The Stone Image—

By Seabury Grandin Quinn

WHY is it, I wonder, that there must always be a rift in the lute, a fly in the ointment, a gnat in the ice-cream soda?

Take Betty and me, for example. If I might be allowed to borrow a term from our Spiritualist friends, I would say that never were husband and wife more thoroughly *en rapport* than Betty and I. When I call down from the bathroom and ask her where in blazes her what-d'ye-call-it is she knows perfectly well that I'm inquiring of the whereabouts of her Crême Shalimah, with which I desire to anoint my newly shaven face. When Betty calls up from the living room and asks me to throw my thing-a-bob down to her I know, as well as if she had told me, that she wishes my pocketknife for the purpose of retipping the pencil from which she had just chewed the point. This far all is well with Betty and me.

But the high gods, who are ever greenly jealous of human happiness, took an underhand method of revenge when they afflicted Betty and me with diverse tastes in things artistic. I have a partiality for etchings, pastels, and aquarelles—clean Western art—and everything savoring of the East, from teakwood to tea, is detestable to me. Betty dotes upon Oriental embroideries, bronzes, and carvings—and thereby hangs this tale.

One bright afternoon last autumn, when the florists were beginning to display chrysanthemums in their windows, and the September haze hung over the hills in the country, Betty took me for a walk down the Avenue. Her cooing amiability ought to have warned me that she was hatching up some dire plot against my peace and happiness, but what married man can fathom the depths of his wife's depravity? So, before I had time to rush madly to the nearest police station and demand protection, I found myself gently but firmly piloted through the yawning portal of a certain little shop where a soft-spoken, coffee-colored descendant of the Forty Thieves exchanges lacquered metal, embossed chinaware, and kindred junk for real money, and beheld my life partner standing rapt in mute admiration before the most horrible concoction of carven stone that ever offended the eyes of civilized man.

In a very general way the thing resembled a human being. That is to say, it possessed the number of pectoral and pelvic limbs customarily enjoyed by man, and there the likeness stopped.

Beneath a brow as shallow as an ape's, and as sloping as a mansard roof, the creature's agate eyes stared forth from above its bloated cheeks with a look of unutterable hate and fury. To right and left of its knoblike nose great tusks of shining ivory protruded from the painted lips, which writhed and twisted in a snarl of rage, and the talon hands it brandished above its head were armed with claws like those of some giant vulture. It was like a vision from a nightmare, a fiend from Dante's Inferno and a djin from some Eastern horror tale rolled into one, and my wife stood there and looked at it as she

had looked at me in the days of our honeymoon!

"Isn't he per-fect-ly adorable?" breathed Betty ecstatically.

I regarded the hideous thing with a look of deepest loathing. "Now I know what the hymn means by 'the heathen in his blindness,'" I commented as I turned my back squarely upon it.

"Ye-es, sair," volunteered the Mocha and Java-colored bandit who owned the shop, "eet ees a var-y rare piece of carving; eet ees the great god Fo, the ruler of the air. I var-y much doubt that there is another like it in the world."

"I hope you're right," I assured him. Then to Betty: "If you're through admiring that monument to delirium tremens, we'll be going." And heedless of the thousand dollars' worth of bric-a-brac which my flouncing coattails menaced I marched from the store, followed by a thoroughly indignant Betty.

We walked the next sixty yards in stony silence; Betty in a white heat of fury which set her quivering from the backbone out; I in that not altogether unpleasant state of mind experienced while devising "cutting" remarks.

I had composed the introduction to a beautiful little lecture by the time we had reached the corner, and was about to settle down to three hundred yards or so of enjoyable monologue when the opening words died on my tongue. Betty was crying, right on the Avenue, and at four o'clock in the afternoon!

"I t-think you're perfectly horrid," she sobbed, as the big, pearly tears began to chase each other down her trembling cheeks. "You know how I w-wanted that lovely statuette, and you wouldn't let me g-get it or anything, and I don't believe you love me anymore, and—" The sentence ended in a wail, and, unlike Lot's wife, who turned back and congealed into salt crystal, my wife looked despairingly back at the shop we had just quit and nearly dissolved in salt water.

"Damn!" I muttered under my breath as a brightly painted woman cast a glance of commiseration at Betty, and her escort glared at me as if he would have liked to wring my neck. Aloud I said: "For the love of Michelangelo Casey, stop crying and we'll go back and get the awful thing; but if we go to the poorhouse trying to pay for it, Betty Haig, don't say I didn't give you fair warning."

