

Kummer Frederic Arnold

The Green God



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CHAPTER I

MR. ASHTON

The dull October afternoon was rapidly drawing to a close as I passed through the village of Pinhoe, and set my steps rather wearily toward Exeter. I had conceived the idea, some time before, of walking from London to Torquay, partly because I felt the need of the exercise and fresh air, and partly because I wanted to do some sketching in the southwest counties. Perhaps had I realized, when I started out, what manner of adventure would befall me in the neighborhood of the town of Exeter, I should have given that place a wide berth. As matters now stood, my chief concern at the moment was to decide whether or not I could reach there before the impending storm broke. For a time I had thought of spending the night at the inn at Pinhoe, but, after a careful examination of the wind-swept sky and the masses of dun colored clouds rolling up from the southwest, I decided that I could cover the intervening five miles and reach the Half Moon Hotel in High street before the coming of the storm. I had left Pinhoe perhaps half a mile to the rear, when the strong southwest gale whipped into my face some drops of cold, stinging rain which gave me warning that my calculations as to the proximity of the storm had been anything but correct. I hesitated, uncertain whether to go forward in the face of the gale, or to beat a hasty retreat to the village, when I heard behind me the sound of an approaching automobile.

The car was proceeding at a moderate speed, and as I stepped to the side of the road to allow it to pass, it slowed up, and I heard a gruff, but not unpleasant, voice asking me whether I could point out the way to Major Temple's place. I glanced up, and saw a tall, heavily built man, of perhaps some forty years of age, leaning from the rear seat of the motor. He was bronzed and rugged with the mark of the traveler upon him, and although his face at first impressed me unpleasantly, the impression was dispelled in part at least by his peculiarly attractive smile. I informed him that I could not direct him to the place in question, since I was myself a comparative stranger to that part of England. He then asked me if I was going toward Exeter. Upon my informing him not only that I was, but that I was particularly desirous of reaching it before the coming of the rain, he at once invited me to get into the car, with the remark that he could at least carry me the major part of the way.

I hesitated a moment, but, seeing no reason to refuse the offer, I thanked him and got into the car, and we proceeded toward the town at a fairly rapid rate. My companion seemed disinclined to talk, and puffed nervously at a long cheroot. I lighted my pipe, with some difficulty on account of the wind, and fell to studying the face of the man beside me. He was a good-looking fellow, of a sort, with a somewhat sensuous face, and I felt certain that his short, stubby black mustache concealed a rather cruel mouth. Evidently a man to gain his ends, I thought, without being over nice as to the means he employed. Presently he turned to me. "I understand," he said, "that Major Temple's place is upon the main road, about half a mile this side of Exeter. There is a gray-stone gateway, with a lodge. I shall try the first entrance answering that description. The Major only leased the place recently, so I imagine he is not at all well known hereabouts." He leaned forward and spoke to his chauffeur.

I explained my presence upon the Exeter road, and suggested that I would leave the car as soon as we reached the gateway in question, and continue upon foot the balance of my way. My companion nodded, and we smoked in silence for a few moments. Suddenly, with a great swirl of dead leaves, and a squall of cold rain, the storm broke upon us. The force of the gale was terrific, and although the car was provided with a leather top, the wind-swept rain poured in and threatened to drench us

to the skin. My companion drew the heavy lap-robe close about his chin, and motioned to me to do likewise, and a moment later we turned quickly into a handsome, gray-stone gateway and up a long, straight gravel road, bordered on each side by a row of beautiful oaks. I glanced up at my new acquaintance in some surprise, but he only smiled and nodded, so I said no more, realizing that he could hardly set me down in the face of such a storm.

We swirled over the wet gravel for perhaps a quarter of a mile, through a fine park, and with a swift turn at the end brought up under the porte-cochère of a large, gray-stone house of a peculiar and to me somewhat gloomy and unattractive appearance. The rain, however, was now coming down so heavily, and the wind swept with such furious strength through the moaning trees in the park, that I saw it would be useless to attempt to proceed against it, either on foot or in the motor, so I followed my companion as he stepped from the machine and rang the bell. After a short wait, the door was thrown open by a servant and we hurriedly entered, my acquaintance calling to the chauffeur as we did so to proceed at once to the stables and wait until the rain had moderated before setting out upon his return journey.

We found ourselves in a large, dimly lighted hallway. I inspected the man who had admitted us with considerable curiosity as he closed the door behind us, not only because of his Oriental appearance – he was a Chinaman of the better sort – but also because he was dressed in his native garb, his richly embroidered jacket reflecting the faint light of the hall with subdued, yet brilliant, effect. He upon his part showed not the slightest interest in our coming, as he inspected us with his childlike, sleepy eyes. "Tell Major Temple," said my friend to the man, as he handed him his dripping coat and hat, "that Mr. Robert Ashton is here, and – " He turned to me with a questioning glance. "Owen Morgan," I replied, wondering if he would know me by name. If he did, he showed no sign. "Just so – Mr. Owen Morgan," he continued, then strode toward a log fire which crackled and sputtered cheerily upon the hearth of a huge stone fireplace. I gave the man my cap and stick, – I was walking in a heavy Norfolk jacket, my portmanteau having been sent ahead by train to Exeter – and joined Mr. Ashton before the fire.

"I'm afraid I'm rather presuming upon the situation," I suggested, "to make myself so much at home here; but perhaps the storm will slacken up presently."

"Major Temple will be glad to see you, I'm sure," rejoined Mr. Ashton, unconcernedly. "You can't possibly go on, you know – listen!" He waved his hand toward the leaded windows against which the storm was now driving with furious force.

"I'm afraid not," I answered, a bit ungraciously. I have a deep-rooted dislike to imposing myself upon strangers, and I felt that my unceremonious arrival at the house of Major Temple might be less appreciated by that gentleman than my companion seemed to think likely.

