

THE KEY OF THE TEMPLE OF HEAVEN

Sax Rohmer

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THE KEY OF THE TEMPLE OF HEAVEN

I. THE KEEPER OF THE KEY

The note of a silver bell quivered musically through the scented air of the ante-room. Madame de Medici stirred slightly upon the divan with its many silken cushions, turning her head toward the closed door with the languorous, almost insolent, indifference which one perceives in the movements of a tigress. Below, in the lobby, where the pillars of Mokattam alabaster upheld the painted roof, the little yellow man from Pekin shivered slightly, although the air was warm for Limehouse, and always turned his mysterious eyes toward a corner of the great staircase which was visible from where he sat, coiled up, a lonely figure in the mushrabiyyeh chair. Madame blew a wreath of smoke from her lips, and, through half-closed eyes, watched it ascend, unbroken, toward the canopy of cloth-of-gold which masked the ceiling. A Madonna by Leonardo da Vinci faced her across the apartment, the painted figure seeming to watch the living one upon the divan. Madame smiled into the eyes of the Madonna. Surely even the great Leonardo must have failed to reproduce that smile the great Leonardo whose supreme art has captured the smile of Mona Lisa. Madame had the smile of Cleopatra, which, it is said, made Caesar mad, though in repose the beauty of Egypt's queen left him cold. A robe of Kashmiri silk, fine with a phantom fineness, draped her exquisite shape as the art of Cellini draped the classic figures which he wrought in gold and silver; it seemed incorporate with her beauty.

A second wreath of smoke curled upward to the canopy, and Madame watched this one also through the veil of her curved black lashes, as the Eastern woman watches the world through her veil. Those eyes were notable even in so lovely a setting, for they were of a hue rarely seen in human eyes, being like the eyes of a tigress; yet they could seem voluptuously soft, twin pools of liquid amber, in whose depths a man might lose his soul.

Again the silver bell sounded in the ante-room, and, below, the little yellow man shivered sympathetically. Again Madame stirred with that high disdain that so became her, who had the eyes of a tigress. Her carmine lips possessed the antique curve which we are told distinguished the lips of the Comtesse de Cagliostro; her cheeks had the freshness of flowers, and her hair the blackness of ebony, enhancing the miracle of her skin, which had the whiteness of ivory shivered sympathetically. Again Madame stirred with that high disdain that so became her, who had the eyes of a tigress. Her carmine lips possessed the antique curve which we are told distinguished the lips of the Comtesse de Cagliostro; her cheeks had the freshness of flowers, and her hair the blackness of ebony, enhancing the miracle of her skin, which had the whiteness of ivory—not of African ivory, but of that fossil ivory which has lain for untold ages beneath the snows of Siberia.

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She dropped the cigarette from her tapered fingers into a little silver bowl upon a table at her side, then lightly touched the bell which stood there also. Its soft note answered to the bell in the ante-room; a white-robed Chinese servant silently descended the great staircase, his soft red slippers sinking into the rich pile of the carpet; and the little yellow man from the great temple in Peking followed him back up the stairway and was ushered into the presence of Madame de Medici.

The servant closed the door silently and the little yellow man, fixing his eyes upon the beautiful woman before him, fell upon his knees and bowed his forehead to the carpet.

Madame's lovely lips curved again in the disdainful smile, and she extended one bare ivory arm toward the visitor who knelt as a suppliant at her feet.

"Rise, my friend!" she said, in purest Chinese, which fell from her lips with the music of a crystal spring. "How may I serve you?"

The yellow man rose and advanced a step nearer to the divan, but the strange beauty of Madame had spoken straight to his Eastern heart, had, awakened his soul to a new life. His glance travelled over the vision before him, from the little Persian slipper that peeped below the drapery of Kashmir silk to the small classic head with its crown of ebon locks; yet he dared not meet the glance of the amber eyes.

