

Gorby and the Rats

Mùsh-o-gurbèh

by Obeyd-i-Zàkàni

Translated from the Persian

by

Omar Pound

Illustrations by Jim Williams

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Obeyd-i-Zākàni and His Times

A man went to the court of a Mongol prince and asked for a bounty for killing one of the prince's enemies. "Bring me the head of my enemy, then I can reward you properly," the prince replied. "Alas," replied the man, "someone had cut off his head before I killed him."

"The Joyous Treatise"

Obeyd-i-Zākàni was born in Qazvin in northern Iran probably in 1300, the Mongol Year of the Rat, and died about 1371. His ancestors, Arab in origin, included distinguished theologians and government officials, but, apart from a few incidental comments by his literary contemporaries admiring him as a poet, we know little about him, except that he moved from town to town and court to court, sometimes looking for patrons, and sometimes escaping from them.

He lived during and in the aftermath of one of the most tragic and violent periods in world history. Mongol invaders had erupted from central Asia and ridden victoriously across much of the Middle East shooting with their powerful short bows from the saddles of their stocky ponies, using military tactics adopted and adapted centuries later by Rommel in North Africa—quick encircling thrusts, cutting off small units of the enemy, and then vanishing into the twilight. These brilliant but cruel strategists under Hülegü brought down and ended the once vast and sophisticated Abbasid empire, killing the Caliph and destroying the capital, Baghdad, in 1258.

Iran was already weakened by constant internal disorder when the Mongols overran it, founding a new dynasty there in 1256—and conditions worsened greatly under their Il-Khànid dynasty with its brutality, debauchery, and, especially after 1335, unstable government. The Mongol occupation ruined the Iranian underground irrigation system of *qanàts*, reduced herds of sheep and goats, and decreased the crops, not merely by destruction and neglect, but through ruthless taxation which drove peasants and even landlords to abandon the soil. With depopulation, the burden on those who remained became even

more devastating and vicious. Local tax-gatherers, themselves fearing savage punishment if they did not collect enough to appease court rapacity, were forced to gouge what they could out of those who survived and could not flee.

The Mongols created history by destroying it, but paradoxically they then encouraged and supported the writing of history, often by administrators at their own courts. Two of the first major examples of world history, 'Alà-al-Dīn Juvaynī's *History of the World-Conqueror* and Rashīd al-Dīn's *Universal History*, which touched on affairs ranging from China to a brief chronicle of the Holy Roman Emperors, were written to the order of Mongol princes.

The writing of poetry, history, theology, even satire was a revered but invariably unsafe career. Life was unpredictable, appointments and rewards arbitrary, and death, seldom from old age, often sudden—honorable by beheading (the sword more prestigious than the ax), and more humbling by hanging. This uncertainty forced the religious life of many Iranians underground into sufism, the Islamic form of mysticism and the perennial refuge of Iranians in times of political upheaval. This sufism, with its emphasis on poverty, encouraged a scathing attitude towards religious leaders who proclaimed their piety at court for modest rewards, or often merely to avoid the local executioner.

This then was Obeyd's world in about 1335: Mongol central government in Iran in total disarray, weakened by relentless internal strife among its usurping princes and local rulers. Somehow Obeyd supported himself, using his wit and satire, without fatally offending the powerful and affluent, while still commenting forcefully on the brutality, debauchery, and corruption ever blatant at court and throughout the country. He attacked this brutality and corruption with humor (often scatological), as the titles of some of his works suggest: "Ethics of the Nobles" (1340) parodies a work by an earlier Persian statesman and astronomer, Naṣīr al-Dīn Tūsī; "The Book of the Beard" is about unbearded youths; "The Book of a Hundred Counsels" (1350), a typical Persian handbook of aphorisms; a book of obscene parodies; a book of "Definitions," full of ribald irony, much like Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary*; a collection of Arabic and Persian yarns called "The Joyous Treatise"; and numerous lyrical poems. He also attacked doctors, lawyers, and religious leaders who practiced most of the vices they denied to their audiences, and he warned his readers against believing their sermons: "You might land up in Hell." As most satirists have always done, he poked fun at these three professions, and his laconic portraits will always be with us:

A doctor: An executioner.

A lawyer: One who distorts truth.

An Imam (a religious leader): Seller of prayers.

