

Wednesday 1st April

The Firework Maker's Daughter by Philip Pullman

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 bashed 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 around.

'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. They all 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!'