

The Exception and the Rule (1930)

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CHARACTERS

Merchant

Guide

Coolie

Two Policemen

Innkeeper

Widow

Leader of the Second Caravan

Judge

Two Colleagues

THE ACTORS:

We hereby report to you
The story of a journey, undertaken by
One who exploits and two who are exploited
Observe the conduct of these people closely:
Find it estranging even if not very strange
Hard to explain even if it is the custom
Hard to understand even if it is the rule
Observe the smallest action, seeming simple,
With mistrust
Inquire if a thing be necessary
Especially if it is common
We particularly ask you —
When a thing continually occurs —
Not on that account to find it natural
Let nothing be called natural
In an age of bloody confusion
Ordered disorder, planned caprice,
And dehumanized humanity, lest all things
Be held unalterable!

SCENE 1

THE RACE THROUGH THE DESERT

Two separate little parties, at some distance from each other, are crossing the desert at speed.

MERCHANT (*to his men, a GUIDE and a COOLIE, the latter laden with baggage*): Hurry, you lazy dogs! In another two days we've got to be at Station Han. We've got to squeeze out a head start of one full day! (*To the audience:*) I am the merchant Karl Langmann. I'm on my way to Urga to make the final arrangements for a concession. My competitors aren't very far behind, and whoever gets there first closes the deal. By my cleverness, my energetic surmounting of every obstacle, and my uncompromising attitude to the personnel, I have made the first part of the journey in half the usual time. Unfortunately, so have my competitors. (*He looks toward the rear through binoculars. To his men:*) Look, they're on our heels again already! (*To the GUIDE only:*) Why don't you drive the fellow on? I hired you to drive him hard, not to take a walk with him on my money. All right: if there's any sabotage, I'll report you — at the employment agency in Urga.

GUIDE (*to the COOLIE*): Make an effort. Faster!

MERCHANT: You don't have the right tone of voice, you'll never be a real guide. I should have taken a more expensive one, they always repay your investment. Go on then: hit the fellow! (*To the audience:*) I'm not for beating but right now there's no other way: if I don't get there first, I'm ruined. (*To the GUIDE:*) Confess: this carrier's your brother — *some* relation anyhow — *that's* why you don't beat him! I know you, though, I know you all from way back, and you

aren't such gentle Jesuses either! Beat him or you're fired — and you can sue me for your wages! For God's sake, they'll overtake us!

COOLIE (*to the GUIDE*): Beat me, keep some of your strength in reserve. I must keep some of *my* strength in reserve if we are supposed to reach Station Han.

The GUIDE beats the COOLIE.

SHOUTS FROM THE REAR: Hello! Is this the way to Urga!
We're friends! Wait for us!

MERCHANT (*neither answering nor looking back*): To hell with you! Let's go! I'll have kept my men going three days, two with curses, the third with promises, and we'll see about the promises in Urga. My competitors are at my heels, but the second night I'll keep going all night, I'll get so far ahead they can't see me, and we'll be at Station Han on the third day, one day ahead of all the others! (*He sings.*)

As I did not sleep
I soon took the lead.
As I kept on the move
I am now far ahead.
The weak lag behind
But the strong arrive.

SCENE 2

THE END OF A MUCH-TRAVELED ROAD

MERCHANT (*before Station Han*): Here is Station Han. Thank God I've reached it one day ahead of all the others. My men are exhausted. What's more, they're pretty bitter about me. They're just not interested in record-breaking. They're not fighters. They're stick-in-the-muds, nobodies, riffraff! Of course they don't dare say anything because there's still the police, thank God, to maintain order.

TWO POLICEMEN (*approaching*): Everything in order, sir? Satisfied with the roads? Satisfied with the personnel?

MERCHANT: Everything's in order. I made it up to here in three days instead of four. The roads are filthy but I'm a man that finishes what he sets out to do. How are the roads after Station Han? What's in store for us?

TWO POLICEMEN: The uninhabited Jahi desert, sir.

MERCHANT: Is there a police escort to be had there?

TWO POLICEMEN (*passing on*): No, sir, we're the last patrol you'll see, sir.

SCENE 3

THE DISMISSAL OF THE GUIDE AT STATION HAN

GUIDE: Since we spoke to the police in the street in front of the station, our merchant is a changed man. The tone he takes with us is quite different: he's friendly. This has nothing to do with the speed of the journey because we're not getting a day off even at this station, which is the last before the Jahi desert. I don't know how I'm to get this carrier all the way to Urga in such an exhausted state. All in all, this friendly behavior on the Merchant's part is very disturbing. It suggests to me he's working something up. He walks around lost in thought. Meditations — machinations! And whatever he cooks up, the carrier and I will just have to take it. Otherwise he'll either not pay us or simply throw us over in mid-desert.

