AKBAR and BIRBAL

tales of humour

Monisha Mukundan

AKBAR and BIRBAL

Monisha Mukundan spent her childhood travelling. Though she has lived in Delhi ever since, she still loves to travel and to read of faraway places and faraway times. She has hundreds of travel plans and an equal number of stories, all of which, she hopes, will happen one day soon.

This is her fifth book for children.

AKBAR and BIRBAL

tales of humour

Monisha Mukundan

RUPA

Published by
Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd 1992, 1999, 2015
7/16, Ansari Road, Daryaganj
New Delhi 110002

Sales Centres:

Allahabad Bengaluru Chennai
Hyderabad Jaipur Kathmandu
Kolkata Mumbai

Copyright © Monisha Mukundan 1992, 1999, 2015

Illustrations courtesy Tapas Guha

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and any resemblance to any actual person, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in a retrieval system, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

First impression 2015

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

Printed by Thomson Press India Ltd., Faridabad

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated, without the publisher's prior consent, in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published.

To
Muk, Govind and Vasundhara

This book is also dedicated, with love, to my friends, who make me laugh and think, and especially to Nandita Gupta and Subhadra Sen Gupta, without whose help and encouragement I could not have written it.

CONTENTS

Introduction

How They Met
Mahesh Das and the Sentry
A Matter of Crows
Inauspicious Omens
The Scribe’s Dream
The Best Vegetable of All
Lamplight
A Hairy Tale
The Reader of Minds
Greater than God
Temper
The Sadhu
Birbal the Ambassador
The Carpet Seller
Birbal the Detective
The Beauty Contest

Blindness
The Fool-hunt
Murder!
The Celestial Palace
Mother Tongue
A Hunt for the Truth

INTRODUCTION

Akbar, the third Mughal emperor, had many talented and clever people at his court. Among them was a man called Raja Birbal, who was a special favourite of the emperor because of his quick wit. Raja Birbal wrote poetry, and Akbar gave him the title of Poet Laureate. He liked to have Birbal near him, because he enjoyed his conversation and his clever way with words.

In the four hundred years since Emperor Akbar ruled India and since Birbal's poems and sayings and ready answers made the great emperor laugh and think, many stories have been told about them. Some may be true, many are not. They are folk tales, or stories that people have passed on from one generation to the next, by telling them again and again. Storytellers have added to the stories and changed them. Nevertheless, they remain popular because they are fun to hear and to read and they make us laugh. And, sometimes, they make us think about what is true and good in our lives.

HOW THEY MET

Emperor Akbar loved to go hunting. Even as a child, he would run away from his lessons and his tutors in order to go riding and hunting. When he grew up, he was a better rider and a more fearless hunter than any of his courtiers. One day, while chasing a tiger, Akbar and a few brave soldiers rode so fast that they left all the others behind. They had gone a long distance from the royal capital at Agra and, as evening came, they realised that they were lost. They went on slowly. They were hot, dusty and tired. Presently, they reached a place where three roads met. ‘Ah, at last,’ the emperor exclaimed. Then, turning to his men, he asked, ‘Which way shall we go? Which road goes to Agra?’

The roads all looked the same. It was hard to tell which road led to Agra. The men looked at each other. They looked at the road. Then they looked at the dust beneath their horses’ hooves. Nobody said a word.

Just then, a young man came walking down one of the roads. Glad to have something to do, the emperor’s men called out to him and ordered him to come forward. He did so, looking up at the richly dressed hunters with bright, curious eyes. ‘Tell us, boy,’ said Emperor Akbar, ‘which road goes to Agra?’

The young man began to smile. ‘Huzoor, everybody knows that roads cannot move. How can this road go to Agra, or go anywhere else?’ he said, and he chuckled delightedly at his own joke.

There was absolute silence. The emperor stared down at the youth. His soldiers held their breath. They knew the emperor’s temper. Not one of them dared to say a single word. ‘People travel,’ the boy went on, not seeming to notice the ominous silence, ‘roads don’t, do they?’

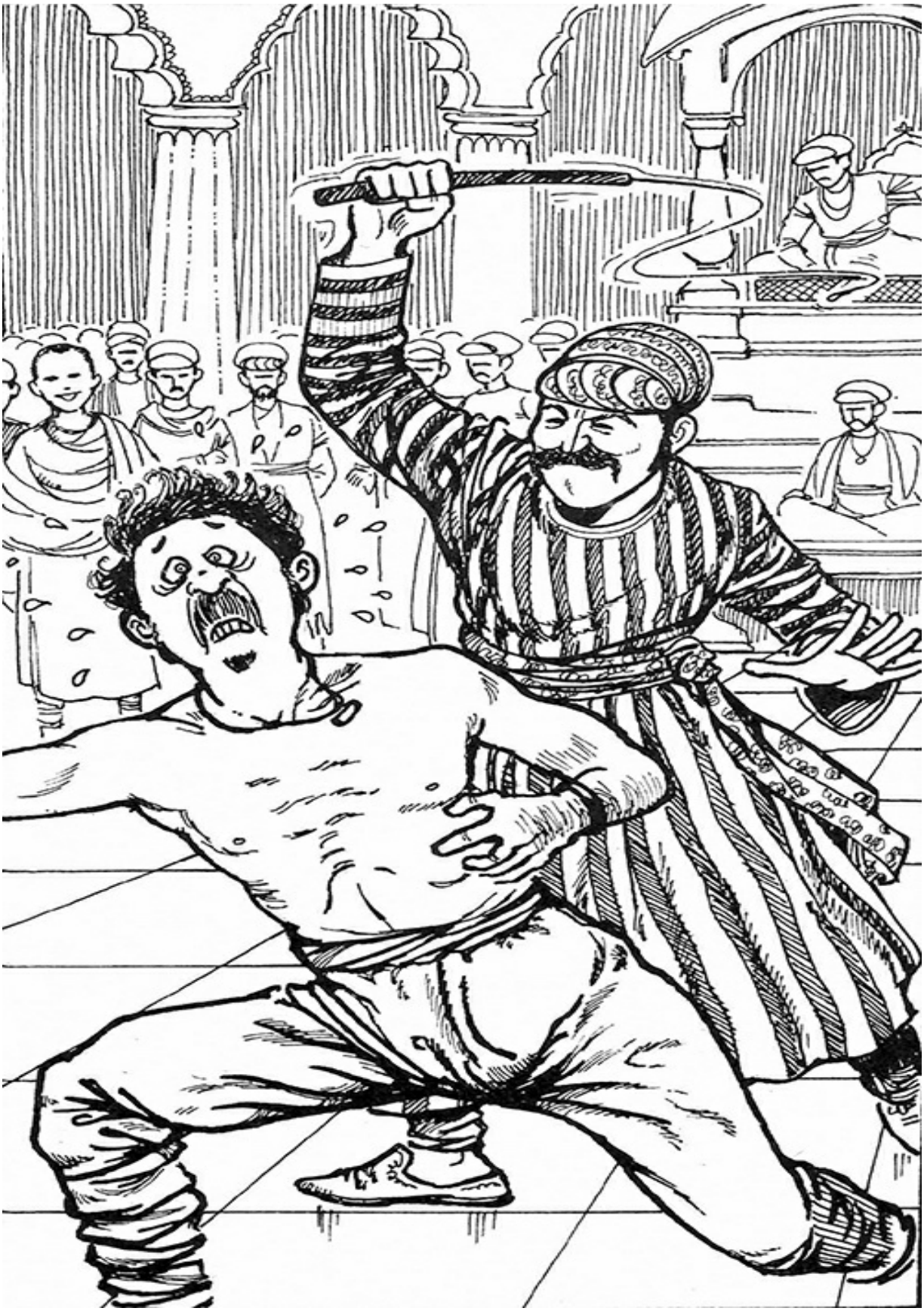
‘No, they don’t,’ the emperor cried suddenly and began to laugh. Nervously, his soldiers began to laugh too. The youth ignored them and continued to look up at the emperor with twinkling eyes. ‘What’s your name?’ Emperor Akbar asked the young man. ‘Mahesh Das,’ he replied. ‘And what is your name, huzoor?’ The emperor pulled off an enormous emerald ring which he wore on his hand. Leaning down, he gave it to the young man.

‘You are speaking to Akbar, Emperor of Hindustan,’ he said. ‘We need fearless young men such as you at our court, Mahesh Das. Bring this ring with you when you come, and I shall recognise and remember you. And now, show us the road we must take in order to go to Agra.’

Mahesh Das bowed low and pointed towards the capital. The emperor turned his horse and galloped away, followed by his soldiers. Mahesh Das watched until a bend in the road hid them from his sight.

MAHESH DAS AND THE SENTRY

A few years later, Mahesh Das decided to travel to the emperor's court at Agra to seek his fortune. He had finished his studies and was ready to see the world. When he arrived at Agra, he walked through the bazaar and past the great havelis in which the nobles lived. It was all very confusing to a young man who had spent all his life in the village. But Mahesh Das was no ordinary individual. He held on to the cloth bag in which he carried the emperor's ring and he looked around him with interest. It was evening by the time he reached the massive fort on the bank of the river Yamuna in which the Emperor of Hindustan lived. Even though he was a brave and resolute young man, Mahesh Das felt very small as he neared the enormous studded gate of the fort. The huge wooden gate was open and important-looking people hurried in and out. Two guards stood outside, holding spears in their strong, muscular hands. Mahesh Das took a deep breath and then going up to one of the soldiers, he said, 'I have come to meet the emperor. He invited me to come to court.'



‘Ho!’ said the soldier, looking at the young man’s dusty feet and simple cotton clothes. ‘So the emperor invited you to his durbar, did he? To the Diwan-i-Khas, no doubt, the Hall of Private Audience, where he meets high-ranking nobles!’ A few passersby stopped to watch, smiling at the simple village lad’s discomfiture.

‘Perhaps,’ Mahesh Das answered boldly, keeping his voice steady even though he felt very frightened. ‘And I have his ring to prove it.’ From his bag, he pulled out the richly worked ring which Emperor Akbar had given him. ‘Oh,’ said the guard, in sudden doubt.

‘That’s no ordinary ring,’ said a pundit who had stopped to watch. ‘You’d better let the young man in.’

‘We-ell,’ said the guard, sorry to have lost an opportunity to bully and to tease. ‘I’ll let you go in on one condition. When you see the emperor, he is sure to give a gift. I’ll let you in if you swear to give me half of whatever the emperor gives you.’

People standing nearby began to murmur. They knew the guard and his greedy ways, and wondered how the young man would deal with him. But to their surprise, Mahesh Das agreed at once, without even trying to argue or bargain. The guard said again softly, threateningly, ‘Don’t forget, or I’ll make you very, very sorry.’

Mahesh Das nodded. ‘I won’t forget,’ he said, and he walked into the fort.

Emperor Akbar was in the Diwan-i-Am, the Hall of Public Audience. Lamps lit up the carvings on the wall and the rich carpets which were spread on the floor. The great pillared hall was full of courtiers dressed in the finest and most beautifully woven garments. But Mahesh Das had eyes only for the emperor, who sat grandly on a platform at the far end of the hall. Bowing low, he made his way towards the throne. The courtiers murmured to each other in surprise. Who could this be? But Emperor Akbar happened to glance up. He recognised the young man at once and asked him to come forward. ‘I remember you, Mahesh Das,’ he said. ‘And I am pleased that you have come. Ask for anything your heart desires and it shall be yours.’

‘Jahanpanah is most gracious,’ Mahesh Das answered. ‘If huzoor pleases, my dearest wish is to be given fifty lashes of the whip!’

‘Mad, the boy must be mad,’ people whispered to each other. But the emperor liked the bright, straightforward look in his eyes and he said, ‘Before we grant this strange wish you must tell us why you want such a gift.’

Then Mahesh Das bowed once again and said, ‘Before the sentry who guards Jahanpanah’s fort permitted me to come into the palace, he made me promise that I should give him half the gift that I received. I am ready to bear twenty-five lashes, in order to share this with the guard.’

When Akbar heard this, he grew very angry. ‘Are our people to be kept away by a greedy, wicked guard?’ he thundered. ‘Send for the rascal!’

The guard was sentenced to the entire gift of fifty lashes and never again tried to bully poor people who sought an audience with the emperor. And Mahesh Das was given a place at the court, with all the comforts that went with it. ‘We confer on you the title of Raja Birbal from this day on,’ the emperor declared. ‘And you shall stay near us and amuse and guide us henceforth!’

A MATTER OF CROWS

Close to the emperor's private apartments was the Diwan-i-Khas, the Hall of Private Audience. It was not as large as the Diwan-i-Am, but it was beautifully decorated and luxuriously furnished. Here, special courtiers and the highest nobles in the land met the emperor to discuss matters of state. Sometimes the emperor liked to discuss other things too, such as where the best melons came from or who the wisest sage was. Occasionally, he liked to pose questions which his courtiers thought were unanswerable. To Emperor Akbar's delight, Birbal always had an answer no matter how absurd the question.

One morning, the emperor took his seat on the throne in the Diwan-i-Khas and demanded, 'Tell us at once: How many crows are there in all of Agra? It is important that we have this information immediately. And if it is not absolutely correct, there will be serious trouble, I warn you.'

The courtiers looked at each other in alarm. What were they to do? Some had a reasonable idea of how many elephants there were in the city. Many knew more or less how many horses there were. One man had even kept track of how many pet parrots there were. But crows? Some courtiers began to pray desperately for a flash of divine inspiration. Others tried to hide behind their friends. A few began to examine the sky anxiously, wondering if they could make a quick count of all the crows they could see and calculate the total on that basis. Only Raja Birbal remained calm and smiling. 'Jahanpanah,' he said after several minutes. 'There are exactly ten thousand, six hundred and sixty-six crows in all of Agra.'

‘Oh?’ said Emperor Akbar with a gleam in his eye. ‘You shall not bluff your way out of this one, Birbal, my friend. We shall have a proper count to confirm your estimate.’

