

Claw of The KIDNAPPED IDOL

A Bicarbonate Johnny Story
By Marcus Lyons
(Author of "Killer of Fire" etc.)



The gem in Rita's
hand blazed like
fire.

Bicarbonate Johnny didn't have to believe in the super-natural to know that this idol was deadly—both to the persons who stole it and the whoever tried to get it back.

RITA'S PERFUMED figure and pilfering fingers had nudged Bicarbonate Johnny into a hole before, but this one promised to make the others look like thumb-prints on a mudpie. Long before Sergeant Sean had finished talking, Johnny's normal Gregory Peck expression had been vanquished by the Ned Sparks one.

"—so we left it like it was an' called you," Sean said, his voice still oddly subdued. "The girl ain't located yet. I thought maybe you could dig up somethin'—"

"The thought," Johnny said greyly, "does more credit to your heart than your brains, Sean. Let's take a look."

Despite the advance warnings he had had, the upstairs room gave Johnny a nasty turn. It was at the back of the house, and its sole contact with the real world was a twisted corridor which angled into darkness. At its end was a dim purple glow and a glowing scarlet monster with a face like a mad boar.

"Cripes," said Johnny feelingly. "Is this all the light there is?"

"There's white lights," Sean muttered uneasily. "But this is the way we found it."

The room was completely hung with tapestries, the gloomy indirect lighting emanating from the high molding; and the figures in the tapestries were frozen in attitudes of formal menace. They shone in livid colors, seemingly by their own light.

The snouted creature on the back wall held in tusks and claws a huge wheel, in which tiny human figures scurried frantically as if in a squirrel cage. To the right stood the empty pedestal.

"You shoulda seen the place when the ruby was here," Sean whispered. "It was right at the foot of the pedestal. When you came in it looked like the edge of the rug had just caught fire."

"Glowing, eh?" Johnny said.

"Hmmm." He crossed the silent carpet. The perfume in the air was unpleasant, half incense and half drug; it had a stupefying quality. A man relaxed in the big chair opposite the pedestal might starve to death for sheer lassitude.

"All right, turn on the overheads."

In the flat, yellow glare the things on the tapestries were just pictures, but the atmosphere was still oppressive. Johnny examined the floor around the pedestal carefully, then the pedestal itself. "Have this dusted, Sean. Don't think you'll find anything, but there's a chance. This is the first idol-napping I ever heard of."

"Damn fools, whoever took the thing," Sean said. His voice had a little more assurance now that he could see better. "What would a crook do with a six-armed heathen monster? Where'd he fence it?"

"Use your head. Where would a crook fence a baby?"

"Oh," said Sean, and then, "Oh, I get it. Sell it back to the old man, huh?"

"Probably." Johnny felt in his pocket for his bottle of soda mints. "I wish Rita—I wish we had that ruby back. This case is a dead loss without it. Whoever took the statue knew the house was always unlocked, just walked in and walked out again. Renwick saw nobody."

"Well, it must have been somebody who knew his habits pretty well—"

Johnny burped impatiently. "Since that Sunday Supplement article about this place, half a million people in this area alone knew all they need to know to pull a job of this sort. I told Renwick he'd need police protection the day after that article came out, but he claimed he had safeguards of his own. The gods, I suppose."

"Didn't help him much here," Sean pointed out unnecessarily. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," said Johnny.

IN THE GLOW of the open forge, the half-naked, pot-bellied figure might have been the black demon Yama himself, straight from the Buddhist Hell. Rita watched him through the store window for a few moments, repelled and fascinated at once, then shrugged and went in.

"Mr. Matsukishi, I'm from the Detective Bureau," she said, not entirely truthfully.

He turned from the forge and looked at her with slitted eyes, from which the flames had long ago driven all color.

"You're the only man in the country who could have made the Renwick idol," she said. "Why didn't you get credit for it in the article?"

The Japanese cocked his head and smiled. "Mr. Renwick is not a collector of bric-a-brac," he said. "He came to me because he wanted something better than he could buy from the gim-crack markets in this country. He is a disciple, you see, not a fake Orientalist. Why should he send a pack of rich women and charlatans down upon me, demanding duplicates?"

