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# A Peculiar Rattle



## Reminiscence

*By Dr. Shyamkant S. Kulkarni*

**E**xactly at 9:27 a.m. I parked my car at Pa-Bec, a seven-eleven store beside a gas station in Okeene. I got out of the car. I had parked beside a Thunderbird in which there was a beautiful young girl sitting behind the steering wheel. Somehow she attracted my attention, but she was very pale and frightened.

I entered the store. A man was standing at the counter. Instantly I recognized the scar on the back of his elbow.

"Dave!" I shouted.

"Let's go, Doc. Follow my Thunderbird, and we're on our way."

I followed Dave to his house; he was driving the same Thunderbird in which I had noticed the frightened blonde.

Our plan was to take my car on the expedition. At his house, we loaded a huge wooden box into the trunk of my car. Before putting it into the trunk, he opened the box. A rattlesnake peeped out of the opening, his head raised, eyes looking around, black tongue quivering and lashing in and out. It was rattling incessantly and seemed furious at its captivity.

Now Dave introduced the young lady to me. "This is Betty, my wife." She smiled listlessly.

"Dave, are you sure? You want me to go with you?"

"We'll have fun, Darling. You're a great help, you know. Doc is new, and he's going for the first time."

Dave got a pair of long steel hooks and Pillstom tongs from the house and handed them to Betty. Soon we were on our way.

We drove six miles to the west until we reached a dirt road. We drove three miles north on the dirt road, took another highway heading east. After another five miles, we reached Howard's farm. It was a huge farm consisting of several gypsum hills, thousands of acres of woods, four ponds, a farm house, and a few oil wells scattered around.

The small den was just behind the farm house. There was a spectacular view because we were on top of a cliff which was made of huge blocks of white gypsum rocks placed one on top of the other, hanging over a ravine underneath, through which a stream was

flowing about a thousand feet below. The stream joined a small pond farther down, and the pond was surrounded by dense green thicket on all sides. Here and there under our feet were small burrows and holes underneath and in between rocks.



As soon as we arrived, Dave removed the huge wooden crate from the trunk of the car and placed it on the ground. Inside, the snake was rattling incessantly "Ta...Tirr...tirr...Ta...tirr." To me, it seemed like a kind of Morse code through which it was trying to send a message to somebody. It was rattling nonstop. I wondered whether the snakes could communicate with one another.

Both Dave and Betty took their gadgets and started peeping into the holes. Betty had a loose-fitting lid in her hand; she would temporarily place their catch in the lid.

"When did you catch that one?" I asked Betty as I pointed to the box.

"I caught that one fifteen days ago," Dave responded. "That was in March. We camped overnight—slept right there." He pointed to a clearing on the ground a few hundred feet away.

"That was a lucky day. I got seven in den one, four in den two. I came again to den one and got three more. Then we stayed overnight. But the night was so cold, we nearly froze."

"Did you have a tent?"

"Oh, no, we made a fire and just slept under a blanket, Betty and I. We had my buddy, Mike, with us that day. Night was so cold and chilly, we kept the fire burning and had to keep bringing wood. But as the sun rose, it got hot again. Betty spotted the pair."

A few days before, Dave had told me that Betty was his third wife. His first two wives had left him because of his profession. Although he was tall and handsome, they left him after a few years of married life. "But Betty is kind of like me. She likes snake

hunting. Her eyes are sharp. She spots the slightest motion in the shadows. She's a good helping hand in my line."

"Betty, you wanna tell Doc about it?"

But Betty was rather reluctant. It was 12 noon when I noticed them. They came out

of that burrow like lightning, clinging to each other. They were copulating, hugging, entwining. They would separate for a minute and then cling together again. They were raising their heads, kissing, then twisting around in a motion like a rhythmic dance, their tails beating and rattling all the while." Betty was describing as if she were witnessing it again with her eyes. "Then Dave got hold of one. 'You catch the other,' he yelled at me. But it disappeared a second before I could do anything." Betty stopped to take a breath, feeling relaxed now.