"The Major is a queer old character," Mr. Ashton remarked, "great traveler and collector. I'm here on a matter of business myself – partly at least. He'll be glad to meet you. I fancy he's a bit lonely with nobody to keep him company but his daughter. Here he comes now." He turned toward a tall, spare man with gray hair and drooping gray mustache, who entered the hall. His face, like Ashton's, had the dull, burnt-in tone of brown which is acquired only by long exposure to the sun, and which usually marks its possessor as a traveler in the hot countries. "Ah, Ashton," exclaimed the Major, dropping his monocle, "delighted to see you. You arrived yesterday?" – He extended his hand, which Ashton grasped warmly.

"Late yesterday. You see I lost no time in coming to report the result of my quest."

"And you were successful?" demanded the older man, excitedly.

"Entirely so," replied Ashton with a smile of satisfaction.

"Good – good!" The Major rubbed his hands and smiled, then apparently observing me for the first time, glanced at Mr. Ashton with a slight frown and an interrogative expression.

"Mr. Owen Morgan," said Ashton, lightly, "on his way to Exeter with me. I took the liberty of bringing him in, on account of the storm."

"I am ready to go on at once," I interjected stiffly, "as soon as the rain lets up a bit."

"Nonsense – nonsense!" The Major's voice was somewhat testy. "You can't possibly proceed on a night like this. Make yourself at home, Sir. Any friend of Mr. Ashton's is welcome here." He waved aside my protestations and turned to one of the servants, who had entered the room to turn on the lights. "Show Mr. Ashton and Mr. Morgan to their rooms, Gibson. You'll be wanting to fix up a bit before dinner," he announced.

"I'm afraid I can't dress," I said ruefully; "my things have all gone on to Exeter by train."

The Major favored me with a sympathetic smile. "I quite understand," he said; "traveler's luck. I've been a bit of a traveler myself, in my day, Mr. Morgan. My daughter will understand perfectly."

"Which rooms, Sir, shall I show the gentlemen to?" asked the man, a trifle uneasily, I thought.

The Major looked at Ashton, and laughed. "Ashton," he said, "you know I only took this place a short time ago on my return from my last trip to the East, and as we do not have many visitors, it's a bit musty and out of shape. Queer old house, I fancy. Been closed, until I let it, for years. Supposed to be haunted or something of the sort – tales of wandering spirits and all that. I imagine it won't worry you much." He glanced from Ashton to myself with a quick smile of interrogation.

"Hardly," replied my companion, lighting a cigarette. "I've outgrown ghosts. Lead on to the haunted chamber."

The Major turned to the servant. "Show the gentlemen to the two rooms in the west wing, Gibson. The green room will suit Mr. Ashton, I fancy, and perhaps Mr. Morgan will find the white and gold room across the hall comfortable for the night."

"Very good, Sir." The man turned toward the staircase and we followed him.

I found my room a large and fairly comfortable one, containing a great maple bed, a chest of drawers and other furniture of an old-fashioned sort. The place seemed stuffy with the peculiar dead atmosphere of rooms long closed, but I soon dispelled this by throwing open one of the windows upon that side of the room away from the force of the storm, and busied myself in making such preparations for dinner as I could with the few requisites which my small knapsack contained. I heard Ashton across the hall, whistling merrily as he got into evening kit, and rather 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 the jewel and set it carelessly upon the top of a cut-glass salt cellar, turning it this way and that to catch the light. As he did so, I observed the Chinese servant enter the doorway opposite me with cigars, cigarettes and an alcohol lamp upon a tray, and I was startled to see his wooden, impassive face light up with a glare of sudden anger and alarm as he caught sight of the jewel. Major Temple, observing him at the same moment, quickly covered the figure with his hand, and the Chinaman, resuming almost instantly his customary look of childlike unconcern, proceeded to offer us the contents of the tray as Miss Temple rose and left the table. I instinctively felt that Mr. Ashton and his host desired to be alone, so, after lighting my cigar, I excused myself and strolled into the great hall where I stood with my back to the welcome fire, listening to the howling of the storm without.

I had been standing there for perhaps fifteen minutes or more, when suddenly I observed Miss Temple come quickly into the hall from a door on the opposite side of the stairway. She looked about cautiously for a moment, then approached me with an eager, nervous smile. I could not help observing, as she drew near, how the beauty of her delicate, mobile face was marred by her evident suffering. Her large dark eyes were swollen and heavy as from much weeping and loss of sleep.

"You are a friend of Mr. Ashton's," she asked earnestly as she came up to me. "Have you known him long?"

"Miss Temple, I am afraid I can hardly claim to be a friend of Mr. Ashton's at all. As a matter of fact I never met him before this afternoon."

She seemed vastly surprised. "But I thought you came with him," she said.

I explained my presence, and mentioned my work, and my purpose in making a walking tour along the southwest coast.

"Then you are Owen Morgan, the illustrator," she cried, with a brilliant smile. "I know your work very well, and I am delighted to meet you. I was afraid you, too, were in the conspiracy." Her face darkened, and again the expression of suffering fell athwart it like the shadow of a cloud.

"The conspiracy?" I asked, much mystified. "What conspiracy?"

Miss Temple looked apprehensively toward the door leading to the dining-room, then her eyes sought mine and she gave me a searching look. "I am all alone here, Mr. Morgan," she said at last, "and I need a friend very badly. I wonder if I can depend upon you – trust you."

It is needless to say that I was surprised at her words, as well as the impressive manner in which she spoke them. I assured her that I would be only too happy to serve her in any way in my power. "But what is it that you fear?" I inquired, soothingly, wondering if after all I was not dealing with a somewhat excitable child. Her next words, however, showed me that this was far from being the case.

