

grumbled at myself for having been drawn into my present position as an unbidden and unprepared guest in the house of persons who were total strangers to me.

After a considerable time, I heard the musical notes of a Chinese gong which I took to be the signal for dinner, so making my way to the staircase with, I fear, a somewhat sheepish expression, I saw Ashton ahead of me, just joining at the end of the hallway a strikingly beautiful and distinguished-looking girl, of perhaps twenty-two or three, dressed in an evening gown of white, the very simplicity of which only served to accentuate the splendid lines of her figure. Her face was pale with that healthy pallor which is in some women so beautiful—a sort of warm ivory tint—and with her splendid eyes and wide brow, crowded with a mass of bronze-colored hair, I felt that even my critical artistic taste could with difficulty find a flaw. It was evident that she and Mr.

Ashton knew each other well, yet it seemed to me that Miss Temple, for so I supposed the young lady to be, did not respond with much cordiality to the effusive greeting which Mr. Ashton bestowed upon her. I descended the steps some distance behind them, and observed Major Temple standing in the center of the main hall, smiling with much apparent satisfaction at the couple ahead of me as they advanced toward him. As I joined them, Major Temple presented me to his daughter as a friend of Mr. Ashton's, which, it appeared to me, did not predispose that young lady particularly in my favor, judging by the coldness with which she received me, and then we all proceeded to the dining-room.

The dinner was excellently cooked, and was served by the same almond-eyed Chinaman who had admitted us upon our arrival. I learned afterwards that the Major was an enthusiastic student of Oriental art, and that his collection

of porcelains and carved ivory and jewels was one of the finest in England. He had, it appeared, spent a great portion of his life in the East and had only just returned from a stay of over a year in China, during which he had penetrated far into the interior, into that portion of the country lying toward Thibet, where Europeans do not usually go.

During dinner, Major Temple and Mr. Ashton talked continually of China, and referred frequently to "it," and to "the stone," although at the time I did not grasp the meaning of their references. I attempted without much success to carry on a conversation with Miss Temple, but she seemed laboring under intense excitement and unable to give my efforts any real attention, so I gradually found myself listening to the talk between Major Temple and Mr. Ashton. As near as I could gather, the latter had set out from Hong Kong some months before, on a search for a certain stone or jewel

which Major Temple desired for his collection, and after an adventurous trip during which he had been forced at the risk of his life to remain disguised as a coolie for some weeks, had finally escaped and returned to England. There was also some talk of a reward, though of what nature I did not understand, but it seemed to give Mr. Ashton great satisfaction, and to cause Major Temple much uneasiness every time it was mentioned, and I saw him glance frequently, covertly, at the blanched face of his daughter. As Mr. Ashton brought his thrilling story to a conclusion, he drew from his waistcoat pocket a small, green leather case, evidently of Chinese workmanship, and, opening it, turned out upon the white cloth what I at first thought to be a small figure of green glass, which on closer inspection proved to be a miniature representation of the god Buddha, standing somewhat above an inch and a half in height, and wonderfully cut from a single

flawless emerald. I looked up at Ashton in amazement as he allowed the gas light to play upon its marvelous beauty of color and the delicate workmanship of its face and figure, then rolled it across the table toward Miss Temple. It represented the well-known figure of the god, sitting with arms extended upon its knees, its face so exquisitely chiseled that the calm, beneficent smile was as perfect, the features as exact, as though the figure had been of life size. As the wonderful sparkling gem flashed across the white cloth in the direction of Miss Temple, the latter started back in dismay and an expression of intense horror passed over her face as she looked up and caught the burning eyes of Mr. Ashton fixed upon hers. She returned his gaze defiantly for a moment, then lowered her eyes and composed her features behind the cold and impassive mask she had worn throughout the evening.

Ashton flushed a sullen red, then picked up