

3. NURSERY RHYMES

 In the ancient Indian temple town of Ayodhya, macaque monkeys have long been revered. Many centuries ago Hindus began making offerings of fruit and nuts because they believed the animals represented the legendary monkey-god Hanuman. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the monkey populations increased and they became something of a tourist attraction. British India, now firmly under colonial rule, was a great destination for motherland visitors who travelled abroad, curious to observe the eccentricities of the little brown natives – and of course the simian inhabitants.

This precipitated a dire warning: be careful of those who will take advantage. And mind the snatching monkeys; hold firm to hats, gloves, canes, parasols and purses. But incidents with the monkeys were inevitable and one of the worst occurred in the summer of 1812. A young woman from Dover had her baby snatched in its carrying cradle. Two macaques took a handle each and carried the tiny white infant into the uppermost branches of an old banyan tree. The mother screamed as the monkeys hooked the carry basket on a thin limb that reached

right out over the market stalls, over the rabble of water carriers, over the rickshaw cyclists, coolies, beggars and street urchins. To make matters worse, on this tropical afternoon, a monsoon storm began to move in. The sea of faces looked up anxiously as the strong winds buffeted the boughs of the banyan, until of course, the inevitable: the extra weight and the wind caused the limb to snap and the child's wicker basket fell like a plummeting coconut. Out of the crowd there suddenly appeared an old Indian manservant who stood beneath the descending cradle, arms outstretched. He saved the English baby's life but tragically, he lost his own.

In the following weeks the incident was reported in the *London Times* and a short verse was composed to illustrate the strange event: *Rock-a-bye baby in a tree top...* The rhyme caught on and was repeated many times, especially by small children. It ended: *and down will come baby, cradle and all.* Oddly, they left out the part about the brave old Punjabi who saved the baby. But nothing rhymed with manservant anyway.