Betty's tears evaporated before she could bring the absurd little dab of lace she calls her handkerchief into play. She pinioned my arm in both of hers and snuggled her cheek against my shoulder. "I just knew you'd buy it for me, Phil, old dear," she gurgled. Of course she did. The world's greatest clairvoyants could take lessons from Betty when it comes to reading my mind.

Between the living room and dining room of our house is a narrow, nondescript sort of room which the real-estate agent called a reception hall and Betty calls her fernery. In it she keeps a wide variety of potted ferns, palms, and flowering plants, over which a man can stumble and break a leg with the minimum expenditure of time and effort. From one end of this little room the stairs which lead to our sleeping apartments curve upward; at the other extremity is a small stained-glass window letting out of a little bay. Against this window Betty set up the petrified horror from the Orient, where its evil sneer greeted me each morning as I descended to breakfast and its misshapen shadow fell across me every evening as I went in to dinner.

For the first few days after the loathsome object was installed in its alcove I merely favored it with a disgusted frown as I passed; but my passive dislike hardened into an active detestation before it had been there three days.

It was Chang's encounter with the thing which made me realize how violent my hate for it was.

Chang was Betty's Siamese cat, and a more courageous grimalkin never walked the back fence by moonlight or gave battle to a wandering cur. I have seen him take on two rivals for his ladylove's favor at once and put them both to ignominious flight; I have seen him charge full tilt against a bull terrier twice his weight and send him yelping off under a veritable barrage of saber-clawed blows and feline billingsgate; yet before the Eastern image all his valor melted into nothingness.

I had paused before the statue one morning to pay it my profane respects, when Chang, who was very fond of me, came marching from the dining room to take his usual morning's ear-rubbing constitutional around my ankles. Halfway round my legs he came face to face with the image's leering mask, and stopped dead still in his tracks. The hairs of his tail and along his spine began to rise, his small ears flattened against his head, his mouth slowly opened in a noiseless "spit," and his legs bent under him till the white fur on his underside touched the floor. For a long moment he

regarded the statue with the fierce, silent glare which only an angry cat can give; then from the nethermost pit of his stomach came a low, rumbling growl, the defiant war cry of a cat about to close with a stronger foe. Slowly, as if stalking a bird, he crept, belly low to earth, toward the image's base; then, with his black nose almost against the stone, he paused, looking up at its malignant face, and suddenly, as though shot from a crossbow, turned and bolted, yowling, up the stairs. I had never seen Chang turn tail on anything, living or dead, and the sight of his abject terror almost unnerved me. Why such a valiant warrior should fly from a piece of carved stone was more than I could understand. But Chang was wise; he, too, came from the East, and he knew.

Next morning we found Chang lying dead at the creature's stone feet, an ugly wound gaping from the blue-gray fur of his breast, and on the statue's twisted lips and on its gleaming ivory tusks was a dull, brick-red stain, the stain that drying blood leaves.

Betty wept inconsolably at the loss of her little pet, but she refused to blame the image for it. "Poor Chang hated it so he dashed himself against its face and was killed when he struck its teeth," she explained between sobs.

I picked up Chang's little corpse and stroked its stiff gray fur gently. "He died like the knightly gentleman he was, defending his home against barbarian invasion," I said, shaking my fist at the hideous face grinning into mine. "If you'll listen to me, dear, you'll have the beastly thing thrown out before it does more damage."

"Indeed we won't!" Betty answered. "I'm sorry for poor Chang, but I won't have my lovely idol thrown away just because he committed suicide." Then she added with mock seriousness: "You'd better be careful how you call my image a 'beastly thing,' Phil; who knows but it has the power of injuring its enemies?"

Lightly spoken as the words were, they sent a quick chill through me; for they voiced a thought which had been vaguely gathering in my subconscious mind. "It will be a bad day for one of us if that stone thing and I ever run foul of each other," I promised truculently as I bore Chang's body away.

The second member of our entourage to be driven out by the stone interloper was our cook, Nora McGinnis. Nora, who was a veritable virtuoso at the kitchen range, had been with us since our second month at housekeeping, and was at once Betty's pride and the neighbors' despair. She was devoted to Betty and me, too, so much so that offers of higher wages from several nearby households had been productive of nothing more than indignant refusals from her and severed diplomatic relations by Betty.

