



Chapter Three

Rambashi and his pirates managed to get *The Bloody Murderer* to the other bank of the river, but Lila had to fish another oar out of the water when one of them dropped it, and promise to sit still and not joggle the boat.

When they hit the bank, everyone fell off their seats.

'All right,' said Rambashi, picking himself up. 'Tie the boat to a good bit of tree or something and take the prisoner ashore.'

'Are we going to eat her?' asked one of the pirates. 'Cause I'm hungry.'

'Yes, we've had nothing to eat for days,' grumbled another. 'You promised we'd have a hot meal every evening.'

'That's enough of that!' said Rambashi. 'You're a pack of scurvy dogs. Take the prisoner up to the cave and stop complaining.'

Lila wasn't sure if she could run away *just* yet. Some of those pirates did look fierce enough to run after her. Though now she looked more closely, she saw their daggers were made of wood wrapped in silver paper, so they wouldn't be able to do her much damage.

'I hope you don't mind this little transaction,' Rambashi said, as they walked along a jungle trail. 'It's purely business.'

'Have you kidnapped me, then?' asked Lila.

'I'm afraid so. You're going to have to hand over all your money in a minute, and

then we'll tie you up and hold you to ransom.'

'Have you done it before?'

'Oh yes,' he said. 'Lots of times.'

'What happens when you don't get any money?'

'Well, we . . .'

'We eat you,' said the hungry pirate.

'Ssh,' said Rambashi, waving his hand vaguely.

'You're not cannibals,' said Lila.

'We're blooming hungry,' said the pirate.

'Have you always been pirates?'

'No,' said Rambashi. 'I used to keep hens, but they all died of melancholy. So I sold the business and bought the boat . . . Oh no! Ssh! Stop! Don't move!'

The last pirates in the line, still grumbling, bumped into those in front, who stood behind Rambashi, transfixed with fear.

For there on the path ahead of them was a tiger. It swung its tail lazily from side to side, and raised its golden eyes at them, and then opened its mouth and roared so loudly that Lila thought the very earth was shaking. One of the smallest pirates put his hand in hers.

So there they stood, and the tiger was just gathering his strength to spring, when Lila suddenly remembered her self-igniting Crackle-Dragons. She took her hand back from the small pirate, reached into her bag, and took out the three she'd brought with her.

'Mind,' she said to Rambashi, and, pulling the string of the first one, she threw the firework in front of the tiger.

The mighty beast had never been so surprised in his life. First one, then another, then yet another Crackle-Dragon snapped and flashed and sparked and leapt at him,



and that was too much: with a whimper, the tiger turned and fled.

The pirates cheered.

'Magnificent!' cried Rambashi. 'Congratulations! I was about to stab him to death, of course, but never mind.' (Lila wondered how he would have done that with his silver-paper-covered knife, but she didn't say anything.) 'And of course,' Rambashi went on, 'this changes everything. We can't keep you hostage if you've just saved our lives. You'll have to be our guest instead. Stay with us overnight, why don't you?'

'We've got no food,' said someone. 'What's she going to eat?'

'We'll send Chang out to catch some fish,' said Rambashi cheerfully, shaking his head at the protests that arose. 'No, no, fish is good for you. Go on, Chang! Don't just stand there!'

'I can't,' said Chang. 'Look.'

They looked back at the river bank. *The Bloody Murderer* was drifting away, with the painter drifting in the water.

'Who tied it up?' said Rambashi.

One of the pirates looked down and tried to rub a hole in the ground with his big toe.

'Hmm,' said Rambashi. 'Fine pirates *you* are. I hope you're ashamed. But never mind! I've got a better idea. Miss!' he said to Lila, rubbing his hands. There was a bright gleam in his eye. 'Can I interest you in a little investment?'

'Well,' Lila said, 'I ought to be getting on.'

'No, really, this is a *much* better idea than piracy,' Rambashi said. 'It came to me in a flash, just as I saw the boat floating away. (I can't be cross with those fellows, they're like children really). Yes, all my best ideas come in a flash. And this one's a corker! Can't fail!'

'Is there any food in it?' said a pirate sourly.

'My dear boy! It's *built* on food! Just wait till you hear – I say! Miss! Just a little money – the safest investment you'll ever make—'

But Lila had walked away. As she went along the path she could hear his voice behind her.

'No, listen, boys – I know where we went wrong last time. I saw it in a flash. But *this* is an idea that'll suit your talents down to the ground. Look, let me draw you a picture...'

Lila would have liked to know what Rambashi's next plan was, but she was eager to hurry on. Mount Merapi was smoking and rumbling in the distance. She felt her heart lift when she saw it again, so powerful and dominating, and she thought, *I belong to that mountain, and it belongs to me!*

And on she went, with no other thoughts in her mind but that, and excitement putting a spring in her step.