"She let her go. It was five feet long and worth fifty bucks," Dave said.

"Have you seen this before—a copulating pair of snakes?" I asked.

"Nope."

The snake in captivity had stopped rattling for a while as if to listen to our conversation. It resumed rattling again—"Tirr...rup...tirr..."

"That snake is furious," Betty muttered to herself. "I don't like that. I wanted him to release the snake—let it go. We could catch it some other time, but he wouldn't listen. My mom used to say, 'You shouldn't watch them like that...'"

"Oh no!" Dave spit saliva and licked his lips.

"Dave, in India we believe this about the cobra. It identifies the smell of the man who stepped on him. He will follow it over miles and will bite him whenever possible. Is that true about the rattlesnake?"

"I don't know, Doc."

"Mom used to say..." Betty started and stopped.

The snake in the wooden crate was rattling incessantly as if it were transmitting a message

to somebody.

"Could you stop him rattling, Dave? I can't bear it. If that's true...., Dave." Betty had started a little later, but she stopped. Suddenly she was trembling with unknown fear. Her face was pale and ashen, her voice shaken. "Of that pair, we caught the female; the male is still at large."

"Don't bother, you're worrying too much, Betty," Dave said.

In front of me ahead was a small mound of white rocks barely two feet high. There was a big hole, the size of my palm, in the middle of it. I noticed some movement in the hole.

"Look, Dave! There's something moving in there!" I shouted with excitement.

"What is it?"

"It's not a snake. It's green—that other." I was stumbling to find the exact word.

"Is that a lizard?"

"Yes, it is," I said.

"Betty, let's get it. We need it for our show." He rushed ahead. "It's a state reptile, Doc—a Mountain Boomer. I need it."

The reptile had retreated into the hole. Dave was trying to open up the burrow. He pulled at the stones, pushed his hook aside, and was digging farther. The Mountain Boomer had gone quiet inside. Dave dismantled half the hillock; in an instant the lizard jumped out of darkness and ran uphill. Dave ran after him trying to catch him with his hand, but the lizard was too swift. It disappeared into a small burrow, and I was unable to shoot a snapshot.

Betty shouted suddenly, "Come back, Dave, quick!"

Then there was that peculiar rattle in the air. Betty was standing by the ruins of that hillock. Her eyes were fixed on the snake. It had just come out of the same hole and was moving quickly toward her. It raised its head, its black tongue slipping out.

"It's the same one, Dave, from that pair—the one that escaped that day."



"Catch him quick, Betty!" Dave was running toward her.

Betty was transfixed as if hypnotized, mesmerized. She didn't move. Dave had reached the spot by now, and he threw his tong, hitting the snake at the tail end. The snake jumped up in the air and reached Betty, hitting her on her bare leg. Betty screamed and ran forward away from the cliff and collapsed a few feet away.

"Take care of her, Doc."

Dave said and forced his tong against the neck of the serpent. He nearly caught the snake in the neck.

"I'm dying, Dave. Let him go." For a second, as Dave heard his wife's voice, he stood as if paralyzed.

The snake jumped from its captivity as the thrust of Dave's muscles slacked for a split second. It jumped and bit him on his thumb and index finger.

"You son of a gun..." Bearing that intense agony in his left hand, David managed to hit the snake on the head. It was all smashed and lay dead on the ground the next instant, only a few feet away from the wooden crate. The snake made a long rattle for a few minutes; suddenly it stopped rattling as if it knew what was happening outside.

I rushed both of them to the hospital. But by the time we got there, Betty was dark blue and couldn't be revived. Dave somehow survived after spending several days in the Intensive Care Unit. He lost the thumb and index finger of his left hand forever because they had to be amputated.

*(Author's Note: This story is fiction; any resemblance to real persons living or dead is by coincidence and is regretted.)*

*(DR. SHYAMKANT S. KULKARNI, a Watonga physician, has lived in Oklahoma since 1987, having emigrated from India. Although his poetry has appeared before in WESTVIEW, "A Peculiar Rattle" is his first story written in English since he moved to Oklahoma.)*