"My father," she said, hurriedly, lowering her voice, "is a madman on the subject of jewels. He has spent his whole life in collecting them. He would give anything – anything! – to possess some curio upon which he had set his desires. Last year, in China, he saw by accident the emerald you have just seen. It was the sacred relic of a Buddhist temple in Ping Yang, and is said to have come from the holy city of Lhasa in Thibet. His offers to purchase it were laughed at, and when he persisted in them, he was threatened with violence as being a foreign devil and was forced to leave the city to avoid trouble. He has never since ceased to covet this jewel, and upon his arrival in Hong Kong, and before setting out for England, he made the acquaintance of this man Ashton, who is a sort of agent and collector for several of the curio dealers in London. We remained in Hong Kong for several weeks before setting sail for England, and during this time, Mr. Ashton persecuted me with his attentions, and made me an offer of marriage, which, in spite of my refusal, he repeated several times. Imagine my amazement, then, when my father, on our arrival in England, told me that he had commissioned Mr. Ashton to obtain the emerald Buddha for him, and had agreed, in the event of his success, to give him my hand in marriage. My prayers, my appeals, were all equally useless. He informed me that Mr. Ashton was a gentleman, that he had given him his word, and could not break it. I was forced into a semi-acquiescence to the arrangement, believing that Mr. Ashton could never succeed in his mad attempt, and had almost forgotten the matter when suddenly my father received word from Mr. Ashton that he had arrived at Southampton yesterday and would reach here this evening. I went to my father and asked him to assure me that he would not insist upon carrying out his inhuman promise, in the event of Mr. Ashton's success, but he only put me off, bidding me wait until the result of his trip was known. I learned it at dinner to-night, and realize from Mr. Ashton's manner that he intends to assert his claim upon me to the fullest extent. Whatever happens, Mr. Morgan, I shall never marry Robert Ashton – never! I would do anything before I would consent to that. I do not know what my father will ask of me, but if he asks that, I shall leave this house to-morrow, and I beg that you will take me with you, until I can find some occupation that will enable me to support myself."

Her story filled me with the deepest astonishment. I thrust out my hand and grasped hers, carried away by the fervor and impetuosity of her words, as well as by her beauty and evident suffering. "You can depend upon me absolutely," I exclaimed. "My mother is at Torquay, to which place I am bound. She will be glad to welcome you, Miss Temple."

"Thank you – thank you!" she cried in her deep, earnest voice. "Do not leave in the morning until I have seen you. Good-night." She hastened toward the stairway and as she ascended it, threw back at me a smile of such sweet gratitude and relief that I felt repaid for all that I had promised.

I stood for a while, smoking and thinking over this queer situation, when suddenly my attention was attracted by the sound of loud voices coming from the direction of the dining-room, as though Major Temple and his guest were engaged in a violent quarrel. I could not make out what they were saying, nor indeed did I attempt to do so, when suddenly I was startled by the sound of a loud crash and the jingling of glassware, and Mr. Ashton burst into the hall, evidently in a state of violent anger, followed by Major Temple, equally excited and angry. "I hold you to your contract," the former

shouted. "By God, you'll live up to it, or I'll know the reason why." "I'll pay, damn it, I'll pay," cried Major Temple, angrily, "but not a penny to boot." Ashton turned and faced him. They neither of them saw me, and in their excitement failed to hear the cough with which I attempted to apprise them of my presence. "Don't you realize that that emerald is worth a hundred thousand pounds?" cried Ashton in a rage. "You promised me your daughter, if I got it for you, but you've got to pay me for the stone in addition."

"Not a penny," cried Major Temple.

"Then I'll take it to London and let Crothers have it."

"You wouldn't dare."

"Try me and see."

"Come, now, Ashton." The Major's voice was wheedling, persuasive. "What did the stone cost you – merely the cost of the trip, wasn't it? I'll pay that, if you like."

"And I risked my life a dozen times, to get you the jewel! You must be mad."

"How much do you want?"

"Fifty thousand pounds, and not a penny less."

"I'll not pay it."

"Then you don't get the stone."

"It's mine – I told you of it. Without my help you could have done nothing. I demand it. It is my property. You were acting only as my agent. Give it to me." Major Temple was beside himself with excitement.

"I'll see you damned first," cried Ashton, now thoroughly angry.

The Major glared at him, pale with fury. "I'll never let you leave the house with it," he cried.

By this time my repeated coughing and shuffling of my feet had attracted their attention, and they both hastened to conceal their anger. I felt however that I had heard too much as it was, so, bidding them a hasty good-night, I repaired as quickly as possible to my room and at once turned in.

CHAPTER II

A CRY IN THE MORNING

I was thoroughly tired out by my long day in the open, and I must have gone to sleep at once. It seemed to me that I was disturbed, during the night, by the sound of voices without my door, and the movements of people in the hallway, but I presume it was merely a dream. Just before daybreak, however, I found myself suffering somewhat from the cold, and got up to close one of the windows, to shut off the draught. I had just turned toward the bed again, when I heard from the room across the hall, the one occupied by Mr. Ashton, a sudden and terrible cry as of someone in mortal agony, followed by the sound of a heavy body falling upon the floor. I also fancied I heard the quick closing of a door or window, but of this I could not be sure. With a foreboding of tragedy heavily upon me, I hastily threw on some clothes and ran into the hall, calling loudly for help. Opposite me was the door of Mr. Ashton's room. I rushed to it, and tried the knob, but found it locked. For some time I vainly attempted to force open the door, meanwhile repeating my cries. Presently Major Temple came running through the hallway, followed by his daughter and several of the servants. Miss Temple had thrown on a long silk Chinese wrapper and even in the dim light of the hall I could not help observing the ghastly pallor of her face.

"What's wrong here?" cried Major Temple, excitedly.

"I do not know, Sir," I replied, gravely enough. "I heard a cry which seemed to come from Mr. Ashton's room, but I find his door locked."

