspicious!” They asked, “Why spend further thought on this? Make preparations for the journey to Mithila!”

The ministers jumped in joy. News of the wedding of Rama spread in a trice all over the City and into the inner apartments of the Palace, where the Queens were. The citizens raised exclamations of “Jai! Jai!” in their exultation. Attendants and servants quickly made preparations for the journey. Jewels, silk brocades and other gifts were packed in large quantities and varieties; countless chariots were loaded with them.

The Emperor and the Imperial Escort, Vashishta the Royal Preceptor, the Chief Priests and other Brahmins and Pundits, ascended their chariots and took their seats. It was as if Ayodhya itself was moving out to Mithila to witness the marriage. For all who longed to join, Dasaratha made suitable arrangements. No one eager to go was left behind! The horses seemed to share the joy that filled the hearts of the inmates of the chariots; for, they trotted fast, without slackening speed or showing signs of exhaustion. Two nights and two days they spent on the road, and the third night, they reached Mithila!

Maharaja Janaka welcomed Emperor Dasaratha at the very Entrance Gate of his City. He welcomed the Ministers,

Sages and Priests as befitted their position and status. He arranged that they take rest for the night in allotted residences. As soon as the day dawned, Dasaratha sent for the rithwiks (priests who have specialised in ritual lore), the queens and the kinsmen, and alerted them to be ready and available the moment they were wanted. Meanwhile, Janaka arrived at the mansion where Dasaratha was, and took him to the special enclosure where the Yajna was being celebrated. Seats had been allotted there for the Preceptors, the Emperor and his entourage, according to their rank and authority.

When all had occupied their seats, Janaka welcomed Dasaratha with the words: “Your coming to Mithila with these great sages and these foremost Brahmins and your kinsmen and escort augurs great good fortune for us. It marks the fruition of the good we have done in past lives. I am sure great joy has filled your mind, at the valour and victory of your son. I am about to enter into relationship with the great Raghu dynasty, resplendent with the boundless heroism of its scions. My dynasty is about to be sanctified more than ever before by this kinship. I believe this is the result of the blessings showered on me by my forefathers. Maharaja! This morning, the Yajna we have been celebrating is coming to a close. I have thought of celebrating the marriage of Sita and Rama after the conclusion of the Yajna. I plead with you to confer your assent.”

Dasaratha thrilled with Ananda. His face was lit by bright smiles. He said, “Maharaja! You are the donor; elders declare that a gift is to be received at the sweet will and pleasure of the donor! So I am ever prepared to take the gift whenever it pleases you!” When Dasaratha spoke with such wit and wisdom, with such heart-melting warmth of affection, Janaka was overwhelmed with Ananda surging within him.

By then, Rama and Lakshmana entered the enclosure with the Sage Viswamitra. They prostrated before their father and their preceptors—Vashishta, Vamadeva and others. Dasaratha’s eyes glistened with delight as they fell upon the sons he had missed so long. He drew them to himself. He placed his hands on their shoulders. He pressed them to his bosom. Seeing the ananda of the father while fondling his sons the Brahmins and ministers forgot themselves in appreciation of the depth of his affection. They were lost in admiration.

Dasaratha conversed intimately with his sons, and listened to their sweet simple descriptions of the Yajna which they guarded from desecration by demonic forces. They told him the incidents of the journey from the hermitage of Viswamitra to Mithila city. The narrative was heard also by Vashishta, Vamadeva and other sages, as well as by Bharatha and Satrughna, Sumantra and many ministers, courtiers, and nobles. They spent the night recapitulating the wonder and mystery that formed the warp and woof of that narrative.

Meanwhile, Janaka was immersed in preparations for the wedding. He was mostly in the palace itself. He invited the Chief Priest, Sathananda, to the court, and prayed to him reverentially to start collecting men and materials for the various rites preliminary to the actual wedding rite. The sage replied, “Maharaja! The Yajna concluded just today. During the next two or three days, there are, I notice a few hours that are auspicious for the ceremonials. I can give details, if you desire to know.”