MERCHANT (*approaching*): Have some tobacco. Here's cigarette paper. You'd go through fire for a single drag, wouldn't you? I don't know what you people wouldn't do to get this smoke in your throats. Thank God we've brought enough along. Our tobacco would take us three times as far as Urga.

GUIDE (*taking the tobacco, aside*): *Our tobacco!*

MERCHANT: Let's sit down, my friend. Why don't you sit down? Travel brings people into a more intimate relationship. Of course if you don't wish to, you may stand. You people have your ways! In general I wouldn't sit down with you and you wouldn't sit down with the carrier. The world is based on such distinctions. But we can smoke together. Can't we? (*He laughs.*) I like that about you. In its way it's a kind of dignity. Very well, pack up the rest of the stuff. And don't forget the water. I hear there aren't

many water holes in the desert. Another thing, my friend, I wanted to warn you: did you notice the look the carrier gave you when you handled him roughly? There was something in his eyes that bodes no good. But you'll have to handle him different in the next few days, we have to increase our speed still more. He's a lazy fellow, that one. The region we're coming to is uninhabited; maybe he'll show his true colors. Now you are a better man, you earn more and you don't have to do any carrying: reason enough for him to hate you. You'd be well-advised to keep away from him.

The GUIDE goes through an open door into the courtyard. The MERCHANT is left sitting alone.

Funny people!

The MERCHANT is silent and stays where he is. In the yard the GUIDE supervises the carrier's packing. Then he sits down and smokes. When the COOLIE is ready, he too sits down, receives from his companion tobacco and cigarette paper, and starts a conversation with him.

COOLIE: The Merchant always says it's a "service to humanity" to take oil out of the ground. When the oil is taken out of the ground, there'll be railroads here, and prosperity will spread. The Merchant says there'll be railroads. How shall I earn my living?

GUIDE: Don't worry. There won't be railroads as fast as all that. They discover oil, and then they suppress the discovery, or so I've heard. The man who stops up the oil-hole gets hush money. That's why the Merchant is in such a hurry. It's not the oil he's after, it's the hush money.

COOLIE: I don't understand.

GUIDE: No one understands.

COOLIE: The path across the desert is sure to get even worse. I hope my feet will hold out.

GUIDE: Certainly.

COOLIE: Are there bandits?

GUIDE: We'll have to keep a lookout — especially today, the first day of the trip. The station attracts every sort of rabble.

COOLIE: How about afterward?

GUIDE: Once we have the Myr river behind us, it's a matter of sticking to the water holes.

COOLIE: You know the way?

GUIDE: Yes.

The MERCHANT has heard voices. He comes up behind the door to listen.

COOLIE: Is the Myr river hard to cross?

GUIDE: Not in general — at this time of year. But when it's in flood, the current is very strong, and you take your life in your hands.

MERCHANT: So he's talking to the carrier. He can sit down with *him*. He's smoking with him!

COOLIE: What do you do then?

GUIDE: You often have to wait a week or so to get safely across.

MERCHANT: Well, well, well! He even advises him to take his time and hold on to his precious life! A dangerous fellow, that one. He'd only back his Coolie up. In any case, not the man to put the job through. No telling what he might do either. In short: as of today, they're two against one. At any rate, it's clear he's afraid to boss his own underlings now we're entering uninhabited territory. I must definitely get rid of the

fellow. (*He joins the other two.*) I gave you the assignment of checking if the things are properly packed. Let's see how you carry out my assignments. (*He takes hold of a strap and gives it a terrific pull. It breaks.*) Call that packing? Breaking a strap means a day's delay. But that's just what you want: delay!

GUIDE: I do not want delay. And the straps don't break if you don't pull at them like that.

MERCHANT: What? Is the strap broken or not? Just you dare tell me to my face it's not broken! You are unreliable. I made a mistake treating you decently, you people don't appreciate it. I've no use for a guide who can't command the respect of the personnel. It seems to me you should be a carrier, not a guide. There are grounds for believing you stir up the personnel.

GUIDE: What grounds?

MERCHANT: You'd like to know, wouldn't you? Very well: you're dismissed!

GUIDE: But you can't dismiss me when we're halfway there.