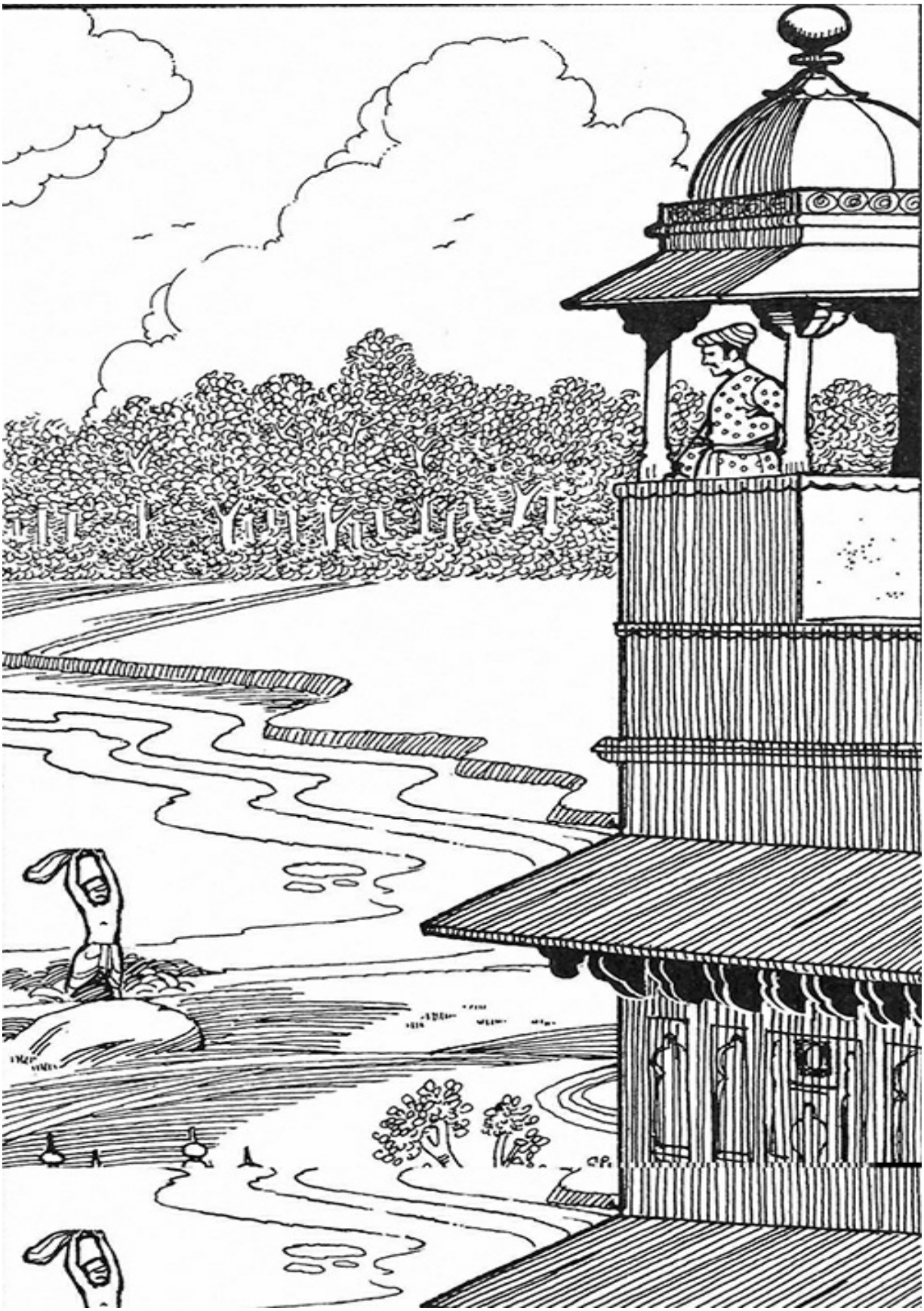
‘By all means, huzoor,’ Birbal replied, unmoved. ‘But I cannot vouch for all the crows remaining in Agra until that is done. Some may go away to visit their friends and relatives in Dilli, in which case you may find that there are fewer than the number I gave you. Or, it is possible that their friends and relatives from Dilli and elsewhere may come to pay them a visit, and so increase the number. But I can say with utter certainty that at this exact moment and only at this moment, there are ten thousand, six hundred and sixty-six crows in Agra!’

‘Birbal, you are incomparable,’ Akbar exclaimed as he burst out laughing. ‘And now, let us go on to more important matters.’

INAUSPICIOUS OMENS

Many people at Emperor Akbar's court were superstitious about all kinds of silly things. One popular superstition was that people's faces could be auspicious or inauspicious. If the first person you was in the morning had an auspicious face, it was believed, you would have a happy day. But if you saw someone who had an inauspicious face, things would go wrong all through the day. Emperor Akbar heard of this belief. He wasn't sure whether he believed it or not, but somehow, it stuck in his memory. One morning, he awoke very early and looked out of his window. He saw a poor washerman scrubbing clothes in the river Yamuna. 'Hmm,' Emperor Akbar mused. 'I wonder if it is a good omen or a bad one to see a washerman at the start of the day.'

The washerman happened to glance up at the fort just then. He caught a glimpse of the emperor's face at the window and at once he went down on his knees in joyous respect. The emperor smiled and turned away. Later that morning, as the emperor went up the steps of the Diwan-i-Khas, he tripped and bumped his shin. The royal hakims hurried to apply soothing oils and ointments, but the emperor's leg was badly bruised and hurt him when he walked. He decided he would not go out riding that day and went for a stroll in the garden instead. He stopped to admire a particularly fine rose and as he bent towards the flower, a bee flew out and stung him on the hand. His attendants rushed around in distress, trying to help him, urging him to go inside, begging him to sit down. 'What an ill-omened day, that our shahenshah should be stung in his own garden,' one of them lamented.



Akbar heard him and his face grew thoughtful. ‘Ill-omened?’ He said slowly. ‘The first person I saw today was the washerman by the river. Perhaps it is he who blighted my day? Perhaps he had an inauspicious face?’

‘Oh yes, Jahanpanah,’ some silly courtier cried. ‘It must be so indeed. The inauspicious face of the washerman has brought pain to your royal person.’

‘May he suffer for his evil presence!’ cried another.

‘May no unfortunate being ever look upon his ill-starred face,’ cried a third.

‘He doesn’t deserve to live!’ cried yet another. ‘One who brings so much misery should certainly die!’

‘Put him to death!’ rose a babble of voices. ‘He caused our shahenshah pain and he should die for it. It was all his fault. Put him to death!’

Birbal arrived as more and more courtiers were raising their voices against the washerman, imploring the emperor to send for him at once in order to sentence him to death. Tansen, the celebrated musician, was standing on the edge of the agitated crowd. He smiled in relief when he saw Birbal arrive. Drawing him aside, he told him all that had happened. Birbal shook his head in amazement. Then he pushed his way to the emperor’s side. ‘Jahanpanah!’ he cried in his ringing voice. ‘I am extremely sad to hear of your injuries.’ Akbar nodded. ‘Tell us, Birbal,’ he said. ‘Shall we behead this ill-omened washerman?’

‘Ill-omened, huzoor?’ Birbal asked. ‘You saw his face and you have a bruised shin and a bee-sting. Jahanpanah, the washerman saw your face early this morning and is now about to lose his head! Which do you think was the more inauspicious of the two?’

Emperor Akbar stared at Birbal for a moment. Then he began to smile. ‘You are right, Raja Birbal!’ he said. ‘It is really a very foolish belief.’

‘Jahanpanah,’ Tansen called. ‘I have a special song that I would like to present to you to celebrate the victory of sense over nonsense.’

‘Let us have music, then,’ Emperor Akbar commanded. ‘And let us all think as we listen.’

THE SCRIBE’S DREAM

There was once a poor scribe in the city of Agra. He copied other people’s writings and books. He earned barely enough to support his family. But, no matter how difficult it was, he and his wife always managed to feed themselves and their children. The scribe was proud of the fact that he had never borrowed a single copper coin. ‘We must never fall into the hands of the moneylender,’ he often told his wife. ‘For if we do, we will surely be ruined.’

The scribe worried so much about his lack of money and his fear of borrowing that his worries even found a place in his dreams. One night he dreamt that he had borrowed one hundred gold coins from the moneylender. He woke up in terror, thinking, ‘One hundred gold coins! Where, oh where will I ever find such wealth!’ Still trembling from his nightmare, he woke his wife and told her all about it. They talked quietly for a while and soon the scribe began to feel better. He was able to lie down again and was soon asleep once more.

The next day, as the scribe's wife drew water from the well at the end of the street on which they lived, she told her friends of her husband's dream. 'Imagine!' she exclaimed. 'He dreamt that we'd borrowed not one or two, but one hundred gold coins from the moneylender!' Her friends laughed with her. A few of them thought it was a very good story and repeated it to their husbands when they got home. The story spread and a few days later, it reached the moneylender's ears. He laughed when he heard it but his eyes began to glitter greedily. That evening, he put on his turban and, picking up his walking stick, strolled over to the scribe's small house.

'I've come,' he announced to the nervous and worried scribe, 'to remind you of the money you owe me.'

'Money?' squeaked the scribe in a panic. 'I owe you?'

'Yes, bhai,' answered the moneylender firmly. 'One hundred gold coins. Surely you cannot have forgotten?'

'One-one-one h-h-hundred gold c-c-coins…' gasped the scribe in a failing voice, tottering to the nearest chair.

The scribe's wife, who had been listening from an inner room, came hurrying out. 'But it was only a dream!' she cried. 'You cannot ask us to return money that has only been borrowed in a dream!'

'Money is money,' the moneylender said, unmoved. 'And money borrowed must be returned. You will have to start tomorrow. I am a kind man, a good-hearted man, and so I shall not demand it all back at once. One gold coin a month will do. And then there will be the interest above that as well.' And with these words, he stood up and left.

The scribe began to moan softly. His wife sat down suddenly, her knees giving way beneath her. They sat in silent despair. Suddenly, from the depths of her misery, the wife had an idea. 'Husband,' she said, sitting up straight. 'We must beg Raja Birbal to help us. Only he can save us from utter ruin.' At this, the scribe sat up. Strength and energy seemed to flow into his limbs. 'I shall go to his house at once,' he said. 'If anyone can save us, it is he.'

Birbal listened to the poor scribe's tale of woe. Then he brought out a bag of gold coins and emptied them on to a table. He counted out a hundred and put the rest away. Then he placed a large mirror in front of the coins.

'Huzoor, huzoor!' the scribe said in a distressed voice. 'I did not come here to beg or to ask you to pay the moneylender. Surely there is another way!'

‘There is another,’ Birbal answered with a smile. ‘Compose yourself and go and call the moneylender to my haveli. Tell him his debt is about to be paid.’

Full of doubts, the scribe hurried to the moneylender’s house with Birbal’s message. The moneylender smiled when he heard and got up at once to accompany him.

When they arrived at Birbal’s house and were shown in, the moneylender spotted the pile of gold coins on the table. He smiled and smiled, unable to take his eyes off them. The mirror behind the coins made the pile look larger and more glittering.

‘So the scribe borrowed a hundred gold coins from you in his dream, did he?’

‘That is so,’ replied the moneylender, never taking his eyes off the coins on the table.

‘Well,’ said Birbal. ‘You may take all the coins in the mirror. The real coins belong to me, but all those in the reflection are yours in return for the dream loan!’

The moneylender knew he had met his match. Without a word, he turned and left the house. Never again did he try to bully the scribe or anyone else in the city of Agra.

THE BEST VEGETABLE OF ALL

One evening, as Emperor Akbar and a group of his courtiers strolled along a terrace which overlooked the river, the emperor remarked, 'Brinjals are the finest vegetables, without a doubt.' All his courtiers were quick to agree. 'Oh,' said one. 'Brinjal is said to be excellent for one's health.' Another commented, 'And the taste! Brinjal cooked with lamb or any other meat is delicious.'

To everybody's surprise, even Birbal began to praise the brinjal. 'What delicacy! What subtle texture! What fine colour!' he cried. 'Oh, brinjal is the emperor of vegetables to be sure. It is a veritable gift from heaven!' And he went on and on, even reciting a small poem in praise of the brinjal. This was a bit too much, even for Emperor Akbar, who was accustomed to flattery and to fawning courtiers. He was certain that Birbal was teasing him and mocking all the courtiers who surrounded him. So, a few days later, the emperor declared, 'There can be no better vegetable in all the world than spinach!'

At once, all those around him began to praise spinach. 'It's so good for the digestion,' said a very fat man who loved to eat. 'And full of goodness,' said his extremely thin friend. 'And it is excellent with meat,' added a man whose wife was notorious for her bad cooking.

'Never has there been a tastier vegetable,' Birbal's voice rose over all the rest. 'What delicacy! What fine colour! Oh, spinach is the emperor of all vegetables. It is a veritable gift of the heavens!'

'Birbal!' Emperor Akbar cried in an outraged voice. 'Only last week you were praising the brinjal in exactly the same words. Have you no loyalty to

your beliefs, no faithfulness to the truth!’

Birbal’s eyes twinkled. ‘Jahanpanah,’ he said, bowing very low. ‘My loyalty and faith are given only to you, my shahenshah, from whom all bounty flows. What do I care for brinjal and spinach if I may be near you?’ Akbar looked around at all his courtiers, who were too nervous of him to ever question anything he said. He understood that Birbal was mocking their sheep-like behaviour, as he proved his own loyalty in his own witty way. He smiled appreciatively. ‘Wah, wah Birbal!’ he said. ‘You never fail to teach us something even when you make us laugh!’

LAMPLIGHT

Emperor Akbar was amazingly brave and strong. On one occasion, he fought a tiger single-handedly. On another, he rode a maddened elephant and brought it under control, even though he almost died in the attempt. The emperor admired those who had as much stamina and courage as he did. One cold January day, he sent messengers through the city of Agra to announce a contest. ‘He who can spend the entire night standing chest-deep in the icy waters of the Yamuna River,’ declared the messengers, ‘shall be awarded one hundred gold coins by the emperor himself!’

There was great excitement all through the city. Athletes and wrestlers and war-toughened soldiers all wanted to try their luck. Some oiled their bodies well so that they would be protected from the cold water. Others ate fistfuls of almonds, which were said to warm the blood. A few drank flasks of wine all through the day in an effort to warm themselves for the ordeal. As night fell, hundreds of men of all ages waded into the river. Among them was a poor stonemason, who needed enough money to pay for his son’s education. He was too poor to buy almonds to eat, or oil to rub over himself, but he was determined to win the money for his beloved child.

