

Chapter Seven

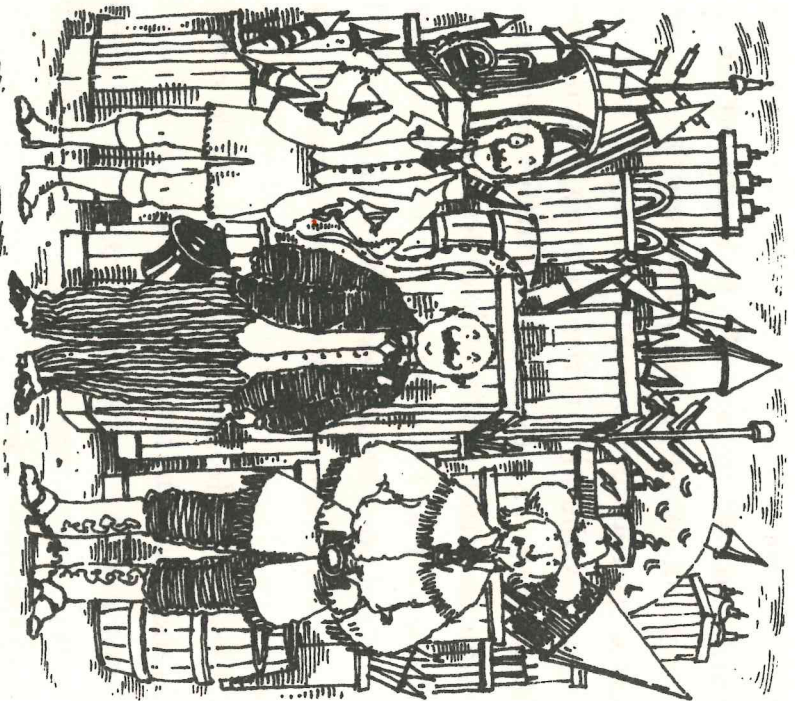
The invited Firework-Makers arrived the very next day, together with all the other famous artists and performers: the Chinese Scout and Guide Opera Company, Señor Archibaldo Gomez and his Filipino Mambo Orchestra, the Norwegian National Comedy Cowbell Players, and many others. They all disembarked from the *S.S. Indescribable* with their luggage and their instruments and their costumes, and began to rehearse at once.

The first Firework-Maker was Dr Puffen-

flasch, from Heidelberg. He had invented a multi-stage rocket which exploded at a height of two thousand feet into the shape of a gigantic Frankfurter sausage, while a huge instrument he'd invented played *The Ride of the Valkyries*. Herr Puffenflasch had gone to immense trouble to prepare something just as spectacular for the New Year Festival, and he supervised the unloading of his enormous equipment with scrupulous care.

The second visiting Firework-Maker was Signor Scorcini from Naples. His family had been making fireworks for generations and his speciality was noise. For this display he had invented a full-scale representation of a battle at sea, featuring the noisiest fireworks in the world, and with King Neptune emerging from the water to see fair play and declare peace.

The third and last Firework-Maker was



Colonel Sam Sparkington from Chicago. His display was called *The Greatest Firework Show in the Galaxy*, and it usually featured Colonel Sparkington himself, wearing a white Stetson hat and riding a

horse. This time, it was rumoured, he had invented an especially exciting display, involving something never before seen in the art of pyrotechnics.

And while the three visiting Firework-Makers were assembling their displays, Latchand and Lila were working on theirs. Time flew past. They barely slept, they scarcely washed, they hardly ate. They mixed vats of Golden Serpents, they ordered a ton and a half of flowers of salt, they invented something so new neither could think of a name for it until Lila said:

'Foaming . . . ' and snapped her fingers.

'Moss?' said Latchand.

'That's it!'

Lila showed Latchand her delayed-fuse method, but it didn't work until he thought of adding some spirits of saltpetre, and then it worked magnificently. It would let them set off fifty or a hundred fireworks at once,

which had previously been impossible. Then Lalchand came up with a spectacular finale, but it depended on something even more impossible: burning a fuse underwater. Lila solved that by thinking of caustic naphtha, and they tried it, and it worked.

And before they knew it, the day of the Festival arrived.

'I wonder where Chulak is?' Lila said vaguely, but her mind was really on the Foaming Moss.

'I hope Hamlet's being treated well,' said Lalchand, but he was really thinking about the caustic naphtha.