MERCHANT: Think yourself lucky if I don't report you at the agency in Urga. Here are your wages, up to this point of course. (*Shouts to the INNKEEPER who enters.*) You are my witness: I paid him his wages. (*To the GUIDE:*) And let me tell you something: you'd better not show your face in Urga any more! (*Looks him over from top to toe.*) You'll never get anywhere. (*He goes into the other room with the INNKEEPER.*) I set out at once. If anything happens to me, you are my witness that today I set out alone with that man (*pointing to the COOLIE*). (*The INNKEEPER indicates with gestures that he understands nothing. The MERCHANT is taken aback. To the audience:*) He doesn't understand. In that case

there'll be no one to say where I went. And the worst of it is these fellows *know* there'll be no one. *He sits down and writes a letter.*)

GUIDE (*to the COOLIE*): I made a mistake sitting down with you. Take care: he's bad, that man. (*He gives him his water flask.*) Keep this flask in reserve. Hide it. If you get lost — and you will — he's sure to take yours. I'll explain the road to you.

COOLIE: I don't think you should. He mustn't hear you talking to me. If he throws me out, I'm done for. He doesn't even have to pay me. I'm not in a union like you, I must put up with everything.

MERCHANT (*to the INNKEEPER*): Give this letter to the people who'll be arriving here tomorrow on their way to Urga. I'm going on ahead with my carrier and no one else.

INNKEEPER (*nodding and taking the letter*): But he isn't a guide.

MERCHANT (*to himself*): So he does understand, he just didn't want to admit it. He knows how things are, he simply has no intention of being a witness in such cases. (*To the INNKEEPER, peremptorily:*) Explain the way to Urga to my carrier.

The INNKEEPER goes outside and explains the way to Urga to the COOLIE. The COOLIE nods eagerly a number of times.

I see there'll be a struggle. (*He takes out his revolver and cleans it, singing.*)

Sick men die

But strong men fight.

Why should the earth give up its oil,

And why should this coolie carry my baggage?

To get the oil we have to struggle

Both with the earth and with the coolie.

And the meaning of the struggle is this:

Sick men die

But strong men fight.

(He goes into the courtyard, ready to leave.) Do you know the way now?

COOLIE: Yes, Master.

MERCHANT: Then let's go.

The MERCHANT and the COOLIE go. The INNKEEPER and the GUIDE watch.

GUIDE: I don't know if the Coolie understood. He understood too quickly.

SCENE 4

A CONVERSATION IN DANGEROUS
TERRITORY

COOLIE (*singing*):

Urga, Urga
I am on my way to Urga.
Nothing can stop me now:
Bandits cannot keep me from Urga
The desert cannot keep me from Urga
For there's food in Urga
And pay.

MERCHANT: This Coolie isn't worried, oh no! There are bandits in this part of the country — the station attracts all sorts of rabble. And he sings! (*To the COOLIE:*) I never did like that Guide. One day insubordinate, the next licking my boots. Not an honest man.

COOLIE: Yes, Master. (*Singing again:*)

Urga, Urga
The road is hard to Urga
I hope my feet hold up
For there's rest in Urga
And pay.

MERCHANT: Now just why do you sing? What are you so cheery about, my friend? You really aren't afraid of robbers? What they could take doesn't belong to you, what *you* have to lose belongs to me. That it?

COOLIE:

Urga, Urga
My wife awaits me in Urga
Our little son awaits me. . . .

MERCHANT (*interrupting him*): I don't like that singing! We have no reason to sing. They can hear you all

the way to Urga. That's how to attract the attention of the rabble. Tomorrow you can sing as much as you want.

COOLIE: Yes, Master.

MERCHANT (*now walking in front of him*): He wouldn't defend himself for one second if anyone tried to take his things away. What would he do? If my property is in danger, it's his duty to defend it like his own. But he wouldn't. Never. A bad lot. He never says anything. That kind are the worst. I wish I could see into his mind. What's he planning to do? He has nothing to laugh about and he laughs. What at? Why, for instance, does he have me walk ahead of him? *He's* the one that knows the way. And where is he taking me? (*He looks around and sees the COOLIE wiping out their footprints in the sand.*) What's that you're doing?

COOLIE: Wiping out our footprints, Master.

MERCHANT: And why, may I ask?

COOLIE: On account of the bandits.

MERCHANT: I see, on account of the bandits. But I want it to be clear where you've taken me. Where *are* you taking me anyway? You go first!

The COOLIE now walks in front of the MERCHANT.