At this, Janaka said saluting Sathananda and standing with folded hands, “Master! I received the assent of the Emperor Dasaratha, last night. This is indeed a sign of extreme good fortune. My younger brother Kusadhwaja is not present here now. He was all these days very busy supplying provisions for the Yajna as and when the high priests asked for them. I am reluctant to celebrate this most auspicious ceremony without his being present by my side. I do not want to deprive him of his share of joy. I have set afoot plans to get him here quickly. I feel it would be best if we fix the day and hour after his arrival.” Sathananda responded, “Good! Good! That will make us all happy beyond calculation!” With this, he left the palace.

Janaka sent messengers with instructions that they should bring the brother to Mithila, with expedition. They found him in his capital City, Sankasya, for, they were taken thither by fleet-footed horses which sped faster than others. They reported to him the developments at Mithila, in detail.

Kusadhwaaja was overcome with the flood of Ananda that surged through him. He collected his kith and kin, as well as his entourage, in great haste. He had chariots loaded with gifts and presents, offerings and precious materials. He started off that very night and quickly reached Mithila.

Janaka hastened to meet him, for, he was counting the minutes that were hurrying by. He clasped his brother in fond embrace. He was filled with inexpressible delight. Kusadhwaaja fell at the feet of his elder brother. He prostrated before Sathananda, and then all three sat on raised seats, in order to deliberate on the further course of action. They consulted among themselves and when they decided finally on what they had to do, they sent for the highly respected elder statesman, Sudhama, and told him: “Minister of State! Proceed now to the presence of Dasaratha and pray to him to come here, to this Palace, with his Ministers, Priests, Courtiers, kinsmen and others he would like to bring with him. Bring him with due honours.”

Sudhama took with him a group of courtiers and scholars and royal priests. He got ready tastefully decorated chariots to bring the Imperial Party and reached the palace where Dasaratha was staying. He submitted to him sweetly and softly, the message he had brought, and with profound obeisance, invited him to the palace of Janaka. Dasaratha was ready. He moved out with his entourage and reached the Durbar Hall of Janaka, very soon. They greeted each other as befitted the occasion and their respective status and occupied the seats laid for them.

Then Dasaratha rose and said, “Janaka! For the Ikshvaku Dynasty, the sage Vashishta is God on Earth! He is our supreme preceptor. He can speak with full authority on the traditions of our dynasty.” As soon as Dasaratha sat down, Vashishta stood before the assembly and spoke as follows: “Royal Sage! Listen, all those who have assembled! Brahman! the Unmanifested Supreme, the Eternal, the Pure, through the exercise of Will created Marichi. Marichi’s son was Kasyapa and his son was Surya. Surya’s son was Manu, Manu had a son named Vaivaswatha Manu. He ruled over the people and earned the appellation, Prajapathi. A son Ikshvaku was born to him. He was the first overlord of Ayodhya, and so the dynasty itself came to be called the Ikshvaku Line. Ikshvaku’s son was Kukshi. Kukshi’s son was named Vikukshi. His son was Bana. Bana’s son was Anaranya. Anaranya had a son named Trisanku. Trisanku’s son was Dhundhumara. Dhundhumara’s son was Yuvanaswa. Mandhata was the son of Yuvanaswa. His son Susandhi had two sons, Daivasandhi and Presenjit. The famous Bharatha was the son of Daivasandhi. Bharatha’s son was Asitha. When Asitha was ruling the kingdom, a coalition of the Haihayas, Thalajanghas and Sasibindus invaded the realm and Asitha had to flee to the Himalayan region with his two queens. He took refuge in the region called Bhrgu Prasravana and after a few years passed away there itself.

“Both his queens were enceinte when he died. They sought asylum in the hermitage of Chyavana who was filled

with compassion at their plight. He consoled them, saying, ‘Mothers! Do not entertain any fear. This is your very home. You will have safe delivery. You will have strong splendour-filled fortunate babies.’ His blessing came true. Within a few days, the elder queen delivered a son named Sagara; and, he was installed as the emperor of Ayodhya.