"Break it in," cried Major Temple; "break it in at once." At his words, one of the servants and myself threw our combined weight against the door, and after several attempts, the fastening gave way, and we were precipitated headlong into the room. It was dark, and it seemed to me that the air was heavy and lifeless. We drew back into the hall as one of the servants came running up with a candle, and Major Temple, taking it, advanced into the room, closely followed by myself. At first our eyes did not take in the scene revealed by the flickering candlelight, but in a few moments the gruesome sight before us caused both Major Temple and myself to recoil sharply toward the doorway. Upon the floor lay Robert Ashton in his nightclothes, his head in a pool of blood, his hands outstretched before him, his face ghastly with terror. The Major at once ordered the servants to keep out of the room, then turned to his daughter and in a low voice requested her to retire. She did so at once, in a state of terrible excitement. He then closed the door behind us, and, after lighting the gas, we proceeded to examine the body. Ashton was dead, although death had apparently occurred but a short time before as his body was still warm. In the top of his head was found a deep circular wound, apparently made by some heavy, sharp-pointed instrument, but there were no other marks of violence, no other wounds of any sort upon the body. I examined the wound in the head carefully, but could not imagine any weapon which would have left such a mark. And then the wonder of the situation began to dawn upon me. The room contained, besides the door by which we had entered, three windows, two facing to the south and one to the west. All three were tightly closed and securely fastened with heavy bolts on the inside. There was absolutely no other means of entrance to the room whatever, except the door which we had broken open and a rapid examination of this showed me that it had been bolted upon the inside, and the catch into which the bolt slid upon the door-jamb had been torn from its fastenings by the effort we had used in forcing it open. I turned to Major Temple in amazement, and found that he was engaged in systematically searching Mr. Ashton's gladstone bag, which lay upon a chair near the bed. He examined each article in detail, heedless of the grim and silent figure upon the floor beside him, and, when he had concluded, bent over the prostrate form of the dead man and began a hurried search of his person and the surrounding floor. I observed him in astonishment. "The police must never find it," I heard him mutter; "the police must never find

it." He rose to his feet with an exclamation of disappointment. "Where can it be?" he muttered, half to himself, apparently forgetful of my presence. He looked about the room and then with a sudden cry dashed at a table near the window. I followed his movements and saw upon the table the small, green leather case from which Ashton had produced the emerald at dinner the night before. Major Temple took up the case with a sigh of relief, and hastily opened it, then dashed it to the floor with an oath. The case was empty.

"It's gone!" he fairly screamed. "My God, it's gone!"

"Impossible," I said, gravely. "The windows are all tightly shut and bolted. We had to break in the door. No one could have entered or left this room since Mr. Ashton came into it."

"Nonsense!" Major Temple snorted, angrily. "Do you suppose Ashton smashed in his own skull by way of amusement?"

He turned to the bed and began to search it closely, removing the pillows, feeling beneath the mattresses, even taking the candle and examining the floor foot by foot. Once more he went over the contents of the portmanteau, then again examined the clothing of the dead man, but all to no purpose. The emerald Buddha was as clearly and evidently gone as though it had vanished into the surrounding ether.

During this search, I had been vainly trying to put together some intelligent solution of this remarkable affair. There was clearly no possibility that Ashton had inflicted this wound upon himself in falling, yet the supposition that someone had entered the room from without seemed nullified by the bolted door and windows. I proceeded to closer examination of the matter.

The body lay with its head toward the window in the west wall of the room, and some six or eight feet from the window, and an even greater distance from the walls on either side. There was no piece of furniture, no heavy object, anywhere near at hand. I looked again at the queer, round conical hole in the top of the dead man's head. It had evidently been delivered from above. I glanced up, and saw only the dim, unbroken expanse of the ceiling above me, papered in white. I turned, absolutely nonplused, to Major Temple, who stood staring with protruding eyes at something upon the floor near one of the windows. He picked it up, and handed it to me. "What do you make of that?" he asked, in a startled voice, handing me what appeared to be a small piece of tough Chinese paper. Upon it was inscribed, in black, a single Chinese letter. I glanced at it, then handed it back, with the remark that I could make nothing of it.

"It is the symbol of the god," he said, "the Buddha. The same sign was engraved upon the base of the emerald figure, and I saw it in the temple at Ping Yang, upon the temple decorations. What is it doing here?" Then his face lighted up with a sudden idea. He rushed to the door, and opened it. "Gibson," he called peremptorily, to his man without, "find Li Min and bring him here at once. Don't let him out of your sight for a moment."

The man was gone ten minutes or more, during which time Major Temple walked excitedly up and down the room, muttering continually something about the police.

"They must be notified," I said, at last. He turned to me with a queer, half-frightened look. "They can do no good, no good, whatever," he cried. "This is the work of one of the Chinese secret societies. They are the cleverest criminals in the world. I have lived among them, and I know."

"Even the cleverest criminals in the world couldn't bolt a door or window from the outside," I said.

"Do not be too sure of that. I have known them to do things equally strange. By inserting a thin steel wedge between the edge of the door and the jamb they might with infinite patience work the bolt to one side or the other. This fellow, Li Min, I brought from China with me. He is one of the most faithful servants I have ever known. He belongs to the higher orders of society – I mean that he is not of the peasant or coolie class. He represented to me that he was suspected of belonging to the Reform Association, the enemies of the prevailing order of things, and was obliged to leave the country to save his head. I do not know, I do not know – possibly he may have been sent to watch.

They knew in Ping Yang that I was after the emerald Buddha. Who knows? They are an amazing people – an amazing people." He turned to me suddenly. "Did you hear any footsteps or other noises in the hallway during the night?"

I told him that I thought I had, but that I could not be sure, that my sleep had been troubled, but that I had only awakened a few minutes before I heard Ashton's cry. At this moment Gibson returned, with a scared look on his face. Li Min, he reported, had disappeared. No one had seen him since the night before. His room had apparently been occupied, but the Chinaman was nowhere to be found.

"The police must be notified at once," I urged.

"I will attend to it," said the Major. "First we must have some coffee."

He closed the door of the room carefully, after we left it, and, taking the key from the lock – it had evidently not been used by Mr. Ashton the night before – locked the door from the outside and ordered Gibson to remain in the hallway without and allow no one to approach.

We finished dressing and then had a hurried cup of coffee and some muffins in the breakfast-room. It was by now nearly eight o'clock, and I suggested to Major Temple that if he wished, I would drive into Exeter with one of his men, notify the police and at the same time get my luggage.

