

The Blue Monkey

By Sax Rohmer

I

A tropically hot day had been followed by a stuffy and oppressive evening. In the tiny sitting-room of our tiny cottage, my friend—who, for the purposes of this story, I shall call Mr. East—by the light of a vapour lamp was busily arranging a number of botanical specimens collected that morning. His briar fumed furiously between his teeth, and, his grim, tanned face lowered over his work, he brought to bear upon this self-imposed task all the intense energy which was his.

I sat by the open window alternately watching my tireless companion and the wonderful and almost eerie effects of the moonlight on the heather. Then:

“We came here for quiet—and rest, East,” I said, smiling.

“Well!” snapped my friend. “Isn’t it quiet enough for you?”

“Undeniably. But I don’t remember to have seen you rest from the moment that we left London! I exclude your brief hours of slumber—during which, by the way, you toss about and mutter in a manner far from reposeful.”

“No wonder. My nerves are anything but settled yet, I grant you.”

Indeed, we had passed through a long and trying ordeal, the particulars whereof have no bearing upon the present matter, and in renting this tiny and remote cottage we had sought complete seclusion and forgetfulness of those evil activities of man which had so long engaged our attention. How ill we had chosen will now appear.

I had turned again to the open window, when my meditations were interrupted by a sound that seemed to come from somewhere away behind the cottage. Cigarette in hand, I leaned upon the sill, listening, then turned and glanced toward the littered table. East, his eyes steely bright in the lamplight, was watching me.

“You heard it?” I said.

“Clearly. A woman’s shriek!”

“Listen!”

Tense, expectant, we sat listening for some time, until I began to suspect that we had been deceived by the note of some unfamiliar denizen of the moors. Then, faintly, chokingly, the sound was repeated, seemingly from much nearer.

“Come on!” snapped East.

Hatless, we both hurried around to the rear of the cottage. As we came out upon the slope, a figure appeared on the brow of a mound some two hundred yards away and stood for a moment silhouetted against the moonlit sky. It was that of a woman. She raised her arms at sight us—and staggered forward.

Just in the nick of time we reached her, for her strength was almost spent. East caught her in his arms.

“Good God!” he said, “it is Miss Baird!”

What could it mean? The girl, who was near to swooning and inarticulate with fatigue and emotion, was the daughter of Sir Jeffrey Baird, our neighbour, whose house, The Warrens, was visible from where we stood.

East half led, half carried her down the slope to the cottage; and there I gave her professional attention, whilst, with horror-bright eyes and parted lips, she fought for mastery of herself. She was a rather pretty girl, but highly emotional, and her pathetically weak mouth was doubtless a maternal heritage, for her father, Sir Jeffrey, had the mouth and jaw of the old fighter that he was.

At last she achieved speech.

“My father!” she whispered brokenly; “oh, my poor father!

“What!” I began— “At Black Gap! . . .”

“Black Gap!” I said; for the place was close upon half a mile away. “Have you come so far?”

“He is lying there! My poor father—dead!”

“What!” cried East, springing up—“Sir Jeffrey—dead? Not drowned?”

“No, no! he is lying on the path this side of the Gap! I . . . almost stumbled over . . . him. He has been . . . murdered! Oh, God help me! . . .”

East and I stared at one another, speechless with the sudden horror of it. Sir Jeffrey murdered!

Suddenly the distracted girl turned to my friend, clutching frenziedly at his arm.

“Oh, Mr. East!” she cried, “what had my poor father done to merit such an end? What monster has struck him down? You will find him, will you not? I thank God that you are here—for although I know you as ‘Mr. East,’ my father confided the truth to me, and I am aware that you are really a Secret Service agent, and I even know some of the wonderful things you have done in the past. . . .”

“Very indiscreet!” muttered East, and his jaws snapped together viciously. But—“My dear Miss Baird,” he added immediately, in the kindly way that was his own, “rely upon me. Myself and my fellow-worker, the doctor here, had sought to escape from the darker things of life, but it was willed otherwise. I esteemed Sir Jeffrey very highly”— his voice shook—“very highly indeed. I, too, thank God that I am here.”

