
Weird Tales

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1953

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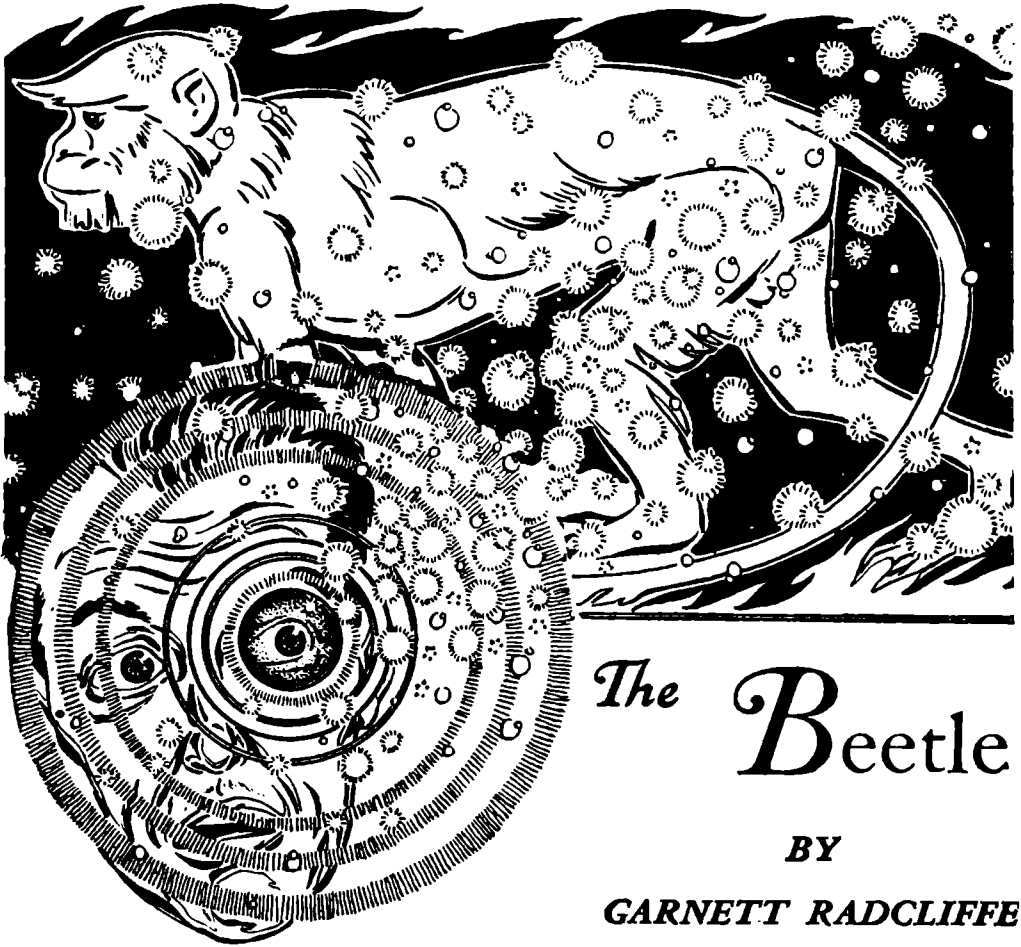
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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

Some very grim feats of imagination were missing from the detective's report; after all, the inspector only wanted facts.



The Beetle

BY

GARNETT RADCLIFFE

ANY moment the trap that had taken months to set might be expected to snap. Inspector Knowles had his watch on the blotting pad as he waited for news of the arrest of the sadistic strangler they called Captain "Y."

Instead of the expected ring

Detective Scott walked into the office. The look on his face brought the Inspector to his feet. He spoke hoarsely.

"What happened?"

"He slipped us," Scott said. "Vanished like a puff of smoke. My fault, I'm afraid."

He seated himself wearily op-

Heading by Jon Arfstrom

posite the Inspector's desk. He was looking white, and haggard. After a pause he spoke.