“His son was Asamanja, who had a son called Amsumantha. Amsumantha’s son was Dileepa, whose son was named Bhagiratha. Bhagiratha begot Kakustha. Kakustha’s son was Raghu. Raghu had a son, Pravardha. Pravardha had Sudarsana as son and Sudarsana, Agnivarna. Seeghraga was the name of the son of Agnivarna. Maru was the name of the son of Seeghraga. After him, the throne came from father to son, to Prasusruka, Ambarisha and Nahusha, in succession.

“Nahusha’s son was Yayathi and Yayathi’s son was Nabhaga. Nabhaga had Aja as his son. Dasaratha is the eldest son of Aja, and his four sons, a precious jewel each one, are Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrughna. Rama, the eldest of the four, raised, bent, strung and broke the Bow of Siva.

“Oh Royal Sage! This royal dynasty is sacred and pure. Everyone born in this line has earned spiritual illumination and has shone in spiritual splendour. They are rooted in righteousness, and withal, are in the front rank of heroes. Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrughna are precious lamps that shed lustre on the annals of the clan.

“I must now suggest that it would be desirable to have this auspicious *samskar* (ceremony) of marriage celebrated for Lakshmana also, for he is the reflection of Rama. Your daughter Urmila can well shine as the spouse of Lakshmana. Do not hesitate; resolve accordingly and make the necessary preparations.” Vashishta blessed the gathering and resumed his seat.

After listening to the narrative of the Ikshvaku Dynasty, from the lips of the great sage Vashishta, Janaka rose from his throne and said, “Oh Brahmarshi! When the scion of a noble clan intends to gift his daughter in marriage, he has to announce the historic glory of his clan, hasn’t he? I have resolved to follow your example and recite the story myself, for it gives me great joy to recapitulate the names of my forefathers and recall their majesty. My birth with this body happened through the blessings of forefathers of this dynasty. It will be justified and its purpose fulfilled only if I describe them myself to this vast gathering.”

Janaka stood prayerfully before all. Vashishta agreed with the request and gave the permission sought. Janaka then began the narration: “Brahmarshi! Revered Preceptors! Maharaja Dasaratha! In the very distant past, there was an emperor named Nimi who adhered firmly to the path of righteousness, and who was therefore famous for might and foresight. His son Mithi built this city, Mithila, to serve as the capital for this kingdom. He was the first sovereign of this region. His reign was very popular and his subjects

were happy and prosperous. His son, Sudhavasu had a son Nandhivardhana who ruled after him. Nandhivardhana's son was Sukethu and Sukethu's son was Devaratha. Brhadratha was the son of Devaratha, and Mahavira was the name of the son of Brahadratha. Mahavira had as his name indicates, vast prowess. His son Sudhrthi had a son called Dhrshtakethu. Dhrshtakethu's celebrated son was Haryaswa. Haryaswa had a son named Maru. Maru's son was Pratheendhaka. Pratheendhaka's son was Keerthiratha. Keerthiratha had a son named Devameedha. Devameedha's son was Vibudha. Vibudha's son was Keerthiratha. Keerthiratha's son was Maharoma and Maharoma's son was Hrsvarupa. He was a talented ruler, a strict adherent of Dharma. He was acclaimed as a Mahatma. He is my father. I am indeed very happy to acknowledge that my father was an ideal personage. The truth is I am now ruling happily over this Mithila City as a result of the merit acquired and handed down as heritage by my forefathers.

“My brother Kusadhwaja is much more to me than a brother. I revere him as a divine personality. He is more of a friend to me than a brother. I brought him up with such love and affection that I have developed great attachment to him. Years ago, when the King of Sankasya demanded that I should yield the Bow of Shiva to him or else meet him in battle, I refused and he laid siege to Mithila City. This was the signal for a bitter war between us during which Sudhanva was killed and I made my brother the ruler of Sankasya. That City is shining bright on the banks of the

Ikshumathi River. Seen from afar, it reminds one of the Celestial Chariot of the Gods, famous as the Pushpaka Vimana! Let me tell you now of another auspicious idea that the Gods have inspired in me.