As night wore on and the river water began to get colder, a large number of men began to leave. By midnight, only a handful were left. Their friends called encouragingly to them from the river bank. One by one, even they began to leave. They could not stand the icy chill that set in during the last few hours before dawn. By the time the first rays of the sun lit the battlements of the fort, only the stonemason was still in the river. He was so

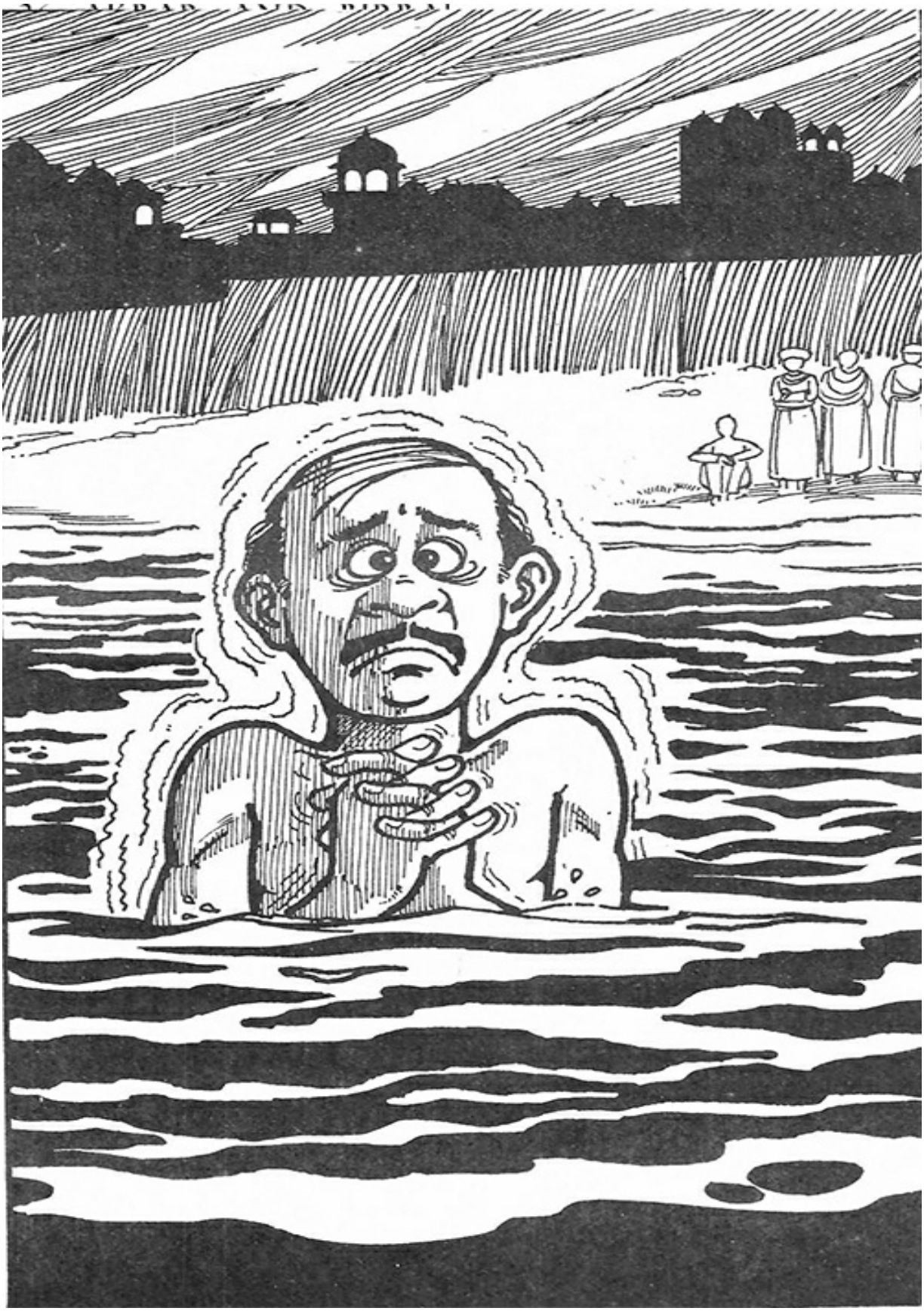
cold, he could not move. His friends had to help him out of the water and revive him with a massage and a hot drink and wrap him in a blanket.

That evening, as the emperor prepared for the evening durbar in the Diwan-i-Am, one spiteful courtier said, ‘Jahanpanah, the prize you are about to award was not won by fair means.’

‘Oh?’ said Emperor Akbar. ‘And how is that?’

‘Huzoor,’ said the man, his eyes glittering with malice. ‘It is said that the man drew warmth and comfort from the sight of the lamplight from the palace. If he was warmed by the lamps of the palace, then he did not truly withstand the icy waters of the river. He won the contest by unfair means, huzoor!’

Emperor Akbar began to think. Could the courtier be right? It was strange that the stonemason had succeeded when all the wrestiers and athletes and soldiers had failed. He was so busy thinking and wondering that he did not notice Raja Birbal slipping away.



It was sometime later that Akbar decided to ask Birbal for his advice, and found that he was not there. The emperor frowned. Messengers were despatched to summon him at once. They returned with a message from Birbal to say he was waiting for his meal of khichchri to be ready, and would join them shortly. An hour went by. The time for the durbar was drawing close and the emperor wanted Birbal to be present. More messengers were sent to call him. They returned with the same message. Birbal was waiting for his khichchri to be cooked. ‘Khichchri does not take so long!’ the emperor said angrily. He decided to go to Birbal’s house himself to find out what the matter was. He found Birbal on the terrace of his house. In front of him was a pot, filled to the brim with water, rice and lentils. The pot was set in a wooden frame which was tilted so that the bottom of the pot faced the emperor’s palace.

‘Birbal, have you gone completely mad?’ Emperor Akbar roared as Birbal rose to greet him.

‘Huzoor, if the poor stonemason was able to warm himself by the fight of the lamps in the royal palace, then surely that same heat will cook my khichchri, especially since I am so much closer to the royal lamplight,' Birbal said quietly.

In reply, the emperor put his arm around Birbal and asked the treasurer to hand him the bag of gold coins. ‘You shall have the honour of holding the award when I present it to the stonemason this evening,’ he said. Then, pulling off the rope of perfectly matched pearls which he wore around his neck, he slid it over Birbal’s head. ‘And now, shall we proceed to the durbar?’ he said, leading the way down the stairs.

‘Huzoor,’ Birbal murmured in gratitude as he followed his emperor down the stairs. Together they walked towards the Diwan-i-Am where the stonemason was waiting.

A HAIRY TALE

It was a hot summer morning. Emperor Akbar had not slept very well the previous night. It was clear to everyone that the emperor was not in a very good mood. ‘I’ve asked die keeper of the royal forests to prepare for a tiger hunt,’ Raja Man Singh whispered to Birbal. ‘At such a time, what cheers the emperor most is to be out riding and camping in the forest away from the palace and the fort and the cares of government.’ Birbal nodded. But in the meanwhile he knew he had to keep the emperor in good humour. So, when Emperor Akbar asked abruptly, ‘Who can answer this? Why is it that no hair grows on the palms of my hand?’ Birbal stepped forward at once. ‘Huzoor,’ he replied, ‘how can hair grow on the palms of your hand? It is just not possible, because your munificence, your generosity is so great that the constant flow of gold and gifts that slip from your hands into the hands of your worthless servant wears away any hair that might grow there.’

Akbar nodded and even smiled, but he was still a little irritable. ‘Is that so?’ he said. ‘In that case, how is it that no hair grows on the palms of your hands, Birbal?’

Birbal held out his hands to the emperor. ‘Jahan-panah, your generosity in filling these worthless hands with gold and gifts wears away every last hair that might grow there.’

‘And the others?’ Emperor Akbar pointed to all the courtiers who stood around them, filling the hall. ‘What about them? Am I so generous to each and every person gathered here? I’d soon have an empty treasury if I were as generous as you say.’ Several of those standing nearby smiled at each other.

Even Birbal, clever Birbal would find it difficult to answer that one, they thought, and waited expectantly to hear him admit that he was at a loss for words.

But Birbal smiled back at them and replied without a moment's hesitation, 'Huzoor, when my fellow servants see the magnificence that your generosity bestows on my worthless being, they cannot stop wringing their hands in jealousy. In doing this, they have rubbed away every single of hair that might have grown on their palms!'

At this, even Emperor Akbar burst out laughing. Soon others joined in the laughter and a wave of merriment filled the hall. 'Well done, Birbal bhaiya!' Raja Man Singh whispered to him. 'You've saved the day!'

THE READER OF MINDS

Some years after Birbal had come to the imperial court at Agra, Emperor Akbar had a magnificent new capital built at Fatehpur Sikri, about twenty kilometres outside the city. The emperor and his queens moved into exquisite stone palaces in the new capital and some of the more important courtiers were given houses close to the emperor’s palace. Among them was Birbal. Many of the other courtiers had to build their own havelis below the hill on which Fatehpur Sikri was built. Some built their homes in the village of Sikri. They could not understand why Raja Birbal had been shown such special favour. It made them feel very envious indeed. They wished there was some way to make Birbal look foolish in front of the emperor. But Birbal was too clever for them. So they grumbled to each other and longed for the day that the emperor would ask him a question that he would be unable to answer.

One of these courtiers, a man called Yusuf Khan, went a step further. One day, when Birbal was away to a distant kingdom, on a special mission for the emperor, Yusuf Khan thought of a plan. That evening, at the durbar, he said to Emperor Akbar, 'Jahanpanah, it is said that Raja Birbal now claims that he can even read the thoughts of others. Is he not extraordinarily clever?'

‘Oh, he is a genius, of that there is no doubt,’ commented another jealous courtier. ‘There is surely nothing that he does not know.’

‘Is he so clever?’ the emperor asked, reacting just as Yusuf Khan hoped he would. ‘We shall soon find out.’

Some days later, when Raja Birbal returned from his mission, he attended the small private durbar in the emperor’s palace. Yusuf Khan and his friends waited anxiously for the emperor to ask the fateful question. They were sure it would put Birbal in a spot. How would he answer? Would he protest and deny that he had ever said such a thing? Would he try to bluff his way out? Could he? Yusuf Khan was certain it was not possible to do so. He waited gleefully for the business part of the durbar to end. Birbal made his report on his successful mission to end the rebellion of a minor ruler and Emperor Akbar congratulated him warmly. Other reports were heard and decisions given to commanders of the army and to various officials. Then, when all the work was done, Emperor Akbar asked Birbal, ‘It is said, my friend, that you can even read minds now. Is this true?’

Raja Birbal glanced around the hall and saw the nasty smiles on the faces of Yusuf Khan and his group. He turned back to the emperor and answered calmly, ‘Jahanpanah, I would not dare to presume enough to think that I could ever read the subtle mind of Your Highness. However, I can certainly tell you the thought that fills the minds of each and every other person present here this evening.’ He paused and smiled at Yusuf Khan. ‘Each of Jahanpanah’s servants who are gathered here today has but one thought in his mind. They are thinking: May God bless our emperor in his mercy and wisdom and allow him good health so that he may rule over us for ever and ever!’ Then, turning to Yusuf Khan, he asked, ‘Am I not right, my dear friend?’

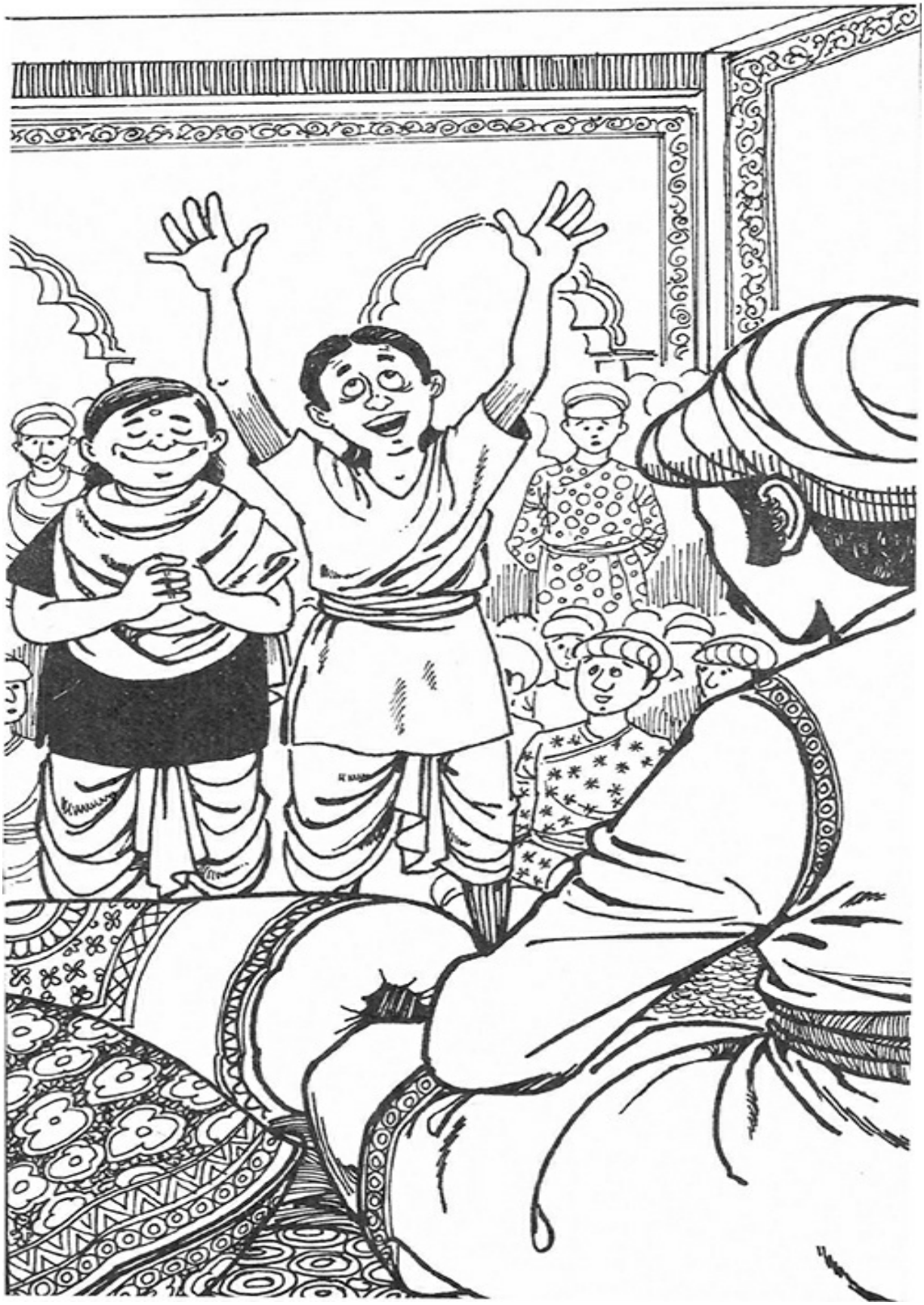
Yusuf Khan met Birbal’s bright eyes and knew that he was beaten. He didn’t dare deny that he was thinking only of the emperor’s welfare and nothing else. Forcing a smile upon his lips, he bowed and said, ‘Shahenshah, he is absolutely right!’ A murmur of agreement rose from all who were gathered there. Not one dared to admit that he was thinking of anything else but the emperor.

Birbal turned to the emperor with a look of immense amusement on his face. He and the emperor both understood exactly what had happened. Emperor Akbar began to laugh. ‘Birbal, you are incomparable!’ he cried,

while Birbal’s enemies fumed in helpless silence.

GREATER THAN GOD

Emperor Akbar enjoyed listening to stories and poems from distant lands, and travellers to Fatehpur Sikri were welcome and treated kindly. One day, two poets from a faraway kingdom arrived at the court. They delighted all who listened with songs and poems and the emperor, with his customary generosity, rewarded them well. The poets had seldom seen so much gold before. They had certainly never been given a whole bag of gold coins each in their entire lives. They were overwhelmed. And, when the emperor ordered the treasurer to give them a set of clothes each, one of the poets begged permission to offer a poem of thanks. Emperor Akbar nodded and the poet began his recitation. He spoke of the emperor's bravery and kindness. He praised the emperor's learning and wisdom and in the final verse, inspired beyond sensible limits, he ended by declaring that Emperor Akbar was the greatest king that had ever ruled 'over this world or any other. He is greater than Lord Indra himself!' cried the poet as he bowed and left the hall.



There was a moment's silence. Many of those in the hall were absolutely shocked diat the poet had compared a mortal to a god. Emperor Akbar looked around and his eyes began to twinkle mischievously. 'So,' he said, 'it appears that I am now even greater than the God Indra!'

