

... she came to a bend in the
jungle path, and found herself beside the
river.

The size of the great mountain made her
gasp. It was far away on the very edge of the
world, but even so it reached halfway up
the sky, with the bare sides rising in a
perfect cone to the glowing crater at the top.
From time to time the fire-spirits who lived
there rumbled angrily underground and
threw boiling rocks high into the air. A
plume of eternal smoke drifted from the
summit to join the clouds.

How can I ever get there? she wondered,
and felt her heart quail. But she had chosen
to make the journey, and she could hardly
turn back when she'd barely begun. She
shifted her bundle from one shoulder to the
other and walked on.

There was no-one to be seen except some
fishermen laboriously rowing their boat
across from the other side of the river.

She stopped and watched as they brought
their boat in towards the bank where she
was standing. They weren't making very
good progress. There were six or seven of
them, and all their oars were getting in
one another's way.

As she watched,
one of the fisher-
men missed the
water completely
with his oar, which
swung round and
climbed another
fisherman on the



head. That fisherman turned around and punched the first one, who fell off his seat with a squeal and dropped the oar in the water. One of the others tried to grab it, but instead he fell out of the boat, which rocked so violently that the others all cried out in alarm and grabbed the sides.

The man who'd fallen out was splashing and spluttering as he tried to climb back into the boat, and all the crocodiles basking in the shallows looked up, interested. Lila caught her breath in alarm, but the fishermen were so helpless that she could hardly

stop herself laughing; because when the man in the water leaned over the gunwale, all the men in the boat leaned over that side to help him, and the boat tipped over so far that they nearly fell in too. They suddenly realized what was happening and let go, and then the boat tipped back the other way and they all fell on their backs.

And the crocodiles slid off the sandbank and began to swim towards them.

'Oh, pull him in, you stupid creatures!' Lila cried. 'Over the end, not over the side!' One of the fishermen heard her, and



hauled the man over the stern to lie in the bottom flopping and gasping like a fish. Meanwhile, the boat had drifted in to the side, and Lila put out a hand to stop it bumping.

As soon as they saw her, the fishermen nudged one another.

'Look,' said one.

'Go on,' muttered one of them. 'You ask her.'

'No! It was your idea! *You* do it.'

'It wasn't me, it was Chang!'

'Well, he can't say anything, he's still full of water . . .'

Finally one of them snorted with impatience and stood up, making the boat rock alarmingly. He was the stoutest man in the boat, and by far the most impressive, for he wore an ostrich plume nodding in his turban, an enormous black moustache, and

a tartan sash.

'Miss!' he said. 'Would I be correct in supposing that you were hoping to cross the river?'

'Well, as a matter of fact, I was,' said Lila. He tapped his fingertips together with pleasure.

'And would I also be correct in supposing that you had a little money?'

'A little, yes,' said Lila. 'Could you take me across? I'll pay you.'

'Look no further!' he said proudly. 'Rambashi's River Taxi is at your service! I am Rambashi. Welcome aboard!'

Lila wasn't sure why a river taxi should have the name *The Bloody Murderer* painted on the bow, nor why Rambashi should be wearing no less than three daggers in his belt: one straight, one curved, and one wavy. However, there was no other way to cross the river, and she stepped aboard, trying to avoid the man who'd been

saved from drowning, who was still lying dripping in the bottom of the boat. The others took no notice of him at all, but rested their feet on him as if he was a roll of carpet.

'Cast off, my brave lads!' cried Rambashi.

Lila sat in the prow, and held the sides apprehensively as *The Bloody Murderer* swayed out into the current. Behind her she could hear the clash of oars as the blades banged together, the cries of pain as one man's handle struck another man's back, and the groaning and cursing as the half-drowned man tried to regain his seat; but she didn't take much notice, because there was plenty to look at on the water. There were dragonflies and hummingbirds, and a family of ducks out for an afternoon cruise, and crocodiles practising looking like logs, and all sorts of things; but presently she noticed that the rowers



stopped talking, and the boat wasn't rocking unsteadily as it had been when they were rowing. In fact, it was drifting.

And the oarsmen weren't entirely silent, either. She could hear whispers:

'You tell her!'

'No, I don't want to. It's your turn.'

'You've got to! You said you would!'

'Let Chang do it. It's about time he did something.'

'He's not fierce enough. You do it!'

Lila turned round.

'Oh, for goodness sake,' she said, 'what are you—?'

But she didn't finish the sentence, because of the sight that met her eyes. All the rowers had put down their oars, which were sticking out in all directions, and each rower had tied a handkerchief over his nose and mouth, and they were all holding daggers. Rambashi was holding two.

They all jumped slightly when she turned round. Then they looked at Rambashi.

'Yes!' he said. 'Fooled you! Ha, ha! This isn't a River Taxi at all. We are pirates! The fiercest pirates on the whole river. We'd cut your throat as soon as look at you.'

'And drink your blood,' one whispered.

'Oh yes, and drink your blood. All of it. Hand over your money, come on!'

'Pay up!' said Rambashi. 'You're captured. Your money or your life! I warn you, we're desperate men!'