“I have brought him here today so that he might share in the joy of the wedding celebrations, Brahmarishi! You commanded that Rama wed Sita and Lakshmana wed Urmila, the other daughter of mine. I accept the command with immeasurable joy. Sita is a celestial damsel and she will wed Rama as the Hero's gift. I shall bow my head in all humility and gladness and give away Urmila to Lakshmana.

“I have another representation to make now for your consideration. Maharaja Dasaratha! You have four sons all born of the same heavenly gift of Grace. Why allow two to remain single? It will contribute to our happiness fully if they too are wedded. It is the asterism of Magha today. This is a good day to commence the rites and have the preliminary ceremonials. The day after, under the asterism Uttaraphalgun, I seek your assent to gift the two daughters of my brother, Mandavi to Bharatha and Sruthakeerthi to Satrughna in marriage.”

At this everyone in the huge gathering acclaimed the proposal, exclaiming, “Subham!” “Subham!” (Most welcome! Most welcome!) Their applause rent the sky.

When Emperor Janaka made this suggestion about the marriages of both Bharatha and Satrughna, the sages Vashishta, Vamadeva, Viswamitra and others deliberated among themselves. Dasaratha was easily persuaded to assent and then they informed Janaka thus: “Oh King! The two Royal clans, the Ikshvaku and the Videha, are filled with holy traditions, the sanctity of which is beyond measurement. The greatness of these two dynasties cannot be measured and described by anyone, however learned or proficient. Dynasties of this status or any that can be pronounced equal to them in nobility, have not appeared on earth before. It is indeed a very auspicious event that these two are now brought together by these bonds of marriage.

“This is highly appropriate, laudable and holy. In addition, we are glad that the brides and grooms are fit in every way for each other. Janaka! Your brother, Kusadhwaja is one who knows and practises Dharma. It is really good that he too should become related to Dasaratha through the marital bond of his daughters. It is a source of immense joy. Hence, we are ready to bless the marriages of his daughters, Mandavi and Sruthakeerthi with Bharatha and Satrughna. Our wish is that these Royal dynasties should be bound close by these marriages.”

Janaka and Kusadhwaja fell prostrate before the sages overcome with delight at their wish being fulfilled. “This is no ordinary event. How fortunate we are that we have

been blessed with this consummation! How lucky that the sages agreed to this proposal and eased the path. Sages will never encourage inauspicious happenings. We shall reverentially obey all your commands,” they said.

Vashishta then said, “No, why should we postpone these two weddings to the day after or some later day! Tomorrow is auspicious for all. It will be very good if all four weddings are celebrated on the same day.” Janaka replied, “I am blessed, indeed! Worthy Preceptor. Emperor Dasaratha has been, since long, your disciple, executing whatever you commanded. We brothers too, from this day, are your disciples. All our burdens are on your shoulders; direct us how to proceed, how to act, we shall unquestioningly follow.” They stood awaiting his reply, with hands folded in utter humility and reverence. At this, Dasaratha rose and said, “Ruler of Mithila! The virtues I find in you two I cannot describe in words! You have made excellent arrangements for the stay and reception of such a magnificent array of Maharajas and Maharishis, as well as of the vast mass of people who have thronged this City. I shall go back to my residence now and carry on the rites of Nandi and Samavarthana in full concordance with Vedic prescription.” The brothers honoured him duly as he emerged from the hall and took leave of him at the main entrance as befitted his status. They then went to their own palaces to fulfil their assignments.

Dasaratha performed the *Nandi* (bull) rite. Very early in the day he made all the four sons perform the

*Samavarthana* rite. He fixed golden ornaments on the horns of cows selected for being given away to pious Brahmins, along with costly vessels for milking them. It was a feast for the eye, the scene of the boys giving the cows away! The citizens of Mithila felt as if the deities of the four quarters were before them with Brahma in their midst. The four sons around Dasaratha appeared thus to them.