II

Five minutes later, East and I set out across the moor, leaving Miss Baird at the cottage. By reason of the lonely situation, and the fact that the nearest house, The Warrens, was fully a mile and a half away, no other arrangement was possible, since delay could not be entertained.

East had managed to glean some few important facts. Sir Jeffrey, whose museum at The Warrens was justly celebrated, had been to London that day to attend an auction at Sotheby’s. His Greek secretary, Mr. Damopolon, and his daughter had accompanied him. Returning by train to Stanby, the nearest station, Miss Baird had called upon friends in the village (Mr. Damopolon had remained in London on business), and Sir Jeffrey had set out in the dusk to walk the two miles to The Warrens; for the car was undergoing repairs.

Pursuing the same path later in the evening, the girl had come upon the body of her father in the dramatically dreadful manner already related. He had no enemies, she declared, or none known to her. She did not believe that her father was carrying a large sum of money, nor—although she had scarcely trusted herself to look at him—did she believe that robbery had been the motive of the crime.

Sir Jeffrey had been carrying a large parcel containing one of his purchases, and I remembered, as we silently pursued our way to the scene of the murder, how East’s keen eyes had seemed to dance with excitement when Miss Baird, in reply to a question, had told us what this parcel

contained. It was a large figure, in blue porcelain, of a sacred ape, and was of Burmese or Chinese origin; she was uncertain which.

Her father had apparently attached great importance to this strange purchase, and had elected to bear it home in person rather than to trust it to railway transport.

“Did you notice if this parcel was there,” East had inquired eagerly, “when you discovered him?”

Miss Baird had shaken her head in reply.

And now we were come to Black Gap, a weird feature in a weird landscape. This was a great hole in the moor, having high clay banks upon one side descending sheer to the tarn, and upon the other being flanked by low, marshy ground about a small coppice. The road from Stanby to The Warrens passed close by the coppice on the south-east.

Regarding this place opinions differed. By some it was supposed to be a natural formation, but it was locally believed to mark the site of an abandoned mine, possibly Roman. Its depth was unknown, and the legend of the coach which lay at the bottom, and which could be seen under certain favourable conditions, has found a place in all the guide-books to that picturesque and wild district.

Whatever its origin, Black Gap was a weird and gloomy spot as one approached and saw through the trees the gleam of the moonlight on its mystic waters. And here, passing a slight southerly bend in the track—for it was no more—we came upon Sir Jeffrey.

He lay huddled in a grotesque and unnatural attitude. His right hand was tightly clenched, whilst with his left he clutched a tuft of rank grass. Strangely enough, his soft hat was still upon his head. His tweed suit, soft collar and, tie all bore evidence of the fierce struggle which the old baronet had put up for his life. A quantity of torn brown paper lay scattered near the body.

I dropped on my knees and made a rapid examination, East directing the ray of a pocket-lamp upon the poor victim.

“Well?” rapped my friend.

“He was struck over the head by some heavy weapon,” I said slowly, “and perhaps partly stunned. His hat protected him to a degree, and he tackled his assailant. Death was actually due, I should say, to strangulation. His throat is very much bruised.”

East made no reply. Glancing up from my gruesome task, I observed that he was looking at a faint track, which, commencing amid the confused marks surrounding the body, led in the direction of the coppice. East’s steely eyes were widely opened.

“In heaven’s name, what have we here!” he said.

A kindred amazement to that which held East claimed me, as I studied more closely the mysterious tracks.

The spot where Sir Jeffrey had fallen was soft ground, whereon the lightest footstep must have left a clear impression. Indeed, around the recumbent figure the ground showed a mass of indistinguishable marks. But proceeding thence, I have said, in the direction of the neighbouring coppice, was this faint trail.

