

THE UNDERTAKERS

BY RUDYARD KIPLING.

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"Not before the fifth shot," said the mugger, as though he had never dreamed of stunning one of his listeners— "not before the fifth shot did I sink, and I rose in time to hear a thief of a boatman telling all those white women that I was most certainly dead. One bullet had gone under a neck-plate of mine. I know not if it is there still, for the reason I cannot turn my head. Look and see, child. It will show my tale is true."

"I'll see the jacked." "Shall an enter of old shoes, a bone-cracker, presume to doubt the word of the Envoy of the River? May my tail be bitten off by blind puppies if the shadow of such a thought have crossed my humble mind. The Protector of the Poor has condescended to inform me, his slave, that once in his life he has been wounded by a woman. This is sufficient, and I will tell the tale to all my children, asking for no proof."

"Over-much civility is sometimes no better than over-much discourtesy, for, as the saying is, one can choke a guest with civility. I do not desire that any children of mine should know that the mugger of Muggers-Ghaut took his only wound from a woman. They will have much else to think of if they get their living as miserably as does their father."

"It is forgotten long ago! It was never said! There never was a white woman! There was no boat! Nothing whatever happened at all!"

The jacked waved his brush to show how completely everything was wiped out of his memory, and sat down with an air.

"Indeed, very many things happened," said the mugger, beaten in his second attempt that night to get the better of his friend. (Neither bore malice, however. Eat and be eaten was fair law along the river, and the jacked came in for his share of punishment when the mugger had finished a meal.)

"I left that boat and went upstream, and when I had reached Arrah and the back waters behind it, there were no more dead English. The river was empty for awhile. Then came one or two dead, in red coats, not English, but of one kind all—Hindoos and Purbeas—then five and six abreast, and at last, from Arrah to the north beyond Agra, it was as though whole villages had walked into the water. They came out of little creeks one after another, as the logs come down in the rains. When the river rose they rose also in companies from the shoals they had rested upon, and the falling flood dragged them with it across the fields and through the jungle by the long hair. All night, too, going north, I heard the guns, and by day the shot fell of men crossing ford, and that noise which a heavy cart wheel makes on sand under water; and every ripple brought more dead. At last even I was afraid, for I said: 'If this happen to me how shall the mugger of Muggers-Ghaut escape?' There were boats, too, that came up behind me without sails, burning continually as the cotton boats sometimes burn, but never sinking."

"Ah!" said the jacked. "Boats like these come to Calcutta of the South. They are tall and black, they beat up the water behind them with a tail, and they—"

"Are three as big as my village. My boats were low and white; they beat up the water on either side of them, and were no larger than the boats of one who speaks truth should be. They made me very afraid, and I left water and went back to this river, hiding by day and walking by night, when I could not find little streams to help me. I came to my village again, but I could not hope to see any of my people there. Yet they were plowing and sowing and reaping, and going to and fro in their fields as quietly as their own cattle."

"Was there still good food in the river?" asked the jacked.

"More than I had any desire for. Even I—and I do not eat mud—men I pulled down as I remember, a little frightened of this constant coming down of the silent ones. I heard my people say in my village that all the English were dead, but those that came face down with the current were not English, as my people saw. Then my people said that it was best to say nothing at all, but to pay the tax and plow the land. After a long time the river cleared, and those that came down it had been clearly drowned by the floods, as I could well see; and, though it was not so easy then to get food, I was heartily glad of it. A little killing here and there is no bad thing—but even the mugger is, sometimes satisfied, as the saying is."

"Marvelous! Most truly marvelous!" said the jacked. "I am become fat through merely hearing about so much good eating. And afterward what, if it be permitted to ask, did the Protector of the Poor do?"

"I said to myself—and by the Right and Left of Gunga I looked my jaws on that vow—I said I would never go roving any more. So I lived by the ghaut very close to my own people, and I watched over them year after year; and they loved me so much that they threw marigold wreaths at my head whenever they saw me. Yes, and my fate has been very kind to me, and the river is good enough to respect my poor and infirm presence; only—"

"No one is all happy from his beak to his tail," said the jacked, sympathetically. "What does the mugger of Muggers-Ghaut need more?"