An apothecary: One who wishes the whole world sick.

An aphrodisiac: The leg of another's wife.

Nightwatchman: One who robs the store he guards by night, then asks for his wages by day.

The poet: A greedy braggart.

"Definitions"

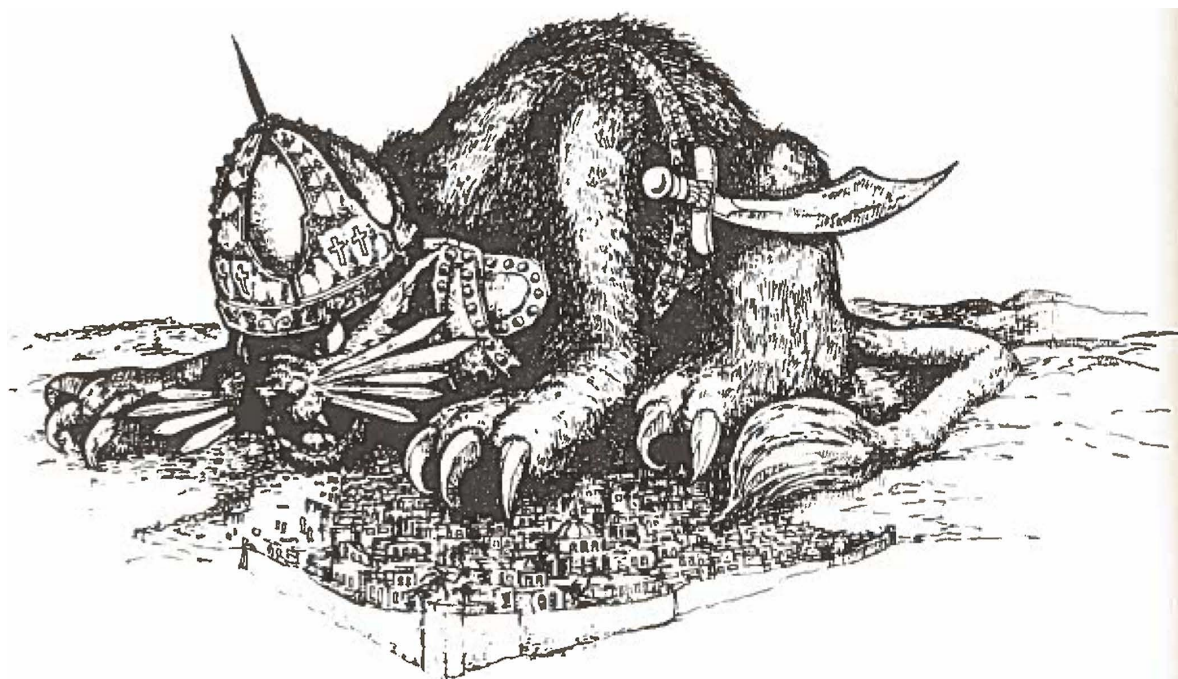
“Do not despise ribaldry, nor look down on satirists,” adds Obeyd, who, along with Juvenal, Aretino, Cervantes, Molière and Swift, defined his notions of morality by portraying contemporary life through satire, although some might say that in describing the external world accurately a writer inevitably creates satire. Perhaps he was spared the attacks other great satirists in history have had to endure because the readers of his time realized that his writings portrayed reality—and in times of such savagery, satire has no force.

Arabic and Persian literature luxuriate in a long tradition of shaggy-dog stories against corruption, false piety, and human folly portrayed through animals. An author can be corrosive about human nature when telling tales about animals without being accused of misanthropic cynicism, and often such stories hide political intent when it is dangerous to be more direct. Orwell’s “Snowball” is in this tradition.

Mùsh-o-gurbèh (literally “Rat (or mouse) and Cat”) is political satire, the cats rapacious local Mongol princes (“fat cats”), even, at times, Iranian ones, and the rats, naive peasants, albeit with their own king rat—but Iran has always been a Royalist country believing in kingship. It is likely that King Rat and the peasants refer to specific events and individuals. For example, Obeyd may have heard the contemporary yarn of the poet who taught his cat to imitate him at his prayers in the mosque. *Mùsh-o-gurbèh* also parodies classical Iranian epic and lyric poetry, hence the translator’s occasional trespassings on English poetry, including lines adapted from Langland’s tale in *Piers Plowman* of the belling of the cat, written about the same time. Obeyd also makes fun of the subtly graded honorifics of Iranian culture, and the instinctive dissembling necessary in a country so often overrun by foreign invaders, where one either cringed or bullied. No middle way existed; and Iran has not changed much today. Gorbys, powerful, greedy, and dishonest, will always be the political portrait of . . . (?)—just a hungry cat eager to fool and gobble up believing rats.