"Sit here beside me," directed Madame, and she slightly changed her position with that languorous and lithe grace suggestive of a creature of the jungle.

Breathing rapidly betwixt the importance of his mission and a new, intoxicating emotion which had come upon him at the moment of entering the perfumed room, the yellow man obeyed, but always with glance averted from the taunting face of Madame. A golden incense-burner stood upon the floor, over between the high, draped windows, and a faint pencil from its dying fires stole grayly upward. Upon the scented smoke the Buddhist priest fixed his eyes, and began, with a rapidity that grew as he proceeded, to pour out his tale. Seated beside him, one round arm resting upon the cushions so as almost to touch him, Madame listened, watching the averted yellow face, and always smiling—smiling.

The tale was done at last; the incense-burner was cold, and breathlessly the Buddhist clutched his knees with lean, clawish fingers and swayed to and fro, striving to conquer the emotions that whirled and fought within him. Selecting another cigarette from the box beside her, and lighting it deliberately, Madame de Medici spoke.

"My friend of old," she said, and of the language of China she made strange music, "you come to me from your home in the secret city, because you know that I can serve you. It is enough."

She touched the bell upon the table, and the white-robed servant reentered, and, bowing low, held open the door. The little yellow man, first kneeling upon the carpet before the divan as before an altar, hurried from the apartment. As the door was reclosed, and Madame found herself alone again, she laughed lightly, as Calypso laughed when Ulysses' ship appeared off the shores of her isle.

God fashions few such women. It is well.

II. THE TIGER LADY

"By heavens, Annesley!" whispered Rene Deacon, "what eyes that woman has!" His companion, following the direction of Deacon's glance, nodded rather grimly.

"The eyes of a Circe, or at times the eyes of a tigress."

"She is magnificent!" murmured Deacon rapturously. "I have never seen so beautiful a woman."

His glance followed the tall figure as it passed into a smaller salon on the left; nor was he alone in his regard. Fashionable society was well represented in the gallery—where a collection of pictures by a celebrated artist was being shown; and prior to the entrance of the lady in the strangely fashioned tiger-skin cloak, the somewhat extraordinary works of art had engaged the interest even of the most fickle, but, from the moment the tiger-lady made her appearance, even the most daring canvases were forgotten.

"She wears tiger-skin shoes!" whispered one.

"She is like a design for a poster!" laughed another.

"I have never seen anything so flashy in my life," was the acrid comment of a third.

"What a dazzlingly beautiful woman!" remarked another—this one a man. While:

"Who is she?" arose upon all sides.

Judging from the isolation of the barbaric figure, it would seem that society did not know the tiger-lady, but Deacon, seizing his companion by the arm and almost dragging him into the small salon which the lady had entered, turned in the doorway and looked into Annesley's eyes. Annesley palpably sought to evade the glance.

"You know everybody," whispered Deacon. "You must be acquainted with her."

A great number of people were now thronging into the room, not so much because of the pictures it contained, but rather out of curiosity respecting the beautiful unknown. Annesley tried to withdraw; his uneasiness grew momentarily greater.

"I scarcely know her well enough," he protested, "to present you. Moreover——"

"But she's smiling at you!" interrupted Deacon eagerly.

His handsome but rather weak face was flushed; he was, as an old clubman had recently said of him, "so very young." He lacked the restraint usual in cultured Englishmen, and had the frankly passionate manner which one associates with the South. His uncle, Colonel Deacon, a mordant wit, would say apologetically:

"Reggie" (Deacon's father) "married a Gascon woman. She was delightfully pretty. Poor Reggie!"

Certainly Rene was impetuous to an embarrassing degree, nor lightly to be thwarted. Boldly meeting the glance of the woman of the amber eyes, he pushed Annesley forward, not troubling to disguise his anxiety to be presented to the tiger-lady. She turned her head languidly, with that wild-animal grace of hers, and unsmiling now, regarded Annesley.