Rita frowned. The notion of an American who actually subscribed to the tenets of Siddharta Guatama was hard to swallow.

"What did you want to know?" the artisan asked politely. "Perhaps the names of those who preceded you?"

"What?" she gasped. "Do you know who they were? How did you know I was looking for them? What—"

"I am always first suspect in anything involving that which is valuable and which is also connected with the Orient." The slight sibilance of his speech began to get on Rita's nerves. "It has forced me into a rigidly upright life. It has also forced me to keep close tabs on less upright people who might wish to throw suspicion upon me."

"And?"

"When two men enter my shop and ask

if I made the Renwick idol, ask certain questions about its—ahhh—significance, and then leave without further questions, I know it is due to be stolen. Such a question means only one thing: if Matsukishi made it, it is valuable."

"But everybody knows it's valuable—its base is ringed with rubies."

He laughed outright, so far as he could. The "tss-sss-sss" that came from between his lips made Rita's skin crawl. "You are not a very good imitation of a detective, young lady," he said. "One of the things they wanted to know, of course, was whether the rubies were real. Since I made it, they could be sure they were. Would you like their names? They are confidence men with a long record of exploiting empty-headed occultists."

"Wait a minute," she said slowly. "If you think I'm not a detective, why offer me the information? I don't get it."

He was still smiling, but the smile did not look quite so benign.

"I am a criminal," he said flatly. "I commit no crimes, but my mind is that of a criminal genius—my talent with metals is only a talent. Circumstances force me to be honest, so I must seek other outlets for my genius." He took a pair of glowing tongs from the furnace and doused them; a cloud of steam rose to the ceiling. "Your interference in this crime will complicate it immensely—perhaps result in your death. I bear you no ill will—but I shall enjoy, watching how the game plays itself out."

He scrawled two names with a pencil-stub and handed the paper to her. "And, for your special guidance—don't underestimate the idol."

Rita opened her hand; the great stone winked its pigeon's blood eye in Matsukishi's face. "I don't underestimate it," she said.

“THEY WERE matched Mogok stones,” Renwick said. His lined old face was as serene as ever, the face of a man who perhaps had seen, if only for a moment, Indra’s Paradise. “The ordinary Burmese ruby rarely goes over an eighth of a carat; those weighed about four carats.”

“I remember,” Johnny said. “Worth more than diamonds.”

“Considerably—but very hard to market, because of their size. I’m not surprised that they offered me the statue back—any jeweler would know those stones in a moment. You’ll notice that they didn’t ask anything like the real value of the statue—the real material value, that is.”

“I noticed,” Johnny said drily. “I noticed something else, too. They’ve made no attempt to arrange a secret transfer of the ransom. They’re evidently pretty sure that you’ll not prefer charges.”

“They’re quite right,” retorted Renwick, somewhat sharply. “You don’t realize, detective, that I can buy another dozen rubies that size overnight. Returning Sitatapatraparajita to her place in the Wheel is the only thing of any importance.” He smiled grimly. “Don’t worry about punishing the thieves. They will doubtless be reincarnated as cockroaches for their indiscretion.”

Johnny could feel his ulcers coming back momentarily. “Then I’m supposed to sit tight and do nothing?”

“If they return the statue to me, I’ll be perfectly willing to swear that they borrowed it with my permission. That would make things all right with the law, would it not?”

“Yes. But—”

“Detective,” said Renwick, leaning forward and squinting, “I want this clearly understood. If you or your men do anything to interfere with the return of the

statue to me, you’ll be out of jobs. My faith does not prohibit my exercising my temporal power in protection of my soul.”

Johnny said icily, “I’ll give your soul such consideration as it seems to merit. If the job involves protecting these con men from some slipup in their plans—don’t call on the police.” He got up. “Let us know when some crime has been committed, Mr. Renwick.”