Hence this fable, known by generations of Iranian children. It begins with a traditional theological opening and ends, as most Persian poems do, with our poet’s name in the final lines (an ancient form of copyright, perhaps). The author’s moral, for those wise enough to see it, appears to be that cats do not change their nature, which could equally well have been written by the Greeks, Renaissance scholars, or modern Humanists.

Gorby and the Rats



*Long long ago
when God was, for without Him nothing was,
and Time had just begun
Heaven decreed a cat should dwell
in a city called Kirmàn.*

*The cat was Gorby
and his reputation caused great alarm
throughout the land of Persia.
His tail was borrowed from a lion
his paws were golden eagles' claws
his chest a silver shield
and every whisker was a sword.*



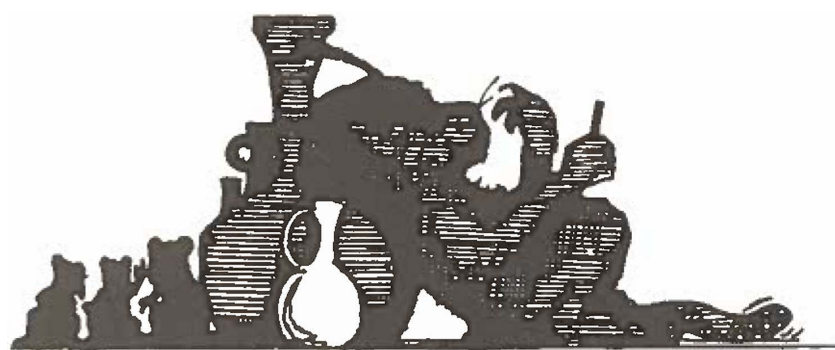
Once, it is said, four lions
dining on honest prey
hearing this dragon-cat roar seven miles away
left their feast unfinished
and with prudence and in peace
slunk
silently
away.

In fact
he was no purring pusillanimous puss.
HE was a CAT, whose paws were the law
and THAT was THAT.





*When Gorby was hungry he used to hide
in a cellar the rats monopolised,
and like a robber in a park
he'd crouch behind full jars of wine
and inside vats
waiting to pounce on well-wined rats.*



*One day
a noisy rat jumped from the cellar wall
dipped his nose and drank,
and drank
and drank his fill
until he thought his squeak a lion's roar.
"Where's that cataleptic kit,
that feline fraud," he growled,
"I'll knot his whiskers, nip his neck
and stuff his hide with straw,
or is pretty little fluffkin scaredy-cat
afraid to meet on the open battle-floor?"*

