

Monkeys--Naughty or Nice? A Cautionary Tale

By Gail Storrs

Everybody likes monkeys, right? Their cute little hands and faces, so like ours and yet a bit alien. They're clever and funny! And their babies are soooo cute! Don't you think?

I thought so. Still, I found, to my distress, that those cute, little, furry guys hide a Dark Side. To put it bluntly, they are thieves. Listen, my children, to the tale of the Naughty Monkey.

A few years ago, I had the amazing opportunity to visit a friend who teaches overseas, in Singapore. Leanne took me to Bali for an Indonesian experience of beauty and peace on this predominately Hindu island. And, oh, is it a beautiful place! The people are friendly and hospitable, with kind eyes.

We journeyed through rice paddies, along beautiful beaches, went snorkeling, and visited local markets. One of our stops was Ubud, a lovely forest city in the middle of the island. When you're in Ubud, of course you must visit the Sacred Monkey Forest.

I loved the monkeys. I really like learning about animals of all kinds, and I'd never been closer to wild monkeys than at the zoo. Who sees a monkey wandering around Seattle? Here, they were as abundant as squirrels. We walked along the steamy jungle path, watching a multitude of small, gray monkeys scamper among us. They had long tails, and their fur came to a tuft on the top of their heads. I took lots of pictures.

"What kind of monkeys are these?" I asked my friend. I have a bit of a zoological background, and I always want to know these things.

"Naughty monkeys," she answered drily, pulling the corners of her mouth back in a disapproving way.

"Oh, come on," I said. "Look at them--look, that one's carrying a baby!" And off I went with my camera.

"Huh," said Leanne.

The next day brought the Uluwatu Incident. Picture this: Uluwatu is an ancient Hindu temple on a hilltop at the southern coast of Bali. The cliff is above us, and the beautiful Indian Ocean before us. We put on the traditional sarong wrap, a couple of yards of cloth worn around the waste like a skirt, that the temple official handed us at the gate and walked into the grounds.

"Watch out for the monkeys," Leanne said as we headed up the stone steps toward the top of the cliff. "They'll take anything; jewelry, watch, camera. One of them stole a hair barrette from me once, and I've seen lots of tourists lose sunglasses. Put your glasses in your pocket. You don't have a spare, do you?"

"No, but if I take off my glasses, how am I supposed to see anything?" I complained.

"Well, hold onto them, then. With both hands."

I promised to do that, and we kept climbing.

When we reached the summit, the view was breathtaking. A small, stone temple stood behind us, and monkeys were scattered around, along with lots of tourists taking their picture. Temple workers stood by with fruit in their arms. One monkey watched us from a nearby stone post on the wall at the edge of the cliff. We looked out over the expanse of a sapphire blue sea, empty for miles. We leaned on the stone parapet and gazed down. It was a *long* way down! I got out my camera.

"Don't take your hands off your glasses!" exclaimed Leanne.

"C'mon, I want to get some pictures."

"Huh!" said my friend.

I steadied my elbows on the stone wall, and raised my camera. Suddenly, I felt a sharp blow to the side of my head. A cry came from my other side.

"Help!"

Leanne had already rushed over to the advancing temple worker and explained the situation in fluent Indonesian. He strolled over to the monkey, which was sitting back on the post, smugly dangling my glasses over the edge of the cliff. He held out a banana. The monkey took it in one hand, and held onto my glasses in the other. The man held out another banana. The monkey took it in one foot. Another banana was tossed to him, and he grabbed it in the other foot.

All this time, we are holding our breath, waiting to see if the glasses are to end up in fragments on the stony beach hundreds of feet below. However, here came the last banana. The monkey threw down my glasses and grabbed the banana with its remaining hand.

The next thing I knew, my glasses were being pressed back into my fingers. Unhurt--not even a scratch except for a few chewed places on the ends of one earpiece (a great visual aid to illustrate this story later). I promptly put them in my pocket! With profuse thanks, still shaking, we began the descent.

"You'll have to hold onto me now, so I don't break my neck on these stairs," I told Leanne, my hand in my pocket holding fast to the glasses.

"Good idea," she replied.

All the way down those steep steps (carefully), through the forest and even after we regained our car, my good friend said nothing more about our experience. Not even an "I told you so."

But, after hearing my adventures, I ask you, are monkeys naughty or nice? Here's my more educated response:

"Huh."

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