"I've alerted all squads; they are certain to pick him up before long. I shouldn't worry too much."

"I do worry. Suppose another woman is found strangled tomorrow?"

"Captain 'Y' won't strangle another woman. He's dodged us for the moment, but he's still in the net. It's just a question of waiting."

"But how on earth did he give you the slip?"

"Put it down to a moment of mental aberration on my part which coincided with an unfortunate disturbance in the Roebuck Arms, of which he took advantage. He's cleverer than I gave him credit for. I was flattering myself he had not the faintest idea he was being shadowed."

The Inspector sighed.

"You've lost him, that's all I can think, about. Anyway, tell me exactly what happened."

Scott smiled. He was thinking that that was just what he *couldn't* do. Captain "Y's" disappearance from the Roebuck Arms had been as inexplicable as a clever conjuring trick.

One could make a fantastic surmise, but not aloud to a man like Inspector Knowles. Knowles

was a practical man and was concerned only with plain facts.

He could have his plain facts. Scott proceeded to lay them before his superior as if he was dealing a hand of cards.

"We worked on Plan 'S,' sir. When Nesbitt phoned me that Captain 'Y' had gone into the saloon bar of the Roebuck Arms in Crewe Street I went there at once. Nesbitt, Brown and Simmons met me outside. I told Simmons to keep an eye on Captain 'Y's' Mercedes which he'd parked in Cotton Mews. Nesbitt and Brown I told to wait outside the entrance to the saloon bar in case he gave trouble when I arrested him. There's only the one door to that bar so I knew they couldn't miss him.

"I went inside alone. It was known he was meeting Mrs. Banbury and the idea was I should try to overhear what he said to her before arresting him. We thought if we could get a line on his methods it might help us to work out how he murdered Nina Mason and Mrs. Sorelli.

"It was seven thirty-five when I went into the Roebuck. Mrs. Banbury hadn't arrived and Captain 'Y' was at the bar talking to the barmaid. He was wearing a duffle coat over a blue blazer with gold buttons, gray flannels and suede shoes. Very smart indeed, Inspector. No one

would have suspected he was—well, what we know he was.”

HAD Knowles been a different type he would have liked to enlarge about how he had felt at that moment. The cosy bar with its glittering shelves and bright fire had seemed like a jungle glade; Captain “Y” like the tiger he was stalking.

As he’d stood beside the tall, well-groomed man with the brushed-back hair and curiously cold eyes he’d felt like a hunter leveling his sights on an unsuspecting quarry.

“The question is,” the Inspector snapped, “did he suspect who *you* were?”

Scott smiled.

“One for me, Inspector! No, I honestly don’t think he had the least idea he was being shadowed. He was in a self-satisfied, boastful mood. As I stood beside him he was actually talking to the barmaid about the Sorelli murder. ‘The police are a lot of numbskulls,’ I heard him say. ‘I’ll lay a fiver they’ll never catch the fellow who strangled her.’”

“Bravado?” suggested the Inspector. “He knew who you were and he was pulling your leg.”

Scott shook his head.

“I’ll stake my experience he hadn’t the least idea. If he had known anything he wouldn’t

have walked into the trap at the Roebuck Arms.”

“He seems to have walked out again,” the Inspector commented.

Scott ignored the remark and went on dealing out the plain facts.

“At ten to eight Mrs. Banbury arrived. She was dressed to kill—or be killed, perhaps, I should say. Mink coat, pearl necklace and diamond rings. . . . I saw a glint in the eye of the tiger when he kissed her plump, white hand.”

“What?”

“Sorry, Inspector, I was only repeating what crossed my mind at the time. You want just the bare facts. Well, after salutations Captain ‘Y’ ordered a pink gin for the lady and a double whiskey for himself—she paid, incidentally—and then they took their drinks to a small table on the left of the fireplace. And I took my humble glass of stout to a settee just behind where I could both see and hear.