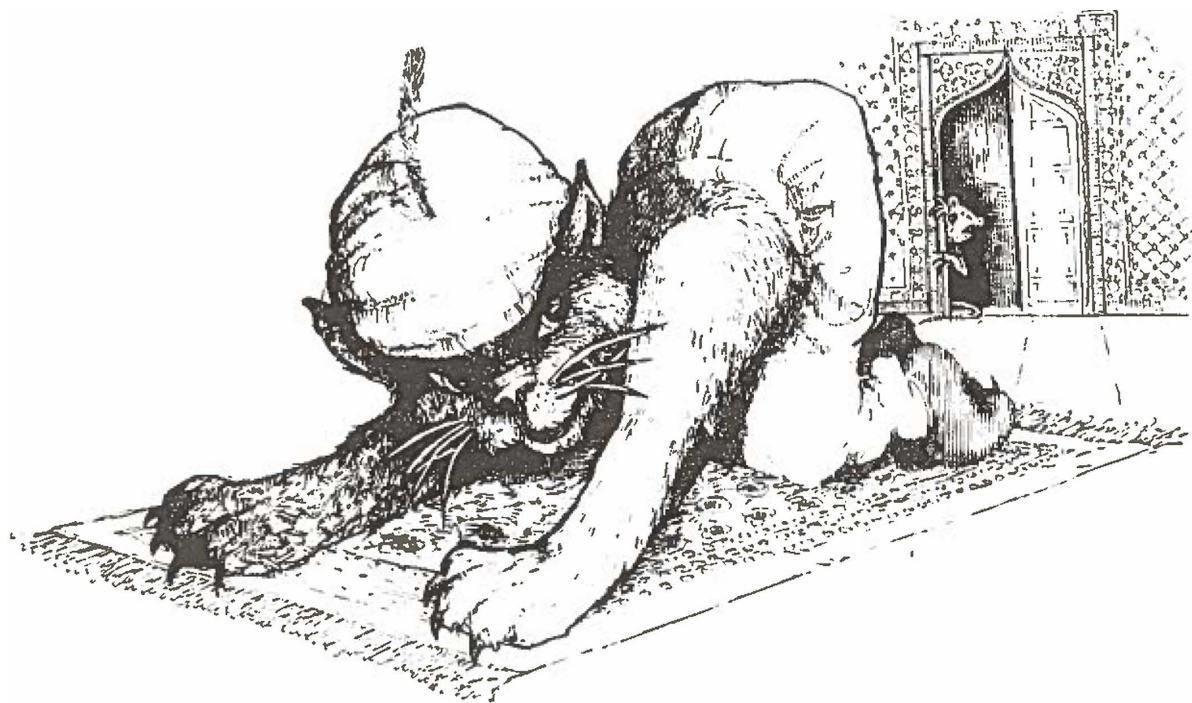
Gorby, still silent, yawned and filed his claws.



*Suddenly he pounced, like a tiger on a mountain-goat.
“You’re doomed,” he miaowed, and grabbed the drunkard’s throat.*

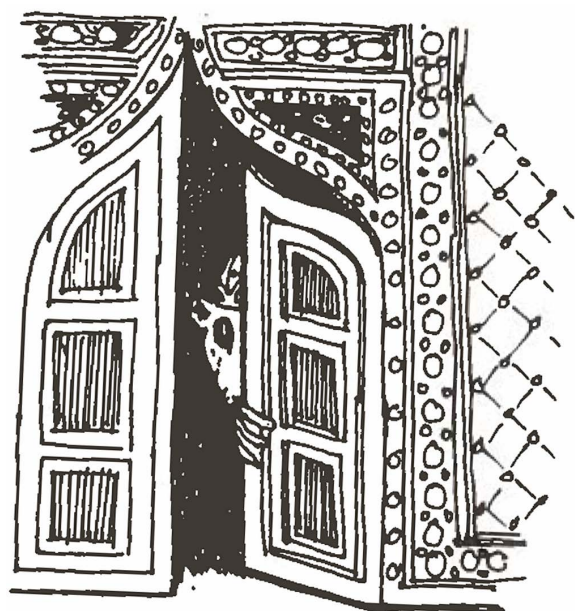
*The rat, his larynx almost severed, whispered, “Gorby dear
your eyes are lanterns leading us to Paradise. Your fur . . .
Forgive me, I have dined too well for humble folk.
Sweet wine has soured my words and fouled my soul
but I am innocent. It was the wine that spoke.”*

*“Rats,” said Gorby, “your tongue has never tasted truth,
and I am deaf to lies.
I heard you call me ‘Ali-cat,’ and worse,
you paper-rat, all filth and fleas,
muscle-man indeed! I’ll Mussulman you!
I’ll weary your wife with waiting.
She’ll need another mate now.”*



*In short, cat ate rat, then,
conforming to the ritual laws
washed his whiskers, face, and claws,
and with all humility
went to the mosque and prayed:*

*Creator of the Universe,
this cat repents with contrite heart
the Muslim blood he used to shed
in rats he tore apart.
Be Clement, be Merciful,
I'll wrong them no more
and here renounce all ratting
and promise alms to the poor.*



*By Heaven's whim
a hidden mosque-rat overheard
puss's promised virtue to his Lord
and before the cat could change his mind
the rat had bustled off to spread the news
to all ratkind.*