Silence. Then the MERCHANT says to himself:

In this sand our footprints really are very easy to see. Actually, of course, it would be a good thing to wipe out our footprints.

SCENE 5

AT THE RUSHING RIVER

COOLIE: We've been on the right road, Master. What we see there is the Myr river. In general, at this time of year, the river isn't hard to cross but, when it's in flood, the current is very strong, and you take your life in your hands.

MERCHANT: We must get across.

COOLIE: You often have to wait a week or so to get across safely. At present you take your life in your hands.

MERCHANT: We'll see about that. We can't wait a single day.

COOLIE: Then we'll have to look for a ford — or a boat.

MERCHANT: It takes too much time.

COOLIE: But I can't swim properly.

MERCHANT: The water isn't very high.

COOLIE (*lowers a stick in the water*): It is very high.

MERCHANT: Once you're in the water, you'll swim all right, you'll have to. You can't see the matter from all sides like me, know what I mean? Why must we get to Urga? Are you too much of a fool to understand it's doing mankind a service to extract oil from the earth? When the oil is extracted, there'll be railways here and prosperity will spread. There'll be bread and clothes and heaven knows what. And who will bring this about? *We* shall. It all depends on *our* journey. Just imagine: the eyes of the whole country are on you — a little man like you! And you hesitate to do your duty?

COOLIE (*has been nodding respectfully during this speech*):
I can't swim properly.

MERCHANT: I risk my life too.

The COOLIE nods overawed.

I don't understand you. Prompted by low considerations of pecuniary gain, you have no interest in reaching Urga as soon as possible. Your interest is to get there as late as possible — because you're paid by the day. In fact it isn't the journey that interests you, it's the pay!

COOLIE (*stands hesitating at the river bank*): What am I to do? (*He sings:*)

1.

Here is the river.

To swim across is dangerous.

Look: There are two men on the riverbank.

One swims across, the other

Hesitates.

Is the first brave? The second cowardly?

No: On the other side

One of the two has business.

2.

The first emerges with a smile from the dangerous water

Onto the opposite bank which he has conquered:

He now sets foot on his property and eats new food.

The second emerges from the dangerous water

Into nothing:

Gasping, and weaker than before, he now confronts

New dangers.

So:

Are both brave?

Are both wise?

They conquered the river together but

They are not both conquerers.

3.

WE and YOU AND I
Are not the same thing.
WE defeat the foe
But YOU defeat ME.

At least let me rest for half a day. I'm tired from all the carrying. Maybe after a rest, I *can* get across.

MERCHANT: I know a better solution: You'll get my revolver in your back. Shall we bet you get across? (*He pushes him on. To himself.*) My money makes me fear bandits and overlook the dangerous state of the river (*He sings:*)

This is how man masters the desert and the rushing river.

This is how man masters man.

The oil, the oil we need, is his reward.

SCENE 6

THE BIVOUC

It is evening, and the COOLIE, whose arm is broken, is trying to pitch the tent. The MERCHANT is sitting nearby.

MERCHANT: But I told you, you don't need to put the tent up today — after breaking your arm crossing the river.

The COOLIE goes on putting it up and does not speak.

If I hadn't pulled you out of the water you'd have drowned.

The COOLIE goes on.

Though of course, I am not responsible for your accident — the tree might just as easily have hit *me* — all the same the mishap befell you during a journey in my company. I have very little cash on me. My bank is in Urga. When we arrive, I'll give you some money.

COOLIE: Yes, Master.

MERCHANT: He doesn't waste words. And with every look he gives me to understand that I'm the cause of his misfortune. A malicious lot, these coolies! (*To the COOLIE:*) You can lie down. (*He walks away and sits down at a distance.*) It's clear that his mishap makes more difference to me than to him. The rabble don't much bother whether they're cripples or men. So long as they can eat, they're satisfied. Their natural limitations keep them from bothering their heads about themselves any further. They're failures. Now, if you make something and it turns out a failure you throw it away. They, *being* failures, throw themselves away. It's the hundred percenter who fights (*He sings:*)

Sick men die

But strong men fight:

And that's how it should be.

All power to the strong

No power to the weak:

For that's how it should be.

Things that fall, let 'em fall,

Then give 'em a kick:

Isn't that how it should be?

Who wins the battle

Can sit down to dine:

Yes, that's how it should be.

The conqueror's cook

Makes no count of the slain:

And that's how it should be.

And God up in heaven

God of things as they are

He made master and man:

And that's how it should be.

Who has good luck is good,

Who has bad luck is bad:

That's just how it should be.