While this gift was going on, Yudhajit, the Prince of Kaikeya, brother of Queen Kaikeyi, the mother of Bharata arrived. His father was yearning to have his grandson, Bharata, for some time with him, and so he had hurried to Ayodhya, but he learnt there that the Royal family had left for Mithila for the marriage of Rama. His father, he said, had no knowledge of the wedding of Rama. He too had no idea that it was happening. So, he had come over to Mithila, since he could witness the marriage and also communicate the desire of the grandfather to have the grandson with him for some time. Dasaratha was glad that he could come.

That night, Dasaratha spoke endearingly to his sons and others on a variety of pleasant topics. No one in the camp slept. Everyone was impatiently awaiting the dawn of the happy day, when each could witness the wedding ceremony of his dear princes. Each one was overwhelmed with joy as if his own son was the bridegroom or his own child the bride. Their ananda can be compared only to *Brahmananda* (Transcendental bliss); that was the measure of their love towards Rama and his brothers.

Early in the morning Janaka proceeded to the special dais on which the rituals of the wedding were to be gone through. He was accompanied by a highly spiritual splendour-showering group of sages. He then completed the preliminary rites and was awaiting the arrival of the bridegrooms and their parents and kinsmen. Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrughna had their ceremonial baths. They wore yellow silken dresses. They had silk cloth wound round their heads. They were bedecked with many ornaments studded with diamonds and sapphires. They gave the impression that they were alluring, heart-captivating Gods who had come down from Heaven.

The auspicious hour named Vijaya was drawing near and they approached the dais preceded by musicians whose instruments struck up a melody that reached the dome of Heaven. The Councillors of the Court, the feudatory rulers, and their attendants followed them carrying huge plates of jewels, silk clothes, gold coins, and other auspicious articles essential for the ceremony.

The populace gazed upon their beauty and prowess, without even winking the eye. They confided to each other that the dignity of their bearing marked them out as Divine, and not human at all. They exclaimed, "Oh, what charm! What a surge of beauty!" Everyone was filled with amazement. "They are denizens of heaven come down on earth," they whispered among themselves, as the bridegrooms passed between the thick rows of onlookers.

Women swore that they had never cast eyes on such charming princes. Every window and terrace was packed to overflowing. At last, The Princes reached the dais, and seated themselves.

Then Janaka and his brother, Kusadhwaja, brought their daughters to the dais. They had been given ceremonial baths and elaborately and beautifully decorated as befitted brides on the wedding day. They wore veils, and followed their fathers, with thousands of maids following them, carrying fruits and flowers, heaps of red and yellow cosmetic fragrances, rice grains, jewels, and gems. It seemed as if the treasures of Mithila were flowing in a full scintillating stream in the wake of the wedding.

The four brides were shining like magnificent lamps. They sat face to face, Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrughna on one side and opposite them, Sita, Urmila, Mandavi and Sruthakeerthi. A velvet cloth was held as a screen between. The residents of Ayodhya and the nobles who had come from there sat behind Dasaratha and the residents of Mithila and those invited for the wedding ceremony by Janaka sat behind him on the elevated dais.

The eyes of all were drawn by the elaborate, artistic and rich decorations which distinguished the marriage *shamiana*. It was all gold, silver and flower and silk and velvet, festoons and flags, candelabras and columns, arches and finials. One could not take the eye off any of these

once it drew one's attention. The vast area was filled to overflowing with kinsmen and well-wishers. It looked as if Mithila itself was experiencing the thrill of the wedding and enjoying the celebrations as if they were her own.

Soon, Dasaratha rose and politely reminded the Preceptor Vashishta, "Why should we delay?" Hearing this, Janaka stood before Vashishta with folded arms, praying that he should himself officiate at the ceremony.

Vashishta agreed and with Viswamitra and Sathananda accompanying him, he lit the sacrificial fire, in the centre of the dais, while Vedic scholars and experts in Vedic recitation raised their voices and repeated hymns appropriate for the auspicious ceremony.