*"Gorby has repented. Gorby has repented.
I saw him in the mosque today
like a pious mullah, beads in paw,
wailing and praying
eyes cast down towards the floor.
O Allah is Compassionate and Merciful is His Name,
dear puss is one of us again."*

*They pranced and danced and sang,
"Dear puss is one of us again,"
and drank and drank,
". . . is pussulman again."*



*Then up stepped The Seven
the noblest of them all, and said,
“Our love for puss is such
we nominate each other
to carry a feast to his celestial hall.”*

*One brought wine,
the next, a whole roast lamb,
another, sweet raisins from his estate,
the fourth, seven dates as big as mice,
the fifth, a bag of fragrant cheese
which was to have been his New Year's feast.
Another thought yoghurt would bring peace
to his digestion,
and the seventh, proudest of them all,
carried above his turbaned brow
a bowl of great price, heaped with pilàw
nightingales' wings
almonds and rice
decked with sweet lemon rind and spice;
and murmuring salaams in puss's praise
they marched to the palace
for audience with the cat.*



*There they were hastily ushered in.
They bowed, fell reverently upon their paws
and squeaked:
“Our heads are gravel beneath your silken paws
our souls but footstools at your feet—
taste these slight refreshments, accept our humble pie,
so we may praise your goodness
and serve you till we die.”*



*"Tis true," the cat replied, "our Holy Book doth say,
'Heaven rewards the pious and the faithful,' and I,
as only Allah knows, have fasted long enough to please Him,
for Behold!—my Reward!
Here you are—a portion
of the Bounty I am worthy of . .
but pardon me,
wondering how to serve you best
I quite forgot myself.
Your presence is my soul's true nourishment.
Come near my dears and sit by me.
O Allah! What fools these morsels be!
Come closer, beside me, on this sofa.
Near's too far—I wish you were all inside me."*



*The rats advanced, each a quivering willow-branch.
“Now,” said Gorby, “let us prey,”
and springing like a lion, grabbed the nearest five
two per paw, while one
hung loosely from his jaw—alive.*

*Tailless but with a tale to tell
the two survivors fled.
“That cat,” they said, “has slain
five princes of our realm
and all you do is murmur:
‘Peace be upon you, peace’;
FIVE, beloved of our clan
torn apart while still alive.
May death be their release
and SHAME, everlasting shame—YOUR only glory.”*



*And dusting themselves with sands of woe
they blacked their brows
dipped their tails in sorrow's mead, and howled,
"To the Capitol, and there we'll tell our King."*

*King Rat, aloof upon his throne
saw them coming from afar
and wondering what they wanted
ordered the palace gates slightly ajar.*

The rats came in, bowed in unison and sang:

*O Royal Rodent, King of Kings
for whom all rodents pray
five princeling rats, five rodent lives
were swallowed up today.*

*Rex rattus! Rex rattus!
Our humble hearts are sad.
O Monarch of all ages
that feline has gone mad.
He used to snatch but one a year
and now he swallows five
yet still proclaims his piety
to those he's left alive.*

*The Royal Anger rose
and clothed its words in pride.
(Here's vengeance for your story-books.)
"THAT CAT MUST DIE!
or thirty thousand Mussulmen
shall know the reason why."*

Within a week the Palace Guard
armed with lances, arrows, slings, and swords
were joined by loyal peasant hordes
from Khurasàn and Resht:
packrats with catgut for catapults and kitbags for cats
rattletrap and samovars, and poisoned snacks.

The army ready, "Wisdom of the Ages,"
an elder in the Royal Ratinue
squeaked sagely,
"We must despatch a diplomat
with a knack for rhatoric to tell that cat
IT'S WAR OR SUBMISSION,"
and soon
an envoy had scurried to Gorby Hall
to gently breathe his mission.