The COOLIE has approached. The MERCHANT notices him and is startled.

He's been listening! Stop! Stay where you are! What do you want?

COOLIE: The tent is ready, Master.

MERCHANT: Don't sneak about in the night. I don't like it. When a man comes to me, I like to hear his foot-steps. And I want to look him in the eye when I talk to him. You lie down, and don't trouble yourself so much about me.

The COOLIE goes back.

Stop! You go into the tent! I'll sit here because I'm used to the fresh air.

The COOLIE goes into the tent.

I wish I knew how much he heard of my song.
(Pause.) What's he doing now? He's still busy.

The COOLIE is seen carefully preparing his "bed."

COOLIE: I hope he doesn't notice anything. With one arm, I can't cut grass properly.

MERCHANT: Stupid not to be on guard. To trust people is stupid. Through me, this man has been hurt — possibly handicapped for the rest of his life. From his point of view, it's only right if he pays me back. And a strong man asleep is no stronger than a weak man asleep. Men shouldn't have to sleep! Certainly it would be better to sit in the tent. In the open you're a prey to every sort of sickness. But what sickness could be as dangerous as this man is! He walks at my side for little money — and I have much money — and the road is equally difficult for us both. When he was tired, he was beaten. When the guide sat down with him, the guide was dismissed. When he wiped out footprints in the sand — perhaps really because of bandits — he was treated with suspicion. When he showed fear at the river, he was given my revolver to look at. How can I sleep in the same tent with such a man? He can't make me believe he'll just put up with it all! I'd like to know what he's thinking up in there now!

The COOLIE is seen peacefully lying down to sleep.

I'd be a fool to go into the tent!

SCENE 7
THE END OF THE ROAD

A

MERCHANT: What are you stopping for?

COOLIE: Master, the road ends here.

MERCHANT: Well?

COOLIE: Master, if you beat me, don't beat me on my sore arm. I don't know the way from here on.

MERCHANT: But the man at Station Han explained it to you.

COOLIE: Yes, Master.

MERCHANT: When I asked you if you understood him, you said yes.

COOLIE: Yes, Master.

MERCHANT: And you did not understand him?

COOLIE: No, Master.

MERCHANT: Then why did you say yes?

COOLIE: I was afraid you'd throw me out. I only know it's supposed to be along the water holes.

MERCHANT: Then go along the water holes.

COOLIE: But I don't know where they are.

MERCHANT: Get moving! And don't try to make a fool of me. I know you've traveled this road before.

They walk on.

COOLIE: But wouldn't it be better to wait for that other caravan?

MERCHANT: No.

They walk on.

THE SHARED WATER

B

MERCHANT: Where do you think you're going now? That's north, the east is *there!*

The COOLIE proceeds in that direction.

Stop! What's the matter with you?

The COOLIE stops but does not look at the MERCHANT.

Why don't you look me in the eyes?

COOLIE: I thought the east was there.

MERCHANT: Just you wait, my lad! I'll show you how to guide me. (*He beats him.*) Do you know now where the east is?

COOLIE (*screaming*): Not on that arm.

MERCHANT: Where's the east?

COOLIE: There.

MERCHANT: And where are the water holes?

COOLIE: There.

MERCHANT (*furious*): There? But you were going *there!*

COOLIE: No, Master.

MERCHANT: Aha! So you were not going there? Were you going *there?* (*He beats him.*)

COOLIE: Yes, Master.

MERCHANT: Where are the water holes?

The COOLIE is silent. The MERCHANT seems calm.

You said just now you know where the water holes are? *Do you know?*

The COOLIE is silent.

MERCHANT (*beating him*): Do you know?

COOLIE: Yes.

MERCHANT (*beating him*): Do you know?

COOLIE: No.

MERCHANT: Give me your flask.

The COOLIE gives it to him.

I could now take the view that all the water belongs to me because you guided me wrong. But I won't! (*To himself:*) I forgot myself: I oughtn't to have beaten him in this situation.

C *

MERCHANT: We were here before. Look, our footprints!

COOLIE: When we were here we must have been near the right road.

MERCHANT: Pitch the tent. Our flask is empty, there's nothing left. (*The MERCHANT sits down while the COOLIE pitches the tent. The MERCHANT drinks secretly out of his bottle. To himself:*) He mustn't notice that I still have something to drink. Otherwise, if he's got a spark of understanding in his thick skull, he'll do me in. If he comes close, I shoot. (*He takes out his revolver and places it on his knee.*) If we could only reach the last water hole! I'm nearly strangled with thirst. How long can a man stand thirst?

