

## Chapter Two

Next morning, while Lalchand was at the paper merchant's buying some cardboard tubes, Lila went to the Elephant House to see Chulak. When she heard what Lalchand had told him, she was furious.

'Mount Merapi – Razvani – the Royal Sulphur – and he wasn't going to tell me! Oh, I'll never forgive him!'

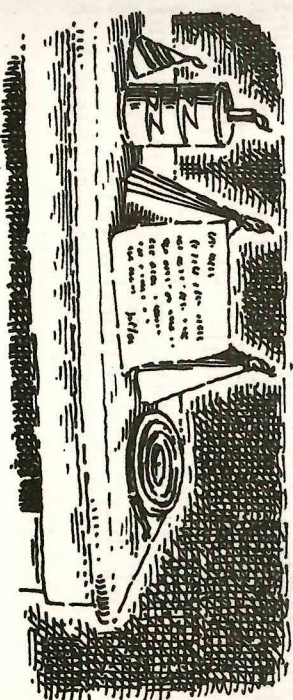
'That's a bit drastic,' said Chulak, who was busy making the Elephant ready for his new job. 'He's only thinking of you. It's dangerous, after all. You

wouldn't catch me going up there.'

'Huh!' she said. 'It's all right to let me make Golden Sneezes and Java Lights, I suppose – little baby things. But not to let me become a real Firework-Maker. He wants me to stay a child for ever. Well, I'm not going to, Chulak. I've had enough. I'm going to Mount Merapi, and I'm going to bring back the Royal Sulphur, and I'll set up as a Firework-Maker on my own and put my father out of business. You see if I don't.'

'No! Wait! You ought to talk to him—'

But Lila wouldn't listen. She ran straight home, packed a little food to eat and a blanket and a few bronze coins, and left a note on the workshop bench:



*Dear Father,  
I have completed my apprentice  
ship. Thank you for all you have  
taught me. I am going to seek the  
Royal Sulphur from Razvani, the  
Fire-Friend, and I shall probably  
not see you again.  
Your ex-daughter,*

*Lila*

Then she thought she should take something to show Razvani her skill, and packed a few self-igniting Crackle-Dragons. One of the last things she had invented was a new way of setting them off: you just had to pull a string instead of setting light to them, because the string was soaked with a solution of fire-crystals. She put three of them in her bag, took one last look around the workshop, and slipped away.

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When Lalchand came back and found her note, he read it with horror.  
'Oh, Lila, Lila! You don't know what you're doing!' he cried, and ran out into the alley.

'Have you seen Lila?' he asked the fried-prawn seller.

'She went off in that direction. About half an hour ago.'

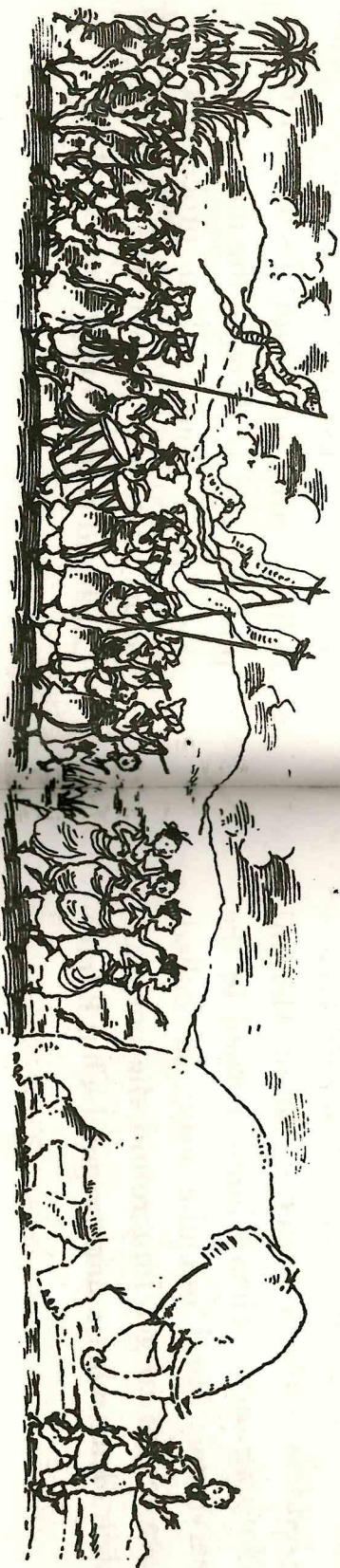
'She had a bundle on her back,' added the batik-painter. 'Looked as if she was going on a journey.'