“It looks,” I said, in a voice hushed with something very like awe, “it looks like the track of . . . a *child!*”

“Look again!” snapped East.

I stooped over the first set of marks. Clearly indented, I perceived the impressions of two small, bare feet, and, eighteen or twenty inches ahead, those of two small hands. I experienced a sudden chill; my blood seemed momentarily to run coldly in my veins, and I longed to depart from the shadow of the trees, from the neighbourhood of the Black Gap, and from the

neighbourhood of the man who had died there. For it seemed to me that a barefooted infant had recently crawled from the side of the dead man into the coppice overhanging the tarn.

Looking up. I found East's steely eyes set upon me strangely.

"Well!" said he, "do you not miss something that you anticipated finding?"

I hesitated, fearfully. Then:

"Sir Jeffrey carries no cane," I began—

"Good! I had failed to note that. Good! But what else?"

Closely I surveyed the body, noting the disarranged garments, the discoloured face.

"What of this torn brown paper?" snapped my friend.

"Good heavens!" I cried; and like a flash my glance sought again those mysterious tracks—those tracks of *something* that had crawled away from the murdered man.

"Where," inquired East deliberately, "is the Burmese porcelain ape of which we have heard? And, since there are no tracks *approaching* the body, where did the creature come from that made those retiring from it, and . . . what manner of creature was it?"

III

At East's request (for my friend was a man of very great influence) the police, beyond the unavoidable formalities, took no steps to apprehend the murderer of Sir Jeffrey. East had a long interview with the dead man's daughter, and, shortly afterwards, went off to London, leaving me to my own devices.

The subject of the strange death of the baronet naturally engrossed my attention to the exclusion of all else. Especially, my mind kept reverting to the tracks which we had discovered leading from the dead man's body into the coppice. I scarcely dared to follow my ideas to what seemed to be their logical conclusion.

That the track was that, not of a child, but of *ape*, I was now convinced. No such track approached where the victim had lain; no track of any kind, other than that of his own heavy footprints, led to the spot . . . but the track of an ape receded from it; and the baronet had been carrying an ape (inanimate, certainly, according to all known natural laws), which was missing when his body was found!

"These are the reflections of a madman!" I said aloud. "Am I seriously considering the possibility of a blue porcelain monkey having come to life? If so, since no other footprints have been discovered, I shall be compelled, logically, to assume that the blue porcelain monkey strangled Sir Jeffrey!"

My friend, East, attached very great importance to the missing curio; this he had not disguised from me. But, beyond spending half an hour or so among the trees of the coppice and around the margin of the Black Gap, he had not to my knowledge essayed any quest for it.

Finding my thoughts at once unpleasant and unprofitable company, I suddenly determined to make a call at The Warrens, in order to inquire about the health of poor Miss Baird, and incidentally to learn if there were any new development.

Off I set, and failed to repress a shudder, despite the blazing sunlight, as I passed the gap ad the spot where we had found the dead man. A tropical shower in the early morning had quite obliterated the mysterious tracks. Coming to The Warrens, I was shown into the fine old library. That air of hush, so awesome and so significant, prevailed throughout the house whose master lay dead above, and when presently Mr. Damopolon entered, attired in black, he seemed to complete a picture already sombre.

As East and I had several times remarked, he was a singularly handsome man, and moreover, a very charming companion, widely travelled and deeply versed in those subjects to which the late baronet had devoted so many years of his life. I had always liked Damopolon, though, as a rule, I am distrustful of his race; and now, seeing at glance how hard the death of Sir Jeffrey had hit him, I offered no unnecessary word of condolence, but immediately turned the conversation upon Miss Baird.

“She has but just hurried off to London, doctor,” he said, to my surprise. “A telegram from the solicitors rendered her immediate departure unavoidable.”

“She has sustained this dreadful blow with exemplary fortitude,” I replied. “Are you sure she was strong enough for travel?”

“I myself escorted her to the station; and Mrs. Grierson, the late baronet’s sister, has accompanied her to London.”