"So you forget me so soon, Mr. Annesley," she murmured, "or is it that you play the good shepherd?"

"My dear Madame," said Annesley, recovering with an effort his wonted sang-froid, "I was merely endeavouring to calm the rhapsodies of my friend, who seemed disposed to throw himself at your feet in knight-errant fashion."

"He is a very handsome boy," murmured Madame; and as the great eyes were turned upon Deacon the carmine lips curved again in the Cleopatrian smile.

She was indeed wonderful, for while she spoke as the woman of the world to the boy, there was nothing maternal in her patronage, and her eyes were twin flambeaux, luring—luring, and her sweet voice was a siren's song.

"May I beg leave to present my friend, Mr. Rene Deacon, Madame de Medici?" said Annesley; and as the two exchanged glances—the boy's a glance of undisguised passionate admiration, the woman's a glance unfathomable—he slightly shrugged his shoulders and stood aside.

There were others in the salon, who, perceiving that the unknown beauty was acquainted with Annesley, began to move from canvas to canvas toward that end of the room where the trio stood. But Madame did not appear anxious to make new acquaintances.

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"I have seen quite enough of this very entertaining exhibition," she said languidly, toying with a great unset emerald which swung by a thin gold chain about her neck. "Might I entreat you to take pity upon a very lonely woman and return with me to tea?"

Annesley seemed on the point of refusing, when:

"I have acquired a reputed Leonardo," continued Madame, "and I wish you to see it."

There was something so like a command in the words that Deacon stared at his companion in frank surprise. The latter avoided his glance, and:

"Come!" said Madame de Medici.

As of old the great Catherine of her name might have withdrawn with her suite, so now the lady of the tiger skins withdrew from the gallery, the two men following obediently, and one of them at least a happy courtier.

III. TWIN POOLS OF AMBER

THE white-robed Chinese servant entered and placed fresh perfume upon the burning charcoal of the silver incense-burner. As the scented smoke began to rise he withdrew, and a second servant entered, who facially, in dress, in figure and bearing, was a duplicate of the first. This one carried a large tray upon which was set an exquisite porcelain tea-service. He placed the tray upon a low table beside the divan, and in turn withdrew.

Deacon, seated in a great ebony chair, smoked rapidly and nervously—looking about the strangely appointed room with its huge picture of the Madonna, its jade Buddha surmounting a gilded Burmese cabinet, its Persian canopy and Egyptian divan, at the thousand and one costly curiosities which it displayed, at this mingling of East and West, of Christianity and paganism, with a growing wonder.

To one of his blood there was delight, intoxication, in that room; but something of apprehension, too, now grew up within him.

Madame de Medici entered. The garish motor-coat was discarded now, and her supple figure was seen to best advantage in one of those dark silken gowns which she affected, and which had a seeming of the ultra-fashionable because they defied fashion. She held in her hand an orchid, its structure that of an odontoglossum, but of a delicate green colour heavily splashed with scarlet—a weird and unnatural-looking bloom.

Just within the doorway she paused, as Deacon leaped up, and looked at him through the veil of the curved lashes.

"For you," she said, twirling the blossom between her fingers and gliding toward him with her tigerish step.

He spoke no word, but, face flushed, sought to look into her eyes as she pinned the orchid in the button-hole of his coat. Her hands were flawless in shape and colouring, being beautiful as the sculptured hands preserved in the works of Phidias.

The slight draught occasioned by the opening of the door caused the smoke from the incense-burner to be wafted toward the centre of the room. Like a blue-gray phantom it coiled about the two standing there upon a red and gold Bedouin rug, and the heavy perfume, or the close proximity of this singularly lovely woman, wrought upon the high-strung sensibilities of Deacon to such an extent that he was conscious of a growing faintness.

"Ah! You are not well!" exclaimed Madame with deep concern. "It is the perfume which that foolish Ah Li has lighted. He forgets that we are in England."