All the people in the hall looked at their emperor in horror. Had he really believed the poet's word? Surely not! And yet, they weren't entirely sure. Emperor Akbar looked back at his ministers and commanders, his nobles and his counsellors, wondering if any of them would have the courage to speak the truth. The ministers, commanders, nobles and counsellors looked back at him. Nobody stirred. 'In that case,' said the emperor, beginning to feel irritated, 'You all agree, then. Your emperor is greater than the God Indra himself!'

Nobody dared to disagree. Slowly, one by one, the courtiers bowed to show that they agreed. A low, ashamed murmur of, 'Ji, huzoor. It is so, Jahanpanah,' filled the hall.

Emperor Akbar thought that the foolishness had gone far enough. He turned to Birbal with a frown. 'And you, Birbal. Do you agree?' he asked.

'Oh yes,' Birbal replied immediately. The emperor's frown grew. 'Huzoor, you can do something even God cannot!' Birbal said. 'If any of your subjects displeases you, Jahanpanah, you can send him on a pilgrimage, or banish him from your empire, never to return. But God cannot. For God rules over the entire earth and the sky and the heavens. There is no place in this world or any other that does not belong to God. So he cannot banish any one of his creatures!' Emperor Akbar's frown vanished. 'Well said, Birbal,' he cried delightedly. And, from every corner of the court, relieved courtiers began to smile weakly and then to laugh. Birbal had done it again!

TEMPER

In the village below Emperor Akbar's capital at Fatehpur Sikri, there lived a quick-tempered priest and his wife. The priest used to eat only one meal a day and his wife took a great deal of trouble to cook something delicious. Wonderful aromas would drift out of the kitchen, so when afternoon came and the priest sat down to eat, he would be very hungry indeed. One day, as he broke off a piece of freshly made roti and dipped in into the bowl of fragrant, steaming dal, the priest noticed a hair floating on the dal. He flung the food away in a rage, shouting to his wife. 'This food is bad! It's been ruined! There's a hair in the dal and it's not fit to eat!'

The priest's wife came running when she heard her husband. She wept when she saw the dal and rotis scattered all over the courtyard. There was no time to make a fresh meal and the priest had to go without his food that day. He got angrier and angrier and when evening came, he said, 'Beware, wife. If ever I find a hair in my food again, I will shave off every last hair on your head.'

This frightened his wife and she became even more careful, pulling her hair back tightly and covering her head with her sari. A week went by. The priest ate his daily meal with all his usual enjoyment. And then, one day, as he was about to bite into a morsel of brinjal and roti, he saw another hair. It was embedded in the roti. The priest sprang to his feet with a terrible roar and rushed towards the kitchen, shouting, ‘Bring me a razor. Now I shall have to shave off your hair!’ His wife gave a howl of terror and, before he could reach the kitchen, she sprang up and slammed the door shut.

‘Open this door at once!’ shouted the enraged priest.

‘Oh, no, no, no, no!’ wailed his wife. ‘Punish me, starve me, only promise you won’t cut off my hair Oh, forgive me, forgive me!’

The woman’s heart-rending cries and the priest’s bellowing voice could be heard all over the village. People came running to see what disaster had befallen them. When they understood what had happened, some began to laugh and others began to argue. A few tried to reason with the priest. He turned upon them with a snarl. The crowd grew bigger and bigger as more and more people arrived. And all the while, the priest’s wife wailed and wept unceasingly from behind the locked kitchen door.

Finally, one very old woman murmured to her grandson. ‘Only Raja Birbal can solve this problem, beta. Run as quickly as you can and beg him to come to the rescue of this wretched woman. The boy nodded and ran up the hill to the double-storied red-stone house in which Birbal lived. Birbal listened to the tale and nodded. Then he gave the boy certain instructions. The boy smiled and hurried away to do as Birbal had asked.

Half an hour later, Birbal led a small procession towards the priest’s house. It looked like a funeral procession. Two men carried a bamboo bier. It was empty, however. Another man carried some logs of wood. The boy carried some flowers and incense. They arrived at the priest’s house and stopped beside the priest. He turned and asked angrily, ‘What’s going on? Has somebody died? Why have you brought the bier here?’

‘I heard that someone had died here,’ said Birbal. ‘Only widows shave their heads, don’t they? I heard your wife was about to shave her head and so I thought you must have died. Are you about to die? We’ve made all the preparations for your funeral.’

‘He’ll have to die first, won’t he?’ cried a cheeky little boy in the crowd.

‘But then who’ll shave his wife’s head? He wants to do it himself!’ cried

another. People began to laugh. The priest hung his head in shame. He understood what Birbal was trying to show him. Slowly, he went towards the kitchen. ‘Come out, wife’, he said quietly. ‘I will try never to be so foolish again.’ His wife unlatched the kitchen door and came to stand beside him. ‘And I’ll be even more careful when I cook, from now on.’

Smiling, Birbal and the village people went home in cheerful good humour.

THE SADHU

Akbar came to the throne when he was only thirteen years old. In the years that followed, he built one of the greatest empires of his time. He lived in unimaginable splendour. He was surrounded by courtiers who agreed with every word he said, who flattered him and treated him as if he were a god. Perhaps it was not surprising that Emperor Akbar was sometimes arrogant and behaved as if the whole world belonged to him. One day, Birbal decided to make the great emperor stop and think about life.

That evening as the emperor was going towards his palace, he noticed a sadhu lying in the centre of his garden. He could not believe his eyes. A strange sadhu, in ragged clothes, right in the middle of the palace garden? The guards would have to be punished for this, thought the emperor furiously as he walked over to the sadhu and prodded him with the tip of his embroidered slipper. ‘Here, fellow!’ he cried. ‘What are you doing here? Get up and go away at once!’

The sadhu opened his eyes. Then he sat up slowly. ‘Huzoor,’ he said in a sleepy voice. ‘Is this your garden, then?’

‘Yes!’ cried the emperor. ‘This garden, those rose bushes, the fountain beyond that, the courtyard, the palace, this fort, this empire, it all belongs to me!’

Slowly the sadhu stood up. ‘And the river, huzoor? And the city of Agra? And Hindustan?’

‘Yes, yes, it’s all mine,’ said the emperor. ‘Now get out!’

‘Ah,’ said the sadhu. ‘And before you, huzoor. Who did this garden and

fort and city belong to then?’

‘My father, of course,’ said the emperor. In spite of his irritation, he was beginning to get interested in the sadhu’s questions. He loved philosophical discussions and he could tell, from his manner of speaking, that the sadhu was a learned man.

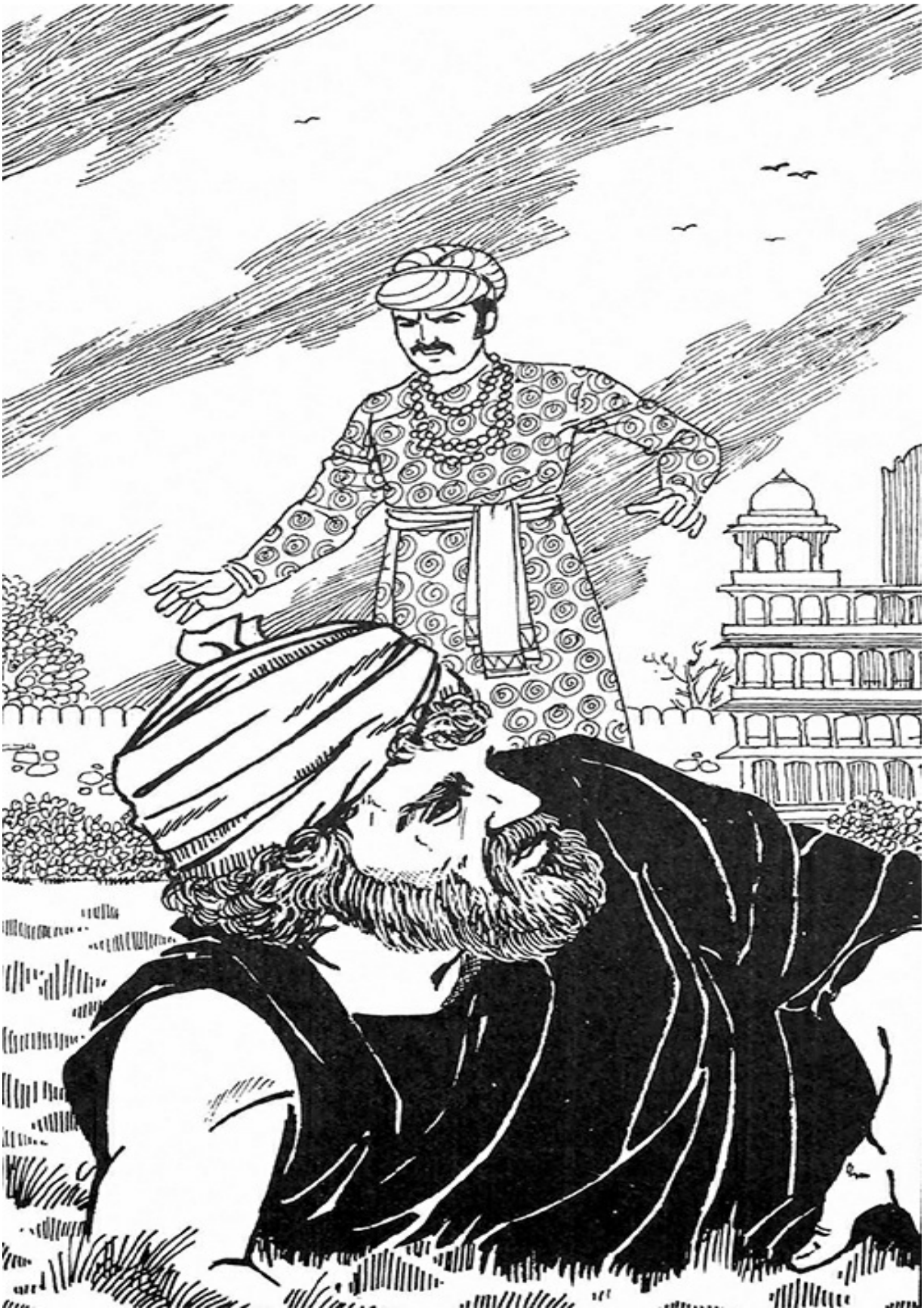
‘And who was here before him?’ the sadhu asked quietly.

‘His father, my father’s father, as you know.’

‘Ah,’ said the sadhu. ‘So this garden, those rose bushes, the palace and the fort—all this has only belonged to you for your lifetime. Before that they belonged to your father, am I right? And after your time they will belong to your son, and then to his son?’

‘Yes,’ said Emperor Akbar wonderingly.

‘So each one stays here for a time and then goes on his way?’



‘Yes.’

‘Like a dharamshala?’ the sadhu asked. ‘No one owns a dharamshala. Or the shade of a tree on the side of a the road. We stop and rest for a while and then go on. And someone has always been there before us and someone will always come after we have gone. Is that not so?’

‘It is,’ said Emperor Akbar quietly.

‘So your garden, your palace, your fort, your empire… these are only places you will stay in for a time, for the span of your lifetime. When you die, they will no longer belong to you. You will go, leaving them in the possession of someone else, just as your father did and his father before him.’

Emperor Akbar nodded. ‘The whole world is a dharamshala,’ he said slowly, thinking very hard. ‘In which we mortals rest awhile. That’s what you are telling me, isn’t it? Nothing on this earth can ever belong to a single person, because each person is only passing through the earth and must die one day?’

The sadhu nodded solemnly. Then, bowing to the ground, he removed his white beard and saffron turban and his voice changed. ‘Jahanpanah, forgive me!’ he said, in his normal voice. ‘It was my way of asking you to think about…’

‘Birbal, oh, Birbal!’ the emperor exclaimed. ‘You are wiser than any philosopher. Come, come at once to the royal chamber and let us discuss this further. Even emperors are but wayfarers on the path of life, it is clear!’

BIRBAL THE AMBASSADOR

Birbal was a well-known figure at the court of Emperor Akbar. Visitors who came to the court carried home stories of Birbal's wisdom and humour. His fame grew until other rulers got to hear of him. Many of them were curious. Some were surprised that the mighty Emperor of Hindustan would permit a mere commoner to rise to such a position of trust and familiarity. One day the sultan of a neighbouring country sent a messenger to Emperor Akbar inviting the famous Birbal to visit his court as an ambassador of goodwill.

Akbar had just returned from a victorious campaign and was in a generous mood. He agreed to send Birbal to visit the court of the sultan.

Birbal prepared for the journey with great care. As the emperor's representative he knew he had to dress grandly and travel with enough elephants and attendants to impress the neighbour with the style and wealth of the court at Delhi. After weeks of preparation, the caravan was finally ready to set out on its journey. Birbal went to say goodbye to the emperor. Akbar wished Birbal a safe journey and then he said, 'I shall miss you, my friend. Come back quickly for the court is dull when you are not here.' Birbal smiled and promised he would.

After many days of slow travel, Birbal arrived at the mountain pass which would lead him to the capital of the Sultan's kingdom. Messengers went ahead to tell the Sultan of his arrival in three days time. At the end of the three days, Birbal rode into the capital of the kingdom. His attendants had gone ahead of him and set up a tented settlement in a beautiful walnut grove. Birbal rested and bathed in a running mountain stream and then he dressed in his grandest clothes. Accompanied by his attendants and by servants carrying gifts of silk and sandalwood, baskets of mangoes and caskets of jewels, Birbal made his way to the palace. He was ushered into the royal hall of audience. Smiling and bowing, Birbal entered. And then he stopped dead. The throne was empty! He looked around. To his astonishment, he saw that all the courtiers gathered in the hall were dressed in identical blue and yellow garments. Even their turbans and jewels were alike. They bowed and salaamed Birbal.

All of them were smiling. Birbal could see that many of them were trying hard not to laugh.

Birbal smiled and salaamed them in reply. He took his time, making an elaborate bow and raising his hand slowly. As he did so, he glanced around. His bright eyes missed very little. He soon found what he was looking for. With a gesture at the men who accompanied him, he walked up to one of the men in the crowd and made an especially low salaam. 'Huzoor,' he said, in a ringing voice. 'My emperor, Badshah Akbar, Shahenshah of Hindustan, sends you his compliments. He hopes these humble gifts will serve as a small token of his regard for you and your people.' One by one the richly dressed attendants marched forward to the man Birbal indicated, and laid the emperor's gifts at his feet.

There was utter silence in the court. Nobody was smiling anymore. 'His Majesty, Badshah Akbar, Shahenshah of Hindustan, bade me to tell you that he holds you in high regard, and he sends you his assurance of friendship and goodwill,' Birbal continued to address the man in front of him.

Finally, the sultan spoke. 'Your emperor is a wise and noble ruler, Birbal,' he said at last. 'And he has surrounded himself with worthy people. You have passed the test we laid for you with amazing ease!' He walked across the room and took his place on the throne. He beckoned Birbal and invited him to sit on a low divan that was placed below the throne. It was a mark of high honour to be invited to be seated in the presence of the sultan,

and Birbal bowed very low before he took his seat. ‘I honour you as a man of uncommon intelligence,’ the sultan said. ‘We shall enjoy having you amongst us. But tell us, Birbal, how did you recognise me so quickly? We had made absolutely certain that our appearances were identical in every way.’