“By the way,” I said, “whilst I remember—was Sir Jeffrey carrying a cane at the time of his death?”

“He had with him a heavy ash stick, as usual, when we parted at Sotheby’s, doctor; but, of course, he may have left it there, as he had a large parcel to take.”

“Ah! that parcel! You can no doubt enlighten me, Mr. Damopolon? What, roughly, were the dimensions of this Burmese idol?”

“The monkey? I don’t think it was actually an idol, doctor; it was, rather, a grotesque ornament. Oh, it was about the size of a small Moorish ape, hollow, and weighing perhaps six or seven pounds.”

“Was it upon a pedestal?”

“No. It was completely modelled, even to the soles of the feet and the nails.”

“Extraordinary!” I muttered. “Uncanny!” Some little while longer I remained, and then set out, my doubts in no measure cleared up, for the cottage. To my surprise—for I had no idea that I had tarried so long—dusk was come. I will frankly confess it—I experienced a thrill of supernatural dread at the thought that my path led close beside Black Gap. However, it was a glorious evening, and I should have plenty of light for my return journey. I walked briskly across the moorpath toward the scene of the mysterious crime, hoping that I should find East returned when I gained the cottage.

Perhaps in a wandering life I have known more thrilling moments than some men; but never while memory serves shall I forget that, when, coming abreast of the coppice, and glancing hurriedly into the shadow of the trees . . . I saw a crouching figure looking out at me!

Speech momentarily failed me; I stood rooted the spot. Then:

“All right, old man!” I heard. “Shall be with you in a moment!”

It was East!

Fear changed to the wildest astonishment. Carrying a strange-looking bundle, he came out and joined me on the path.

“Did I frighten you?”

“Is it necessary to ask!” I cried. “But—whatever were you doing there by the Black Gap?”

“Fishing! Look what I have caught!”

He held up for my inspection the object which he carried, by means of two loops of stout cord bound about it. It was a large china figure of an ape!

“The blue monkey!” he snapped. “Come! I am going to The Warrens.”

IV

Again I sat in the fine old library of The Warrens. At the further end of the long, book-laden table, facing me, sat East; Mr. Damopolon occupied a chair on the right, and midway between us, in the centre of the table, presiding over that strange meeting, was the fateful blue monkey.

"You see, Mr. Damopolon," said East, "I knew that Sir Jeffrey was carrying this thing"—he indicated the image—"at the time of his death, and, since it had disappeared, I assumed at first that it had been the motive of the crime. Sir Jeffrey had money and other valuables upon him; therefore we were obviously dealing with no ordinary thief.

"Accordingly, I made inquiries respecting the history of the thing, and found that it possessed but little market value and next to no historical importance. It was of comparatively modern Chinese workmanship, and Sir Jeffrey had bought it, apparently, because it amused him, though why he should have taken the trouble to carry it home, heaven only knows. My first idea—that the curio was a very rare and costly piece—was thus knocked on the head.

"I sought another motive for a crime so horrible and, by a stroke of intuition, I found one. You may not have had an opportunity of studying the mysterious tracks which so puzzled us, Mr. Damopolon, before they were obliterated, but my friend, the doctor, will bear me out. They commenced, then, close beside the body of the murdered man, and they were, as I now perceive, made by the feet of this blue monstrosity upon the table here!"

"Impossible," murmured the secretary incredulously.

"So it appeared to me at the time, when, although I had not then seen the image of the monkey, I perceived, by the absolutely regular character of the impressions, that they were made, not by a living creature, but by the model of one which had been firmly pressed into the soft ground at slightly varying intervals. Since no footprints other than those of Sir Jeffrey were to be found in the vicinity, I was unable to account for the presence of the person who had made these impressions. I devoted myself to a close scrutiny of those footprints of Sir Jeffrey's which led up to the scene of the attack. It became apparent, immediately, that some one had *followed* him . . . some one who crept silently along behind the unsuspecting victim . . . some one so clever that he placed his feet *almost exactly* in the marks made by the baronet!