They arranged around the Altar of Fire, golden plates decorated with flowers and sandal paste, full of tender sprouts of nine species of grains. There were also incense burners, sacred spoons for offering oblations in the holy flames, golden water pots, cups, and such other articles essential for the rite. They spread the holy kusa grass thick on the floor, so that it lay as level and as smooth as laid down in the texts. Then, they began to pour oblations into the fire while reciting the hymns which assure happiness and prosperity to the brides and bridegrooms. Every rite was gone through with meticulous accuracy and correctitude. The initiatory threads were tied on the wrists of the Princes and Princesses.

The next rite was the rite of gifting the brides. Vashishta called upon Janaka to come forward. He came near the Sacred Fire Enclosure, dressed in regal splendour and wearing all the regal jewels. As directed by the sage he held the hands of Sita and placed them in the outstretched palms of Rama. His eyes streamed tears of joy. Coconut symbolising prosperity had already been placed in the palms of Rama and after Sita's hands rested on it, milk was poured on the hands by Janaka as part of the ceremony of gifting.

Janaka spoke these words to Rama at that time: "Rama! Here is Sita, my daughter. She will tread your Dharmic path from now on. Accept her. She brings prosperity, peace and joy. Hold her hand with yours. She is highly virtuous and true. From this moment, she will follow you like your shadow, ever." With these words, he poured water on the hands of Rama, to set the seal on the gift.

Then he came near where Lakshmana was. He said, "Lakshmana! I am giving you this bride, Urmila, accept her," and with the prescribed Manthras, he completed the ceremony of gifting her to the bridegroom. Similarly, he approached Bharatha and pronouncing the Vedic Manthras traditionally used for the wedding, he gifted Mandavi to him as his bride. In the same manner Sruthakeerthi was gifted by him with the pouring of holy water and Vedic recitation to Satrugna. After this the scholars well versed in Vedic lore completed the customary rites and rituals for drawing upon the wedded couples the Grace of the Gods.

Then Janaka rose and standing in the centre of the dais, he announced to the bridegrooms, "Darlings! Our daughters are to be installed as mistresses of your households. The auspicious moment has come." As soon as he said so, with the blessing and approval of Vashishta, the four brothers held their brides each by their hand and they circumambulated first the sacred fire, and then Janaka and Vashishta the Preceptor, and prostrated before them.

While they were doing so, showers of flowers fell upon them; joyous music rose from a galaxy of instruments. The distinguished gathering acclaimed the moment and scattered rice grains on their heads, wishing them all the best in life. The jubilation with which they cheered "Subham! Subham," shook the sky. It filled all ears with delight. The gods played divine music in heaven. Elysian drums were beaten in ecstatic exaltation. The minstrels of heaven sang hallelujahs.

On the dais, court musicians sang the traditional wedding songs describing the splendour of the marriage ceremony and extolling it as on a par with the marriage of Lord Siva and Gauri. They sang it in a rich variety of *ragas* (musical tones) and melodies filling the atmosphere with vibrations of delight. The four brothers with their brides stood on the dais facing the vast gathering, and bowed in acknowledgement of their cheers and greetings: "May you be happy forever," "May everything auspicious be added unto you."

The brothers, resplendent in their youth, heroism and beauty, proceeded with their brides into enclosures behind the curtains from where their mothers were watching the ceremony, so that they might prostrate before them and be blessed by them. Then, they returned to the palace allotted for the stay of the Royal Party. From that day, for three days, the populace witnessed a magnificent variety of ceremony and festival, packed with joy and jubilee. The people of Ayodhya who had come to Mathila as well as the inhabitants of Mithila itself could not distinguish night from day! It was festivity without intermission.

The day after the wedding, Viswamitra went to Dasaratha and told him that the mission upon which he had resolved had been fulfilled. He called the brothers close to him, he fondled them very affectionately. He blessed them profusely, and turning to Dasaratha, expressed his intention to proceed to the Himalayan regions. At this, Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrughna fell at the sage's feet. Viswamitra then went to the palace of Janaka and told him also that his desire had fructified triumphantly! He blessed Janaka, and the brides, Sita, Urmila, Mandavi and Sruthakeerthi. He announced there too that he was proceeding to the Himalayas. Dasaratha and Janaka and many others of Ayodhya and Mithila were in a fix. They could neither let the Sage depart, nor persuade him to stay. At last, they laid at his feet their load of gratitude and took the dust of his feet when he left, blessing everyone.