"Not at all," protested Deacon faintly, and conscious that he was making a fool of himself. "I think I have perhaps been overdoing it rather of late. Forgive me if I sit down."

He sank on the cushioned divan, his heart beating furiously, while Madame touched the little bell, whereupon one of the servants entered.

She spoke in Chinese, pointing to the incense-burner.

Ah Li bowed and removed the censer. As the door softly reclosed:

"You are better?" she whispered, sweetly solicitous, and, seating herself beside Deacon, she laid her hand lightly upon his arm.

"Quite," he replied hoarsely; "please do not worry about me. I am wondering what has become of Annesley."

"Ah, the poor man!" exclaimed Madame, with a silver laugh, and began to busy herself with the teacups. "He remembered, as he was looking at my new Leonardo, an appointment which he had quite forgotten."

"I can understand his forgetting anything under the circumstances."

Madame de Medici raised a tiny cup and bent slightly toward him. He felt that he was losing control of himself, and, averting his eyes, he stooped and smelled the orchid in his buttonhole. Then, accepting the cup, he was about to utter some light commonplace when the faintness returned overwhelmingly, and, hurriedly replacing the cup upon the tray, he fell back among the cushions. The stifling perfume of the place seemed to be choking him.

"Ah, poor boy! You are really not at all well. How sorry I am!"

The sweet tones reached him as from a great distance; but as one dying in the desert turns his face toward the

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distant oasis, Deacon turned weakly to the speaker. She placed one fair arm behind his head, pillowing him, and with a peacock fan which had lain amid the cushions fanned his face. The strange scene became wholly unreal to him; he thought himself some dying barbaric chief.

"Rest there," murmured the sweet voice.

The great eyes, unveiled now by the black lashes, were two twin lakes of fairest amber. They seemed to merge together, so that he stood upon the brink of an unfathomable amber pool—which swallowed him up—which swallowed him up.

He awoke to an instantaneous consciousness of the fact that he had been guilty of inexcusably bad form. He could not account for his faintness, and reclining there amid the silken cushions, with Madame de Medici watching him anxiously, he felt a hot flush stealing over his face.

"What is the matter with me!" he exclaimed, and sprang to his feet. "I feel quite well now."

She watched him, smiling, but did not speak. He was a "very young man" again, and badly embarrassed. He glanced at his wrist-watch.

"Gracious heavens!" he cried, and noted that the tea-tray had been removed, "there must be something radically wrong with my health. It is nearly seven o'clock!"

The note of the silver bell sounded in the ante-room.

"Can you forgive me?" he said.

But Madame, rising to her feet, leaned lightly upon his shoulder, toying with the petals of the orchid in his buttonhole.

"I think it was the perfume which that foolish Ah Li lighted," she whispered, looking intently into his eyes, "and it is you who have to forgive me. But you will, I know!" The silver bell rang again. "When you have come to see me again—many, many times, you will grow to love it—because I love it."

She touched the bell upon the table, and Ah Li entered silently. When Madame de Medici held out her hand to him Deacon raised the white fingers to his lips and kissed them rapturously; then he turned, the Gascon within him uppermost again, and ran from the room.

A purple curtain was drawn across the lobby, screening the caller newly arrived from the one so hurriedly departing.

IV. THE LIVING BUDDHA

It was past midnight when Colonel Deacon returned to the house. Rene was waiting for him, pacing up and down the big library. Their relationship was curious, as subsisting between ward and guardian, for these two, despite the disparity of their ages, had few secrets from one another. Rene burned to pour out his story of the wonderful Madame de Medici, of the secret house in Chinatown with its deceptively mean exterior and its gorgeous interior, to the shrewd and worldly elder man. That was his way. But Fate had an oddly bitter moment in store for him.

"Hallo, boy!" cried the Colonel, looking into the library; "glad you're home. I might not see you in the morning, and I want to tell you about—er—a lady who will be coming here in the afternoon."