"That little white child which I did not get," said the mugger, with a deep sigh. "He was very small, but I have not forgotten. I am old now, but before I die it is my desire to try one new thing. It is true they are a heavy-footed, noisy and foolish people, and the sport would be small, but I remember the old days above Benares, and if the child lives he will remember still. It may be he goes up to the bank of some river, telling how he once passed his hands between the teeth of the mugger of Muggers-Ghaut, and lived to make a tale of it. My fate has been very kind, but that plagues me sometimes in my dreams—the thought of the little white child in the

bows of that boat." He yawned and closed his jaws. "And now I will rest and think. Keep silent, my children, and respect the aged."

He turned stiffly and shuffled to the top of the sandbar, while the jacked drew back with the adjutant to the shelter of a tree stranded on the end nearest the railway-bridge.

"That was a pleasant and profitable life," he grinned, looking up inquiringly at the bird who towered above him. "And not once, mark you, did he think fit to tell me where a morsel might have been left along the banks. Yet I have told him a hundred times of good things wallowing down-stream. How true is the saying: 'All the world forgets the jacked and the barber when the news has been told.' Now he is going to sleep. Arrh!"

"How can a jacked hunt with a mugger?" said the adjutant, coolly. "Big thief and little thief; it is easy to say who gets the pickings."

The jacked turned, whining impatiently, and was going to curl himself up under the tree trunk, when he suddenly covered and looked up through the dragged branches at the bridge almost above his head.

"What now?" said the adjutant, opening his wings uneasily.

"Wait till we see. The wind blows from us to them, but they are not looking for us—those two men."

"Men, is it? My office protects me. All India knows I am holy." The adjutant, being a first-class scavenger, is allowed to go where he pleases, and so this one never dined.

"I am not worth a blow from anything greater than an old shoe," said the jacked, and listened again. "Hark to that footfall!" he went on. "That was no country leather, but the shed foot of a whiteface. Listen again! Iron hits iron up there. It is a gun. Friend, those heavy-footed, foolish English are coming to speak with the mugger."

"Warn him, then. He was called Protector of the Poor by some one not unlike a starving jacked but a little time ago."

"Let my cousin protect his own hide. He has told me again and again there is nothing to fear from the whitefaces. They must be whitefaces. Not a villager of Muggers-Ghaut would dare to come after him. See! I said it was a gun. Now, with good luck, we shall feed before daylight. He cannot hear well out of water, and—this time it is not a woman!"

A shiny barrel glittered for a minute in the moonlight on the girders. The mugger was lying on the sandbar as still as his own shadow, his forehead spread out a little, his head dropped between them, snoring like a muggon. A voice on the bridge whispered: "It's an odd shot—straight down almost—but as safe as houses. Better try behind the neck. Golly, what a brute! The villagers will be wild if he's shot, though. He's the decoy (goddling) of these parts."

"Don't care a rap," another voice answered. "He took about fifteen of my best coolies while the bridge was building, and it's about time he was put a stop to. I've been after him in a boat for weeks. Stand by with the Martini as soon as I've given him both barrels of this."

"Mind the kick, then. A double four-barrel's no joke."

"That's for him to decide. Here goes!"

There was a roar like the sound of a small cannon (the biggest sort of elephant-rifle is not very different from some artillery), and a double streak of flame, followed by the stinging crack of a Martini, whose long bullet makes nothing of a crocodile's plates. But the explosive bullets did the work. One of them struck just behind the mugger's neck, a hand's breadth to the left of the backbone, while the other burst a little lower down, at the beginning of the tail.

"In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred a mortally wounded crocodile can scramble off for deep water and get away; but the mugger of Muggers-Ghaut was literally broken into three pieces. He hardly moved his head before the life went out of him, and he lay as flat as the jacked.