The third day, when Dasaratha expressed his desire to leave for Ayodhya, Janaka did not interpose any obstacle,

but made all arrangements for their departure. He gathered the courtiers and attendant maids that were to accompany the brides. He collected and filled many chariots with the articles that they had to take with them. He gave as presents large numbers of elephants, chariots, horses and cows. He presented to the sons-in-law jewels and precious gems in plenty; also a vast variety of priceless gifts that could be used in daily life. With the dawn of the next day, the caparisoned chariots were ready for the journey. The women of the court were in tears; indeed, to speak the truth, all the women of the city were weeping at the departure of the four dear princesses.

Unable to bear the pangs of separation from Sita and Urmila, many nurses and maids broke down with grief. The mothers held the hands of the sons-in-law and prayed to them to treat their daughters gently and with affection. "They know no hardship or sorrow, they have grown up soft and tender," they pleaded in pathetic appeal. They wept as if they were losing their very eyes. At last, they ascended the chariots and moved off. The City was filled with gloom, as much gloom as the ecstasy it was filled with for three days previous!

Janaka found it hard to take leave of Sita. He tried his best to curb the flow of tears. He accompanied Emperor Dasaratha for some distance describing to him the virtues of Sita and pleading with him to treat her with loving tenderness. With tears in his eyes, he prayed that he may be informed frequently of her welfare and happiness. He spoke

also of the other brides and evinced great anxiety on their behalf too. Dasaratha responded most sympathetically; he spoke soothingly, trying his best to allay the agitation of his mind. He said, “Janaka! We have no daughters of our own. So, these are the daughters whom we longed to fondle so long! They are both daughters and daughters-in-law for us. There will not be anything wanting for them. All things necessary for their joy and happiness will be provided. Do not worry or grieve in the least. Return fully assured of our love and affection for them.” Thus saying Dasaratha ordered his chariot to halt.

Janaka alighted from the chariot of the Emperor and approached the brides who were seated with the bridegrooms. He consoled them in various ways to bear the pang of separation from the home where they had been reared so lovingly. He imparted courage, and quoted many Dharmic texts which enjoin loyalty to the husband and the husband’s kith and kin. He reminded them how they have to treat the servants of the household which each of them was now entering. He accepted their respectful prostrations and caressed them once again and blessed them. When he turned his back on them to proceed to Mithila, he burst into sobs. Nevertheless he ascended his chariot and moved towards home. The chariots sped Ayodhyawards and Mithilawards. Very soon they were miles apart.

When Janaka reached Mithila, the apartments of the Palace were empty, with no signs of life, no shine of joy, no sound of elation. He could not be there even for an instant. Mithila was a City of Grief. Janaka sent for Sage Sathananda

and the Ministers and in order to free his mind a little from the upsurge of sorrow, he had a number of items of business discussed and settled with them. In the midst of the discussions, his mind would wander into sadness again. He used to give replies unrelated to the problems raised. At this, one minister said, “Oh King! The separation from Sita seems to have caused great grief in your heart. No father can escape this separation and this grief. Once she is gifted to the bridegroom, the father’s duty is to reduce the attachment gradually; this is a matter not unknown to your Majesty. And we know that Sita is no ordinary maiden! She is a Divine Angel. So, separation from her must cause you great agony. Oh King, the daughters are Divine; and note, the sons-in-law too have Divine Splendour. They appear to have descended from Heaven. In Mithila, everyone, young and old, had that feeling and that reverence towards them. It is really a wondrous coincidence that such bridegrooms have been wedded to such brides, worthy in every way, in physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual characteristics, in status, wealth, power, family honour, dynastic sanctity and religious faith. This cannot happen to all. Therefore, the daughters will have happiness, without the least diminution. Their lives will be filled with greater and greater joy as the years roll by.” They recalled the grandeur of the marriage celebrations and calmed the agitated mind of Janaka. They engaged themselves in consoling him and restoring his equanimity and mental peace.