The words died upon Rene's lips unspoken, and he stared blankly at the Colonel.

"I thought I knew all there was to know about pictures, antiques, and all that sort of lumber," continued Colonel Deacon in his rapid and off-hand manner. "Thought there weren't many men in London could teach me anything; certainly never suspected a woman could. But I've met one, boy! Gad! What a splendid creature! You know there isn't much in the world I haven't seen—north, south, east and west. I know all the advertised beauties of Europe and Asia—stage, opera, and ballet, and all the rest of them. But this one—Gad!"

He dropped into an arm-chair, clapping both his hands upon his knees. Rene stood at the farther end of the library, in the shadow, watching him.

"She's coming here to-morrow, boy—coming here. Gad! you dog! You'll fall in love with her the moment you see her—sure to, sure to! I did, and I'm three times your age!"

"Who is this lady, sir?" asked Rene, very quietly.

"God knows, boy! Everybody's mad to meet her, but nobody knows who she is. But wait till you see her. Lady Dascot seems to be acquainted with her, but you will see when they come to-morrow— see for yourself. Gad, boy! . . . what did you say?"

"I did not speak."

"Thought you did. Have a whisky-and-soda?"

"No, thank you, sir—good night."

"Good night, boy!" cried the Colonel. "Good night. Don't forget to be in to-morrow afternoon or you'll miss meeting the loveliest woman in London, and the most brilliant."

"What is her name?"

"Eh? She calls herself Madame de Medici. She's a mystery, but what a splendid creature!"

Rene Deacon walked slowly upstairs, entered his bedroom, and for fully an hour sat in the darkness, thinking—thinking.

"Am I going mad?" he murmured. "Or is this witch driving all London mad?"

He strove to recover something of the glamour which had mastered him when in the presence of Madame de Medici, but failed. Yet he knew that, once near her again, it would all return. His reflections were bitter, and when at last wearily he undressed and went to bed it was to toss restlessly far into the small hours ere sleep came to soothe his troubled mind.

But his sleep was disturbed: a series of dreadfully realistic dreams danced through his brain. First he seemed to be standing upon a high mountain peak with eternal snows stretched all about him. He looked down, past the snow line, past the fir woods, into the depths of a lovely lake, far down in the valley below. It was a lake of liquid amber, and as he looked it seemed to become two lakes, and they were like two great eyes looking up at him and summoning him to leap. He thought that he leaped, a prodigious leap, far out into space; then fell—fell—fell. When he splashed into the amber deeps they became churned up in a milky foam, and this closed about him with a strangle grip. But it was no longer foam, but the clinging arms of Madame de Medici! . . .

Then he stood upon a fragile bridge of bamboo spanning a raging torrent. Right and left of the torrent below were jungles in which moved tigerish shapes. Upon the farther side of the bridge Madame de Medici, clad in a single garment of flame-coloured silk, beckoned to him. He sought to cross the bridge, but it collapsed, and he

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fell near the edge of the torrent. Below were the raging waters, and ever nearing him the tigerish shapes, which now Madame was calling to as to a pack of hounds. They were about to devour him, when——

He was crouching upon a ledge, high above a street which seemed to be vaguely familiar. He could not see very well, because of a silk mask tied upon his face, and the eyeholes of which were badly cut. From the ledge he stepped to another, perilously. He gained it, and crouching there, where there was scarce foothold for a cat, he managed fully to raise a window which already was raised some six inches. Then softly and silently—for he was bare-footed—he entered the room.

Someone slept in a bed facing the window by which he had entered, and upon a table at the side of the sleeper lay a purse, a bunch of keys, an electric torch, and a Service revolver. Gliding to the table Rene took the keys and the electric torch, unlocked the door of the room, and crept down a thickly carpeted stair to a room below. The door of this also he opened with one of the keys in the bunch, and by the light of the torch found his way through a quantity of antique furniture and piled up curiosities to a safe set in the farther wall.