Birbal smiled. ‘Sire, your eyes were fixed on me, to see how I reacted. But the eyes of every other person present in the court darted between me and you. They were watching their sultan to see how he behaved, in order to follow his lead. That told me at once who was the king and who the followers!’

THE CARPET SELLER

Birbal had gone to the royal mint to see what progress the engravers were making with Akbar's new Din-i-Ilahi coins. The emperor's profile was to appear on one side of the coins and Birbal had undertaken the task of ensuring that it was a close likeness. He walked slowly down the road past the bazaar, thinking about the engravings he had seen. The road was crowded as people hurried to the Diwan-i-Am, the Hall of Public Audience. Some had come all the way from Agra in search of justice, or help. The court's reputation for justice had spread across the empire and even the poorest peasant came to seek justice at the royal court, confident that the emperor would hear his case. Among the hurrying crowd was a merchant from Persia, who questioned passersby anxiously. 'I have been robbed and cheated. Will your emperor hear my tale? Will he restore my goods? I am a stranger here, and have no one to plead my case. Will your emperor hear me and make reparation?'

Birbal heard the unfamiliar accent and turned to see who the speaker was. What he saw was a bedraggled figure whose robes were torn and whose shoes were dusty and scuffed from journeying on a dusty road. He noticed the embroidery on the shoes, the rich quality of the clothes and turban that the stranger wore. He noticed how the man's forehead was creased with worry and how uncertain he seemed. Slowing down, Birbal waited until the man drew level with him, and then he said, 'Assuredly, Jahanpanah will see that justice is done, stranger. But who do you accuse of robbing you? It is not often that travellers are robbed on the emperor's roads, so close to Fatehpur

Sikri.’

‘It was not on the road, huzoor,’ the stranger replied and his voice was full of anger. ‘I hired a boat to carry my load of carpets from Dilli to Agra, thinking that it would be safer to travel by boat rather than risking the serais on the Dilli-Agra road. I agreed to a handsome rate and the boatman agreed that he would take no passengers but me and my merchandise. We had a safe journey, and reached Agra yesterday. But when we arrived here, the boatman refused to let me unload my carpets. He claims they belong to him! He ordered his men to beat me and throw me off the boat! Is this the justice of your empire? Is this the security of which we are told in our country? Has prosperity brought robbery in its wake?’

The man’s voice rose as he began to think of all that he had lost. ‘My companion died during the journey. I had thought to make a profit and carry the gold back to his wife and children when I break the news to them. My family too is waiting for my return, their hopes pinned on the merchandise I carried across such a distance to your fair land. Am I to return alone and penniless?’ Overcome by his own words, the man began to weep.

‘Jahanpanah is ever fair and just,’ Birbal said to the man. ‘Present your case to him today. Has the boatman come to Sikri as well?’

‘Yes, for when I went to the kotwal in desperation, he sent his men to the boatman and ordered him to present himself at Sikri. He has already arrived I think, for he was able to hire horses for the journey while I had to beg a ride in a cart full of sugarcane.’ Leaving the angry merchant to join the crowd at the entrance to the Diwan-i-Am, Birbal took a shorter path he knew and went to the serai where all travellers to Fatehpur Sikri stayed. It was below the palace complex and had a splendid view of the lake beside Sikri and the fields that lay beyond. He found the boatman, whose name was Suleiman, just finishing a hearty meal that his servants had cooked for him. Birbal greeted him with a flourish and then he said, ‘I’m told you have some carpets for sale.’

‘I do indeed,’ said Suleiman. ‘Just as soon as that rascal foreigner has been adequately punished by Jahanpanah for taking advantage of my generosity. I took pity on him and allowed him to travel in my boat from Dilli to Agra, because he seemed to have lost all his money. When we reached the city, he claimed that the valuable carpets I bought in Dilli belong to him! But justice will be done, huzoor, I’m sure of it. I will bring the carpets for you to see tomorrow.’

‘Genuine Persian carpets, are they?’ Birbal asked.

‘Without a doubt,’ Suleiman answered.

‘And what price do you expect for each one?’

‘Oh, nothing less than twenty gold mohurs,’ Suleiman answered.

‘Twenty gold mohurs? No, no, my friend. Even the best quality Persian carpets do not fetch more than ten mohurs,’ Birbal replied. ‘I am looking for good quality carpets to furnish my new house. If these are of the quality you say they are, I will buy your entire consignment of fifteen carpets, but I’ll pay you no more than ten mohurs for each one.’ The boatman considered Birbal’s offer for a long moment. Then he shrugged slightly and answered, ‘All right, just bring the money tomorrow and I will have the carpets brought here by noon.’

With a salaam and a smile Birbal strode away. He entered the palace complex through the elephant stables and slipped into the Diwan-i-Am from behind the Emperor’s seat. The merchant was seated under a flowering tree beside the entrance. He sat alone, looking miserable. Birbal joined him and

said cheerfully, ‘They say our shahenshah will be here soon. You’ll be able to present your case to him.’

‘I hope he will believe me,’ the merchant said sadly. ‘I am a stranger in this land and do not even have a gift to offer him.’

‘In fact, I myself am looking for a gift for my friend,’ Birbal said conversationally. ‘If you should get your carpets back, no doubt you will be selling them?’

‘But of course. I have brought them to sell, huzoor,’ the man replied. ‘If I get them back, I will give you the first choice. There are some beautiful pieces among them, including one with the immortal Tree of Life design.’

‘And what will the price of your carpets be?’ Birbal asked.

‘There are different prices for each one,’ the merchant replied.

‘I’ll pay you thirty gold mohurs for the Tree of Life carpet,’ Birbal said.

‘Thirty mohurs!’ the merchant cried in outrage. ‘Huzoor, I cannot sell my carpets for less than I bought them. If I get them back, you must see them for yourself and then you will not jest with me about such a low price.’

Birbal nodded and went to join the emperor, well satisfied with his morning’s work.

A short while later, the naqqara musicians began to play and the people crowded into the Diwan-i-Am grew quiet and expectant. Then the herald announced the arrival of the emperor. The emperor’s titles flew off his tongue like bursts of sound, filling the stillness with a sense of awe. The entire crowd bowed deeply, and then slowly raised their eyes, to see the sunlight glinting off the jewels on the emperor’s turban as he took his seat in the jharokha above them.

His courtiers gathered around him and his soldiers took their places in front of the jharokha. Like a wave, the entire crowd seemed to sway towards the emperor’s seat. Nobody actually moved, because there was a system to be observed. Each person would get an opportunity to present his case, but palace officials made sure they did so in a proper order. Leaving the merchant looking anxiously at the royal seat, Birbal slipped through the crowds and went to join the courtiers and advisers who stood just below the emperor’s seat.

Eventually the merchant and the boatman were called to the front. Neither of them noticed Birbal standing amongst the crowd of courtiers. The boatman spoke first. With anger in his voice and tears in his eyes, he told the emperor how he had, in charity, offered a complete stranger space on his boat and

‘When we reached Agra, this ingrate, this stealer of reputations, this…this…demon in disguise began to demand that I hand over my merchandise to him! And now, instead of being allowed to go about my business, I have been forced to come here and to waste Jahanpanah’s precious time with this tale of woe.’ He bowed low and stood back casting angry looks at the bedraggled merchant. All around Birbal the courtiers were shaking their heads and murmuring—‘What will these thieves do next?’ ‘Abusing the poor boatman’s kindness!’ ‘Let him be arrested!’ The merchant looked at them in a frightened way and then he told his story in halting sentences. ‘Jahanpanah, those…those carpets were mine. I have travelled for many days in the hope of bringing them to your city…I am but a humble merchant and I have been robbed. Hear me, O Shahenshah, and give me justice.’ His voice was faint and he looked nervous and scared. The murmurs around Birbal grew more fierce. ‘He should be punished.’ ‘He is clearly guilty.’ ‘Look, how frightened he is. He must be the wrongdoer.’

Akbar looked down at the two men and then at his murmuring courtiers. All the people in the Diwan-i-Am were quiet, waiting for the emperor’s verdict. The emperor frowned. Then he leaned forward and said, ‘Well, what do you advise, my friends?’ At once the courtiers began to give their opinions. The boatman smiled as he listened to their words and the merchant bowed his head as if he had already been condemned. Then suddenly Birbal’s voice rose above the others. ‘Jahanpanah, they are wrong! It is the boatman who is the thief.’

‘Really, friend Birbal?’ asked Raja Man Singh in a sarcastic tone. ‘Perhaps you were on the boat, and saw the whole thing with your own eyes?’

‘I used my eyes and my brain!’ Birbal replied. And then turning to the emperor once more he explained, ‘I met these men in the city and spoke to them. The boatman has no idea of the value of the merchandise. He is out to sell it as fast as he can and make whatever rhoney he can out of it. The merchant knows each carpet and values each one. He did not know if he would get his goods back, but he was not willing to promise them to anyone at an unfairly low cost. Let the merchandise be brought here before us now! We will see who knows it well, and which of them can tell us the true value of each carpet!’

It did not take very long for the truth to be discovered. The boatman, who had spoken with such lying confidence was imprisoned and the merchant

moved to a place in the serai from where he did brisk business. The Tree of Life carpet was sold to Birbal at a reasonable cost, and became one of his proudest possessions.

BIRBAL THE DETECTIVE

Birbal was on the roof of his house doing his early morning yoga exercises when he heard the sound of running footsteps on the stone-flagged path below.

His servant's voice came up clearly in the early morning quiet, and the voice that answered him, of Anwar Ali, a mansabdar who was a fearless leader in battle. 'I must see your master at once!' he cried. 'It is an emergency. See, I have not even paused to put on my outdoor slippers. I have come running for help at once.' Birbal completed his surya namaskar and then he stood up, moving towards the stairs. But there was no need to go down, because Anwar Ali came running up, panting from the exertion and from anxiety.

'Birbal, Birbal, you must help me at once. I shall be ruined if you do not!'

The servant appeared close behind Anwar Ali. He looked scared. 'Huzoor, I tried to tell him you were not to be disturbed…'

'Never mind. Go and bring us some sherbet and fruit. And some cushions and rugs to sit on.' Then he turned to his friend and said, 'Now tell me slowly, as slowly as you can, bhai. What has happened?'

'What has happened?' cried Anwar Ali beginning to pant and sweat all over again. 'Happened? A disaster, that's what. Ruination and tragedy, that's what! Disgrace and exile, probably. Poverty and death, I tell you!'

Birbal handed him a cup of water and said, 'Stop, slow down, my friend. Now tell me slowly, very slowly.'

Anwar Ali's eyes still darted around the terrace, but he sat down heavily

on the rugs that the servant spread and began to speak in short jerky sentences. ‘I arrived yesterday from Lahore. Jahanpanah had trusted me with the purchase of twelve flawless emeralds for the necklace he plans to give the empress for Diwali next week. I bought the best emeralds I could find. They were stones such as you have never seen before. Absolutely perfect, and very rare. I carried them in a pouch inside my kurta all the way back. I even slept with the pouch next to my chest at night. They were with me when I got home. I placed them in a hidden niche I have in my room, under a lamp, before I went to have a bath. I was gone only or so. When I returned and lifted the lamp, the emeralds were gone! God only knows how! Some villain must have been watching me. Somebody must have known of the mission the emperor gave me. Unless it was djinns? Unless it was ghosts or some evil spirit?’ Anwar Ali’s voice rose as he spoke. He jumped to his feet and began to pace up and down the roof, knocking over his untouched glass of khus sherbet. Birbal moved the rug out of the way of the sticky drink and began to walk beside his friend. ‘Calm yourself, my friend.’

‘C-c-c-calm?’ cried Anwar Ali. ‘I might as well fling myself from your roof and then we can all be calm. Do you know what the emperor will do to me? He’ll have me torn apart by wild elephants! He’ll drown me in the lake! He’ll have me trampled during the next elephant fight! He’ll…He’ll.

‘He’ll get his emeralds back!’ Birbal said firmly, taking his friend by the shoulders and shaking him. ‘I will get the emeralds back for you.’

‘Ruined. I might as well die now. Poison, that’s the answer. Have you any poison, Birbal? Maybe one that will work fast?’

‘I will get the emeralds back!’ Birbal yelled into his friend’s ear.

‘Oh,’ said Anwar Ali. ‘You don’t have to shout, Birbal, I’m not deaf.’

Birbal took three deep breaths. Then, very quietly, he said, ‘Who was in your house when it happened, bhai?’

‘In my house … in my house…let’s see. The syce was outside, seeing to my horse. The water carrier had just poured water for my bath. The maid was cooking my meal. The boy had just put out my clothes for me. My hookah bearer was preparing a hookah.’

‘Send for them all,’ Birbal told his friend. ‘And do not worry. I will dress and come to your house in a short while. We will find the thief.’

Anwar Ali was less agitated now. He drank Birbal’s glass of sherbet in an absentminded fashion and, stepping heedlesly into the green pool of the sherbet he had spilled, he left a trail of sticky footprints all down the stairs.

Birbal dressed and had his morning meal in thoughtful silence. Then he went to the carpenter’s workshop and spoke to the head carpenter, choosing five equal lengths of bamboo.

His preparations made, Birbal walked briskly to Anwar Ali’s house. Leaving his slippers outside the house, Birbal went into the baithak, where Anwar Ali was sitting, his head in his hands, his clothes all in a mess. He sprang up when he saw Birbal, clapping his hands to summon his servants. From behind a chik curtain, his wife and two daughters watched anxiously.

The servants entered the room, a subdued and frightened bunch, standing nervously near the door.

Birbal looked at each one. His eyes glittered. Then he announced in a loud and positive tone, ‘One of you is a thief!’ He banged his walking stick on the ground as he spoke. The room echoed with the burst of sound. The servants began to tremble. ‘No, no, huzoor. There has been a mistake,’ came a murmur of protests.

‘I have served nawab sahib for ten years with utter loyalty,’ cried the syce, falling at Birbal’s feet.

‘My brother served with huzoor in the army. I would give my life for him!’ cried the water bearer.

The maid wept and sobbed, unable to say a word.

The hookah bearer shook his head and trembled. His mouth opened and closed but no sound came out.

The boy who looked after Anwar Ali’s clothes put his head at Birbal’s feet and begged him to discover the thief.

Birbal looked at each one very carefully, staring into their eyes until they were forced to lower them. Then he pulled the five lengths of bamboo out of a bag. His voice became low and menacing. ‘I have in my possession these magic bamboo sticks. They were made by a famous magician in Bukhara. He has used them often to find honest individuals for the royal court. And now they are in my possession. Each of these sticks has a special power.’

He handed one length of bamboo to each of the servants. ‘These magic sticks know how to trap a thief!’ he roared. Even Anwar Ali jumped. The servants were pale and trembling. From behind the chik curtain, the women watched the bamboo in fascinated stillness.

‘Tomorrow, you will bring the sticks back to me. The magic stick that is in the possession of the thief will grow by exactly two inches. Tomorrow we will know without a doubt who the thief is. These sticks are over a hundred years old and they have never been wrong.’