However, Nora was too thoroughly Celtic to be able to share the same roof with that Oriental abomination. Before Chang's murder she had sidled by it like a stray cat passing a group of boys on a snowy day, after that she crossed herself devoutly each time she had to pass through the hall. Finally she came to Betty and announced her intention of leaving forthwith.

"Oi've cooked fer yez an' Oi've washed fer yez, an' Oi loiks ye bot'," she explained, "but that there haythen thing out there"—she jerked her thumb toward the hall—"wunk its oye at me whin Oi came through there jest now, an' Oi'll not shlape another noight in th' same house wid it, so Oi won't!" And she didn't.

If a predisposition to baldness and three years of married life hadn't rendered the operation well-nigh impossible, I should have torn my hair. "See what your precious image has let us in for now," I stormed at Betty. "First he kills Chang, then he drives Nora off, and now I suppose we'll all have to die of starvation."

Betty pursed her small lips stubbornly. "I'll do the cooking myself until we can get another maid," she promised.

"Please, Betty," I besought, "let's go to a hotel and board until the new cook comes." I had to spend the rest of the morning explaining that remark to a very much insulted wife. But we went to the hotel just the same.

We menaced our digestions with hotel fare for nearly a week before we managed to secure a Swedish girl who cooked our meals, broke our best china, and regarded the stone image with an equal degree of bovine indifference. The very sight of her passing the hateful thing with never the tribute of a sidelong glance had a steadying effect upon my nerves which more than atoned for the havoc her clumsy hands wrought among our Royal Minton cups and plates. After observing her indifference for a week or so, I, too, got so that I could go by the stone monster with no more than a shrug of

disapproval.

The violence of my aversion to the image might have simmered down to nothing more than an artistic distaste if Betty's infatuation had not seemed to increase in geometrical progression as time went by. She would stand gazing at its ugly painted face for minutes on end, almost in a state of hypnosis, till I grew actually jealous.

If it had been a piece of noble Greek artistry claiming her admiration I could have understood and condoned her love for it, for Betty is an aesthetic little person, with an intense appreciation of the beautiful. But her regard for this carven Calaban—

"Upon my word, my dear," I told her one day, somewhat nettled by her attitude, "I do believe you're letting that Eastern nightmare make an idolatress of you."

Betty laughed, a little nervously, I thought. "I don't know what there is about the thing that's so fascinating," she confessed. "Sometimes I think I hate it as much as you do, Phil. But"—she hesitated a second, as if doubting the wisdom of taking me into her confidence—"but sometimes, when I look at it for a while I *do* feel as though I ought to go on my knees before it."

"And if I ever catch you doing such a trick," I said, "I'll be up in police court next morning for wife beating."

It was a few days after this conversation that I was puzzled and annoyed by a faint odor of Chinese punk hanging in the air of the dining room when I came down to breakfast.

Incense of all kinds is distasteful to me; so much so that I never attend high-church services when I can avoid it, and of all the scents with which the nose of man is insulted I particularly detest that of Chinese punk. Even as a pretext for keeping away mosquitoes we have never burned joss sticks in the house, yet there the scent was, as plain as cabbage on a New England Thursday.

I sniffed the air like a restive hound for a few moments, then concluded that my olfactory nerves had been playing a practical joke on me, and dismissed the matter from my mind.

But the odor persisted. Some days it was more pronounced than others—occasionally it was so faint as to be no more than a reminiscent annoyance—but always it was present.

There seemed to be a subtle connection, too, between the varying strength of the perfume and Betty's health. On mornings when the bitter-sweet effluvium hung like an invisible fog among the rafters of the hall and dining-room ceilings there were great, violet circles against the white flesh beneath her eyelids, and her eyes themselves were dull and lackluster, as though she had been troubled in her sleep. As the pungent tang of the incense waned and faded from the house, her face regained its wanted color, and the old-time sparkle returned to her eyes.

The mystery of the odor baffled me, and the changes in Betty worried me. So, like all modern philosophers, I thought much, drank much, and smoked much over the problem—and arrived nowhere.