"Good! I had accounted for the presence of the murderer. He struck Sir Jeffrey with some heavy implement, but failed to stun him. Then began the struggle, which so churned up the ground that all tracks were lost. The murderer prevailed. He was a man of wonderful nerve. Never once did he place his foot upon virgin ground; not one imprint by which he might be identified did he leave behind him!"

"Then how," inquired Damopolon, who was hanging upon every word, "did he leave the scene if—"

"Listen," snapped East. "I found by the body the torn paper in which the china image had been wrapped—but no string! I went all the way to London to learn if the parcel had been tied with string and if Sir Jeffrey had been carrying a stick!"

"But surely," said Damopolon, "I could have saved you the journey, since I was with the late baronet immediately before he set out for home."

"Quite so—but I had another reason for my visit."

East shot a sudden glance from Damopolon to myself, and there ensued a moment of electric silence.

“Beside the track made by the feet of the image,” he resumed slowly, “I found a series of wedge-shaped holes, one on either side of each monkey-impression. Do you follow me, Mr. Damopolon?”

“Perfectly,” replied the Greek, taking up and lighting a cigarette. “Wedge-shaped holes, you say?”

“They were the clue for which I sought! I saw it all! The china ape had been used as a *stepping-stone!* The cunning criminal had thus gained the firm ground in the coppice without leaving a footprint behind! . . .”

“But, my dear East,” I interrupted, “I cannot follow you. He stepped from beside the body on to the image, which he had placed at a convenient distance?”

“Yes. Then, by means of loops of string—see, they are still attached!—he lifted it forward with his feet—”

“ But—”

“Supporting his weight upon two sticks— Sir Jeffrey’s and his own! Hence the wedge-shaped holes beside the track! He had actually reached firm ground when his own stick snapped off short, and he made the fatal error of leaving the fragment and the ferrule, imbedded in the hole! Here is the fragment!

On the table East laid a fragment of an ebony cane, broken off short some three inches above the nickel ferrule.

“Ebony is so brittle, is it not, Mr. Damopolon?” he said.

“It is indeed,” agreed Damopolon, standing up as though he believed East to have finished.

“Yet this stick was made of a particularly fine piece,” added East. “Carter!” he cried loudly.

The library door opened . . . and Detective Sergeant Carter, of New Scotland Yard, entered, carrying a broken ebony stick. Damopolon upped his cigarette, and, whilst he stooped to recover it:

“Carter and I went fishing this afternoon,” said East, “in the Black Gap. The criminal had sought to hide the broken cane—which bears his monogram—and also the image. He had tied them together, filled the image with clay; and dropped them into the water. Fortunately, they stuck upon an outstanding mass of weeds, and we did not fish in vain. Is there any point, Mr. Damopolon, which I have not made clear? I don’t know what implement you used to strike Sir Jeffrey, nor do I know what you did with his ash-stick! . . .”

Clutching wildly at the table, I rose to my feet, my gaze set amazedly upon the man thus accused, upon the man I had called my friend, upon the man who owed so much to the dead baronet. And he? . . . He tossed his cigarette into the hearth and shrugged his shoulders. But, now, I saw that he was deathly pale. He began speaking in a hoarse, mechanical voice:

“I struck him with a broken elm branch,” he said. “His hat saved him. I completed the matter with my bare hands. I was desperate. You need not tell me that Olive—Miss Baird—has confessed to our secret marriage, nor shall I weary you with the many reasons I had to hate her father and the pressing need I had for the fortune which she inherits at his death. It is finished; I have lost, and—”

“Carter!” cried East. “Quick! quick!”

But though the detective, who had been edging nearer and nearer to the speaker, now sprang upon him with the leap of a panther, he was too late. The sound of a muffled shot echoed through The Warrens, and the Greek fell with an appalling crash fully over the library table, so that the blue monkey slid across its polished surface and was shattered to bits upon the oaken floor!