He seemed, in his dream, to be familiar with the lock combination, and, selecting the correct key from the bunch, he soon had the safe open. The shelves within were laden principally with antique jewellery, statuettes, medals, scarabs; and a number of little leather-covered boxes were there also. One of these he abstracted, relocked the safe, and stepped out of the room, locking the door behind him. Up the stairs he mounted to the bedroom wherein he had left the sleeper. Having entered, he locked the door from within, placed the keys and the torch upon the table, and crept out again upon the dizzy ledge.

Poised there, high above the thoroughfare below, a great nausea attacked him. Glancing to the right, in the direction of the window through which he had come, he perceived Madame de Medici leaning out and beckoning to him. Her arm gleamed whitely in the faint light. A new courage came to him. He succeeded, crouched there upon the narrow ledge, in relowering the window, and leaving it in the state in which he had found it, he stood up and essayed that sickly stride to the adjoining ledge. He accomplished it, knelt, and crept back into the room from which he had started. . . .

The head of an ivory image of Buddha loomed up out of the utter darkness, growing and growing until it seemed like a great mountain. He could not believe that there was so much ivory in the world, and he felt it with his fingers, wonderingly. As he did so it began to shrink, and shrink, and shrink, and shrink, until it was no larger than a seated human figure. Then beneath his trembling hands it became animate; it moved, extended ivory arms, and wrapped them about his neck. Its lips became carmine—perfumed; they bent to him. . . and he was looking into the bewitching face of Madame de Medici!

He awoke, gasping for air and bathed in cold perspiration. The dawn was just breaking over London and stealing grayly from object to object in his bedroom.

V. THE IVORY GOD

The great car, with its fittings of gold and ivory, drew up at the door of Colonel Deacon's house. The interior was ablaze with tiger lilies, and out from their midst stepped the fairest of them all—Madame de Medici, and swept queenly up the steps upon the arm of the cavalierly soldier.

All connoisseurs esteemed it a privilege to view the Deacon collection, and this afternoon there was a goodly gathering. Chairs and little white tables were dotted about the lawn in shady spots, and the majority of the company were already assembled; but when, in a wonderful golden robe, Madame de Medici glided across the lawn, the babel ceased abruptly as if by magic. She pulled off one glove and began twirling a great emerald between her slim fingers. It was suspended from a thin gold chain. Presently, descrying Annesley seated at a table with Lady Dascot, she raised the jewel languidly and peered through it at the two.

"Why!" exclaimed Rene Deacon, who stood close beside her, "that was a trick of Nero's!"

Madame laughed musically.

"One might take a worse model," she said softly; "at least he enjoyed life."

Colonel Deacon, who listened to her every word as to the utterance of a Cumaeen oracle, laughed with extraordinary approbation.

There was scarce a woman present who regarded Madame with a friendly eye, nor a man who did not aspire to become her devoted slave. She brought an atmosphere of unreality with her, dominating old and young alike by virtue of her splendid pagan beauty. The lawn, with its very modern appointments, became as some garden of the Golden House, a pleasure ground of an emperor.

But later, when the company entered the house, and Colonel Deacon sought to monopolize the society of Madame, an unhealthy spirit of jealousy arose between Rene and his guardian. It was strange, grotesque, horrible almost. Annesley watched from afar, and there was something very like anger in his glance.

"And this," said the Colonel presently, taking up an exquisitely carved ivory Buddha, "has a strange history. In some way a legend has grown up around it—it is of very great age—to the effect that it must always cause its owner to lose his most cherished possession."

"I wonder," said the silvern voice, "that you, who possess so many beautiful things, should consent to have so ill-omened a curiosity in your house."

"I do not fear the evil charm of this little ivory image," said Colonel Deacon, "although its history goes far to bear out the truth of the legend. Its last possessor lost his most cherished possession a month after the Buddha came into his hands. He fell down his own stairs—and lost his life!"