*“His Majesty orders his humble envoy, me,
to beg your presence at his court, professing loyalty,
and bids me to inform you
his army numbers thousands, whose loyalty is sure;
Alas! O lustrous furry one,
IT’S FEALTY or WAR.”*

*“Cat-fodder,” snarled Gorby, “go away.
I am in command here, and in Kirmàn I stay,”
and secretly mustered an army of cats,
regiments from Isfahan and Princes from Yazd.*

*By the great salt desert marched the rats
across mountain passes rode the cats
to the open Plains of Fàrs,
and there both armies met and fought
paw to paw in battle, like heroes from the past.*



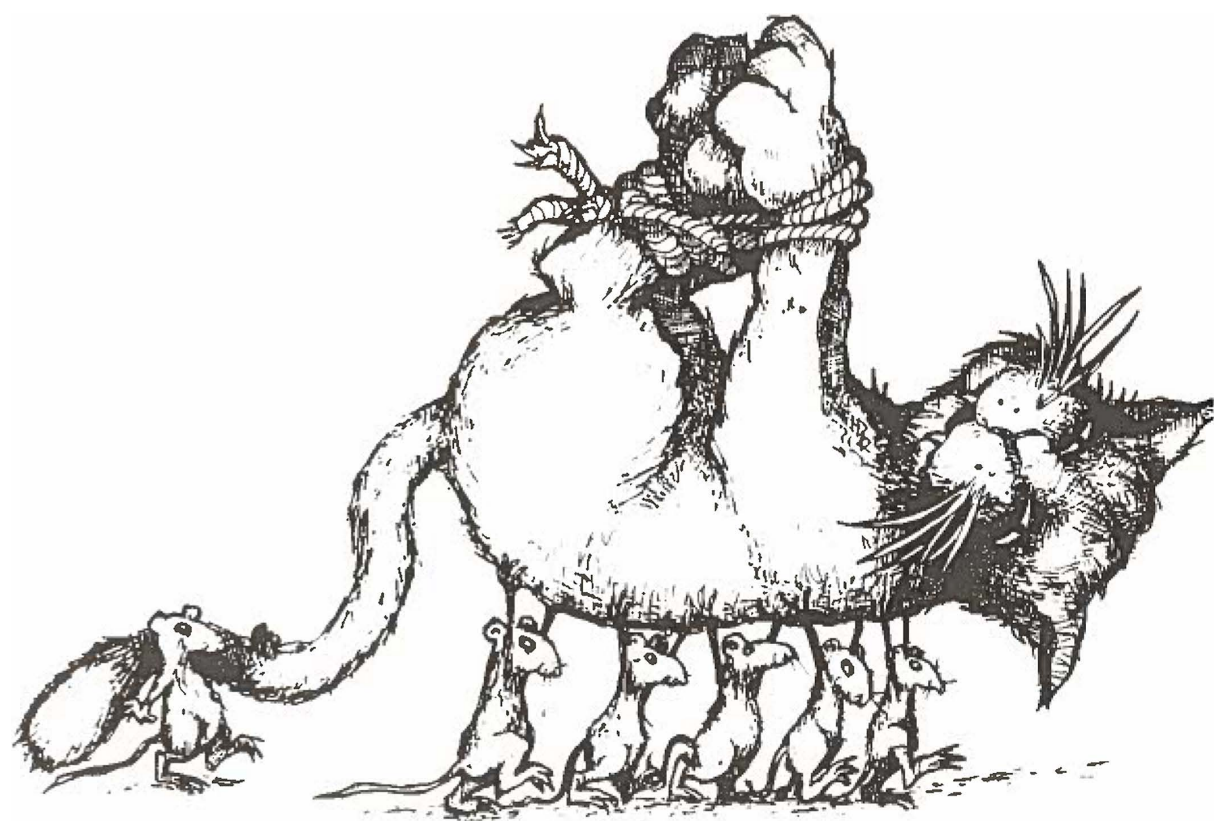
*In every corner of the field unnumbered lie the dead,
as vanguards fall, reserves stand still—
no space for lances, horse or shield,
and nowhere else to tread.*



*Then right to the center the Feline Guard attacks
as a regiment of rodents turns tail in its tracks.
Confusion and chaos havoc and doubt
as cat after cat wins every bout
and many a rat is routed.*

*Then suddenly arose a cry of valor
“The cat is down!” All Praise to Allah.
“Rally, rats! Rally!”*

*There lay Gorby groaning on the ground
his stallion’s heel nipped by a rat
who swore to bring him down.
Puss to dust. Alas!
There Gorby lay
groaning several lives away
on the Plain of Fàrs.*



*“Catch him! Bind him! Truss him up!”
squeaked seven rat-lion-cubs.
“Tie his paws with string,
tie ’em tight and mind his claws,
then WE
will take him to our King.”
(Loud applause.)*