After the servants had crept away, Anwar Ali turned to his old friend and said, ‘Tell me Birbal, is such a thing really possible? You were so convincing that even I am beginning to wonder if there is some truth to what you said.’

Birbal smiled and sipped his sherbet. ‘We will see tomorrow,’ was all he would say, as he took his leave and began to stroll down the paved path that led to the palace.

Early the next morning, a servant from Birbal’s house went to the homes of the servants and collected the bamboos, making each one sign his name or make a recognisable mark on the bamboo so that it could be identified later. When Birbal arrived at Anwar Ali’s house, they were all waiting worriedly outside the front door. Birbal led them in and then he laid the lengths of bamboo out on the floor. They were all the same length, except for one. It was two inches shorter than the others! The freshly cut edge made it clear what had happened. Birbal glanced at the mark on the stick. ‘You, Raju the

hookah bearer,’ Birbal roared. ‘Your guilty conscience betrayed you. The others trusted their honesty and returned the bamboos as I had given them. You were afraid that the length would be different because you had the emeralds in your house—so you cut the bamboo two inches, believing that it had grown in the night as I had said. You have declared yourself guilty more effectively than any lawyer could have!’

When Anwar Ali came to visit Birbal that evening, he brought with him an enormous basket of mangoes, which Birbal loved. ‘I can eat and sleep once again,’ he told his old friend. The emeralds are safely in the emperor’s possession!’

THE BEAUTY CONTEST

At Akbar's new city of Fatehpur Sikri, there were many different kinds of workshops, making all kinds of things, from guns to paintings. Akbar took a keen interest in the craftsmen who worked in these karkhanas and often visited them to see how they were progressing. The karkhana in which the miniature painters worked was a large airy room into which the winter sun streamed. It lit up the pearly clam shells in which the painters mixed their colours, shining on the smooth surface of the paper which artist Madhu Kurd was preparing by rubbing it with a smooth piece of agate. It fell on the clutter of brushes and charcoal at Tulsi Kalan's elbow and it lit up the hunting scene which he was sketching. Bhawani, an artist whose paintings of Fatehpur Sikri had been used in the bound version of *the Ain-i-Akbari*, the history of Akbar's reign, had almost finished a new painting. It showed Akbar resting in a pavilion during a hunt. All the familiar faces were there, and the artist had included some new faces, from his imagination to a group of servants who stood with dishes of food ready to be served. 'What a plain-looking individual this is!' Akbar said, pointing to one of the servants. 'Surely you could have given me a more pleasant-faced servant, Bhawani?' The artist bowed, his face creased with worry. 'I beg your pardon, huzoor,' he murmured. 'Your worthless servant has committed a terrible error.'

Birbal took the emperor aside.

'Jahanpanah,' he whispered. 'It grieves me to disagree with you. I speak with reluctance and fear, huzoor, but I beg that you will permit me to disagree.'

‘Disagree?’ Akbar exclaimed. Then he saw the twinkle in Birbal’s eyes and as always, he began’to smile. ‘All right, I give you permission. What have you to disagree with, Birbal?’

Raising his hand to shield his mouth so that no one would overhear or lip-read his words, Birbal murmured, ‘Huzoor, that figure in the painting is perfectly good looking. Would you not consider allowing Bhawani to proceed with the work?’

Akbar looked at Birbal for a long moment. ‘Oho, my friend,’ he said. ‘So now you have set yourself up as a judge of art and good looks in addition to everything else, have you!’

‘I would never presume to such a thing,’ Birbal murmured, but his eyes were full of amusement.

Akbar turned suddenly and spoke to the assembled courtiers, ‘Birbal here thinks he is now a judge of good looks!’ he announced. The courtiers began to smile. Was the emperor going to make a fool of his favourite at last?

They listened eagerly.

‘My dear friend Birbal is going to find me a perfectly beautiful child. He will do so by tomorrow morning. The child will have to be a boy and he will have to be perfect in all aspects. Let us see how many of us agree with Birbal’s judgement of beauty!’

Birbal bowed to his emperor, accepting the challenge.

‘Tomorrow, at the Diwan-i-Khas!’ the emperor said. Birbal went down to the village of Sikri and sat for a long time in a maidan where boys of all ages were flying kites. Saif, the son of Faiz Khan, was considered a handsome youth, but studying him carefully, Birbal saw that his chin was too pointed. Munna, who was mad about elephants and spent all day helping the mahouts was certainly good looking, Birbal mused, and yet…and yet, could one call a boy handsome whose eyebrows met in the middle of his forehead, as Munna’s did? Birbal’s gaze went from one boy to another. None of them had absolute, perfect beauty. Each one had some flaw or the other. He got up slowly from the rock on which he had been sitting and strolled through the village, looking at all the people he passed with a new awareness. Soldiers strode past, their moustaches turned up smartly, craftsmen walked by, barely looking up, their minds busy with their work. There were cooks and carpenters, weavers and potters; Birbal looked at each one carefully. There were cheerful faces and frowning faces, faces that were creased with worry and others that seemed to see an invisible beauty in the air. So many different

kinds of faces. Birbal saw how each face told the world something about the thoughts in that person's mind and something about that person's life. He remembered how there was a man in the bazaar who said he could 'read' faces.

Birbal thought about the artists in the karkhana and wondered how they chose which faces they would put in the paintings. Each face had its own story to tell. Birbal walked slower and slower as he neared his house. He washed up and went to have his evening meal. His wife came to sit near him as he ate. As he dipped his fingers into the biryani she had made for him, and enjoyed the fragrant chillies and dahi that went with it, Birbal told his wife about his dilemma. 'I have yet to find the perfect child,' he said slowly. 'Each person I look at is both good looking and plain, depending on what I'm looking for.'

Just then, Birbal's young son Gopal came running into the house. He came calling out to his mother and ran up the stairs when he smelt the aroma of the meal Birbal was being served. Birbal looked up as the boy entered. His cheeks were red with exertion and his clothes were dusty with the evening's games. He smiled at his father and his eyes glowed in his flushed face.

'Wash your hands and come, you may eat with your father this evening,' Birbal's wife told her son. The boy ran to do so and as he turned, Birbal began to smile.

'I've found an answer to the emperor's puzzle,' he said and would say nothing more.

The next morning, Birbal asked his wife to dress their son with extra care. 'But why?' she asked. 'Don't you have to go to the Diwan-i-Khas? Isn't this the time that the emperor wants to see you at his side?'

'Yes.'

'Yes? Is that all you will say, just yes?'

'Yes,' said Birbal.

His wife looked at Birbal with growing alarm. 'Do you intend to take our son to the emperor's palace?' she asked. 'How will you keep the child quiet in the august presence? What if he disturbs Jahanpanah?'

'Send Ramu the servant to wait outside. I will send the boy back in a very short while.' Taking his walking stick in one hand and his son's hand in the other, Birbal proceeded to the Diwan-i-Khas at a leisurely pace. Other ministers and advisers, princes and visitors were also going in the same direction. They murmured to each other. Some began to smile. Birbal walked

on as if he was quite unaware of all the comments. His son skipped along beside him, looking curiously at all the grandly dressed people who were walking in small groups towards the beautifully carved building in which the emperor met his courtiers and advisors.

Birbal greeted his fellow courtiers but refused to talk to any of them, smiling and refusing to answer their questions. Then the drums and the herald announced the arrival of the emperor. All the courtiers bowed and a murmur of respectful greetings filled the hall. Birbal's son bowed too, copying his father.

Akbar settled himself on the Persian carpets which were spread on a platform under a delicately decorated canopy. 'Well, Birbal my friend, what have we here? Is this the most beautiful lad you could find? Bring him to me and let me judge.' Looking very serious, Birbal did as he was told. The emperor watched father and son walk towards him. Birbal was a handsome man, tall and well-built, with a straight, elegant nose and a wide smiling mouth. His best feature was his eyes, which were large and brilliant and full of expression. Unfortunately, his son Gopal looked like his mother. He had a snub nose and a slight squint. Even the kindest of friends would not call him a good-looking child. Akbar stared at him in disbelief. The courtiers began to hide their smiles behind their hands. A shifting and rustling sound filled the hall, as people turned to smile at each other. Everybody looked expectantly at Akbar.

Akbar stared at the boy and then at Birbal. Birbal remained absolutely serious. Suddenly Akbar gave a roar of laughter and understanding. 'Oh Birbal, my Birbal, you…you…Come, approach my seat child, and take this diamond as a mark of my regard. Send him home, Birbal, you have made your point.'

And as Birbal led his son away, Akbar turned to his puzzled courtiers and said, 'Oh, you fools, don't you understand what Birbal was telling us? To every parent his child is the most exquisite being in creation; for beauty is in the eye of the beholder. We cannot judge beauty or have absolute standards, because each person has his own sense of what is beautiful.'

'And isn't that a fortunate circumstance,' said Birbal entering with a smile that looked as if it would split his face in two. 'Imagine if there was only one kind of good looks, one kind of beauty, how wretchedly boring that would be!'

'Send word to Bhawani the painter. Let the servant's face be as it is. No doubt some will think it a beautiful face!' Akbar cried, smiling at Birbal as he spoke.

BLINDNESS

It was a full moon night. Emperor Akbar and his favourite courtiers were seated on the terrace of the palace, waiting for Tansen. He was to sing for them that evening. ‘He is late,’ Raja Man Singh whispered to Birbal. ‘Shahenshah has not noticed it as he is too busy talking to the vistor from Portugal. But Mian Tansen had better come quickly or the emperor will be displeased.’ The two friends looked anxiously at the steps which led to the terrace. It was more than twenty minutes before Tansen appeared. He was panting slightly. ‘Forgive me, Shahenshah, I beg your pardon,’ he said breathlessly. ‘I had mislaid my tanpura and was searching for it all over.’

‘A tanpura is a large thing to mislay, my friend,’ said the emperor who was in a cheerful mood. ‘How did you manage to do such a thing?’

Tansen looked embarrassed. ‘Uh…oh…it…it was behind the door and I somehow overlooked it,’ he murmured, adding quickly, ‘Shall I go down to my seat and begin?’

There was a ripple of laughter. Akbar joined in the merriment. Then he nodded to Tansen to go down to the special stage in the centre of a pond from where his voice carried up to the terrace. As Tansen and his students went down, Birbal remarked, ‘It is quite amazing how blind we can be, even though God has given us eyes.’

‘What do you mean?’ the emperor asked. Several others called out their protests. An argument followed. Birbal listened to everyone but he said once again, ‘A person with the best eyesight in the world can still be blind when he will not look at what is in front of him.’ The discussion only came to an end when the sounds of the tanpura floated up to the terrace.

A few days later, Birbal carried an old charpai to the centre of the village. He removed all the old string that had been used to weave the cot. Settling down on a small wooden stool, he began to restring the cot. Abdul Aziz, one of Akbar’s generals happened to pass by. ‘What in the world are you doing, Birbal?’ he asked.

Birbal smiled and nodded but he did not reply.

A little while later, Tansen himself came that way. ‘Birbal, what is this? What are you up to now?’ Once again, Birbal smiled but refused to answer. Soon word got to the court that Birbal had gone quite mad and was stringing a cot in the middle of the busy bazaar. One by one, all the courtiers came to see for themselves. Soon word reached emperor Akbar. Even he came to find out what his friend was up to. ‘Birbal, what is going on? What are you doing?’ the emperor demanded. ‘Have you gone entirely mad?’

At that, Birbal stopped what he was doing. He rose and bowed to his emperor. ‘Huzoor, since I have been here, fifty-six intelligent men have come to ask me what I am doing. I am stringing a cot as each one of them and—forgive me, Jahanpanah—even you—can plainly see. Yet fifty-six times I have been asked what I am doing. Is that not a kind of blindness? Their eyes are telling them what is in front of them, but they refuse to understand. We are blind because we do not use our minds as well as our senses, is that not so?’

THE FOOL-HUNT

Akbar had returned from fighting a long war in Gujarat. He said he wanted to forget about wars and politics for a little while. He declared an evening of music to celebrate the full moon. A few of his favourite courtiers were invited to join him on the terrace of his palace. Below, on a seat in the middle of a square pond, Mian Tansen, the legendary musician, was singing. The water in the pond and the hollow space beneath the seat on which Tansen sat, made his voice echo through the courtyard. Every note rose clearly and beautifully up to the terrace, where Akbar and his friends sat listening in silent content. In the Panch Mahal, the women of the zenana were listening too, and the soft sounds of their ankle bells and the tinkle of ice in their glasses of sherbet added a quiet background to the beautiful music.

Mian Tansen finished his raga and joined the emperor on the terrace, quietly accepting the praise that everybody showered on him. Food and drinks were brought and gradually the conversation shifted to other subjects. As always, Akbar was interested in the sayings of wise men and in hearing about learned visitors to Fatehpur Sikri in his absence.

‘There was a man who came from Dilli in your absence, Jahanpanah,’ Tansen said, with a twinkle in his eye. ‘Everybody said he was very wise, but when he began to speak, his words were utterly without wisdom.’

‘Then you did not look at him closely,’ Akbar said. ‘It is easy to spot a wise man. His eyes have intelligence and his walk is thoughtful and measured. It is fools who hide in the guise of sensible individuals and only

when you engage them in conversation does their foolishness become clear to you!'

'Jahanpanah, if you will permit me and forgive me, I would like to disagree with your words,' Birbal said, turning towards the emperor.

Akbar frowned. Some of the courtiers, who had begun to look a bit sleepy, brightened up and listened attentively.

'Fools give themselves away with every action, every word,' Birbal said. 'Not only does a fool have a silly expression, everything he undertakes is an exercise in idiocy.'

'Are there so many fools in our empire then?' Raja Man Singh demanded. 'Are you saying we live in a city of fools? Are there so many fools walking the streets of Fatehpur Sikri, just waiting to be found?'

'All around us,' Birbal said airily, waving his hands in the direction of the town.

'Find them for me then, these fools that you can spot so easily,' Akbar said suddenly.

'Let us have a contest of fools and Birbal, I shall expect you to gather at least eight by midday tomorrow. If they are truly foolish, I shall give each a reward and you, my gatherer of fools, will get the biggest reward of all!' All those near by began to laugh at the idea of Birbal going on a fool-hunt!

'And will you produce your fools by tomorrow, my friend?' Raja Man Singh asked as he and some others joined Birbal on the stairs on their way out of the palace.

'Oh yes,' Birbal answered and he went home and had a good night's sleep.

Early the next morning, Birbal set out on the road to Agra. He stopped just outside the wall of Fatehpur Sikri and he began to watch all those who came towards the huge iron-studded gate.

Birbal hadn't been there very long when he came across a dhobi riding a donkey. The donkey seemed quite comfortable, but the man was struggling to balance an enormous bundle of clothes on top of his head.

Birbal rode up beside the weary washerman, 'Why do you struggle with such a load?' he asked. 'Why not tie it behind you and ride comfortably?'

The dhobi couldn't turn his head but he answered from beneath the bundle. 'My donkey is old and tired, huzoor. He has not long to live. I am trying to help him. I would have carried him too, but he would not let me pick him up. At least I can help him by bearing some of his load.'