Meanwhile, Chulak was getting ready to smuggle Hamlet out of his new home. The master had gone to bed early, groaning, but the slaves were still awake, and Chulak had to distract them.

'Now listen,' he said to them in the kitchen. 'You know you've got to do all you can to please the great White Elephant, or else the King'll be cross?'

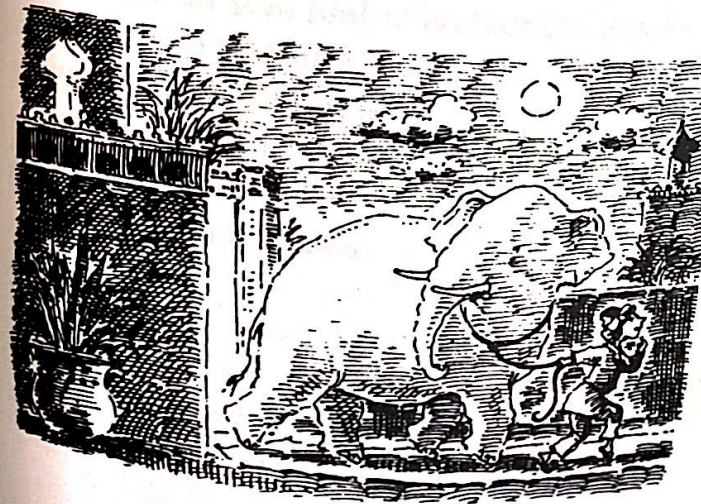
They all nodded.

'Well, the Elephant's a bit restless. He never sleeps well the first night in a new place, so we'll have to play a game of Elephant's Footsteps to cheer him up. You have to go and hide your eyes in the garden, and when you think you can hear him coming, turn around. He likes playing that.

Go on, go and wait in the garden, and I'll tell him when you're ready.'

The slaves all streamed out of the back door, and as soon as they were hiding in the garden with their eyes shut, Chulak unlocked the front door and led Hamlet out to the gate.

'It's a good thing they put down that carpet I ordered,' he whispered. 'You don't half make a row on the gravel.'



'Can we go past the Zoo?' Hamlet whispered.

'No, of course not! Never mind Frangipani. It's Lila we've got to think about. And stop breathing so heavily ...'

They tiptoed out of the gate, and found Lalchand waiting there with a tarpaulin, just as Chulak had asked.

'What's it for?' Lalchand whispered.

'For this,' said Chulak, and made Hamlet kneel down to have it laid over his back. 'So he doesn't show up so much in the dark.'

'Huh,' grumbled Hamlet. 'It's hot and scratchy and it smells like a marquee. Couldn't you find a nice blanket?'

'I don't think you realize your own size,' Chulak said.

'Do be careful!' said Lalchand. 'I ought to come with you – it's not a safe journey at all— Oh, I should have told Lila everything from the start! I should have trusted her!'

What a foolish old man I am!'

'Yes,' said Chulak. 'Still, never mind. We'll find her. Come on, Hamlet!'

And they set off. Lalchand stood watching them for a minute, until they'd disappeared in the dark streets.

But someone was watching Lalchand.

One of the slaves who'd come to play Elephant's Footsteps was hiding under a bush nearby; and as soon as he realized what he'd seen, he began to tremble. Helping the White Elephant to escape was a terrible crime. There'd be a terrible punishment – and there might be a great reward for the person who pointed out the criminal.

So when Lalchand began to trudge homewards, the slave silently followed him to find out who he was and where he lived.

Chulak and Hamlet walked all night, and when morning came they slept in a little

valley under some thick trees. They woke up in the afternoon and, while Hamlet browsed on the leaves, Chulak went to the nearest village to ask the way to the Emerald Lake. He came back with an armful of bananas and some news.

'Guess what, Hamlet?' We're in luck! This is the night of the Full Moon. The Water Goddess comes out of the lake and grants people's wishes. Couldn't be better, my boy! Finish your leaves and let's be moving.'



They weren't the only people going to the Emerald Lake. The jungle paths were busy with families carrying picnic baskets, and even a troop of monkeys was heading in the same direction. Just before the sun set, Chulak and Hamlet saw a young man busily pinning up notices on the trees beside the path.

Chulak was about to read one when the young man caught sight of him.

'Hey! I know you!' he said. 'And him . . .'

'We know lots of people,' said Chulak. 'Is this the right way for the Emerald Lake?'