Betty, too, fretted about the perfume because it annoyed me, and about herself because, except for toothache, measles, and similar childish ills, she had never been sick a day in her life. Betty is neither the broken lily nor drooping-violet type of woman. She can shop all morning, go to a matinee, and foxtrot half the night, which is a considerably larger contract than I should care to take on. Also she can handle a canoe like a red Indian, swim like a Sandwich Islander, and play stiff enough tennis to command the respect of any man. And here she was developing nerves and headaches and listlessness, just as though she were an ordinary woman instead of being my wife.

"I think I'll go to see Doctor Towbridge," she announced. "It's not like me to be all done in at breakfast time."

I agreed with her enthusiastically. Next to having no Betty at all, a sick Betty was the worst thing I could imagine.

When she returned from the doctor's she was more puzzled than ever. "He couldn't find anything wrong," she said, "and that worries me all the more, 'cause people don't get this way when there's nothing the matter with them."

Doctor Towbridge and I rode downtown together next morning, and I begged him for some clew to Betty's indisposition. "Wel-l," he answered, after the manner of all physicians who find themselves in a tight place, "I don't know that I'd care to say positively at this time just what Mrs. Haig's trouble is. Organically she's as fit as a fiddle, but she seems to be suffering from a lowering of vitality, possibly induced by insomnia. And I discovered traces of hysteria, too."

"Insomnia!" I scouted. "Why, man, Betty sleeps

like a top; she sleeps as well as I do, and I'm almost as hard to rouse as Lazarus."

Doctor Towbridge lit a fresh cigar and stared for a minute at the rows of near-colonial villas racing past the car windows. "Did Mrs. Haig ever walk in her sleep as a child?" he asked. "Somnambulism may have the same effect as insomnia, you know."

Now, Betty and I had known each other just three months when we were married; so I had no more idea whether she had walked in her sleep as a child than I had what colored pinafores she wore when she was attending kindergarten. But Doctor Towbridge's question gave me to think. Suppose Betty were sleepwalking! And our sleeping rooms were on the second floor. Good Lord, if she were to walk through an open window! I determined then and there to do some watchful waiting that night.

But if the old saying concerning the ultimate destination of good resolutions be true, I must have paved several blocks of infernal highways with mine; for midnight found me in bed, wooing Morpheus in no uncertain nasal tones.

Two o'clock, though, found me awake; very wide awake.

I sat up in bed. The big, white November moon, swimming easily in a surf of frothy clouds, splashed an intermittent spray of silver light over the bedroom's polished floor. Outside the window the wind set up a shrewish scolding in the branches of the tall chestnut which grew beside the house, and up the stairs drifted the acrid, unmistakable perfume of burning joss sticks.

I looked at Betty's bed. The covers were thrown back and there was the dint of her head in the center of her pillow; her kimono hung in its accustomed place across the back of her slipper chair. But Betty was nowhere to be seen.

"That infernal incense again!" I exclaimed as I scrambled out of bed and hurried to the stairway. "There's something devilish going on in this house."

Half a dozen angry strides took me to the stairhead; two more carried me to the curve of the steps. There I paused, looking down into the evilly grinning face of the stone image. Before it was Betty, clad only in her pajamas and straw bedroom sandals, lighting the last of seven joss punks set fanwise in a vase upon the floor. The stick took fire and sent its writhing coil of smoke upward to the idol's head, and Betty, with her hands crossed over her breast, her body bent nearly double, retreated three steps, paused, and groveled to the floor; rose and backed away five more steps, repeated the genuflection; then rose to her full height, rigid as a carven thing herself.

Hands held stiffly at her sides, she continued to stare fixedly into the monster's agate eyes as she slipped her little pink-and-white feet from their straw sandals and took one step forward barefoot. Raising her hands, palms forward, till they reached the level of her ears, she went to her knees and bent slowly forward till hands and forehead rested on the floor. Once, twice, three times she did this slowly; then her prostrations increased in speed until the soft thud-thud of her head and hands against the floor was like the ticking of a slow-movement clock.

As she swayed forward and back in this act of mad adoration she recited gaspingly:

O Fo, the Mighty,
O Fo, the Powerful,
O Fo, who holdest the thousand-starred heavens as a sunshade in thy hand,
O Thou who governest the moon and the tides,
O Thou who placest the mighty winds upon the great seas,
O Thou who bendest the skies above the earth,
Have pity upon me.