Birbal smiled delightedly. ‘Come to the Diwan-i-Am at noon, my friend. The emperor will give you a gift.’ The dhobi promised he would. Birbal turned his horse back to the highway, leaving the dhobi to struggle onwards with his bundle. Birbal hadn’t gone far when he came upon a father and his son digging an empty field. It was not the season to plough or to plant and so Birbal stopped to ask them what they were doing. ‘Oh, huzoor, see our misfortune,’ the father exclaimed. ‘I had buried some money in this field during the harvest season. Now that my son is getting married, we will need it soon. We have been digging for three days now and cannot find our pot of mohurs.’

‘Are you sure of the spot?’ Birbal asked.

‘Oh, very sure. This is our field, you see.’

‘Did you not mark the place where you buried the mohurs?’ Birbal asked.

‘We did,’ the son replied. ‘I buried the pot right next to the place where we saw the peacock dancing.’

‘The emperor will give you some mohurs if you come to the palace at noon and tell him your tale,’ Birbal said, turning his horse around so that the two men would not see him laughing.

It was nearly time for his morning meal and Birbal urged his horse towards the gates of the capital. All around him, farmers were bringing their sacks of grain and vegetables to the market, and soldiers from the emperor’s army were riding back and forth on royal business. The road was beginning to get crowded, and Birbal’s horse slowed down to make room for a cart laden with sugarcane. On the dusty edge of the road, Birbal saw two men fighting. He dismounted and cracked his whip over their heads. They sprang back at the sudden sound and at that moment, Birbal shouted to them to stop. They paused, panting. ‘What is the matter?’ Birbal demanded. ‘Don’t you know you are not allowed to disturb the peace on the emperor’s highway?’

‘Forgive me, huzoor,’ one man said, picking up his turban which had fallen off and lay in the dust. ‘This… this…dog of a Lalloo Ram said he would wish for a tiger to eat my bull, when all I wanted was a glass of milk. Why should he do that? Why should he want to have my bull eaten and deprive me of a small glass of milk?’

‘Bulls don’t give milk, you fool!’ Birbal exclaimed.

‘B-but,’ said the man in surprise.

‘As if my tiger would bother to eat his mangy bull,’ Lalloo Ram cried. ‘I only wished for a tiger because it would get us to the village faster than a bull

that we have to stop and milk.’

‘And you wished for a bull so that you could milk it and have a glass of milk?’ Birbal asked the first man, trying not to laugh out loud. The man nodded. ‘And now I am thirsty and dusty and my kurta is torn,’ he added sadly.

Birbal gave them a coin. ‘This will pay for two glasses of milk at the shop under that tree,’ he told them. ‘If you come to the palace at noon and tell your story again, without fighting about it, the emperor himself will give you a reward.’

Dusting off their clothes, the two men hurried to the food shop, their quarrel forgotten.

Birbal rode through the gates of the great fortified capital of the Mughal empire, thinking of all that he had seen. He needed one more fool, perhaps he would find such a person in town. Meanwhile, both he and his horse were hungry and thirsty so he set out on the path that led up the hill to his house. He hadn’t gone very far, when he came upon a man who was lying on his back in a puddle of water, crying for help. His arms were held stiffly in front of him and he was rolling back and forth in an effort to get to his feet. Birbal wondered if he was having a fit, or whether his arms were broken. Quickly dismounting from his saddle, Birbal seized the man by his shoulders and hauled him to his feet. ‘What is the matter?’ he asked. ‘Shall I take you to the hakim sahib?’

The man shook his head, his arms still held out stiffly in front of him. ‘I am a carpenter, kind sir,’ he answered. ‘I have not had work for many days, and today, the owner of the grain shop has asked me to build a shelf for him. It is to be this wide,’ he nodded at his stiff, outstretched arms. ‘Unfortunately, I tripped on a rock and fell down. If I had let my arms down to pick myself up, I would have lost the measurement that the shopkeeper gave me. That is why I could not get up. Now I will rush back to my workshop and measure the correct piece of wood for the shelf.’ Bowing his head in gratitude he hurried off.

Birbal ran after him. ‘Come to the palace at noon,’ he told the carpenter. ‘The emperor himself will give you a gift!’

‘Ji huzoor, ji huzoor,’ cried the man in amazed joy and hurried off, his arms still outstretched.

At noon, Birbal and his crowd of fools gathered at the palace. One by one, Akbar listened to their stories. The palace rang with laughter and the clink of coins as Akbar rewarded each bewildered fool, who wasn’t sure why he was being rewarded. When the fools had gone and everyone was silent once more, Akbar said, ‘Birbal, I will not reward you, for you have failed in the task!’

‘Failed, my emperor?’

‘I asked for eight fools but I have seen only six,’ Emperor Akbar said.

Birbal bowed. Then he looked up and everyone.could see his merry smile. ‘Jahanpanah, forgive me. The seventh fool is I, for spending a whole morning on such a quest.’ He looked down at the floor and continued softly, ‘And Jahanpanah, what can I say?’

There was a moment’s silence.

Akbar began to laugh. He laughed and laughed so much he could hardly speak. ‘And the eighth fool is he who sent you on such a quest, is it, my Birbal? Yes, we are fools indeed!’ He threw a bag of gold mohurs at Birbal’s feet. ‘A richly deserved reward, my friend. Send for the scribe and let us record the story of our battle now. There has been enough foolishness for today!’

MURDER!

Birbal had a cough. He stayed home for three days, drinking the ginger and honey tonic his wife made for him, and soothing his throat with hot drinks. On the fourth day, feeling better, he dressed and strolled towards the emperor's palace. It was time for the informal gathering that took place in the evenings, when Akbar was not away from his capital. Birbal smiled. It felt good to be well again and he was looking forward to hearing all the news. He had just passed the spectacular Panch Mahal, when he heard footsteps running to catch up with him. He turned and waited for his friend Raja Man Singh. 'Have you heard?' the Rajput said breathlessly. 'Do you know the terrible news?'

Birbal looked at Raja Man Singh's worried face and he shook his head. 'I've been ill and seen nobody,' he said briefly. 'What has happened?'

'It happened only this morning and…and I just heard that Tansen… Tansen…' he paused, unable to continue.

Birbal looked at him in alarm. 'This is frightening indeed. Is Tansen all right?'

'Oh, he is all right; that is to say, he is well. But… Jahanpanah has had him imprisoned.'

'Imprisoned? How can this be?'

Raja Man Singh took a deep breath. 'Do you remember that young singer, Badal Ram?'

'Of course. He sang only last month. He is getting better every day. In fact, I was telling my wife only the other day that it looks as if we have

another Tansen in our midst.’

‘Never say that!’ Raja Man Singh exclaimed. ‘Listen, before you say another word. Yesterday at noon, Badal Ram was found dead near the main gateway. It is believed that someone killed him and many are whispering that Tansen had him poisoned out of jealousy.’

‘Tansen would be unable to even poison the rats in his house!’ Birbal said forcefully. ‘The very idea is ridiculous.’

They had reached the palace by this time. The gathering of courtiers was very subdued and even Akbar looked distracted and worried. He managed to smile when he saw Birbal. Bowing and asking permission to speak, Birbal said, ‘Jahanpanah, surely you cannot believe that Tansen would ever do such a thing.’

‘Who else would have reason to wish that young man ill? Oh, half my pleasure in life has been destroyed by this one act of jealousy.’

‘And the other half of your pleasure will be destroyed by your own act, Jahanpanah. With Tansen in prison, you will be utterly deprived of music. How can this be?’

‘Justice must be done!’ Emperor Akbar thundered. ‘and if Tansen is guilty, I will’ not place him above the law, even if he sings like an angel.’

‘Ah, but is Tansen guilty?’ Birbal asked.

Akbar looked at him in anger. ‘Am I a fool to sentence an innocent man to prison, a man so close to my heart? Of course he is guilty. Didn’t Hookam Beg see him buying something from the herb seller in Agra? And wasn’t Badal poisoned? The hakim recognised the symptoms when he was called to treat the young man.’

‘Huzoor, why was Hookam Beg at the herb shop? How did he see what Tansen was buying? What had Tansen to say?’

There was utter silence in the court. Akbar looked at Birbal for a long while. ‘It seems I have been hasty, Birbal. Let Hookam Beg and Tansen be sent for. Let the herb seller be called too, and Badal Ram’s family.’

A formal court of justice was held the following day. Birbal was given the task of questioning the people involved, while the emperor sat in judgement.

‘No,’ said the herb seller. He did not remember what Tansen had bought that day. He did not think it was a poisonous plant, however. Tansen usually bought herbs that soothed the throat or strengthened the chest.

Hookam Beg said he had been in the shop to buy ingredients for a

special.tonic he made for his horses. The herb seller agreed that he often did so.

Birbal let them both go and then he turned to the emperor. ‘Who would have wanted to kill that young man?’ He turned to the others, ‘Did he have any enemies, does anyone know?’

There was a general shaking of heads. Nobody knew much about the young man, it appeared. Then one man whispered to another. ‘I believed he belonged to a clan who are the sworn enemies of the Bhams of Bhamisar.’

Emperor Akbar ordered Tansen to be released until the matter was cleared up. He was forbidden to leave town, but within the walls of Fatehpur Sikri, he was free to wander wherever he wished. In the evening, he was called to sing as usual. He could not refuse his emperor, but all who heard him agreed that his music was as sad as his face.

‘There will be no happy music until his name is completely cleared,’ Birbal said to Raja Man Singh and the two friends set about investigating the case.

Birbal began to question people in and around the town. One dark night, he dressed up as a horse trader and stood around the bazaar for a long time, listening to people talking. Gradually, the story emerged. Badal Ram was not the actual name of the young man. Once, in a fit of anger, he had killed a Bham clansman and had been obliged to flee for his life. Having trained as a singer, he disguised himself, took a new name and began to sing at the court of a neighbouring raja. His fame spread, and fearing that he would be exposed, he travelled to the Mughal court at Agra, thinking that the long distance from his own home would foil his pursuers. It had, for a short while. But they found him in the end.

Birbal sent messengers to Bham and to Badal Ram’s home to investigate further. Soon all the facts were in his hands. He carried his story to Akbar.

‘A sad tale,’ Akbar said, shaking his head. ‘I am glad you stopped me from destroying all my happiness and losing both my singers out of haste and lack of thought.’ Then he turned to Tansen. ‘Emperors do not usually ask forgiveness of their subjects, Tansen,’ he said quietly. ‘But I ask your pardon now.’

And Tansen responded with a song of joy and gratitude.

THE CELESTIAL PALACE

Akbar enjoyed listening to travellers' tales of faraway places. Once a traveller from China came to the court at Fatehpur Sikri. He told the emperor about the beauties of his homeland, and of the grand palaces the Chinese rulers lived in. The emperor listened in fascinated silence. The traveller, encouraged by all the attention he was getting began to exaggerate a little. He described a summer palace in the mountains, which he had never seen. Using his imagination, he told the emperor that the palace was built of the palest of stone and the lightest of wood and adorned with jade. It was, he said, an architectural miracle, a palace so light and airy, he said, it seemed to float in the air. 'It must have been built by djinns,' he told the court. 'It is like no other palace I have seen in all my years of travel.'

A few days after the traveller had gone, Akbar began a discussion on the art of building. He had been involved in every step of building Fatehpur Sikri and he loved beautiful architecture. 'Surely,' he said, turning to Birbal, 'Surely even we can devise a palace so light it would seem to float in the air. Perhaps we could even find a way to make a celestial palace. We have the money, we have skilled and clever builders, we have …'

'Forgive me for interrupting you, Jahanpanah,' Birbal said, and he could not help smiling. 'Djinns can do the impossible, we humans can only dream of such wonders!'

Akbar hated being interrupted, and to be interrupted by Birbal telling him what he could and could not do! He lost his temper. 'Not only will we dream of celestial palaces, my dear friend, he said, with a frown, 'we will also have

them. Are you trying to tell the Emperor of Hindustan what he can or cannot do?'

'I beg your pardon,' Birbal cried. 'I spoke out of turn. My tongue betrayed me. Forgive me, I implore you!'

Akbar was still irritated. 'Perhaps I will forgive you,' he said unsmilingly, 'if you build me a celestial palace!' As all the courtiers gasped in horror, he flung Birbal a bag of gold coins. 'You have one month to begin work. When that month is over, I shall come in person to see what progress you have made. Go now, and begin!'

Birbal bowed and left the court. When news reached his wife of what had happened, she began to weep in despair. 'You see what your wit and disobedient tongue have led us to,' she said to Birbal. 'What is to become of us? This is surely the end!'

'I will find a way out, never fear,' Birbal told her firmly, but he was worried. Three days went by. Birbal refused to see any visitors. He sat alone on the terrace of his house, smoking hookah after hookah and thinking. His wife moved about the house in a flood of tears, unable to eat or to speak.

On the morning of the fourth day, Birbal had his bath very early and set off to the bazaar. All the shops were closed and the streets were silent. Birbal went straight to the house of the bird-seller. The man was surprised to see him and bowed low, ‘I beg your pardon for receiving you in my nightclothes,’ he said, pulling out a bench for Birbal to sit on. He wiped the bench and placed it in a corner of the verandah of his shop. ‘Tell me how I may serve you, huzoor.’

‘I want at least five hundred parrots,’ Birbal told the man, pulling out his purse and placing some gold mohurs upon the bench. ‘I want them delivered in secret to a haveli on the outskirts of the town. You are to keep this absolutely secret. Do you understand?’ He looked up suddenly and the man met his eyes squarely.

‘You can trust me, huzoor,’ he said.

For the next two weeks, Birbal left his house every morning at dawn and rode out of town to the haveli he had rented. He returned every night. ‘He refuses to answer any questions,’ Birbal’s wife told her friends. ‘All he says is that he is training his workmen. But at least he is more cheerful and so I am no longer afraid.’

On the appointed day, Birbal hired five carts. He arrived at the emperor’s palace followed by the carts which rattled noisily up the slope to the gates that led to the Diwan-i-Am and the private courtyard that lay behind it.

Emperor Akbar had missed his favourite courtier’s conversation and jokes. He was sorry that he had made such an unreasonable demand, but he knew he could not go back on it now. ‘Well, Birbal,’ he demanded, as Birbal bowed to him. ‘Have you begun work on my celestial palace?’

‘Indeed I have, Jahanpanah. And I have brought it to show you how far I have progressed.’

‘Really?’ Emperor Akbar raised his eyebrows. ‘You must be a djinn after all!’ The courtiers began to smile and nudge each other.

While Birbal was talking to the emperor the cart men had been rapidly unloading large wickerwork cages in which the parrots had been brought to the palace. Now, at a sign from Birbal, they began to release the parrots. Suddenly the entire courtyard was filled with a flurry of bright green wings. The parrots flew around crying, ‘Bring the mortar!’ ‘Bring the bricks! ‘Bring the stone!’