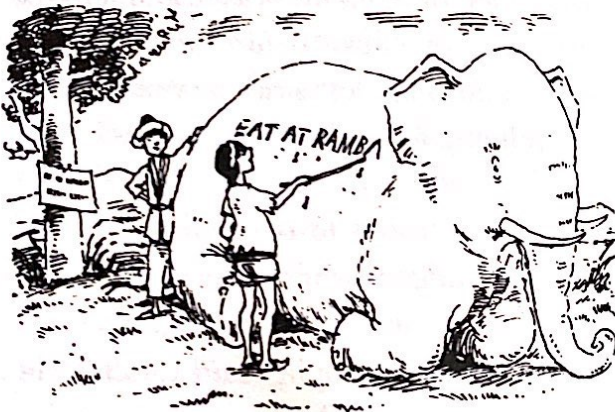
'Just along there. Here, can I . . .?' The young man looked bashful.

Chulak knew what he wanted.

'Kneel down, Hamlet,' he said. 'Customer.'

Hamlet couldn't say anything with the young man there, but he gave Chulak a severe look as he knelt down. The young

man daubed something on Hamlet's side with a stick and some mud, and gave Chulak a coin.



'Thanks!' he said. 'Wait till I tell the boss!'

And he ran off. Chulak read what he'd written:

EAT AT RAMBASHI'S JUNGLE GRILL

'Rambashi?' Chulak said, 'I've got an

Uncle Rambashi. He used to be a chicken farmer.'

The notices on the trees were advertising the Jungle Grill as well. It was opening that very night, and there were meals at half-price if you brought in a voucher from one of the notices.

'It'll be nice to see Uncle Rambashi again,' Chulak said. 'Come on, it'll be dark in a minute.'

They hurried on. Soon they came out on the shores of the Emerald Lake. Under the trees at the edge of the water there stood some houses on stilts, with cooking fires and coloured lanterns, and as the tropical darkness covered the sky in less than five minutes, Chulak and Hamlet entered the village.

Naturally, a white elephant with an advertisement written on him caused a sensation, and soon Chulak and Hamlet

were being followed by a crowd of excited children and some older people with nothing else to do. Even the troupe of dancers getting into their costumes for the ceremony couldn't resist, and the dancing-mistress had to run after them with her mouth full of safety pins to pull them back and scold them.

'Which way to Rambashi's Jungle Grill?' Chulak asked, and someone pointed along the shore to where a wooden building stood on stilts over the water. There was a terrace with coloured flags, and tables with checkered tablecloths, and lamps made out of wine bottles, and a cloud of smoke was coming from the kitchen, with the sounds of sizzling and bubbling and the smell of grilling meat and fish and spices.

'Just in time, Hamlet! What d'you think of that? And that's Uncle Rambashi!' said Chulak.

Rambashi, wearing a white apron over his tartan sarong, was ushering some customers on to the terrace when he saw Chulak.

'Chulak! My boy! How delightful to see you! And your – your friend – your pet – this excellent mobile advertising billboard! Come in, dear boy! Voucher? Oh, don't bother with that. Free food for everyone, in honour of the Ceremony of the Full Moon! (Of course I'll lose money on it, but we'll soon make it up. Wonderful publicity). Yes, that's right, ladies and gentlemen! Free meals tonight!'

'What about us?' said a waiter. 'When do we get our supper?'

'Customers first,' said Rambashi. 'You and the boys can have as much as you like later on.'

'I thought you were in the chicken business?' said Chulak, tucking in to a big plate of prawns and rice in satay sauce.

'Yes, but I had to give that up. I felt sorry for the hens, Chulak. So we took to the transport business for a while – river taxi, you know, with some freelance work on the side – but then came the opportunity to invest in the restaurant trade – where my talents truly lie, Chulak! – Yes, madam, our grilled lake trout is exquisite tonight – may I suggest some saffron rice to accompany it? and a flask of jasmine wine? Yes, all free! No charge! Compliments of the house . . .'

The Jungle Grill was certainly doing good business – or would have been, if Rambashi had been charging for it.

'I hope he knows what he's doing, Hamlet,' Chulak said, as the elephant browsed quietly on the banyan tree that overspread the terrace. 'He reckons it'll be such good publicity that they'll come back when he starts charging. I'm not so sure.

Still, the food's good. Smoky, but tasty.'

Rambashi's cook was having trouble with the grill, which he kept having to throw water over when it got too hot. Clouds of smoke and steam kept billowing out, and the waiters rushed to and fro with full plates and dirty plates and flasks of wine and menus and coconuts full of ice cream.

Meanwhile, the village elders were preparing the lakeshore for the Full Moon ceremony. Chulak and Hamlet, full of supper, wandered along to have a look. The sand was swept and smoothed, lanterns were hung in the trees, and blossoms of all colours were scattered on the water. The path from the temple to the lake was crowded several deep on either side, and Chulak had to climb on Hamlet's back in order to see.