O Fo, who orderest the sun and all the lights of heaven,
O Fo, who makest the lions to roar and the little beasts to keep silence,
O Fo, who bindest in the lightnings with thy grasp and whose voice is the thunder of the clouds,
O Fo, who standest upon the white mountaintops and liest down in the green valleys,
O Fo, who driest up the rivers with thy wrath and encompasseth the dry land with thy floods,
I lay myself before thee.

Inch by inch she had crawled on her knees to the idol's base, and that stone abomination, that misbegotten son of Eastern heathenism, leered triumphantly down while Betty—my Betty—put her soft little lips to its misshapen feet.

"Hell and furies!" I yelled, covering the distance intervening between Betty and me in a single leap. "I'll smash that damned image if it's the last act of my life."

Before I put my iconoclastic threat into execution I bent above the wretched woman crouching on the floor, mad enough with berserker rage to grind her underfoot.

I seized her by the shoulders and wrenched her upright, ready to shake her as an ill-tempered terrier worries a rat. But my vengeance died stillborn. Betty's eyes stared unseeingly into mine; her face had the set, unwitting expression of one in a hypnotic trance. She was sound asleep with her eyes open; bound fast in the fetters of somnambulism.

"Betty! Betty, dear," I whispered contritely, drawing her slender little body to me and nursing her head against my shoulder.

A shiver ran through her, and her hands gripped my arm till the polished nails bit into my flesh through the sleeve of my robe as she nestled her face close to my breast. "Oh, Phil! Phil, dear, I've had such a terrible dream," she whimpered. "Put your arms around me tight, dear; I'm so frightened." And her hot tears wet through the silk of my robe.

With a sobbing, hysterical Betty to comfort and pacify and carry upstairs to bed, I had no time for smashing images that night, but before Betty went to sleep, with my hand cuddled in both of hers, we agreed to oust the stone demon from the house before another night.

Getting rid of a statue, however, especially one like ours, is often more easily discussed than accomplished. First, the thing weighed nearly two hundred pounds; second, it was fragile to an unbelievable degree and had to be handled as carefully as high explosive; lastly, it had cost us nearly five hundred dollars—and wasn't entirely paid for. I would gladly have forfeited the unpaid balance for the pleasure of smashing the hateful thing into smithereens; but Betty's frugal soul revolted at the mere suggestion. Ready as she is to pauperize herself—and me—for new things, Betty would sooner part with an arm than suffer a loss on any article once in her possession.

Then, too, the image had to be crated and packed before any drayman would consent to handle it; so, pending the time it could be properly prepared for its journey to the auction rooms, we wrapped it in rugs and stood it in a secluded corner of the backyard, where it stared in hooded fury at the blank wall of the garage and attracted the speculative interest of all the small boys in the neighborhood.

I was forever going to take a day off and box the thing up properly, but like the man who pleaded inclement weather as an excuse for not mending his leaking roof when it was raining, and lack of necessity when the weather was fine, I delayed the operation from day to day, while the image stood unpacked, save for its covering of carpet.

"You'd better get someone out from the city to crate that thing today," Betty advised me one morning about three weeks after the statue had been evicted from the house.

"Um-m?" I answered absently, engrossed in a combination of toast, coffee, and the morning's paper.

"Yes, you would," she repeated, "or I'll be leaving the house. Look!" She pointed through the dining-room window to the backyard.

I looked, and set my paper down suddenly, swallowing several mouthfuls of air in quick succession as I did so. "It can't be!" I ejaculated.

"But it is," Betty insisted.

And it was. The image was nearer the house by twenty feet than it had been the night before.

"How the devil did it get there?" I asked querulously of nobody in particular.

"I—I d-don't know," Betty faltered. But from the shakiness of her voice and the wideness of her eyes I knew that she had her own opinion.

"Well, it can't have walked there, you know," I argued.

"N-no, of course not," Betty agreed a trifle too readily.

I went out to investigate, not stopping to put on either hat or overcoat. There was no doubt about it; the thing had moved nearer the house since darkness the day before. "Some of the neighborhood boys must have decided to play a joke on us, and moved the thing during the night," I explained, after looking the ground over. "They probably intended to set it up on the front lawn, but gave it up when they found out how heavy it was."

"Yes, that must be it," Betty concurred rather unsteadily. "It simply couldn't have walked there itself," she repeated, as if anxious to convince herself of the impossibility of any such thing having happened.