* Section C has no title in the 1937 text.

COOLIE: I must hand over to him the flask that the Guide at the Station gave me. Otherwise, if they find us, me still alive and him half dead, they'll put me on trial.

He takes the bottle and walks toward the MERCHANT. The MERCHANT suddenly discovers the COOLIE in front of him and doesn't know if the COOLIE has seen him drink or not. The COOLIE has not seen him drink. In silence, he holds out the flask to him. But the MERCHANT, thinking that it is one of the big stones of the countryside and that the COOLIE, enraged, wants to kill him, cries out loudly.

MERCHANT: Put that stone down!

And with a single shot from his revolver he brings down the COOLIE who, not understanding, continues to hold out the flask.

I was right. There, you bastard! You had it coming.

The Song of the Tribunals

Sung by the actors while the stage is set for the trial scene.

In the wake of the robber hordes
 Come the tribunals
 And when the innocent are murdered
 The judges gather about their corpses and condemn
 them.
 At the grave of the murdered
 All their rights are murdered.
 The words of the tribunal
 Fall like the shadow of a knife
 And the knife, alas, is sufficient:
 What need, afterward, of a verdict?
 Overhead fly the vultures and whither?
 The desert has repelled them:
 The tribunals will feed them.

Here the assassin will find a home
And the persecutor a sanctuary.
Here the thief hides what he has stolen
And wraps it in a piece of paper upon which
A law is written.

SCENE 8

THE TRIBUNAL

The GUIDE, the Coolie's WIDOW, and the INNKEEPER are already sitting in the courtroom.

GUIDE (*to the WIDOW*): Are you the Coolie's Widow? I am the Guide who engaged your husband. I've heard you are demanding the punishment of the Merchant and damages. I came to this law court right away because I have proof that your husband was innocent. It's in my pocket.

INNKEEPER (*to the GUIDE*): I hear you have a proof in your pocket. Let me give you some advice: leave it in your pocket.

GUIDE: Is the Coolie's Widow to go away empty-handed?

INNKEEPER: Do you want to be blacklisted?

GUIDE: I'll think it over.

The JUDGE and his two colleagues take their seats. So does the accused MERCHANT. Also the INNKEEPER and the members of the second caravan.

JUDGE: I declare the proceedings open. The Widow of the deceased has the floor.

WIDOW: My husband carried this gentleman's baggage through the Jahi desert. Shortly before the end of the journey, his master shot him down. Even though my husband can't be brought back to life thereby, I demand that his murderer be punished!

JUDGE: You are also demanding damages.

WIDOW: Yes. My little son and myself have lost our breadwinner.

JUDGE (*to the WIDOW*): The material part of the claim is nothing to be ashamed of. I'm not reproaching you for it. (*To the members of the second caravan:*) Behind the expedition of the merchant Karl Langmann came another expedition — joined by the guide who had been dismissed from the first expedition. They sighted the stranded expedition barely a mile from the route. What did you see as you approached?

LEADER (*of the second caravan*): The Merchant had very little water left in his flask. And his carrier lay dead on the sand.

JUDGE (*to the MERCHANT*): Did you shoot the man?

MERCHANT: Yes. He attacked me unawares.

JUDGE: How did he attack you?

MERCHANT: He intended to strike me down from behind with a stone.

JUDGE: Can you explain the motive of his attack?

MERCHANT: No.

JUDGE: Did you drive your men very hard?

MERCHANT: No.

JUDGE: Is the guide present who made the first part of the journey and was dismissed?

GUIDE: Present!

JUDGE: What have you to say?

GUIDE: As far as I know, the important thing for the merchant was to be in Urga as soon as possible on account of a concession.

JUDGE (*to the MERCHANT*): Had you the impression that the expedition behind you maintained an unusually high speed?

MERCHANT: Not unusually. We had a full day's start and kept it up.

JUDGE (*to the MERCHANT*): Then you *must* have driven them hard.

MERCHANT: *I* didn't drive them hard. That was the Guide's job.

JUDGE (*to the GUIDE*): Did the accused make a point of telling you to drive the carrier especially hard?

GUIDE: I didn't drive him harder than the usual. Maybe less hard.

JUDGE: Why were you dismissed?

GUIDE: Because in the Merchant's opinion my attitude to the Coolie was too friendly.

JUDGE: And you shouldn't be so friendly? Did you have the impression that this Coolie who was not to be given friendly treatment was a malcontent?