I assured him that I had no desire to inflict myself upon him further as a guest, but that the murder of Ashton and the necessity of my appearing as a witness at the forthcoming inquest made it imperative that I should remain upon the scene until the police were satisfied to have me depart. At my mention of the police the Major showed great uneasiness, as before.

"You need not say anything about the – the emerald," he said, slowly; "it would only create unnecessary talk and trouble."

"I'm afraid I must," I replied. "It is evidently the sole motive for the murder – it has disappeared, and unless the police are apprised of its part in the case, I fail to see how they can intelligently proceed in their attempts to unravel the mystery."

He shook his head slowly. "What a pity!" he remarked. "What a pity! If the stone is ever found now, the authorities will hold it as the property of the dead man or his relations, if indeed he has any. And it would have been the crowning glory of my collection." It was evident that Major Temple was far more concerned over the loss of the emerald than over the death of Robert Ashton. "But they will never find it – never!" he concluded with a cunning smile, and an assurance that startled me. I wondered for a moment whether Major Temple knew more about the mysterious death of Robert Ashton than appeared upon the surface, but, recollecting his excited search of the dead man's belongings, dismissed the idea as absurd. It recurred, however, from time to time during my short drive to Exeter, and the thought came to me that if Major Temple could in any way have caused or been cognizant of the death of Robert Ashton from without the room – without entering it – his first act after doing so would naturally have been to search for the emerald in the hope of securing it before the police had been summoned to take charge of the case. I regretted that I had not examined the floor of the attic above, to determine whether any carefully fitted trap door, or hidden chimney or other opening to the interior of the room below existed. I also felt that it was imperative that a careful examination of the walls, as well as of the ground outside beneath the three windows, should be made without delay. It was even possible, I conjectured, that a clever thief could have in some way cut out one of the window panes, making an opening through which the window might have been opened and subsequently rebolted, though just how the glass could then have been replaced was a problem I was not prepared to solve. There was no question, however, that Robert Ashton was dead, and that whoever had inflicted that deadly wound upon his head, and made away with the emerald Buddha, must have entered the room in some way. I was not yet prepared to base any hypotheses upon the supernatural. As I concluded these reflections, we entered the town by way of Sidwell street and I stopped at the Half Moon and secured my luggage. We then drove to the police headquarters and I explained the case hurriedly to the Chief Constable, omitting all details except those pertaining directly to Mr. Ashton's death. The Chief Constable sent one of his men into an inner room, who

returned in a moment with a small, keen-looking, ferret-faced man of some forty-eight or fifty years of age, with gray hair, sharp gray eyes and a smooth-shaven face. He introduced him to me as Sergeant McQuade, of Scotland Yard, who it seemed, happened to be in the city upon some counterfeiting case or other, and suggested that he accompany me back to the house. We had driven in Major Temple's high Irish cart, and, putting the man behind, I took the reins and with Sergeant McQuade beside me, started back in the direction of The Oaks. We had scarcely left the limits of the town behind us, when I noticed a figure in blue plodding slowly along the muddy road ahead of us, in the same direction as ourselves, and Jones, the groom upon the drag behind me said, in a low voice as we drew alongside, that it was Li Min, Major Temple's Chinese servant, whose sudden disappearance earlier in the morning had caused so much excitement. The Chinaman looked at us with a blandly innocent face and, nodding pleasantly, bade us good morning. I stopped the cart and ordered Jones to get down and accompany him back to the house, and on no account to let him out of his sight. As we drove on I explained all the circumstances of the case in detail to Sergeant McQuade, and informed him of my reason for placing Jones as guard over the Chinaman. No sooner had I done so than the Sergeant, in some excitement, requested me to return with him to Exeter at once. I did not inquire into his reasons for this step, but turned my horse's head once more toward the town, the Sergeant meanwhile plying me with questions, many of which I regretted my inability to answer to his satisfaction. They related principally to the exact time at which the murder had occurred, and how soon the disappearance of Li Min had been discovered. I decided at once that the detective had concluded that Li Min had committed the murder and had then hurried off to Exeter to place the emerald Buddha in the hands of some of his countrymen in the town, and was now proceeding leisurely back with some plausible story and a carefully arranged alibi to explain his absence from the house. I mentioned my conclusions to the Sergeant and saw from his reply that my assumption was correct. "I hope we are not too late," he exclaimed as he suggested my urging the horse to greater speed. "It is absolutely necessary that we prevent any Chinaman from leaving the town until this matter is cleared up. I'm afraid however, that they have a good start of us. There is a train to London at eight, and, if our man got away on that, it will be no easy matter to reach him."

"Of course you can telegraph ahead," I ventured.

"Of course." The detective smiled. "But the train is not an express, and there are a dozen stations within fifty miles of here where anyone could leave the train before I can get word along the line." He looked at his watch. "It is now ten minutes of nine. I am sorry that you did not notify the police at once." I made no reply, not wishing to prejudice the detective against Major Temple by explaining my desire to do this very thing and the latter's disinclination to have it done. We had reached police headquarters by this time, and the Sergeant disappeared within for perhaps five minutes, then quickly rejoined me and directed me to drive to the Queen Street Station. I waited here for him quite a long time and at last he came back with a face expressive of much dissatisfaction. "Two of them went up on the eight train," he growled. "One of them the clerk in the booking office remembers as keeping a laundry in Frog Street. The other he had never seen. They took tickets for London, third class." He swung himself into the seat beside me and sat in silence all the way to the house, evidently thinking deeply.

When we arrived at The Oaks, very soon after, we found the Major waiting impatiently for us in the hall. Jones and Li Min had arrived, and the Major had subjected the latter, he informed us, to a severe cross-examination, with the result that the Chinaman had denied all knowledge of Mr. Ashton's death and explained his absence from the house by saying that he had gone into town the night before to see his brother who had recently arrived from China, and, knowing the habit of the household to breakfast very late, had supposed his return at nine o'clock would pass unnoticed. I made Major Temple acquainted with Sergeant McQuade, and we proceeded at once to the room where lay all that now remained of the unfortunate Robert Ashton.