And neither of them said anything about the King's decision, but they couldn't get it out of their minds.

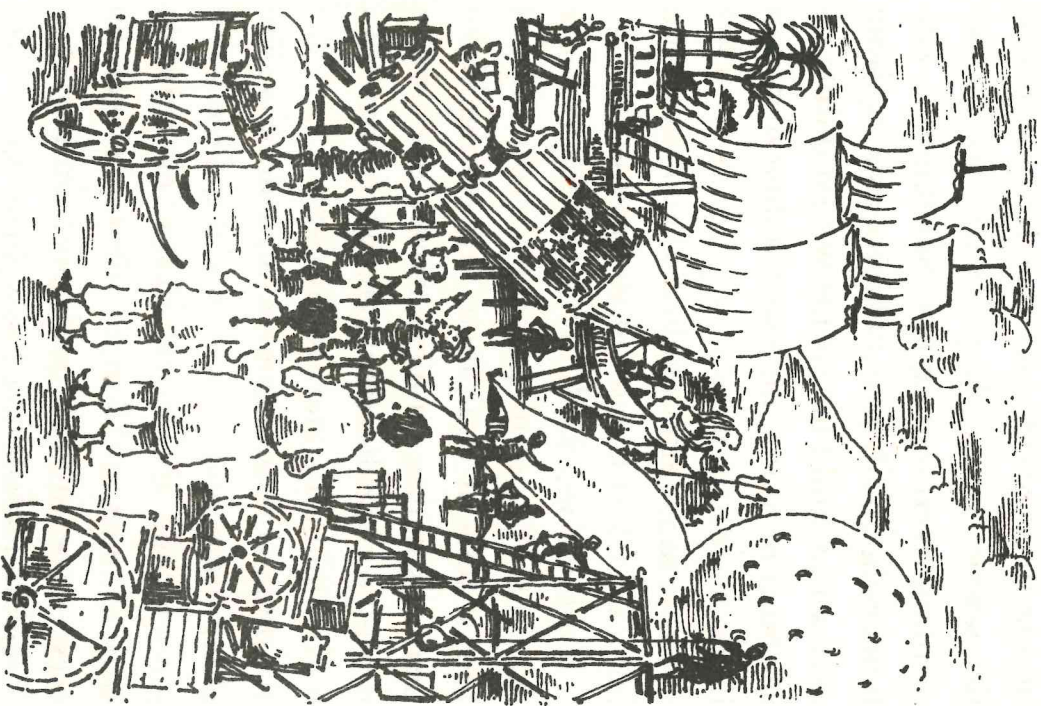
After a hasty sleep and a hurried breakfast, they loaded up the fried-prawn seller's cart (he'd lent it to them because he was

taking the day off) and trundled it through the streets to the Royal Park, where the displays were going to take place. The batik-seller followed behind with another cart, and behind him came the sandalwood-carver from down the street with a third, all laden with fireworks.

But when they reached the ornamental lake, Lila and Lalchand stopped in dismay.

For there was Dr Puffenflask supervising the final stages of putting together about fifteen tons of equipment, all swathed in a neat tarpaulin, and swarmed over by a dozen pyrotechnicians in white overalls, with clipboards and stethoscopes.

And next to him there was Signor Scorcini clambering about on a model galleon even longer than the Royal Barge, all bristling with cannons and flares, while his Neapolitan crew were arguing and gesticulating in a Neapolitan dialect as they lowered a vast,



nodding, bearded model of King Neptune below the water.

And next to him Colonel Sparkington was rehearsing his display. There was a gigantic red, white, and blue rocket with a saddle on the back of it, and on a scaffolding platform high above the treetops there was a model of the moon, with dozens of craters all being loaded with exciting-looking things . . .

It was too much. Latchand and Lila looked at the vast displays being prepared by the other artists, and then at their three little cart-loads, and their hearts sank.

'Never mind,' said Latchand. 'Ours is a good display, my love. Think of the Foaming Moss! They've got nothing like that.'

'Or the underwater fuse,' said Lila. 'Look, they're having to light that sea-god by hand. We can do better than that, Father!'
'Of course we can. Let's get to work . . .'

They unloaded their materials, and the batik-painter and the sandalwood-carver took their carts back, with the promise of free tickets to the show.