Then the ceremony began. A great drum

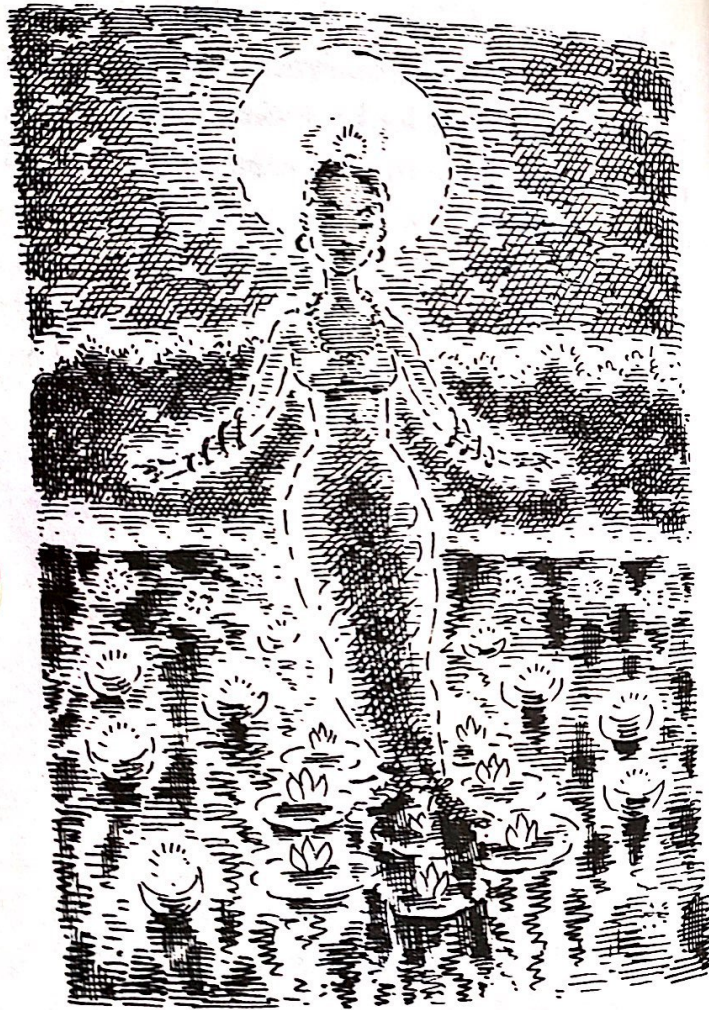
sounded three times, and an orchestra began to play: gongs and xylophones and drums and cymbals and flutes. A line of dancers came out of the temple and swayed down the path towards the lake, their fingernails snapping and flicking like fireflies and their golden skirts shimmering in the lantern light.

The headman of the village struck a light and lit a scented candle in a paper boat, which he floated out on to the lake. The incense made the air sweet and rich. Very soon other paper boats were floating out to join it, and then a little child pointed at the tree tops on the far side of the dark lake and said: 'Moon!'

The full moon was rising. And as it rose the music rose too, the gongs and the xylophones and the cymbals all summoning the Goddess from the lake.

And then she was there, though no-one had seen her arrive; it was as if she'd come when they were looking away, and when they looked back they saw her; though no-one had really looked away. She was floating to the shore on a raft of water-lilies, a beautiful lady in a robe the colour of the moon, with silver rings and amulets, and a necklace of jasmine flowers.

One after another the villagers bowed to her and asked her help: this woman for a sick child, that man for a good harvest, these lovers for a blessing on their marriage. The Goddess rebuked some for asking too much, though she never refused anyone in need. When they had all finished, and the Goddess was about to depart, Chulak gathered his wits and shook his head, because he was a little dazzled by her beauty, and he thrust his way to the water's



edge and knelt down.

‘Goddess!’ he said. ‘Please hear me, too!’

But before the Goddess could answer, hands took him roughly and hauled him away.

‘What are you doing, stranger?’

‘Away with him! Defiling the lake!’

‘Who is he? Who gave him permission?’

‘Stone him! Turn him out!’

Chulak struggled. He could see Hamlet raising his trunk and shifting his feet, and he knew the elephant was getting angry.

‘No!’ he cried. ‘Listen! I’ve got a special request! Let me just ask the Goddess!’

The high priest looked down, frowning. His face was shadowed and stern.

‘How dare you come to this sacred place?’ he said. ‘The Goddess of the lake is not to be disturbed by your frivolous requests. Take him away! No! She shall not hear you!’

Be thankful we let you go with your life.
Take him to the village boundary, and if he
comes back, kill him!'