"Thunder and lightning! Lightning and thunder!" said that miserable little beast. "Has the thing that pulls the covered carts over the bridge tumbled at last?"

"It is no more than a gun," said the adjutant, though his very tail-feathers quivered. "Nothing more than a gun. He is certainly dead. Here come the white-faces."

The two Englishmen had hurried down from the bridge and across to the sandbar, where they stood admiring the length of the mugger. Then a native with an ax cut off the big head, and four men dragged it across the spit.

"The last time that I had my hand in a mugger's mouth," said one of the Englishmen, stooping down (he was the man who had built the bridge), "it was when I was about five years old, leaning down the river by boat to Monghyr. I was a mutiny baby, y' know. Poor mother was in the boat, too, and she often told me how she fired dad's old pistol at the beast's head."

"Well, you're certainly had your revenge on the chief of the clan—even if my gun has had your nose blood. Ill, you boatman! Haul that head up the bank and we'll boil it for the skull. The skin's too knocked about to keep. Come along to bed now. This was worth sitting up all night for, wasn't it?"

Curiously enough, the jacked and the adjutant made the very same remark not three minutes after the men had left.

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CURES THE WORST PAINS in from one to twenty minutes. NOT ONE HOUR in the hand, untidy of the stomach, nausea, heartburn, disgust of food, fullness of weight of the stomach, sour eructations, stinging or fluttering of the liver, choking or suffocating sensations when in a lying posture, dimness of vision, dots on the chief of the clear green, if my gun has had your nose blood. Ill, you boatman! Haul that head up the bank and we'll boil it for the skull. The skin's too knocked about to keep. Come along to bed now. This was worth sitting up all night for, wasn't it?"

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For Atlantic City, 6.30 a.m. For New York, 6.30 a.m. and Elizabeth, 8.30 a.m. (except Philadelphia) p.m. Sunday, 2.15 p.m.

For Branchburg, Allentown, Bethlehem, Easton and Philadelphia, 8.25 a.m., 12.50, 2.50, 5.00 (except Philadelphia) p.m. Sunday, 2.15 p.m.

For Long Branch, Ocean Grove, etc., at 8.20, 12.50, 1.30 p.m.

For Reading, Lebanon and Harrisburg, via Allentown, 8.20 a.m., 12.50, 5.00 p.m. Sunday, 2.15 p.m.

For Pottsville, 8.20 a.m., 12.50 p.m. Returning, leave New York, foot of Liberty street, North river, at 9.10 (express) a.m., 1.10, 1.30, 4.30 (express) with Buffet parlor cars p.m. Sunday, 4.30 a.m. Leave Philadelphia, Reading Terminal, 1.00 a.m., 2.00 and 4.30 p.m. Sunday, 6.27 a.m.

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THE HIGH VALLEY RAILROAD

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Leave Scranton for Pittston and Wilkes-Barre, via D. & H. R. R. at 8.00, 8.30, 11.30 a.m., 1.30, 2.30, 5.30, 8.30 p.m.

Leave Scranton for Pottsville, via D. & H. R. R. at 7.45, 8.15, 11.25 a.m., 1.30, 2.30, 5.30, 8.30 p.m.

Leave Scranton for Bethlehem, Easton, Reading, Harrisburg and all intermediate points via D. & H. R. R. at 7.45, 8.15, 11.25 a.m., 1.30, 2.30, 5.30, 8.30 p.m.

Leave Scranton for Tunkhannock, Towanda, Elmira, Ithaca, Geneva and all intermediate points via D. & H. R. R. at 7.45, 8.15, 11.25 a.m., 1.30, 2.30, 5.30, 8.30 p.m.

Leave Scranton for Rochester, Buffalo, Niagara Falls, Detroit, Chicago and all points west via D. & H. R. R. at 7.45, 8.15, 11.25 a.m., 1.30, 2.30, 5.30, 8.30 p.m.

Leave Scranton for Buffalo, via D. & H. R. R. at 7.45, 8.15, 11.25 a.m., 1.30, 2.30, 5.30, 8.30 p.m.

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