GUIDE: No. He put up with everything because, as he told me himself, he was afraid of losing his job: he didn't belong to a union.

JUDGE: Did he have a lot to put up with? Answer! And don't be thinking over your answers all the time! The truth will out!

GUIDE: I was only with him as far as Station Han.

INNKEEPER (*to himself*): That's the way to talk to them.

JUDGE (*to the MERCHANT*): Did anything occur afterward that could explain the Coolie's attack?

MERCHANT: No. On my side, nothing.

JUDGE: My good fellow, don't paint yourself whiter than you really are, you won't get off that way. If you handled your Coolie with kid gloves on, how do you explain his hatred for you? Obviously, you can

only make us believe that you acted in self-defense if you also make us believe in the Coolie's hatred. Use your head!

MERCHANT: Let me confess this much: I did beat him one time.

JUDGE: Aha! And you believe that such hatred on the Coolie's part was occasioned by this one event?

MERCHANT: No. I let him have my revolver in his back when he didn't want to cross the river. It's also true that he broke his arm during the crossing. That too was my fault.

JUDGE (*smiling*): In the Coolie's opinion.

MERCHANT (*also smiling*): Of course. Actually, I helped him get out of the water.

JUDGE: Very well. *After* the dismissal of the guide you gave the Coolie occasion to hate you. And beforehand? (*To the GUIDE, insisting:*) Admit, after all, that the man hated the Merchant! A moment's thought makes it quite obvious. It stands to reason that a man who is badly paid, who is forcibly driven into danger, whose very health is impaired for another's gain, who risks his life for almost nothing — it stands to reason that he should hate him!

GUIDE: He didn't hate him.

JUDGE: We would like now to cross-question the Innkeeper of Station Han. Perhaps his report will give us an idea of the Merchant's relations with his personnel. (*To the INNKEEPER:*) How did the Merchant treat his men?

INNKEEPER: Well.

JUDGE: Shall I clear the court? Do you think it would hurt your business if you tell the truth?

INNKEEPER: No. In the present case, it isn't necessary.

JUDGE: As you wish.

INNKEEPER: He even gave the Guide tobacco and paid his wages in full without making trouble. And the Coolie was well-treated too.

JUDGE: Your station is the last police station on this route?

INNKEEPER: Yes, that's where the uninhabited Jahi desert begins.

JUDGE: I see. This friendliness of the Merchant's was more or less imposed by circumstances, was not destined to last — a strategic friendliness, so to speak. It reminds me of our officers during the war. They made it their business to be kinder and kinder to their men the nearer they got to the front. Friendship of this sort doesn't count, of course.

MERCHANT: For example: he'd been forever singing along the way. From the moment when I threatened him with the revolver — to get him across the river — I never heard him sing again.

JUDGE: He must have been completely embittered. It stands to reason. Again I must refer to the war. In wartime one could understand the men saying to us officers: *You* fight for yourselves, but we fight for you! And likewise the Coolie could say to the Merchant: You do business for yourself, but I do business for you!

MERCHANT: Let me confess something else. When we got lost I shared one flask of water with him but I intended to drink the second myself.

JUDGE: Did he see you drinking maybe?

MERCHANT: I assumed he did — when he came toward me with the stone in his hand. I knew he hated me. When we came to uninhabited territory I was on guard day and night. I had to assume that he would fall on me at the first opportunity. If I hadn't killed him, he would have killed me.

WIDOW: I would like to say something. He can't have attacked him. He never attacked anybody.

GUIDE: Keep calm. I have proof of his innocence in my pocket.

JUDGE: Has the stone with which the Coolie threatened you been found yet?

LEADER: That man (*pointing to the GUIDE*) took it out of the dead man's hand.

The GUIDE shows the flask.

JUDGE: Is that the stone? Do you recognize it?

MERCHANT: Yes, that's the stone.

GUIDE: Then look what is in the stone. (*Pours water.*)

FIRST COLLEAGUE: It's a water flask and not a stone. He was handing you water.

SECOND COLLEAGUE: It certainly looks now as if he hadn't wanted to kill him at all.

GUIDE (*embracing the WIDOW*): You see now: I was able to prove it. He was innocent. It is exceptional but I was able to prove it. I gave him the flask when he set out from the last station. The Innkeeper is my witness: this is my flask.

INNKEEPER (*to himself*): Fool! Now *he's* done for!

JUDGE: That cannot be the truth. (*To the MERCHANT:*) Are we to believe he gave you something to drink?