The day passed quickly. All the Firework-Makers were very curious about one another's displays, and kept wandering over to have a look, with the excuse of borrowing a handful of red fire powder or a length of slow fuse. They came to look at Lalchand and Lila's, and they were very polite, but it was plain that they didn't think much of it. And all of them were desperate to look under Dr Puffenflasz's tarpaulin, but he kept it tightly tied down.

Promptly at seven o'clock the sun went down, and ten minutes later it was dark. People were beginning to arrive already, with rugs to sit on and picnic baskets, and from the Palace nearby came the sound of bells and gongs and cymbals. All the

Firework-Makers were busy in the dark, putting the finishing touches to their displays, and they all wished one another good luck.

Then came a roll of drums, and the Palace gates were thrown open. By the light of a hundred flickering torches, a great procession made its way to the grandstand by the lake. The King was being carried in a golden palanquin, and the royal dancers were swaying and stepping elegantly alongside. Behind them, decorated with gold cloths and jewels of every colour, with his tusks and toenails painted scarlet, came Hamlet.

'Oh, look at the poor thing!' said Lila. 'He looks utterly miserable. I'm sure he's lost weight.'

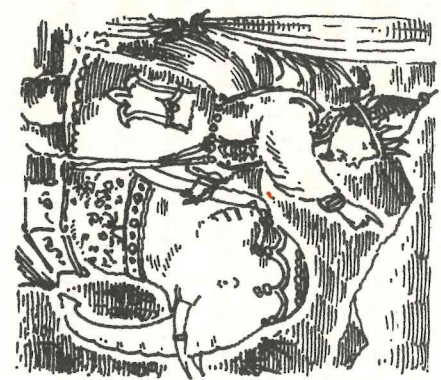
'He's missing Chulak, that's what it is,' said Lalchand.

Hamlet stood disconsolately beside the

grandstand as the King declared the competition open.

'A prize of a gold cup and a thousand gold coins will be awarded to the winner!' the King proclaimed. 'Only your applause will decide who has won. The first contestant

will now begin his display.'



The Firework-Makers had drawn lots to see which order they would perform in. Dr Puffenflask was first. Of course

the audience had no idea what to expect, and when his mighty rockets whizzed up into the night sky, and his gigantic *Bombardenorgelnitsparkenpump* began to play *The Ride of the Valkyries*, hurling out great lumps of Teutonic lava, they all burst

into oohs and aahs of excitement. Then came the highlight of his display. Out of the darkness arose a tribute to the King's favourite dish: a gigantic pink prawn, fizzing and sputtering, which



began to revolve faster and faster until it all went out in a shower of salmon-coloured sparks and a sonorous chord from the *Bombardenorgelnitsparkenpump*.

The applause was colossal.

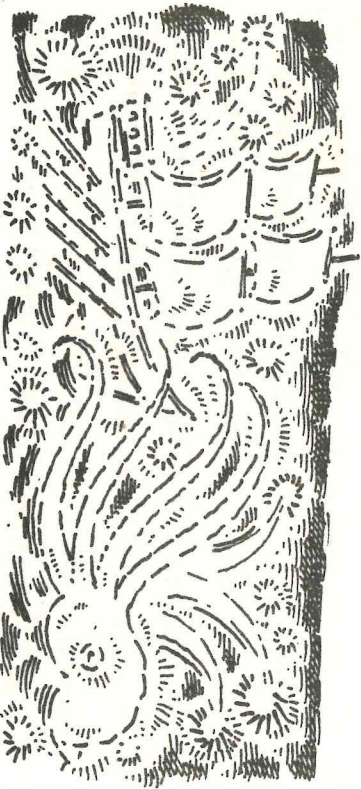
'That was good,' said Lila apprehensively.

'That big prawn. Really . . . big. And pink.'

'A bit too obvious,' said Lalchand. 'Don't worry. Nice pink, though. Must ask him for the recipe.'

The next to go was Signor Scorcini with

his Neapolitan Pyrotechnicians. Red, green, and white rockets whizzed up in the air to explode with enormous bangs that echoed all round the city, and then the galleon came ablaze with sparklers and Catherine wheels, and a chorus of galley-slaves made of Roman candles moved their oars stiffly to and fro. Suddenly a giant octopus rose up out of the water waving ghastly green tentacles, and attacked the ship. The sailors fired all kinds of Jumping Jacks and Whizzers and Incandescent Fountains at it, and then they tipped cascades of Greek Fire over it from barrels lashed to the masts. The



noise was indescribable. Just when it looked as if the ship was about to tip over, up came King Neptune, waving his trident, accompanied by three mermaids. The band struck up, and the mermaids sang a jolly Euro-song called *Boom Bang-a-Bang*, the octopus waved its tentacles in time, and more rockets went off in rhythm with the music.