“I was hoping to learn something of the methods by which our tiger decoyed his victims to their death. Well, I didn’t. Circumstances decreed their conversation should take quite a different turn.

“What *did* they talk about? You’d never guess so I’ll tell you. They talked of monkeys. It appeared that when Mrs. Ban-

bury was getting out of her car outside the pub she had seen a monkey in the street outside. The poor little thing had looked so cold and lonely and lost crouching on the pavement! She hoped its owner would find it before some nasty dog came along. . . .

"That was her opening gambit, and Captain 'Y' followed it up. Apparently, he'd also seen a monkey when he was coming into the Roebuck. But he was used to seeing monkeys lost in London. He'd seen several during the last couple of months or so. His theory was that someone had forgotten to shut the doors of one of the cages at the Zoo, but the authorities were keeping it dark. That made Mrs. B. giggle and say, 'You are funny, Colonel Fitzgerald!'"

"Colonel Fitzgerald?" the Inspector repeated. "When he killed Nina Mason he was calling himself Major Robinson!"

"He'd promoted himself for Mrs. Banbury. A couple of customers were going out and as the chap was holding the door for his wife Mr. Monkey himself came hopping in. I suppose he'd got fed up sitting on the cold pavement. So we'd quite a menagerie in the Roebuck Arms that evening! A human tiger, a mink-coated lamb and a real live monkey! Talk of the jungle!"

"What?"

"Nothing, Inspector. I'll get on with the facts. The monkey was quite tame. He hopped on the counter and when the barmaid, greatly daring, picked him up he put his arms round her neck like a baby. He was a jolly little chap, one of the ordinary brown *sangu* variety. I've seen thousands of them in Southern India."

INSPECTOR Knowles made an impatient movement.

"Damn the monkey! What I want to hear is how Captain 'Y' gave you the slip."

Scott sighed.

"I don't know, Inspector, I can only give you the facts as they happened. The sight of the monkey started Captain 'Y' reminiscing. He went back to his days in India. Incidentally, he really was in India during the war, wasn't he?"

"He was until he was cashiered from the Poona Cavalry for pinching the mess funds."

"He didn't tell that to Mrs. B. What he told her was how he used to shoot monkeys when he was stationed at Ferozepore. I've been at Ferozepore myself, and I think he was telling the truth. The place is overrun with sacred monkeys, as tame as London sparrows. *Sacred* monkeys, Inspector. . . . Monkeys under the

special protection of the great Monkey God Harathi Ram . . ."

"You mean it's forbidden to shoot them?"

"One doesn't shoot monkeys unless one happens to be a sadist like Captain 'Y.' He told Mrs. Banbury it was great fun potting the little beggars. She asked if he'd ever eaten one and he said he had and it had tasted like chicken."

"What about it?"

Inspector, your knowledge of Hindu mythology is nil, Scott thought. Have you never heard of the black magic of Harathi Ram, the terrible Monkey God? Have you never heard how Harathi Ram wreaks vengeance on those who harm his children?

When he'd been in India he had visited a temple of the Monkey God. There had been a monstrous statue of the most fearsome of all the Hindu deities. Half

monkey, half human with up-raised arms and horrible snarling face it had filled him with a sense of dread as he stood dwarfed by its shadow in the dim temple. A priest had whispered to him that if you offended Harathi Ram his magic would find you and punish you though you fled to the utmost parts of the earth.

Superstition? The Inspector would have thought him mad had he dared to voice his thoughts.

"Next thing happened," he went on, "was that the monkey sprang off the counter, hopped across the bar and climbed into the fireplace. It wanted to get warm, I suppose. Everyone crowded round to watch. A monkey in a London bar is quite a novelty.

"Captain 'Y' knelt down to stroke it. I think he wanted to



show off his familiarity with monkeys. I heard him speak to it in Urdu, 'Barra jao, chota souer ki butcha.' That means in English, 'Get out, you little son of a pig', and is a most insulting thing to say."