MERCHANT: It must have been a stone.

JUDGE: No, it was not a stone. You can see for yourself it was a flask.

MERCHANT: But I couldn't *assume* it was a flask. The man had no reason to give me something to drink. I wasn't his friend.

GUIDE: But he did give him something to drink!

JUDGE: But why did he give him something to drink?
Why?

GUIDE: I suppose because he thought the Merchant was thirsty.

The judges exchange smiles.

Probably because he was human.

The judges smile.

Perhaps because he was stupid — I think he had nothing against the Merchant.

MERCHANT: Then he must have been *very* stupid. The man had been hurt through me, possibly for the rest of his life. His arm. It was only right if he wanted to pay me back.

GUIDE: It was only right.

MERCHANT: He walked at my side for little money — and I have much money. But the road was equally difficult for us both.

GUIDE (*to himself*): So he knows!

MERCHANT: When he was tired he was beaten.

GUIDE: And that was wrong?

MERCHANT: To assume that the Coolie would not strike me down at the first opportunity would have been to assume he had lost his reason.

JUDGE: You mean you assumed with justification that the Coolie must have had something against you. You may, then, have killed a man who possibly was harmless — because you couldn't *know* him to be harmless. This happens also with the police at times. They shoot into a crowd of demonstrators — quite peaceful folk — because they can't see why these folk don't simply drag them off their horses and lynch them. Actually, the police in such cases fire out

of pure fear. And that they are afraid is proof of their good sense. You mean you couldn't know the Coolie was an exception!

MERCHANT: One must go by the rule, not by the exception.

JUDGE: Exactly. What reason could this Coolie have had to give his tormentor something to drink?

GUIDE: No sensible reason.

JUDGE (*singing*):

Such is the rule: an eye for an eye.
Only a fool waits for an exception.
A man of sense would not expect
Something to drink from his enemy.

GUIDE:

For in the system which they created
Humanity is an exception:
If you perform a human act
You pay the penalty.
O fear for the man
Who would be friendly:
If he tries to help someone, hold him back.
Near at hand someone is thirsty:
Close your eyes, quick!
And close your ears!
Near at hand someone is groaning:
Don't make a move!
Someone's shouting for help.
Woe to you
If you forget this!
You give a man something to drink
And it's a wolf that drinks.

JUDGE: The Court takes counsel. (*The JUDGE and his TWO COLLEAGUES withdraw.*)

LEADER (*of the second caravan*): Aren't you afraid of never getting another job?

GUIDE: I had to tell the truth.

LEADER (*smiling*): Well, if you had to . . .

The judges return.

JUDGE (*to the MERCHANT*): The Court has another question to put to you. Is it possible that you had something to gain by shooting the Coolie?

MERCHANT: On the contrary. I needed him for the business on hand in Urga. He carried the maps and surveying instruments which I needed. I could never have carried all those things by myself.

JUDGE: Then you didn't close the deal in Urga?

MERCHANT: Of course not. I was too late. I am ruined.

JUDGE: Then I pronounce the verdict. The Court regards it as proven that the Coolie approached his master not with a stone but with a water flask. But even when this is granted, it is more credible that the Coolie wished to kill his master with the flask than that he wished to give him something to drink. The carrier belonged to a class which has indeed motive to feel itself handicapped. For men like the Coolie it was nothing short of good sense to protect himself against an unequal distribution of the water. Yes, to these people with their narrow and one-sided outlook, moreover, that embraces only the external realities, it must even seem just to avenge oneself on one's tormentor. On the day of reckoning they have everything to gain. The Merchant did not belong to the same class as his carrier. He had therefore to expect the worst from him. The Merchant could not believe in an act of comradeship on the part of a carrier whom, as he has confessed, he had brutalized. Good sense told him he was threatened in the highest degree. The uninhabited character of the territory must perforce have filled him with apprehension. The absence of police and laws made it

possible for his employee to seize his share of the water — nay, encouraged him to do so. The accused acted, therefore, in justifiable self-defense — it being a matter of indifference whether he was threatened or must *feel* himself threatened. In the circumstances he had to feel himself threatened. The accused is therefore acquitted. The plea of the carrier's widow is dismissed.

THE ACTORS:

So ends

The story of a journey

You have heard and you have seen

You have seen what is common, what continually
occurs

But we ask you:

Even if it's not very strange, find it estranging

Even if it is usual, find it hard to explain

What here is common should astonish you

What here's the rule, recognize as an abuse

And where you have recognized an abuse

Provide a remedy!