

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi

written by Rudyard Kipling – adapted for EAL

This is the story of a great war. Rikki-tikki-tavi fought this war in an English family's home in India. He had some help, but he did the real fighting. Rikki-tikki was a mongoose. His name came from the sound he made going into battle: Rikk-tikk-tikki-tikki-tchk! When Rikki was small, a flood swept him away from his home and family. A little boy named Teddy found him half-dead and brought him home. Teddy and his mother warmed the mongoose until he woke up. The mother had a soft spot for animals, but she wasn't sure if she wanted a wild animal in her house. But Teddy's father knew that a mongoose was the perfect house pet. After all, deadly snakes lived right in their garden, and mongooses were very good snake killers.

Rikki-tikki soon felt better, and he spent the rest of the day and the next morning exploring Teddy's house. In the yard he heard the sad voices of two tailorbirds, Darzee and his wife. The birds were crying because a cobra named Nag ate one of their babies. Just then, Nag himself appeared. He was a huge black cobra, five feet long.

"I am Nag," he said. "Look, and be afraid!"

Rikki never met a cobra before, but he knew that a mongoose's job was to kill snakes. Nag knew that, too, and the cobra was afraid of the little mongoose.

Rikki-tikki replied, "Well. Do you think you should eat baby birds?"

Nag then played a trick on Rikki-tikki.

"Let's talk," he said. "If you eat eggs, why shouldn't I eat birds?"

"Behind you! Look behind you!" cried Darzee.

Rikki-tikki jumped high up in the air. A second snake, Nag's wife Nagaina, slithered up behind him, but the mongoose got out of the way of her deadly bite. Rikki landed on Nagaina's back and bit her, but she struggled free.

When a mongoose's eyes grow red, it means he is angry and ready to fight. Now Rikki-tikki's eyes grew very red. But Nag and Nagaina were gone.

Teddy ran down the path to pet Rikki-tikki. But as Teddy bent down, something moved in the dust. It was Karait, a small but deadly snake. Rikki's eyes glowed red. Teddy shouted to his parents. His father ran out with a stick and beat the dead body of Karait. Rikki-tikki had already killed the snake by the time the father got there.

"Why is he doing that?" thought Rikki-tikki. "I have already killed the snake."

The family treated Rikki like a hero. He enjoyed the attention. But he did not forget about Nag and Nagaina.

That night, Rikki wandered around inside the house. He met Chuchundra the muskrat, a little ratlike animal. Chuchundra was very scared. He told Rikki that Nag and Nagaina were planning an attack that very night. Just then, Rikki-tikki heard a soft scratch-scratch coming from the bathroom. Rikki-tikki moved quietly into the bathroom. There he heard Nag and Nagaina whispering in a hole.

"Go in quietly, and kill the big man first," said Nagaina.

"Are you sure we should kill the people?" said Nag.

"Of course. The mongoose will leave if we kill them. Then we can be king and queen of the garden, and we will have a safe hatching ground for our eggs," said Nagaina. She and Nag had eggs that were almost ready to hatch. Nag slipped through the hole into the bathroom. His head came first, then his five feet of scaly body.

Rikki-tikki was angry, but also afraid. He stayed very still for an hour. Then, he moved slowly toward Nag. He knew he had to kill Nag with his first bite. Rikki jumped on Nag's head. Nag shook him every which way. Rikki was dizzy and hurt all over, but he didn't let go of the cobra's head and he held on tightly. Then suddenly Rikki heard a big loud bang. The fight woke up Teddy's father, who shot Nag with his gun.

He picked up Rikki and shouted, "It's the mongoose again! This time, he saved our lives!"

Tired after the fight, Rikki-tikki dragged himself to Teddy's bedroom and fell fast asleep.

When morning came, Rikki-tikki knew he had a job to finish. Nagaina was still alive. Rikki went to Darzee for help. The bird told Rikki that Nagaina was by the rubbish heap, crying over Nag's dead body. Her eggs were in the melon garden. But the foolish bird didn't want to help Rikki get rid of the cobra's eggs. He thought it was unfair to destroy eggs. Darzee's wife was smarter. She didn't want young cobras around. She helped Rikki by playing that her wing was broken. Nagaina thought it was an easy target, so she went to catch the bird.

This gave enough time for Rikki-tikki to find Nagaina's twenty-five soft, white eggs. He crushed all but one when he heard Darzee's wife screaming: "Rikki-tikki, I led Nagaina toward the house. Now she is going in! Hurry! She is going to kill!"

Holding the last egg in his mouth, Rikki-tikki hurried to the porch. There, Teddy and his parents sat at the breakfast table. They were as still as stones, hardly daring to breathe. Nagaina was coiled up on the floor by Teddy's chair.

Rikki-tikki came up and cried, "Turn round and fight, Nagaina!"

"I will fight you soon," she said, but she didn't turn away from Teddy's bare leg.

Rikki-tikki's eyes were blood red. "Look what I have here," he said. "Your last egg! I have smashed all the others."

Nagaina turned around. Now the father could pull Teddy across the table to safety.

"Tricked!" laughed Rikki-tikki. "Rikki-tikki-tcktck! Now, come and fight me."

Nagaina looked at her egg. "Give me the egg, Rikki-tikki. I will go away and never come back," she said, lowering her hood.

"Yes, you will go away — away to the rubbish heap. Fight!" said Rikki-tikki.

They circled each other in a deadly dance. But Rikki forgot about the egg. Nagaina quickly picked up her last egg and raced away with it. Rikki-tikki followed her and caught her tail with his sharp little teeth. Together they disappeared down a rat hole.

Darzee, who was watching the battle, cried, "A mongoose has no chance against a snake down there. Brave Rikki must be dead!"

But suddenly, the grass moved again. There was Rikki-tikki. He climbed out of the hole.

"It is all over," Rikki said. "Nagaina is dead."

Then he curled up right there and slept until late afternoon. He didn't even hear the Coppersmith, a little bird whose job was to shout out the good news.

That night at the house, Rikki ate a feast. He was amused by all the celebration.

"Just think, he saved our lives and Teddy's life," said Teddy's mother.

"What are they worried about?" Rikki-tikki wondered. "The cobras are all dead. And if any more come, I will be here."

Rikki-tikki was proud in his own way, and he had every right to be. From then on, he guarded the house and the garden. No cobra was brave enough to enter it ever again.