HAD the Inspector been a different sort of man he might have enlarged. Captain "Y's" expression hadn't been the expression of a man who loved animals. His lurking smile, the slow caressing movements of his manicured hands and the way the monkey seemed to shrink from his touch—somehow all those things had made him think of little Nina Mason, the girl who had been found strangled in a Mayfair flat.

He had noticed the monkey's eyes had suddenly gone red. They looked hypnotic and baleful as it lifted its little head to stare at the man. Then it put its paws on his beautiful white hand and made as if it were trying to draw him down towards the fire. . . .

A monkey pulling a man's hand playfully like a kitten! What had there been in that to give him such a sense of intangible horror? Other customers had laughed.

He continued speaking to the Inspector.

"Then the disturbance hap-

pened. A beetle of some sort fell with a flop into the fireplace. It began to run round and round inside the curb. The monkey began playing with it, letting it get almost to safety and then scooping it back with its paw like a cat playing with a mouse."

While he spoke his mind was asking questions. *Had* it been a beetle, that frantic inch-high thing that ran upright on two legs, its wings flapping behind like a brown coat? *Had* it been a beetle that jumped over cinders, fell into hot ash, made wild leaps for the top of the curb and even tried to dash into the fire in its mad fear of the monkey?

Its terror had been most unpleasant to watch. The other customers had stopped laughing. Scott could remember their ejaculations of disgust: "It's a mouse. . . . No, it's a young bat. . . . I tell you it's a moth. . . ." Then a woman had begun to scream. "*The monkey's torturing it. . . . Get it away from the monkey. . . . It's like a little man!*"

A barman had come running with a coal shovel. He tried to scoop up the—well, whatever the thing was. It had jumped on to the shovel and for a second the firelight glow had shown it to him like the tiny figure of a running man seen through the wrong end of a telescope. Its an-

tennae had looked like arms raised above its head, its wings had been like a duffle coat flapping round its legs, and it had left drops of blood on the shovel.

It hadn't buzzed. It had uttered tiny sounds like the echoes of screams from Hell.

Scott wiped a face that had suddenly gone wet. The Inspector was staring at him.

"Are you ill?"

"I felt a bit faint, overwork I suppose. I was talking about the—the beetle. Someone tried to scoop it out of the fireplace with a shovel. But the monkey was too quick. It grabbed it off the shovel and stuffed it struggling into its mouth. Then before you could say 'Jack Robinson' it leapt on to the mantelpiece and then to a shelf and from there out through an upper window that was open."

Again he wiped his forehead. He had seen the monkey's shadow on the wall and ceiling as it leapt for the window. Some trick of lighting had made it look like a monstrous, crouching, simian nightmare, as if the shadow of the Monkey God himself had fallen on that London bar. He had seen the legs of the beetle, two twitching threads protruding from the great pouched-up mouth. . . .

Aware of the Inspector's

curious stare he forced himself to go on.

"It was then I noticed that Captain 'Y' had disappeared. He must have taken advantage of the confusion to slip away."

"You never saw him go?"

"No. The men I'd posted outside didn't see him either."

"Is there any other exit?"

"None that I could discover. Mrs. Banbury was as mystified as we were. She said she shut her eyes because the monkey gave her the horrors, and when she opened them Captain 'Y' had disappeared."

The telephone on the desk rang. The Inspector snatched up the receiver. After a minute he turned to his subordinate. His face wore a grim smile as he spoke.

"They've found him! A burned and mangled body that has been identified as his has been found in the Crewe Street tube. I gather a couple of trains had gone over him. My idea is that he knew the game was up. While you were goggling at a beetle he made his get-away from the Roebuck, ran down to the tube and jumped on the line. Any better explanation?"

Scott had one, but he preferred to keep it to himself. After all, it *might* have been only his own morbid imagination!