The audience loved it. They roared with delight.

'Oh dear,' said Lalchand. 'That was very exciting. Oh dear, oh dear.'

'But didn't you see how they had to light the sea-god?' Lila said. 'They had to wait till he was right out of the water and a little man in a boat reached up with a match. Just wait till they see our underwater fuse!'

When the applause had died down, Colonel Sparkington's display began. First a lot of saucer-shaped fireworks whizzed

down from the darkness and landed on the grass. That got a round of applause on its own, because fireworks usually went up, not down. Then the famous moon swung into view, way up above the treetops, and Colonel Sparkington galloped in on a white horse made of tiny Catherine wheels, waving his Stetson hat to the audience, who were in such a good mood that they cheered and cheered.

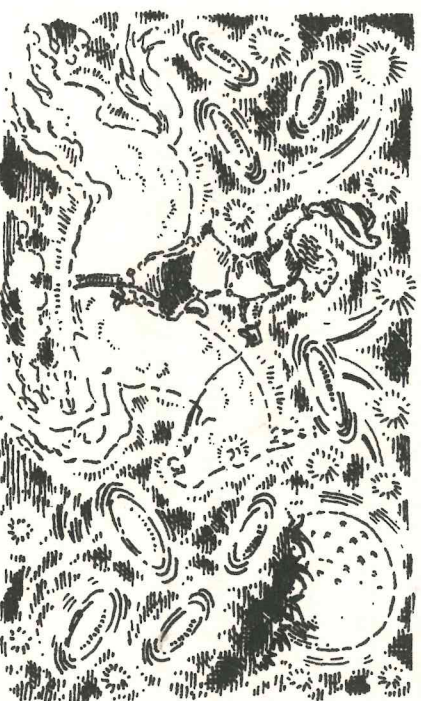
Lila could see an official beside the King carefully counting the seconds that each burst of applause lasted. She swallowed hard.

Then came the climax of Colonel Sparkington's display. After stamping out the flying saucers with his Catherine-wheel horse, the gallant Colonel jumped aboard the red, white and blue rocket. A Cherokee chieftain galloped in on a Palomino pony and fired a blazing arrow at the tail of the

rocket, which ignited at once and whooshed up along a wire to the moon, with Colonel Sparkington waving his hat all the way.

As soon as it landed, a dozen craters flipped open and out came some little round-faced moon people with big eyes and pointed ears.

The audience went wild. The moon people waved the flags of all nations and bowed to the King, Colonel Sparkington distributed rockets to them all, and they whizzed off in all directions, singing a song called *Sparkington For Ever*. You could hear the clapping, the cheering and whistling and stamping, for miles around.



Lila and Lalchand looked at each other. There was nothing to say. But then they hugged each other very tightly, and ran to their places, and as soon as the audience was settled again, they began their display.

The first thing that happened was that little lotus flowers made of white fire suddenly popped open on the water, with no hint of where the fire had come from. The audience fell silent, and when the flowers began to float across the dark lake like little paper boats, they were completely hushed.

Then a beautiful green light began to glow beneath the water, and rose slowly upwards to become a fountain of green fire. But it didn't look like fire – it looked like water, and it splashed and danced like a bubbling spring.

And while the fountain played over the lake, something quite different was happening under the trees. A carpet of living moss

seemed to have spread itself across the grass, a million million little points of light all so close together that they looked as soft as velvet. A sort of 'Aaah' sound came from the audience.

Then came the most difficult part. Lila had designed a sequence of fireworks based on what she had seen in the Grotto of the Fire-fiend, but it all depended on the delayed-action fuses working as they should – and of course they hadn't had time to test them properly. If some of the fireworks went off a second too early or a second too late, the whole show would make no sense.