Madame de Medici languidly surveyed the figure through the upraised emerald.

"Really!" she murmured. "And the one from whom he procured it?"

"A Hindu usurer of Simla," replied the Colonel. "His daughter stole it from her father together with many other things, and took them to her lover, with whom she fled!"

Madame de Medici seemed to be slightly interested.

"I should love to possess so weird a thing," she said softly.

"It is yours!" exclaimed the Colonel, and placed it in her hands.

"Oh, but really," she protested.

"But really I insist—in order that you may not forget your first visit to my house!"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"How very kind you are, Colonel Deacon," she said, "to a rival collector!"

"Now that the menace is removed," said Colonel Deacon with laboured humour, "I will show you my most treasured possession."

"So! I am greatly interested."

"Not even this rascal Rene," said the Colonel, stopping before a safe set in the wall, "has seen what I am about to show you!"

Rene started slightly and watched with intense interest the unlocking of the safe.

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"If I am not superstitious about the ivory Buddha," continued the Colonel, "I must plead guilty in the case of the Key of the Temple of Heaven!"

"The Key of the Temple of Heaven!" murmured a lady standing immediately behind Madame de Medici. "And what is the Key of the Temple of Heaven?"

The Colonel, having unlocked the safe, straightened himself, and while everyone was waiting to see what he had to show, began to speak again pompously:

"The Temple of Heaven stands in the outer or Chinese City of Peking, and is fabulously wealthy. No European, I can swear, had ever entered its secret chambers until last year. One of its most famous treasures was this Key. It was used only to open the special entrance reserved for the Emperor when he came to worship after his succession to the throne—that was, of course, before China became a Republic. The Key is studded almost all over with precious stones. Last year a certain naval man—I'll not mention his name—discovered the secret of its hiding-place. How he came by that knowledge does not matter at present. One very dark night he crept up to the temple. He found the Keeper of the Key—a Buddhist priest—to be sleeping, and he succeeded, therefore, in gaining access and becoming possessed of the Key."

A chorus of excited exclamations greeted this dramatic point of the story.

"The object of this outrage," continued the Colonel, "for an outrage I cannot deny it to have been, was not a romantic one. The poor chap wanted money, and he thought he could sell the Key to one of the native jewellers. But he was mistaken. He got back safely, and secretly offered it in various directions. No one would touch the thing; moreover, although of great value, the stones were very far from flawless, and not really worth the risks which he had run to secure them. Don't misunderstand me; the Key would fetch a big sum, but not a fortune."

"Yes?" said Madame de Medici, smiling, for the Colonel paused.

"He packed it up and addressed it to me, together with a letter. The price that he asked was quite a moderate one, and when the Key arrived in England I dispatched a check immediately. It never reached him."

"Why?" cried many whom this strange story had profoundly interested.

"He was found dead at the back of the native cantonments, with a knife in his heart!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Lady Dascot. "How positively ghastly! I don't think I want to see the dreadful thing!"

"Really!" murmured Madame de Medici, turning languidly to the speaker. "I do."

The Colonel stooped and reached into the safe. Then he began to take out object after object, box after box. Finally, he straightened himself again, and all saw that his face was oddly blanched.

"It's gone!" he whispered hoarsely. "The Key of the Temple of Heaven has been stolen!"

VI. MADAME SMILES

Rene entered his bedroom, locked the door, and seated himself on the bed; then he lowered his head into his hands and clutched at his hair distractedly. Since, on his uncle's own showing, no one knew that the Key of the Temple of Heaven had been in the safe, since, excepting himself (Rene) and the Colonel, no one else knew the lock combination, how the Key had been stolen was a mystery which defied conjecture. No one but the Colonel had approached within several yards of the safe at the time it was opened; so that clearly the theft had been committed prior to that time.