Lalchand hurried after her at once. But he was an old man with a weak heart, and he couldn't run fast, and the streets were crowded: rickshaw-drivers jostled with bullock-carts, a caravan of silk-traders was pushing its way through the market, and in the Grand Boulevard, a procession was going past. The crowd was so thick that Lalchand couldn't move any further.



The reason for all the excitement was that the White Elephant was being led to his new owner. Chulak was leading Hamlet at the head of the procession, and with them came musicians playing bamboo flutes and banging teak drums, and dancers swaying and snapping their fingernails, and a troop of servants with tape measures, ready to measure Hamlet's new home for the silk curtains and velvet carpets the owner would have to buy. Flags flapped and banners waved in the sunlight, and the White Elephant shone like a snowy mountain.

Lalchand forced his way through the crowd to Chulak's side.



'Did you tell Lila about Razvani and the Royal Sulphur?' he panted.

'Course,' said Chulak. 'You should have told her yourself. Why?'

'Because she's gone, you wretch! She's gone off by herself to Mount Merapi – and she doesn't know the rest of the secret!'

'Is there more, then?'

'Of course there is!' said Lalchand, struggling to keep up. 'No-one can go into the Fire-Fiend's Grotto without protection. She needs a flask of magic water from the Goddess of the Emerald Lake – otherwise she'll perish in the flames! Oh, Chulak, what have you done?'

Chulak gulped. They were nearly at the house of the White Elephant's new owner, and they had to slow down to allow all the dancers and musicians and flag-bearers to get through the gate first and form two lines for the White Elephant to walk between.

Then Hamlet whispered, just loud enough for Chulak to hear:

'I'll find her! Help me get away tonight, Chulak, and we'll go and take Lila the magic water.'

'Good idea,' whispered Chulak, beaming. 'Just what I was going to suggest.' He turned to Lalchand and said, 'Listen, I've got a proposition. Me and Hamlet'll find her! We'll get out tonight. Emerald Lake - Goddess - magic water - Mount Merapi! Nothing to it.' Then Chulak turned to the servants. 'Mind out the way,' he called, 'we've got to get him round the corner - dear, dear, what a narrow gate! That'll have

to come down. And what's this? *Gravel?* You want the White Elephant to walk on *gravel?* Fetch a carpet at once! A red one! Go on! Hurry!'

He clapped his hands, and the servants bowed and scampered away. In the background the new owner was tearing his hair. Chulak whispered to Lalchand once more:

'Don't worry! We'll get away tonight. All we need is a tarpaulin.'

'A tarpaulin? Whatever for?'

'No time to explain now. Just bring one to the gate tonight.'

And Lalchand had to make do with that. He went back to the workshop feeling heavy-hearted.

All this while, Lila had been making her way through the jungle towards the sacred volcano. Mount Merapi lay far to the north, and she had never seen it until, late that



afternoon, 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.

The jungle was a noisy place. Monkeys gibbered in the trees, and parrots screeched,

and crocodiles snapped their jaws in the river. Every so often Lila had to step carefully over a snake sleeping in the sun, and once she heard the roar of a mighty tiger. 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 fishermen missed the water completely with his oar, which swung round and clumped 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 ideal! 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 sarong.

'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.

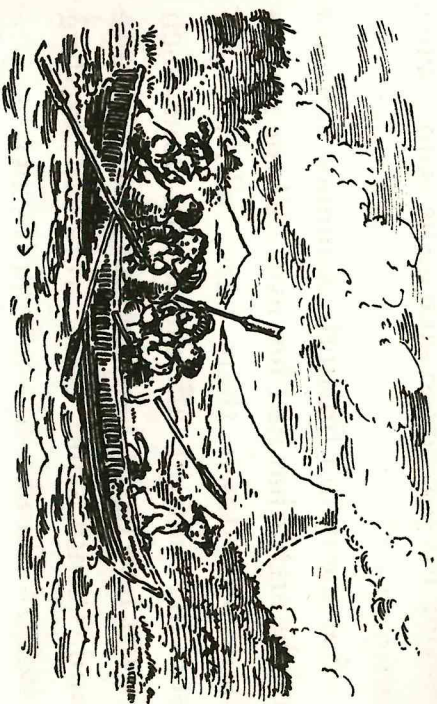
'Rambashi's River Taxi is at your service! I am Rambashi. Welcome aboard!'

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 had



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!'

He waved his dagger so vigorously that the boat rocked and he nearly fell out. Lila almost laughed.

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