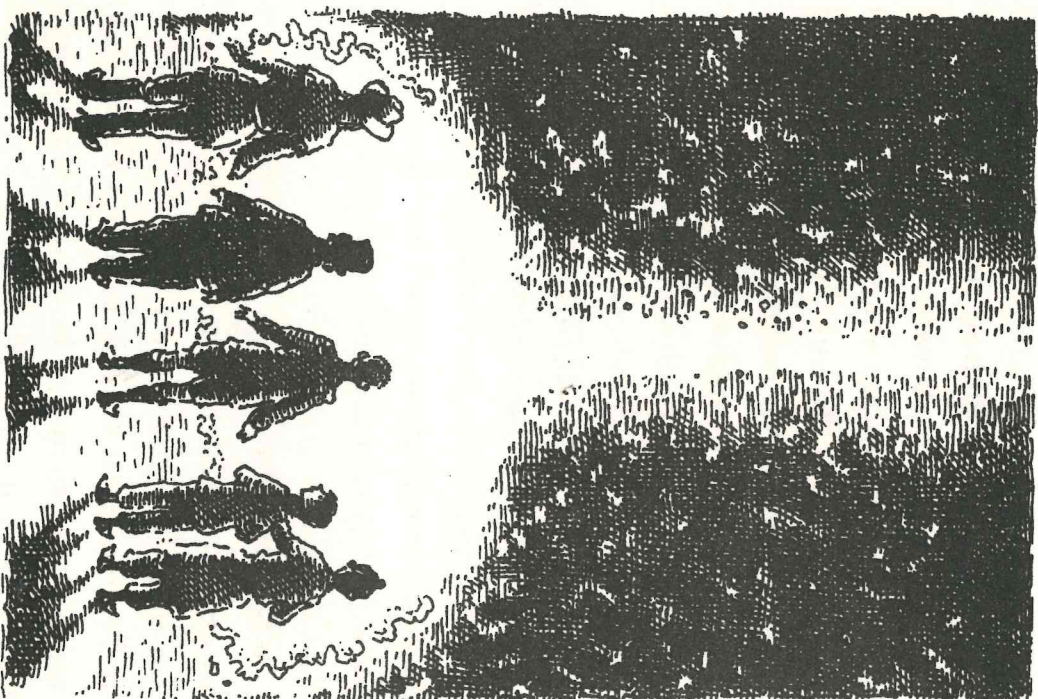
But there was no time to worry about that now. Quickly and expertly she and Lalchand touched fire to the end of the master fuses, and held their breath.

First came a series of slow dull explosions like the beat of a muffled drum. Everything was dark. Then a red light shivered down-

wards, leaving a trail of red sparks hanging in the air, like a crack opening in the night. The solemn drumbeats got louder and louder, and everyone sat very still, holding their breath, because of the irresistible feeling that *something* was going to happen.

Then it did. Out of the red crack in the night a great cascade of brilliant red, orange, and yellow lava seemed to pour down and spread out like the carpet of fire in the Grotto. Lila couldn't resist glancing up very swiftly at Dr Puffenfläsch, Signor Scorcini, and Colonel Sparkington, and saw them all watching wide-eyed like little children.

When the lava carpet had flowed down almost to the edge of the lake, the speed of the drumbeat got faster, and sharp bangs and cracks beat the air between them. And suddenly, dancing as he had in the Grotto, Razvani himself seemed to be there,