ON THE TENTH floor, a light showed behind the door marked *Kent, Merlyn, Meredith and MacDougal, Investment Brokers*; but it was evidently far toward the back of the office, for the translucent glass panel was pale and marked with fuzzy shadows. After a moment, Rita risked trying the knob. It turned soundlessly under her hand.

The main body of the office was unlit, with the deserted desks of secretaries and clerks crouching in the dimness. At the back of the big room two rather sizable cubicles were partitioned off, and the one labeled “Mr. Kent” was the one with the light in it.

Rita crouched by the railing, where the receptionist’s desk would shield her if someone should look out. Whatever these two nut cult operators were doing here, it did not seem to have much connection with investments.

“You were fools to come here,” a quiet, cultured voice was saying. “I assure you I know exactly what is to be done—you simply jeopardize the whole pattern by trailing me at every turn.”

“I don’t know about that,” said a smoother, more oily voice. “We’ve no real protection on this deal. How do we know you won’t have the cops on us when we pick up the money? I don’t like this business of behaving as if there were nothing to worry about. It isn’t common sense.”

"Nobody bothered you when you delivered the statue," the quiet voice pointed out. Rita bit her lip. If Renwick had the statue back—

A chair scraped back. Rita thought faster than she had thought since the day Black Hermann had really sawed the volunteer from the audience in two. If she were to break for the door, they might hear it close—and the elevators weren't running at this hour. It wouldn't be nice to be caught in a stairwell. With a display of legs that should have had an audience of thousands, she swung quickly over the rail and curled up in the kneehole of the desk.

The door clicked, and footsteps slapped the asphalt tile. "I can understand your worry," the almost-Oxonian voice was saying: "But you aren't dealing with petty thievery here." There was a soft chuckle. "You're accustomed to being honest but illegal—our business is strictly legal, but often anything but honest."

"That's nothing to us," said someone who had not spoken before. "Save the lawyer talk. We put the damn mechanism back where we were supposed to put it. We get honest payment for the job. Otherwise—"

"You've nothing to worry about," Kent said. The door shut with an indecisive sound.

For a few moments Rita stayed where she was; most of her limbs seemed to be asleep, but most of all her head refused to behave. Renwick had the statue back. She was too late. She knew the names of three of the men involved, but she knew Renwick, too—he'd be content to let the whole affair blow over once his precious goddess had come home to roost. Even if she were to tell Johnny what she knew, he couldn't take any action—the ruby had led her into a cul-de-sac.

The ruby!

It had to go back. Now that the statue

was where it belonged, the ruby had to be with it—otherwise she'd have Johnny in a spot. She'd withheld evidence.

She crawled out of the kneehole, stretched magnificently, and made for the door.

THE ORNATE entrance was open. Renwick's door was always unbarred, for his Buddhism demanded that he entertain every beggar. She hurried down the hall to the stairs and walked softly on up; second floor; third; another hallway. It was very quiet.

The corridor to the adytum was unlit and narrow, and it was not pleasant to think about the red-snouted demon at its end. Her small hand sweated on the cheap pliers. *Funny*, she thought; *I never thought I'd bless those guys with their phony engagement rings; but now I know a good strong claw setting from a dime-store job. I'll have to jam to get this damn rock back where it sits.*

It was hard to breathe in the corridor, for the blackness and the close walls. After a while she struck the corner, and around it saw the dim purple glow and the red demon at the end. She walked steadily toward it. The pig-god of passion waited for her, glowering.

At the door she stopped and looked about her. The statue stood on its pedestal, its greenish body poised like a ballet dancer upon its toes, its six arms fanned menacingly, on its head the crown of Siva the Destroyer. All around its feet the rubies glared—except for the one black space where there was no ruby. In her hand the great stone seemed to pulse eagerly.

Renwick had his goddess back; there was someone immobile in the big armchair. Rita had eyes only for the empty socket.

