

Apple

Kashif's jeep had reached the outskirts of the old dusty town. He had another 50 km to go before he reached the lime-stone deposits. He had taken several mines on lease, a few months ago. The path all along to the deposits was a bouldered and a rocky one. He had to pass through several sleepy and poor hamlets on the way. He was already feeling hungry. But there may be nothing, he knew, he could find on the way.

He looked all around; it was a busy square. Several vehicles were stopping for a rest-break. A couple of *dhabaas* had sprung up in the area, offering a relief to the bus and truck drivers, many of whom were occupying the benches and plastic chairs spread outside the hotels. Kashif felt the rumblings of hunger inside his stomach. He was not too sure if he wanted to eat at those shabby hotels. There was no other recourse, however. He began to walk slowly towards a *dhabaa*, which was busier than the others. Some were eating but others who had finished were washing their hands and even rinsing their mouths then and there... Kashif felt that he could not possibly eat at such a place and turned away.

At a few yards, he spotted a vendor selling apples on a hand-cart. Kashif went to him and at the sight of bright-red and smooth-textured apples, he almost smiled.

'Well, for how much are these apples?' Kashif asked.

'Only eighty (fifty) rupees a kilo, Sir'.

'It is way too expensive... you are charging far too much', Kashif protested.

'Sir, this is the price. If you want, take them at this price. I will not make a rupee less...' The seller certainly did not seem to be one of those who succumbed to the pressures of bargaining.

Kashif felt anger surging in him, hearing the brazen tone of the fruit-seller. He had a strong impulse to pick up one heavy apple and aim it at the fruit-seller's head. He restrained himself. He needed to eat something at the earliest. He

told the fruit-seller to weigh one kilo apples for him. The fruit-seller began to load the weighing scales with apples and Kashif noticed that some had shrivelled skin and marks on them. 'Keep your hands off and let me select the apples I want... Remove all these rotten ones that you have deliberately selected, and stay back', instructed Kashif in an angry tone.

As Kashif was selecting the apples, there appeared two little kids from nowhere and stood there, near the cart. 'How much do these apples cost?' enquired the younger one of the two. 'Eighty (fifty) rupees, a kilo', replied the fruit-seller harshly. Kashif looked at the two boys with a keen interest. They both had a cloth-bag each, hung on their tiny shoulders. It contained books, and Kashif could see the stains of ink on both the bags. Their short-pants were loosely stitched, and the hemming was coming out, with threads dangling at many a places. Their shirts were crumpled and a little dirty too. *Perhaps, they had played too gleefully at school, that day*, Kashif wondered and smiled to himself. They reminded him of his own school-going days. He and his friends sported similar appearances while coming back from school.

'Are both of you brothers?' Kashif asked. They did look alike. One seemed to be about 8 years old, and the other, maybe five.

They looked up at Kashif and nodded, even as the fruit-seller extended the paper bag containing the apples to Kashif.

'Are you going to buy the apples or just keep standing there and staring at them?' the fruit-seller angrily retorted at the kids.

'Give us an apple for 8 (5) Rs', the elder one looked at the fruit-seller with pleading eyes, and slowly took out a few coins from the pocket of his shirt.

'I want that one', said the younger one excitedly, pointing towards a big red apple. He had the look of someone who has just taken the most sensible and wise decision, and looks at others in anticipation for a glance full of praise.

'Run off, you two', rebuked the fruit-seller in an angrier tone this time. 'Who can get an apple for less than 15 (10) Rs these days?'

The elder one was crestfallen. He quietly kept the coins back in his pocket, and holding the hand of the younger one, began to walk away. The younger one had lost the gleam in his eyes. The eyes were sad, instead.

Kashif was watching the two boys, walking away. The look of disappointment on their innocent little faces had torn Kashif's heart. He felt like calling them back and giving them both, an apple each from his own paper bag. *However, they were school children and not beggars*, he reminded himself.

'Arrey, you could have given them one small apple... You would not have lost much. You broke their hearts...' Kashif chided the fruit-seller.

'Oh, Saheb! How could I have just given them an apple? Do you know how much each one costs? Can one get anything these days in 7-8 (4-5) Rs? Nothing less than 15 (10) Rs I would have taken for an apple. I cannot afford to do charity here'.

Kashif understood his viewpoint. The fruit-seller could not be blamed. 'Ok... take this seven (five) Rupees from me and I will go and get the boys back. Take the rest from them, and give them an apple', said Kashif to the fruit-seller, while himself thinking: *I can give him money for two apples too. But then, the two boys will wonder as to how were they being given two apples for their eight (five) Rupees. It is better that they do not develop unreal expectations in this world.*

He decided to let the scene remain real for the children, and walked hurriedly in the direction where the children had gone. In a few minutes, he spotted them walking, with their hands around each other's neck, on the gravelled path.

'Hey, listen, you two...' Kashif called out.

Both the boys stopped abruptly and turned. They had a flicker of recognition on their faces. They had seen him at the fruit-seller's cart.

'Why don't you two run back to the fruit-seller and grab an apple...? I have bargained with him and he has agreed to give you an apple for 8 (5) Rupees', said Kashif excitedly to the boys.

They were both looking at him, a little bewildered. 'Uncle, but we have spent our 8 (5) Rupees already. Look, we have bought these groundnuts,' replied the elder one. Kashif looked at where he was pointing with his finger. Their tiny pockets on their short-pants were brimming with groundnuts.

What could he do now?, wondered Kashif. The two boys had started walking ahead again. A disappointed Kashif too made his way towards his jeep. He was carrying his paper-bag containing apples with him. The bag seemed heavier to him than it was. His hunger had died. He wanted to throw the bag containing the apples. He opened the jeep and sat inside. The image of the two boys was recurring in his mind.

He bowed his head and sat clutching the steering wheel. His own childhood was flashing before him. His school was also miles away from home and he had to walk a long stretch on unpaved muddy roads, and pass through a busy thoroughfare and a market on the way. With gleaming eyes, he and his friends would stare for hours at times, at the fantastic things on display in the windows of the expensive shops. He used to have a rupee in his pocket every day. On his way to school, he would place his hand on the pocket several times and feel the coin, to check if it was intact. His pants too had stitches coming out at many places. During the recess at school, the one rupee coin would finally come out from the pocket into his fist. He would buy groundnuts on some days, and guavas on other. There used to be hawkers selling apples and grapes too. Once he too had tried buying an apple, in exchange of the rupee he had. The outcome was the same as it had occurred with the two boys today.

'Sir, may God bless you, sir... please help me', said a voice outside the jeep's window. Kashif looked up with a start and saw a woman in tatters, begging outside the window. Five children were clinging to her closely, and all had tear-stained cheeks. Kashif opened the door of the jeep and handed the paper-bag containing one kilo apples to her. He then drove off.