Now Rene sought to recall the details of a strange dream which he had dreamed immediately before awakening on the previous night; but he sought in vain. His memory could supply only blurred images. There had been a safe in his dream, and he—was it he or another?—had unlocked it. Also there had been an enormous ivory Buddha. . . . Yet, stay! it had not been enormous; it had been. . .

He groaned at his own impotency to recall the circumstances of that mysterious, perhaps prophetic dream; then in despair he gave it up, and stooping to a little secretaire, unlocked it with the idea of sending a note round to Annesley's chambers. As he did so he uttered a loud cry.

Lying in one of the pigeon-holes was a long piece of black silk, apparently torn from the lining of an opera hat. In it two holes were cut as if it were intended to be used as a mask. Beside it lay a little leather-covered box. He snatched it out and opened it. It was empty!

"Am I going mad?" he groaned. "Or——"

"You are wanted on the 'phone, sir."

It was the butler who had interrupted him. Rene descended to the telephone, dazedly, but, recognizing the voice of Annesley, roused himself.

"I'm leaving town to-night, Deacon," said Annesley, "for—well, many reasons. But before I go I must give you a warning, though I rely on you never to mention my name in the matter. Avoid the woman who calls herself Madame de Medici; she'll break you. She's an adventuress, and has a dangerous acquaintance with Eastern cults, and. . . I can't explain properly. . . ."

"Annesley! the Key!"

"It's the theft of the Key that has prompted me to speak, Deacon. Madame has some sort of power—hypnotic power. She employed it on me once, to my cost! Paul Harley, of Chancery Lane, can tell you more about her. The house she's living in temporarily used to belong to a notorious Eurasian, Zani Chada. To make a clean breast of it I daren't thwart her openly; but I felt it up to me to tell you that she possesses the secret of post-hypnotic suggestion. I may be wrong, but I think you stole that Key!"

"I!"

"She hypnotized you at some time, and, by means of this uncanny power of hers, ordered you to steal the Key of the Temple of Heaven in such and such a fashion at a certain hour in the night. . . ."

"I had a strange seizure while I was at her house. . . ."

"Exactly! During that time you were receiving your hypnotic orders. You would remember nothing of them until the time to execute them—which would probably be during sleep. In a state of artificial somnambulism, and under the direction of Madame's will, you became a burglar!"

As Madame de Medici's car drove off from the house of Colonel Deacon, and Madame seated herself in the cushioned corner, up from amid the furs upon the floor, where, dog-like, he had lain concealed, rose the little yellow man from the Temple of Heaven. He extended eager hands toward her, kneeling there, and spoke:

"Quick! quick!" he breathed. "You have it? The Key of the Temple."

Madame held in her hand an ivory Buddha. Inverting it she unscrewed the pedestal, and out from the hollow inside the image dropped a gleaming Key.

"Ah!" breathed the yellow man, and would have clutched it; but Madame disdainfully raised her right hand which held the treasure, and with her left hand thrust down the clutching yellow fingers.

She dropped the Key between her white skin and the bodice of her gown, tossing the ivory figure

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contemptuously amid the fur.

"Ah!" repeated the yellow man in a different tone, and his eyes gleamed with the flame of fanaticism. He slowly uprose, a sinister figure, and with distended fingers prepared to seize Madame by the throat. His eyes were bloodshot, his nostrils were dilated, and his teeth were exposed like the fangs of a wolf.

But she pulled off her glove and stretched out her bare white hand to him as a queen to a subject; she raised the long curved lashes, and the great amber eyes looked into the angry bloodshot eyes.

The little yellow man began to breathe more and more rapidly; soon he was panting like one in a fight to the death who is all but conquered. At last he dropped on his knees amid the fur. . . and the curling lashes were lowered again over the blazing amber eyes that had conquered.

Madame de Medici lowered her beautiful white hand, and the little yellow man seized it in both his own and showered rapturous kisses upon it.

Madame smiled slightly.

"Poor little yellow man!" she murmured in sibilant Chinese, "you shall never return to the Temple of Heaven!"