With the aid of our Swedish maid, who was as strong as any man and twice as clumsy, we replaced the statue and returned to the house, I to finish my interrupted breakfast, Betty to chirp happily over the details of the dance we were going to attend that night.

By the time I returned to the house that evening

I had developed one of the worst head colds it had ever been my misfortune to acquire, due to my hatless excursion into the yard that morning. Every other breath was followed by a sniff, and each time I spoke the remark was punctuated by a sneeze. In such a condition my attendance at the dance was quite impossible.

"Another score I owe that cursed image," I muttered as I discarded the fifth handkerchief I had used that day and unfolded the sixth.

Betty's sympathy for me was matched only by her disappointment at missing the dance.

"Miss the dance?" I echoed as I brought my seventh handkerchief into play. "Who said you'd have to miss the dance? You can go with Frank and Edith Horton in their car, and they can drop you here on the way home."

"And you won't mind staying here alone, and won't get sick, old dear?" Betty asked as she picked up the telephone to tell the Hortons to call for her. "Doctor Towbridge will be there tonight, I know, and I'll bring him home with me, if you wish."

I gave the simple homemade cough remedy I was compounding another vigorous shake. "If you bring any sawbones into this house tonight, Betty Haig," I threatened, "I'll surely do him bodily injury." I added a bit more rock candy to the flask of whisky.

"You'll be in a state of beastly intoxication when I get back, I know," Betty said as she viewed my bottle of rock and rye dubiously, "but that doesn't prevent your tying these ankle ribbons for me now." And she put a slender, pink satin-shod foot on my knee.

I laced the ribbons about her trim ankles and kissed her left shoulder blade as I dropped her evening cloak over a party frock which, like Gungha Din's uniform, "wasn't nothing much before, and rather less than 'arf o' that be'ind."

Betty gone, I changed my coat for a house jacket and settled myself on the lounge before the fire to read, smoke, and treat my cold with copious drafts of the mixture I had prepared.

Efficacious as rock and rye is in the cure of a cold, it has one great disadvantage; it has a tendency to make a man lose count of the number of doses he's taken. After my seventh or ninth dose—I forget which—I ceased counting, and adhered to the simple formula of a dose to a sneeze—and sometimes I caught myself sneezing without legitimate excuse.

A couple of hours' course of this treatment, combined with the sizzle and crackling of the logs burning in the fireplace, set me nodding.

"Ol' stone image doesn't like it out there in the cold. Ol' image jealous 'cause I wouldn't let Betty worship it—wants to come back to house and get revenge on me," I mumbled, half maudlin, as I dropped my pipe and book and thrust my head deep into a sofa pillow.

How long I slept I do not know. Certainly it must have been several hours, for when I opened my eyes and sat up with a start the fire had burned itself to a bed of dull ashes on the hearth, and a chill had crept through the living room. My reading lamp, too, had burned itself out, and save for the fitful gleam of a nearby streetlight, shining through the window, the room was in darkness.

Lying there in that no man's land between sleep and waking, I heard the grandfather's clock in the hall strike off the half-hour, and put my feet to the floor sleepily. "Half past something or other," I yawned; "must be getting late. Wonder how soon Betty will be getting home?"

The crazy little French gilt clock that Betty keeps on the parlor mantel, and which is always half an hour slow, chimed twelve times nervously. That meant we were in the middle of that eerie hour which belongs neither to the day which is gone nor the day which is to come, and which, for want of a better term, we call midnight.

The fumes of the rock and rye I had taken earlier in the evening still hung in my brain, dulling my perceptions and clouding my vision a little. In the uncertain light from the streetlamp it seemed to me I detected a movement among the inanimate objects in the room.

I opened my mouth in another prodigious yawn, and flung my arms wide in a mighty stretch, striving to shake off the remnants of my sleep. Before either yawn or stretch were finished, however, I was sitting bolt upright on the couch, listening to the sound which came to me from the veranda. It was a slow, heavy, scraping, thumping sort of noise; the kind that would be produced by the dragging of a heavy weight across the floor, or the rolling of a ponderous chest, or the walking of some great-footed animal.

Thump, thump, thump, the footsteps—if they were footsteps—sounded on the planks of the

porch, around the corner of the house, across the width of the piazza, up to the very door of the vestibule. Then a silence, ten times more ominous than the noise itself.