CHAPTER III

A QUEER DISCOVERY

We found Gibson guarding the door where we had left him. Miss Temple was nowhere to be seen. Major Temple took the key from his pocket, and, throwing open the door, allowed McQuade and myself to enter, he following us and closing the door behind him.

"Where did you get the key?" asked the detective as Major Temple joined us.

"It was in the door – on the inside."

"Had the door been locked?"

"No. It was bolted."

"And you broke it open when you entered?"

"Yes. Mr. Morgan and my man, Gibson, forced it together."

McQuade stepped to the door and examined the bolt carefully. The socket into which the bolt shot was an old-fashioned brass affair and had been fastened with two heavy screws to the door jamb. These screws had been torn from the wood by the united weight of Gibson and myself when we broke open the door. The socket, somewhat bent, with the screws still in place, was lying upon the floor some distance away. McQuade picked it up and examined it carefully, then threw it aside. He next proceeded to make a careful and minute examination of the bolt, but I judged from his expression that he discovered nothing of importance, for he turned impatiently from the door and, crossing the room, bent over the dead man and looked long and searchingly at the curious wound in his head. He then examined the fastenings of the windows minutely, and, raising one of the large windows in the south wall, looked out. Evidently nothing attracted his attention outside. He turned from the window, after closing it again, and started toward us, then stooped suddenly and picked up a small white object which lay near one of the legs of a table standing near the window. It was in plain view, and I wondered that I had not seen it during my previous examination of the room. McQuade handed the object, a small bit of lace, I thought, to Major Temple. "What do you make of that?" he asked.

Major Temple took the thing and spread it out, and I at once saw that it was a woman's handkerchief. My surprise at this was overbalanced by the look of horror which spread over the Major's face. He became deathly pale, and his hand shook violently as he looked at the bit of lace before him. I stepped to his side and saw, as did he, the initials, M. T., in one corner and noticed a strong and most peculiar odor of perfume, some curious Oriental scent that rose from the handkerchief. McQuade gazed at us, curiously intent. "Do you recognize it?" he inquired.

"Yes," said Major Temple, recovering himself with an effort. "It is my daughter's."

"How do you explain its presence here?" asked the detective.

"I do not attempt to do so, any more than I can undertake to explain any of the other strange events connected with this horrible affair," said the Major, pathetically. He seemed to me to have aged perceptibly since the evening before; he looked broken, old.

McQuade took the handkerchief and placed it carefully in his pocket, and continued his examination of the room. As he did so, I stood aside, a prey to strange thoughts. I felt ready to swear that the handkerchief had not been upon the floor during my previous examination of the room, yet how could its presence there now be explained, with the door locked, the key in Major Temple's pocket, and Gibson on guard in the hall. I thought of Muriel Temple, young, beautiful, innocent in every outward appearance, yet remembered with a qualm of misgiving her flashing eyes and determined manner as she spoke of Robert Ashton, her aversion to him, and her determination never to marry him under any circumstances. I felt that there was more beneath this strange tragedy than had yet appeared upon the surface, yet, believing thoroughly in the innocence of Miss Temple of any part in the affair, I mentally resolved to do all in my power to sift it to the bottom. I had no

illusions as to any special skill upon my part as an amateur detective, and I did not propose to come forth equipped with magnifying glass and tape measure and solve the problem in the usual half-hour which sufficed for the superhuman sleuth of fiction, but I felt that I did possess common sense and a reasonably acute brain, and I believed that, with sufficient time and effort, I could find out how and why Robert Ashton had come to his sudden and tragic end. My thoughts were interrupted by Sergeant McQuade, who, having brought his examination to a sudden close, announced to Major Temple that the police and the divisional surgeon would arrive shortly and that meanwhile he would have a look at the grounds beneath the windows of the room. I decided to accompany him, but, before doing so, I suggested to the Major that it might be well to show Sergeant McQuade the scrap of paper, containing the single Chinese character, which we had found upon the floor. Major Temple took it from his pocket and handed it to the detective without a word. I could see that the latter was puzzled. "What does it mean?" he inquired. "Do you know?" He turned to Major Temple.

"Only that it is a religious symbol used by the Buddhist priests in China," said the latter. "It is found in their temples, and is supposed to ward off evil influences."

"Is there any reason to suppose," inquired McQuade, "that its presence here indicates that the room has been entered by Li Min or any of his countrymen, in an attempt to recover the emerald which I understand Mr. Ashton had with him? Might it not equally well have belonged to the dead man himself – a copy, perhaps, made by him of the character – a curiosity in other words, which he might have desired to preserve?"

I followed his line of reasoning. I had told him nothing of the relations between Miss Temple and Ashton, but it was evident that the finding of her handkerchief in the murdered man's room had started him off on another tack.

"None whatever," the Major responded. "Yet since the jewel has disappeared, its recovery was in my opinion beyond question the reason for the murder, and but four persons knew of the presence of the jewel in this house."

"And they were – ?" The detective paused.

"My daughter, Mr. Morgan, Li Min, and myself."

"How did Li Min come to know of it?"

"He saw us examining it at dinner last night, while waiting on the table."

The detective pondered. "Was the stone of such value that its recovery would have been sought at so great a cost?" He glanced gravely at the silent figure upon the floor.

"Intrinsically it was worth perhaps a hundred thousand pounds – as a curio, or as an object of religious veneration among the Buddhist priests and their followers, it was priceless." Major Temple spoke with the fervor and enthusiasm of the collector.

Sergeant McQuade's eyes widened at this statement. "A hundred thousand pounds!" he exclaimed. "And you intended to buy it from Mr. Ashton?"

The Major hesitated. "Yes," he stammered, "yes, I did."

"At what price?" came the question, cold and incisive.

"I – I – Mr. Ashton secured the jewel for me as my agent."

"But surely you were to give him some commission, some reward for his trouble. What was that reward, Major Temple?"

"I had promised him the hand of my daughter in marriage."

"And was he satisfied with that settlement?" continued the detective, ruthlessly.

"We had a slight disagreement. He – he wanted a cash payment in addition."