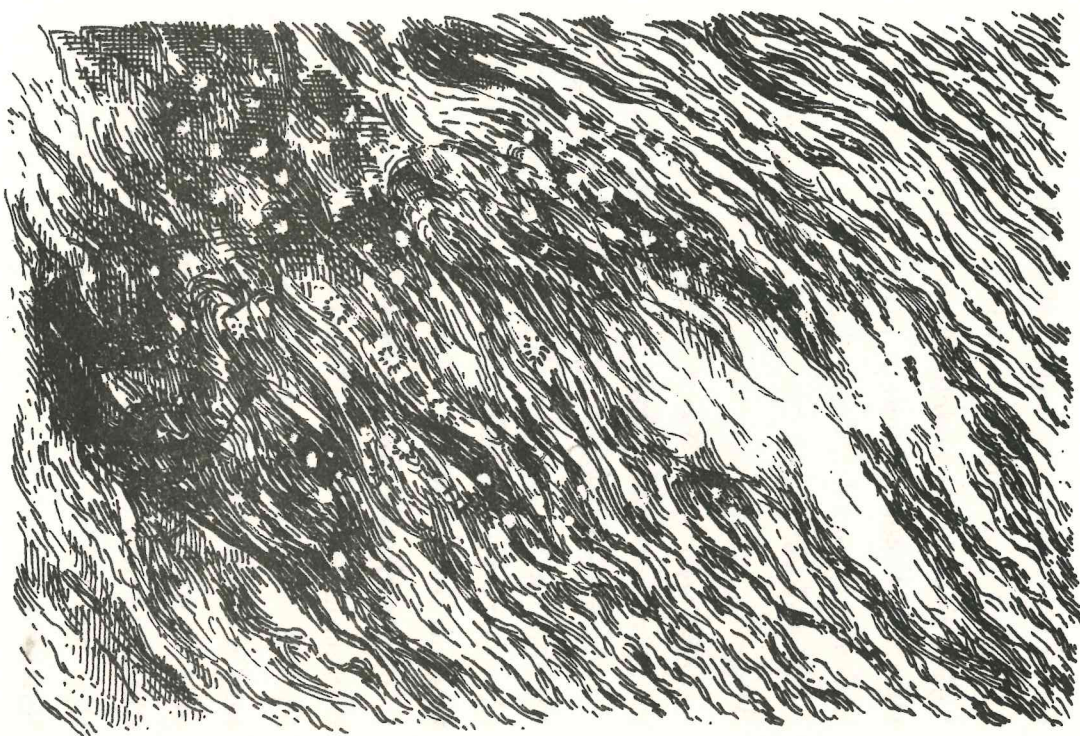


whirling and stamping and laughing for joy in the play of the eternal fire.

Both Lila and Lalchand forgot everything else, and seized each other's hands and danced as well. Never had they produced such a display! No matter what happened, it was worth it, everything was worth it, for a moment of joy like this! They laughed and danced for happiness.

But their fire was not Razvani's, of course, and it couldn't last for ever. The great red firework-demon burnt himself out, and the last of the red lava poured slowly into the lake, and then the little white lotus-boats, now scattered over the water like the stars in the sky, flared up and burnt more brightly than ever for a moment before all going out at once.

Then there was silence. It was a silence that got longer and longer until Lila could hardly bear it, and she gripped Lalchand's



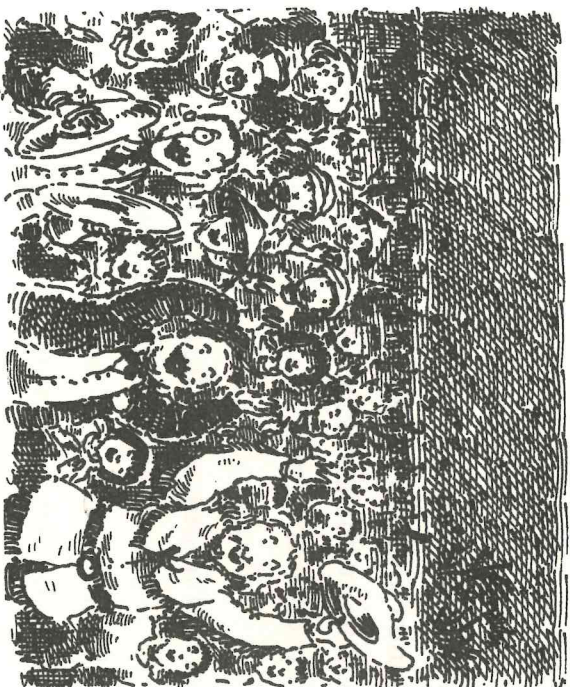
hand so tightly it nearly cracked.

And when she thought it was all over, Lalchand was doomed, everything was ruined, there came a mighty yell from Colonel Sparkington.

'Yee-haa!' he cried, waving his hat. And—

'Bravissimo!' shouted Signor Scorcini, clapping his hands above his head. And—
'Hoch! Hoch! Hoch!' roared Dr Puffenfläsch, seizing the cymbals from his *Bombardenorgelnisparkenpume* in order to clap more loudly.

The audience, not to be out-applauded by the visiting Firework-Makers, joined in with such a roar and a stamping and a clapping and a thumping of one another on the back and a whistling and a shouting that four hundred and thirty-eight doves roosting in a tree ten miles away woke up and said, 'Did you hear that?'



Of course the court official timing the applause had to give up. It was obvious to everyone who had won, and Lalchand and Lila went up to the Royal platform where the King was waiting to present the prize.

'I keep my word,' the King said quietly. 'Lalchand, you are free. Take this prize, the pair of you, and enjoy the Festival!'

Hardly knowing what was happening,