Some flew out of the huge courtyard and could be heard crying in the

distance. Others perched on the roof of the enclosing walls and fell silent. When the hubbub had died down a little, Birbal said calmly, ‘As you can see Jahanpanah, my workmen are busy building the celestial palace. They have been working for a month and have made good progress I’m told.’ He paused and Akbar nodded. He was beginning to smile. There was utter silence in the court. ‘Huzoor, the palace is high up in the sky. My workmen, being birds, have no difficulty coming and going. Alas, we poor humans are earthbound and cannot reach the celestial palace. It is there, but it is not visible to our eyes!’

Akbar began to laugh. The sound of his laughter mingled with the cries of the parrots, and slowly the others understood how clever Birbal had been.

MOTHER TONGUE

Although Emperor Akbar himself never learnt to read and write properly, he had great respect for scholars. He had a valuable collection of books and always welcomed learned people to his court. His love of learning became well known and scholars came from distant lands to meet the emperor. One day a slim man with a grey beard and very dark eyes came to the court. He was dressed in a Delhi-style turban and wore garments of fine handwoven silk from the south. His shoes looked Pathan and his jewellery seemed to have come from Bengal. He addressed the emperor in faultless Persian. ‘I have the honour of knowing many languages, Shahenshah,’ he announced. ‘I have travelled the world and as I travelled, I learnt Latin, Portuguese, Arabic, and Chinese. I also know Bengali, Gujarati, Telugu, Tamil and Sanskrit.

‘Your linguistic skills are formidable,’ the emperor replied, and sent for his scholars to test the man’s knowledge. They tried him in many languages and his accent and knowledge of each language was perfect. ‘He could be a Bengali,’ said the Bengali architect’s assistant who came to test him, ‘and yet, his features are not really from that region.’ He was puzzled and could say nothing further.

‘I would swear that he was Portuguese,’ said a Portuguese trader who happened to be in the city. ‘Except for his Indian complexion.’ A small buzz of conversation arose in the court as people began to discuss the visitor. The man smiled and bowed to the emperor once more. His eyes were full of amusement. ‘Many have tried to find my place of origin, Your Majesty,’ he

said with quiet pride. ‘None has succeeded. I have a musician’s ear for sound and I speak all languages perfectly.’

‘If anyone can guess this man’s mother tongue correctly, I will reward him well. And if nobody can identify his home region, he may ask for anything his heart desires!’ emperor Akbar declared. Then he turned to Birbal and announced, ‘My friend Birbal, if you value your reputation as a wise man, I expect you to discover the truth!’ Birbal bowed and asked for a little time. The emperor gave him until the next morning to solve the mystery. The man who spoke many languages smiled with quiet confidence. ‘Nobody has ever discovered the truth,’ he said.

That evening, as dusk fell, the man who spoke many languages was walking down a quiet path that led to the serai where he was staying. As he turned the corner, two masked men sprang out at him from behind a tree. He cried out in fear as he fell back, drawing his sword as he did so. Before he could defend himself, an enormous wall hanging was flung over his head. He cried out again, struggling with the heavy folds of cloth.

‘It is all right,’ cried a voice, and kindly hands helped him thrust back the cloth. In minutes he was free of the cloth and as he looked around him in alarm, Birbal said soothingly, ‘They have gone.’ He picked up the man’s turban and dusted it off before returning it. ‘We do not usually greet the emperor’s honoured guests like this,’ Birbal said to the man. ‘I trust the emperor will forgive me and that you will forgive me too.’

‘Forgive you? Were you responsible for the attack?’ cried the man angrily.

‘Not an attack,’ Birbal replied. ‘Merely a little playacting. They would never have harmed you, for they are my servants and were following strict instructions.’

‘An outrage!’ cried the man. ‘Within the walls of the greatest emperor of our times! An attack on an innocent visitor!’ Refusing to listen to Birbal he turned and was gone in a swirl of silk and the angry slap of slippers against the stone-paved path.

Birbal followed slowly. He reached the Diwan-i-Khas as the man was ending his angry complaint. ‘Well, Birbal, what have you to say?’ Emperor Akbar asked, turning to Birbal in surprise and displeasure.

‘Only this, Jahanpanah. Our visitor’s mother tongue is Gujarati. Am I right?’

The man’s eyes widened. He bowed stiffly and nodded. ‘Yes, it is true,’ he said very slowly as if the words were sticking in his throat. ‘I started life as a trader from Surat.’

Birbal smiled. ‘When my servants pretended to attack you, and again when the cloth was thrown over your head, you cried out in terror. In times of great fear or shock, when we react without time to think, it is our mother tongue that comes most easily to our lips. Forgive me for playing such a trick on you. But it told me what I needed to know.’

‘Wah, wah,’ came murmurs from the others in the hall. ‘Bravo, Birbal. I knew you would not fail me,’ the emperor cried. Then turning to the visitor, he said, ‘I invite you to stay here, for as long as you choose, as our honoured guest. Knowledge is always welcome at this court.’

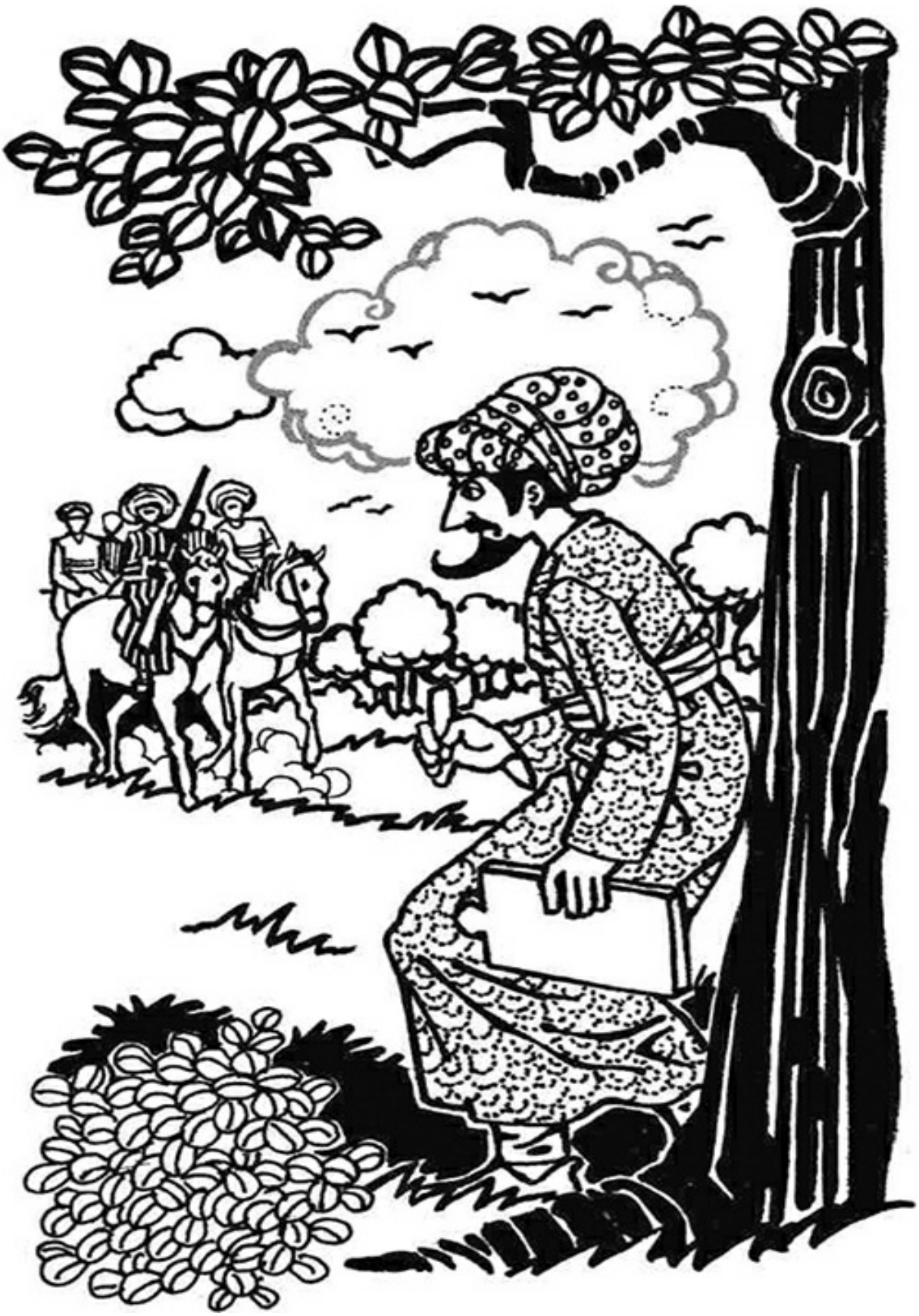
A HUNT FOR THE TRUTH

One day, when Akbar was sitting in court, a case came up for trial. The man who was brought before him had once been the keeper of the royal granary. He had been caught selling the emperor's grain. He had grown rich on his dishonesty and finally, after many years, he had been caught. Akbar ordered him to give back all the money he had earned from the stolen grain and ordered the guards to lock him up until he had decided what to do with the man.

As the guards led the former official away, Akbar turned to Birbal and said, 'Do you think some people are naturally corrupt and dishonest or is it their jobs that turn them into crooks?'

'Some people would find ways to be dishonest no matter where they are,' Birbal answered slowly. 'And some people, no matter what their occupation, would remain honest, I think. It seems to me that people are either honest or they are not.'

'Hmmm,' said Emperor Akbar. 'I wonder…' He thought for a few minutes. 'I was disturbed to find that the keeper of the granary proved to be a thief. I could have sworn he was an honest man. I wonder if the temptation to steal overcame him …'



‘Or whether he would find an opportunity for corruption no matter where he was?’ Raja Man Singh completed the thought. ‘It is an interesting question.’

‘On this question will depend the man’s final punishment,’ the emperor said. ‘If he allowed the temptation of his occupation to overcome his honesty, perhaps I will give him a lighter punishment. But how can we be certain of this?’

‘I have an idea,’ Birbal said. ‘If Jahanpanah agrees, we will be able to answer this question.’ Rapidly and quietly, so that nobody overheard him, Birbal outlined his plan to Akbar. Akbar listened quietly and when Birbal had finished he sent for the accused man.

‘I have decided to give you one more chance,’ the emperor told the former keeper of the granary. ‘I am giving you a task to perform. See that you do so sincerely and honestly. I shall expect a report from you at the end of three days.’

The man bowed.

‘You are to count the number of crows that visit the big peepal tree near Hari Singh’s farm outside Sikri,’ Akbar said. ‘You may begin tomorrow morning, when you are released from the royal prison.’

The man bowed and nodded. ‘I will not fail you, Jahanpanah,’ he said, looking a little puzzled.

The next morning, the former keeper of the granary was released from prison at dawn. He went to the peepal tree near Hari Singh’s farm and spread a durrie under the tree. Lying on his back, with a wooden slate and a piece of chalk in his hand, he began to watch the crows. It was a strange task but if that was the Emperor’s command, well it was better than being locked in a prison cell, he thought, as he made himself comfortable.

All day long, he watched the crows and counted and—wrote on his slate. When it grew dark, and the birds all settled for the night, he went home. At dawn the next day, he was back at his post. He enjoyed the cool breeze and the way the wind made the peepal leaves dance.

A few hours later, the man heard the sound of voices. Looking across the fields, he saw a party of about six hunters coming towards him. They rode decrepit horses and were shabbily dressed. As he watched the group come closer, suddenly, one of the men fired a shot at the tree. There was a loud explosion and all the birds in the tree flew up in alarm. A loud cawing and

shrieking filled the air.

The counter of crows sprang to his feet in a fury. He rushed towards the riders. ‘What have you done?’ he cried out in rage. ‘You have made me lose count! You have disturbed me at the emperor’s work! You have ruined the census of crows that the emperor ordered. I shall have to report you! Oh, the emperor will surely punish you for your act.’

‘B-b-ut,’ said one of the hunters, ‘We did not know. It was done in ignorance. Surely the emperor will excuse us.’

‘Excuse you? Impossible. He will fly into a rage. He will be furious. Who knows what terrible punishment he will order for the disturbers of the royal peace.’

The hunters began to look at one another. They looked worried.

‘You will be in terrible trouble,’ the man told the hunters. ‘Anything can happen…unless.’

‘Yes, bhai, yes, unless…what?’ said the hunter nearest him.

‘Unless,’ said the man, very slowly, ‘unless, of course I do not report you. If the emperor does not know what you have done, he cannot punish you can he?’

‘But your counting of the crows?’

‘Oh, I can manage that… if the price is right,’ the man said. ‘If I was to get say, fifty gold mohurs. If somebody was to leave fifty gold mohars next to my durrie right now, I would forget what you have done. The emperor would not know what has happened and the matter will end.’

A man at the back of the group sprang off his horse. He rushed forward. ‘You rascal!’ he cried angrily. ‘You bring lies and dishonesty to all that you do!’

The man fell back in terror. ‘Jahanpanah. I…I…did not recognise you.’

‘You were not meant to, you scoundrel!’ roared Akbar. ‘Seize the man and put him in prison. This time I will not be merciful.’

Then he turned to Birbal, who had dismounted quickly and was holding Akbar’s horse. ‘Birbal, you have answered my question!’

‘He has indeed!’ said Raja Man Singh, as he wiped his gun and handed it to an attendant. ‘It has been an interesting hunt today, Birbal, a hunt for the truth.’

'Birbal, oh Birbal!' the emperor exclaimed. 'You are wiser than any philosopher.'

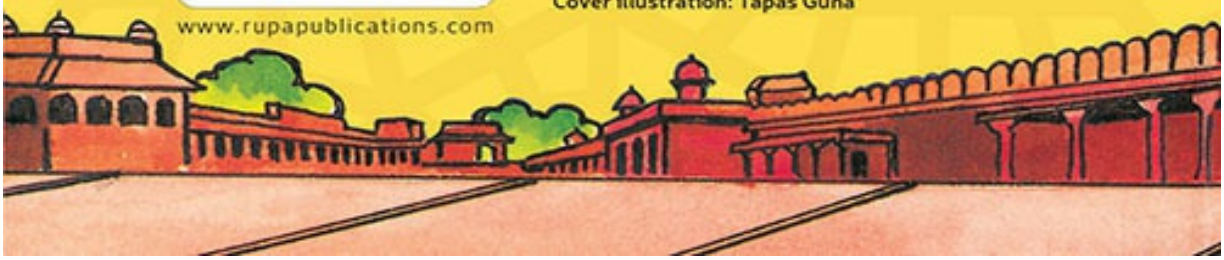
Stories about Mughal Emperor Akbar and his witty and intelligent prime minister, Birbal, have delighted readers since time immemorial. In this lively collection, learn how an ordinary young man, Mahesh Das, became the beloved Raja Birbal we all know today, and how he uses his famous wit, time and again, to build a 'celestial palace' for Emperor Akbar, order a census of crows, trap a thief using a magic bamboo, and much more.

Replete with wisdom and wit, and brought to life by Tapas Guha's beautiful illustrations, this clever collection of stories also offers valuable life lessons hidden beneath its humour.

Also available as an **e-book**

Fiction/Short Stories

RUPA

www.rupapublications.com

Cover illustration: Tapas Guha