"Which you refused?"

"The matter had not been settled."

"And how did your daughter regard the bargain?" asked McQuade, coldly.

Major Temple drew himself up stiffly. "I fail to see the purpose of these questions," he said with some heat. "My daughter was ready to meet my wishes, Sergeant McQuade. Mr. Ashton was a gentleman and was much attached to her. They met in China."

The detective said no more, but ordered the door locked as we passed out, and put the key in his pocket. I asked his permission to accompany him in his explorations outside, to which he readily consented, and, with a parting injunction to Major Temple to see that Li Min was not allowed to leave the house, we passed out into the gardens by a rear entrance.

The storm of the night before had completely passed away and the morning was crisp and clear, with a suggestion of frost in the air. The wind, which had not yet died down, had done much to dry up the rain, but the gravel walks were still somewhat soft and muddy. The rain however had stopped some time during the night, and as the tragedy had occurred later, and not long before daybreak, there was every reason to believe that traces of anyone approaching the house beneath the windows of Mr. Ashton's room would be clearly visible. It was equally certain that any traces of steps made before or during the rain must have been thereby completely obliterated. The soft graveled path encircled the rear of the house and turned to the front at the end of each wing. We walked along it and presently found ourselves beneath the two windows upon the south wall, which opened from the green room. There were no evidences of anyone having walked upon the pathway since the rain, nor was it apparent that anyone could have gained access to the windows high above without the aid of a ladder, which, had one been used, must inevitably have left its telltale marks behind. Sergeant McQuade looked down, then up, grunted to himself and passed on. There was nothing of interest here. At the end of the pathway we came to the termination of the wing and I saw the detective look about keenly. Here certainly the conditions were more favorable. A covered porch encircled the end of the building and extended along its front. There were three windows in the west face of the wing, one in the room which I had occupied, one in the end of the hallway and one in Mr. Ashton's room. The roof of the porch was directly beneath them. How easy, I thought at once, for anyone inside the house to have reached the porch roof from the window at the end of the hall, and to have gained, in half a dozen steps, the window of Mr. Ashton's room. I thought of the handkerchief, of the footsteps I fancied I had heard during the night, and shuddered. Here again the Sergeant first examined the graveled walk with elaborate care, but, as before, with no immediate results. Presently, however, he stepped toward the front of the house. There, in the soft gravel, were the prints of a woman's feet, leading from the corner of the path to the front entrance. I bent down and examined them with curious eyes, then recoiled with a cry of dismay. The footprints lead in one direction only, and that was toward the front door. In a flash I realized what theory McQuade would at once construct in his mind. The murderer, reaching the porch roof from the hallway, and obtaining access to the murdered man's room through the window, upon escaping from the room to the roof, would be unable to again enter the house from the roof because of my presence in the hall. What more natural than to descend from the porch to the ground by means of the heavy vines growing about the stone pillar supporting the porch roof at the corner, and, after walking quickly along the path a few steps, reach and re-enter the house through the front door, and appear almost at once among the others who had gathered in the upper hall as soon as the tragedy was known? I remembered at once that Miss Temple had appeared in a loose dressing gown. Would she, then, have had time to throw off her dress so quickly, wet and muddy as it must have been, and to change her shoes for slippers? Where were these shoes, I wondered, if this train of reasoning was correct, and would their condition prove that she had been out of the house during the night? As these thoughts crowded tumultuously through my brain, I saw McQuade examining the heavy mass of ivy which grew at the corner of the porch with a puzzled expression. Following his glance, I realized that the theory had at least a temporary setback. The vine was not broken or torn in any way as would inevitably have been the case had anyone used it as a means of descent from the roof. But I myself observed, though I felt sure that McQuade did not, a lightning rod which extended from the roof of the wing, down to the porch roof, across it, and

thence to the ground about midway along the west side of the porch, and, had anyone descended in this way, he would have walked along the border between the side of the porch and the path until he arrived at the corner. Here, however, he would have been obliged to step off the border and on to the gravel, owing to the heavy vine, mentioned above, growing at this point. His footsteps upon the grass would of course have left no mark. I did not call McQuade's attention to this at the time, but waited for his next move. It did not surprise me. He strode along the path at the front of the house to the steps leading to the large porch and porte-cochère at the front of the main building, tracing the muddy footprints up to the porch and upon its floor until they were no longer perceptible. He then entered the house and at once made for the upper hall in the west wing, I following him closely. His first move, as I expected, was to examine and open the window at the end of the hall, which, I was not surprised to find, was unfastened. His second was to step out upon the roof. No sooner had I joined him here than he crossed to the window of the green room and peered in. The interior of the room was clearly visible, but the window was tightly bolted within, and resisted all his efforts to open it. The Sergeant looked distinctly disappointed. He stepped to the corner of the roof, made a further examination of the vines, came back to the window and again tried to open it, then, with a low whistle, he pointed to a mark upon the white window sill which had at first escaped both his and my attention. It was the faint print of a hand – a bloody hand – small and delicate in structure, yet, mysterious as seemed to be all the clues in this weird case, it pointed, not outward from the room, as though made by someone leaving it, but inward, as by a person standing on the roof and resting his or her hand upon the window sill while attempting to open the window.

"What do you make of that, Sir?" inquired the detective.

"It looks as though it had been made by someone entering instead of leaving the room," I replied. "It could not have been made by anyone leaving the room. No one would get out of a window that way."

"Except a woman," said McQuade dryly. "A man would swing his legs over the sill and drop to the roof. It's barely three feet. But a woman would sit upon the sill, turn on her stomach, rest her hands on the sill with her fingers pointing toward the room, and slide gently down until her feet touched the roof beneath." He smiled with a quiet look of triumph.

"The whole thing is impossible," I retorted, with some heat. "There's no sense in talking about how anyone may or may not have got out of the room, when the bolted window proves that no one got either in or out at all."

"Perhaps you think that poor devil in there killed himself," said the detective, grimly. "Somebody must have got in. There is only one explanation possible. The window was bolted after the murder."