*They danced and pranced and beat the drum of joy
until they reached the court.*





*And there, King Rat, seeing the cat was safely tied
scowled and shouted:*

*“Foul inhuman beast! You lied!
You ate my army, you greedy thing,
and worse—without the Royal Permission.”*

*“Alas,” sighed Gorby,
“my face is black with shame and sin,
my soulless soul now pleads and craves
your Royal Renown for Clemency
to save my worthless skin.*

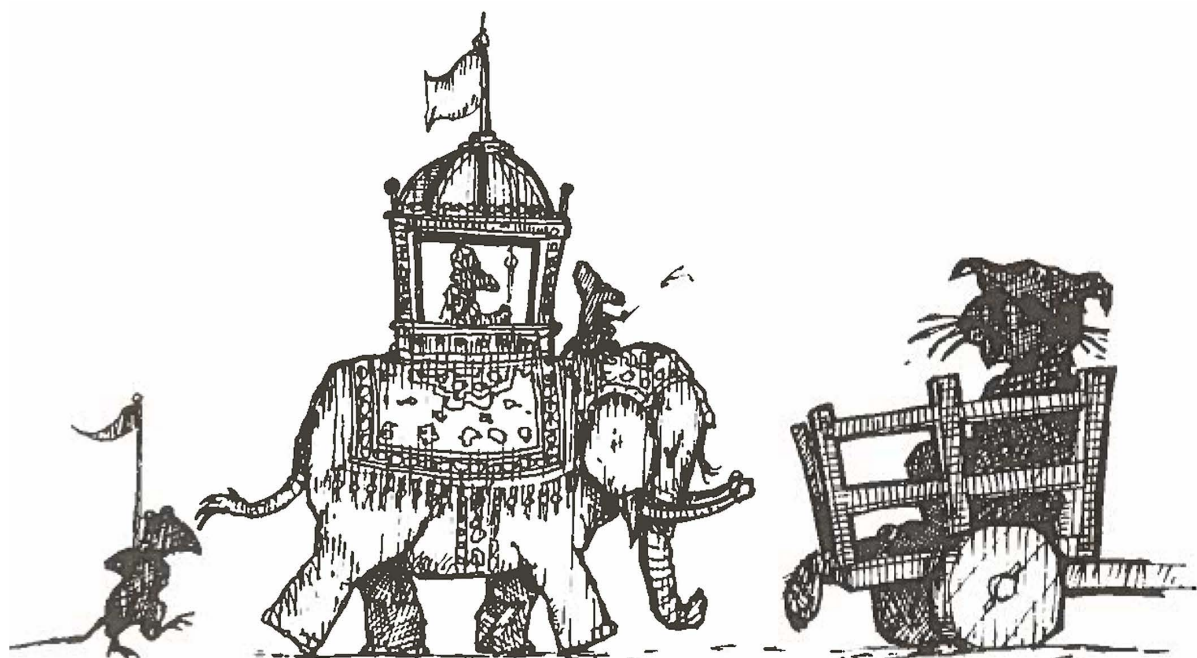
Hear my purr for pardon, Lord.

Hear my purrrrrrrrrrrr.”

His words were wet with weeping.

*“To the gibbet with that dog of a cat,”
the King shouted.*

*“In recompense for all the noble necks he broke
I myself will ride the Royal Elephant
to watch him swing
and die.”*



*And surrounded by his army
fore and aft
he rode in triumph through the town
to hear the music of his citizens
who cheered and laughed.*