She tiptoed across the deep carpet,

slipping the ruby into the jaws of the pliers. The horribly placid, pupil-less face of the idol watched her approach. She tried desperately to fix her eyes on the empty setting, but she could not make out the claw that should have gleamed there, empty. Heavy perfume coiled around her. The ruby refused to glow, but she probed blindly into the vacant middle between two malignant stones and struck it home—

The statue struck back. The six arms hissed through the thick air. Two of the three-fingered hands raked her forehead and cheek. There was a terrible light, and then something darker than darkness . . . which quickly covered her as she slumped.

“‘YOU WERE lucky,” Johnny said. “This’ll teach you to play Sherlock Holmes. That thing should have killed you. That’s what it was supposed to do.”

Rita shuddered. “I thought it had.”

“It wasn’t your fault that it didn’t. This whole business was ‘way over your head. I took time out to check on Renwick stock after he tied my hands—and it was in bad shape. He had a sizeable fortune tied up in that statue, and he couldn’t have sold it himself without tipping the market that he’d lost all his investors’ dough. So he had it stolen. The guys who stole it knew that Matsukishi had put a gimmick in it. They used to bring specially favored groups of their nut cult here for a demonstration. That loose ruby just sat on three prongs, see, and it was baited for the victim.”

“Baited?” said Rita stupidly.

“Yeah. Animals, small ones; a suckling pig, for instance. The fanatics watched while the victim rooted around in front of the pedestal, and then the instant he touched his snout to the smeared ruby those claws assisted him into his incarnation.”

“But why?”

“Karma. Greed. It’s a sin. But the whole set-up was screwy. The fanatics would have been better off in Satanism than Buddhism. There’s no Buddha in this shrine, you’ll notice; just the god of passion. No love, no benevolence to animals.”

“I don’t get it,” Rita confessed.

“The guys who stole it knew that unless the spring mechanism was disconnected, the statue would strike at anyone who put the faintest pressure on the gem. When they tilted it to disconnect, the ruby rolled off, and they were in too much of a hurry to notice until too late.”

“Johnny, I see that. I was pretty sure Matsukishi was in on the con game, and that some sort of switch was being run on the rubies. But I took the only ruby they lost. I don’t see how you spotted what was going on without having that stone.”

“I didn’t have to see the stone,” Johnny said, swizzling his milk with a reluctant gesture. “I knew it had fallen out, and I knew one thing about it. All the effects in Renwick’s room are fluorescent; he uses ultra-violet lighting, and his tapestries are made of threads with fluorescent minerals in them. Real rubies don’t fluoresce. When Sean told me that the stone you pinched glowed in this damn black light, I knew that synthetic rubies were going to be plugged into this business somewhere.”

He traced a small circle on the table. “Rita, nobody has to know everything. All you need to know is where to find the information. Renwick mentioned a Buddhist goddess to me: Sitatapatraparajita. I looked her up. She has eight arms. The statue has six. The statue was a fake clear through. Renwick is no more a Buddhist than we are; he had that idol made as an investment against the day when his stock market trickery would

catch up with him. He hired the con men to swipe the idol, sell the real stones, and return the idol to him with synthetic gems in the proper places. He'll have lots of time to contemplate his tummy where we've got him now."

Johnny smiled. "I was a little late getting to Matsukishi, but that was sheer luck. He'd run out of special information to impart to everybody else, so he gave me the real tip-off. I found out why Renwick wasn't worried about the ruby that disappeared after the statue was stolen, and I found out why the article only described one ruby as glowing. Naturally he hadn't been letting a pig play with a real gem. And in the switch, showmanship got the better of him. He had it arranged that all the replacements would be fluorescent. The nut cult visits were profitable ones. He no sooner got the little

lady back than he loaded up the claws with the usual poison, and arranged a demonstration for next week."

Rita touched trembling fingers to the scored lines in her cheek and forehead. "And then it scratched me, Johnny! Why didn't it kill me?"

"I expected you back, baby." He reached into her purse and offered her the small mirror. "You'll notice the stripes aren't red any more. You got scratched and disinfected at the same moment."

Rita's expression proved she didn't find clown-orange becoming, as Johnny burped succinctly. Then he added, "It was only metaphen, this time. Will you keep your sticky fingers out of the act from now on?"

THE END