"By the murdered man, I suppose," I retorted ironically, nettled by his previous remark.

"Not necessarily," he replied coldly, "but possibly by someone who desired to shield the murderer." He looked at me squarely, but I was able to meet his gaze without any misgivings. "I was the first person who entered the room," I said, earnestly, "and I am prepared to make oath that the window was bolted when I entered."

"Was the room dark?" he inquired.

"It was," I answered, not perceiving the drift of his remarks. "One of the servants brought a candle."

"Did you examine the windows at once?"

"No."

"What did you do?"

"I knelt down and examined the body."

"What was Major Temple doing?"

"I – I did not notice. I think he began to examine the things in Mr. Ashton's portmanteau."

"Then, Mr. Morgan, if, occupied as you were in the most natural duty of determining whether or not you could render any aid to Mr. Ashton, you did not notice Major Temple's movements, I fail to see how you are in a position to swear to anything regarding the condition of the window at the time you entered the room."

"Your suggestion is impossible, Sergeant McQuade. Had Major Temple bolted the window, I should certainly have noticed it. I realize fully the train of reasoning you are following and I am convinced that you are wrong."

The Sergeant smiled slightly. "I do not follow any one train of reasoning," he retorted, "nor do I intend to neglect any one. I want the truth, and I intend to have it." He left the roof hurriedly, and, entering the house we descended to the library, where Major Temple sat awaiting the conclusion of our investigations.

"Well, Mr. Morgan," he inquired excitedly as we came in, "what have you discovered?"

I nodded toward the Sergeant. "Mr. McQuade can perhaps tell you," I replied.

"I can tell you more, Major Temple," said the detective, gravely, "if you will first let me have a few words with Miss Temple."

"With my daughter?" exclaimed the Major, evidently much surprised.

"Yes," answered the detective, with gravity.

"I'll go and get her," said the Major, rising excitedly.

"If you do not mind, Major Temple, I should much prefer to have you send one of the servants for her. I have a particular reason for desiring you to remain here."

I thought at first that Major Temple was going to resent this, but, although he flushed hotly, he evidently thought better of it, for he strode to a call bell and pressed it, then, facing the detective, exclaimed:

"I think you would do better to question Li Min."

"I do not intend to omit doing that, as well," replied McQuade, imperturbably.

We remained in uneasy silence until the maid, who had answered the bell, returned with Miss Temple, who, dismissing her at the door, faced us with a look upon her face of unfeigned surprise. She appeared pale and greatly agitated. I felt that she had not slept, and the dark circles under her eyes confirmed my belief. She looked about, saw our grave faces, then turned to her father. "You sent for me, Father?" she inquired, nervously.

"Sergeant McQuade here" – he indicated the detective whom Miss Temple recognized by a slight inclination of her head – "wishes to ask you a few questions."

"Me?" Her voice had in it a note of alarm which was not lost upon the man from Scotland Yard, who regarded her with closest scrutiny.

"I'll not be long, Miss. I think you may be able to clear up a few points that at present I cannot quite understand."

"I'm afraid I cannot help you much," she said, gravely.

"Possibly more than you think, Miss. In the first place I understand that your father had promised your hand in marriage to Mr. Ashton."

Miss Temple favored me with a quick and bitter glance of reproach. I knew that she felt that this information had come from me.

"Yes," she replied, "that is true."

"Did you desire to marry him?"

The girl looked at her father in evident uncertainty.

"I – I – Why should I answer such a question?" She turned to the detective with scornful eyes. "It is purely my own affair, and of no consequence – now."

"That is true, Miss," replied the Sergeant, with deeper gravity. "Still, I do not see that the truth can do anyone any harm."

Miss Temple flushed and hesitated a moment, then turned upon her questioner with a look of anger. "I did not wish to marry Mr. Ashton," she cried. "I would rather have died, than have married him."

McQuade had made her lose her temper, for which I inwardly hated him. His next question left her cold with fear.

"When did you last see Mr. Ashton alive?" he demanded.

The girl hesitated, turned suddenly pale, then threw back her head with a look of proud determination. "I refuse to answer that question," she said defiantly.

Her father had been regarding her with amazed surprise. "Muriel," he said, in a trembling voice – "what do you mean? You left Mr. Ashton and myself in the dining-room at a little after nine." She made no reply.

Sergeant McQuade slowly took from his pocket the handkerchief he had found in Mr. Ashton's room, and, handing it to her, said simply: "Is this yours, Miss?"

Miss Temple took it, mechanically.

"Yes," she said.

"It was found beside the murdered man's body," said the detective as he took the handkerchief from her and replaced it in his pocket.

For a moment, I thought Miss Temple was going to faint, and I instinctively moved toward her. She recovered herself at once. "What are you aiming at?" she exclaimed. "Is it possible that you suppose *I* had anything to do with Mr. Ashton's death?"

"I have not said so, Miss. This handkerchief was found in Mr. Ashton's room. It is possible that he had it himself, that he kept it, as a souvenir of some former meeting, although in that case it would hardly have retained the strong scent of perfume which I notice upon it. But you might have dropped it at table – he may have picked it up that very night. It is for these reasons, Miss, that I asked you when you last saw Mr. Ashton alive, and you refuse to answer me. I desire only the truth, Miss Temple. I have no desire to accuse anyone unjustly. Tell us, if you can, how the handkerchief came in Mr. Ashton's room."

At these words, delivered in an earnest and convincing manner, I saw Miss Temple's face change. She felt that the detective was right, as indeed, did I, and I waited anxiously for her next words.

"I last saw Mr. Ashton," she answered, with a faint blush, "last night about midnight."

Her answer was as much of a surprise to me as it evidently was to both Major Temple and the detective.

"Muriel," exclaimed the former, in horrified tones.

"I went to his room immediately after he retired," continued Miss Temple, with evident effort. "I wished to tell him something – something important – before the morning, when it might have been too late. I was afraid to stand in the hallway and talk to him through the open door for fear I should be seen. I went inside. I must have dropped the handkerchief at that time."

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