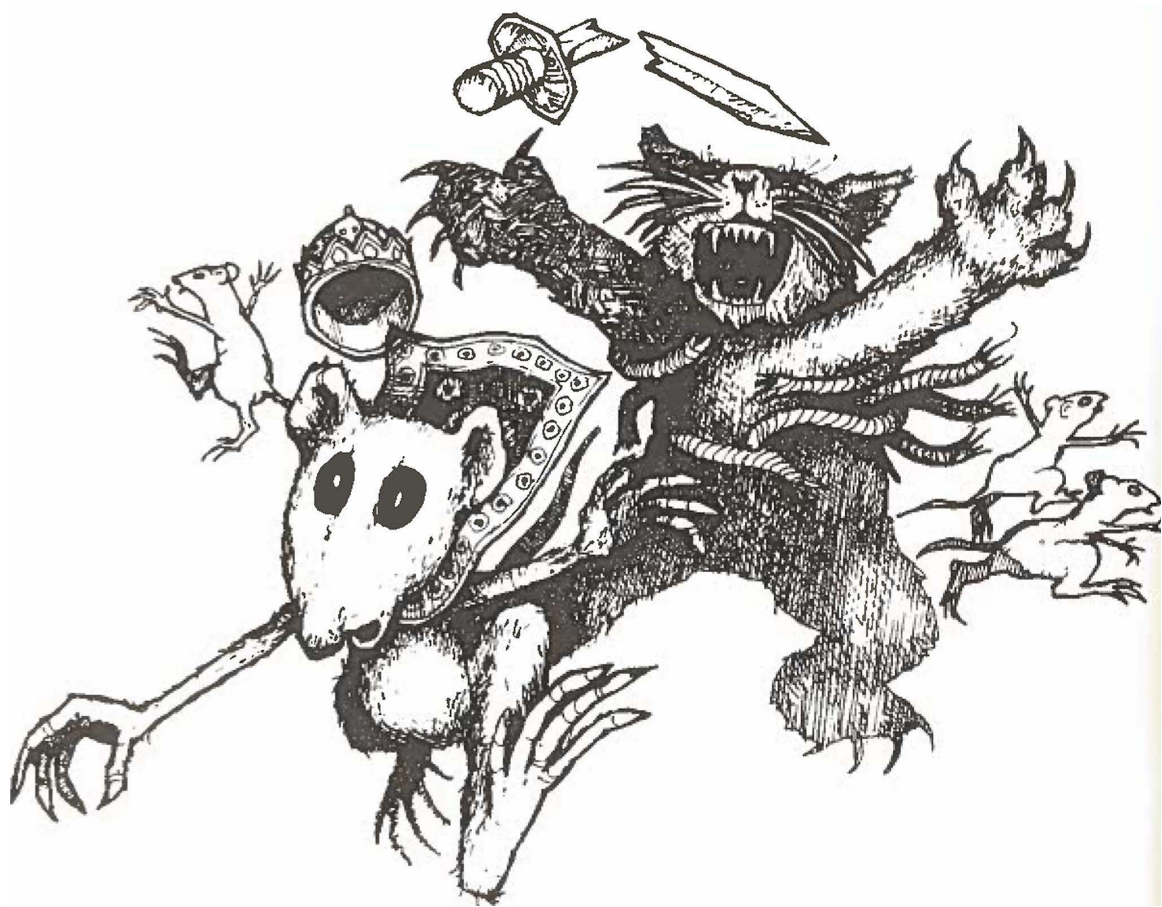


*And there in the market-place tied to the gallows
stood Gorby, miaowing and caterwauling sorrows.*

*“What! Do I hear a miaow from that black Kirmàni cow?
Is he still alive, when I decreed THAT CAT MUST DIE,
AND NOW?”*

*Some edged back by nudging others on.
Their chatter soon became a murmur,
till all had swallowed silence and were dumb.
Not a rat stirred.
Not a rat in all the rout
dared step up and hang the cat,
not to win all Persia.*

*The King, sorrowed by their shame
and furious at their fear
quivered angrily,
“What! Are we starved of heroes here?
You rattle-tattle rodent bipeds,
you slinking sewer rats.
May every feline in Kirmàn
feast off you tonight.”
And stepping forward, single-pawed
he raised his sword
to cut the cat in two.*



*When Gorby saw the King of Rats
he suddenly became a dragoned-lion again:
his courage boiled, the cauldron of his fury spilled,
he tore his cords asunder,
spread his golden eagles' claws
unsheathed each whiskered quill and sword
and levelled every rat
so none would rise again—
except as dust.*

*Which ends my tale. The army fled.
King Rat deserted.
Howdah and kingdom tumbled down,
while I,
steeped in the wine of wonder
asked the meaning of this yarn.
“The meaning’s clear,” the poet said,
“if you are wise enough to see it.
It is . . .” But then, alas,
came the allotted span.
Allah called,*

our poet heard his name:

O B E U D

and passed away.

*. . . and as in every chestnut lies
Truth's Kernel—so in every tale.*

