



## Chapter One

**A** thousand miles ago, in a country east of the jungle and south of the mountains, there lived a Firework-Maker called Lalchand and his daughter Lila.

Lalchand's wife had died when Lila was young. The child was a cross little thing, always crying and refusing her food, but Lalchand built a cradle for her in the corner of the workshop, where she could see the sparks play and listen to the fizz and crackle of the gunpowder. Once she was out of her cradle, she toddled around the

workshop laughing as the fire flared and the sparks danced. Many a time she burnt her little fingers, but Lalchand splashed water on them and kissed her better, and soon she was playing again.

When she was old enough to learn, her father began to teach her the art of making fireworks. She began with little Crackle-Dragons, six on a string. Then she learned how to make Leaping Monkeys, Golden

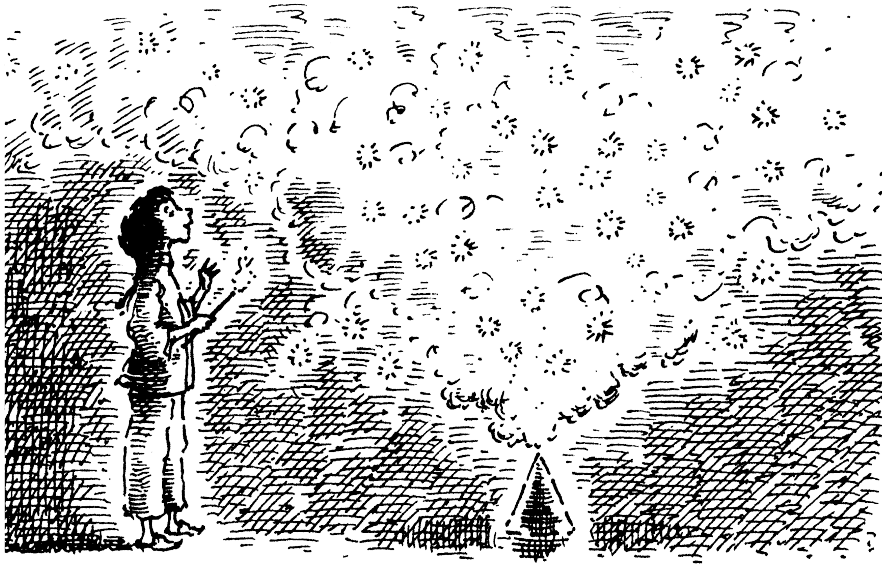


Sneezes, and Java Lights. Soon she was making all the simple fireworks, and thinking about more complicated ones.

One day she said, ‘Father, if I put some flowers of salt in a Java Light instead of cloud-powder, what would happen?’

‘Try it and see,’ he said.

So she did. Instead of burning with a steady green glimmer, it sprayed out wicked little sparks, each of which turned a



somersault before going out.

‘Not bad, Lila,’ said Lalchand. ‘What are you going to call it?’

‘Mmm . . . Tumbling Demons,’ she said.

‘Excellent! Make a dozen and we’ll put them into the New Year Festival display.’

The Tumbling Demons were a great success, and so were the Shimmering Coins that Lila invented next. As time went on she learned more and more of her father’s art, until one day she said, ‘Am I a proper Firework-Maker now?’

‘No, no,’ he said. ‘By no means. Ha! You don’t know the start of it. What are the ingredients of fly-away powder?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘And where do you find thunder-grains?’

‘I’ve never heard of thunder-grains.’

‘How much scorpion oil do you put in a Krakatoa Fountain?’

‘A teaspoonful?’

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*‘What? You’d blow the whole city up. You’ve got a lot to learn yet. Do you really want to be a Firework-Maker, Lila?’*

*‘Of course I do! It’s the only thing I want!’*

*‘I was afraid so,’ he said. ‘It’s my own fault. What was I thinking of? I should have sent you to my sister Jembavati to bring you up as a dancer. This is no place for a girl, now I come to think of it, and just look at you! Your hair’s a mess, your fingers are burned and stained with chemicals, your eyebrows are scorched . . . How am I going to find a husband for you when you look like that?’*

Lila was horrified.

*‘A husband?’*

*‘Well, of course! You don’t imagine you can stay here for ever, do you?’*

They looked at each other as if they were strangers. Each of them had had quite the wrong idea about things, and they were