The breath in my lungs and throat seemed suddenly impregnated with nitrous fumes, strangling and burning me at once, and tiny globules of cold perspiration seeped out upon my scalp and the palms of my hands as I sat there in the dark, resolutely closing my mind against the thought of what waited outside the door.

"B-r-r-ring!" the shrill clamor of the doorbell cut in on my terrified vigil. I jumped up with a relieved grin. Doorbells are comforting things to have about at such times; there is something reassuringly modern and human about them.

I got to my feet almost cheerfully and reached for the electric switch. My groping fingers found it readily enough but no flood of warm, yellow light followed their pressure. As frequently happens, the current was off.

In darkness, then, I shuffled along the hall to the front door.

That vague, nameless horror we all feel at times when entering a dark room alone was on me as I fumbled with the knob. Very cautiously I put back the curtain from the glass panel in the door and peeped into the shadowy vestibule. There was nothing to be seen.

"Humph!" I grunted. "Nobody there. Ears must have been playing a trick on me; bell didn't ring at all." Emboldened by the emptiness of the vestibule, I swung the door wide.

"Who's there?" I called, feeling quite sure that my challenge would go unanswered.

A moment later I regretted my rashness. Just within the door, dimly outlined against the gray darkness of the outer night, crouched an ungainly, squat figure. Its staring eyes glared with a hellish phosphorescence; its ivory tusks gleamed from writhing, blood-red lips; its hideous painted face twisted in a grimace of deadly hatred.

"Why, it—it—it's the *image!*" I gibbered fatuously.

It was the image. The same image that had slain poor little Chang; the same stone monster that had forced Betty to worship it; yet it was not the same. Its loathsome, bloated face changed expression; it moved; it was *alive!*

Shaken in a very palsy of fear, I shrank back into the hall.

Swift as my retreat was, it was not quick enough. With a swaying, ungainly bound, the thing was upon me. Great hands, cruel and relentless as the coils of a serpent, closed round my neck, choking the breath from me; huge, fiery eyes glared vengefully into mine; long, gleaming tusks were gnashing at my throat, seeking the living blood in my veins.

With arms and legs and stiffened back I strained against the monster, striving to unclasp the cruel hands throttling me, pushing vainly against the terrible embrace which drew me nearer, ever nearer, the champing white teeth which flashed from the misshapen face so near mine.

As I fought against the accursed thing crushing me in its relentless grip, I thought wildly, "This is how poor Chang died," and I braced my knee against its swollen belly.

Cold, acid sweat stood out upon my forehead and rolled down into my eyes; my lungs were bursting with the air imprisoned within them; great, sonorous gongs seemed booming in my ears; lights flashed before my eyes, and the walls of the vestibule seemed toppling in upon me.

The image and I swayed back and forth in a death grapple, went down; there was a crash, a blinding flash of light, my hands relaxed their grip on the stone shoulders, I was deathly sick at my stomach—

"Bring me another cold rag; he'll be all right in a minute," Doctor Towbridge's voice sounded close beside me, and his firm, capable hands replaced a cold-water pack on my forehead.

I sat up and stared about me. I was lying on the couch in the living room. Doctor Towbridge was bending over me, and a very frightened Betty stood behind him, a cloth saturated with cold water in her hand.

"Young man," Doctor Towbridge bent his sternest professional look upon me, "next time you feel inclined to cheat an honest physician out of his honest fee don't risk a case of alcoholic poisoning trying to drink up all the rock and rye in town."

"But I wasn't drunk," I expostulated; "that cursed image—"

"Yes, yes, we know all about that, too. We found it broken to pieces in the vestibule, and you've done nothing but rave about it for the past half-hour. The neighbors' boys evidently carried out their design of putting the thing against your

front door, and when you went to the vestibule it fell through the door and was broken. Too bad, too; it was a valuable piece of bric-a-brac, wasn't it?"

I looked at them out of the corner of my eye. "Yes," I answered meekly. If they already thought me drunk, what would they think if I were to tell them how the image really came to be broken? "Yes," I agreed, "it cost us a lot of money; but I think we can worry along without it."

Doctor Towbridge may have been right. Perhaps I did take too much rock and rye that night; maybe the neighbors' boys did put the stone image in the doorway. Possibly my fight with the grisly thing was all the figment of an alcohol-inspired dream. But there is one thing I'd like the doctor to explain—if he can. For a week after that horrible night there were great purple bruises on my throat, where I had believed the monster's terrible hands had been.