

The Ivory God

by Joseph Smith Fletcher, 1863-1935

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At six o'clock Thurston put down his pen, pushed his chair back from the table at which he had been writing, and rose to his feet with a series of gestures indicative of mental and physical fatigue. He glanced at the few sheets of manuscript which represented the result of a long day's labour, and he frowned, as if in anger or distaste.

He had written, or tried to write, from ten o'clock until one, and again from two until six; and his entire product after seven hours' work was comparatively infinitesimal. He had felt no enthusiasm; he had been unable to concentrate his thoughts; the whole thing had been distasteful to him. As he glanced around him he asked himself for the thousandth time whether the game was worth the candle.

More from force of habit than from genuine desire to do it, Thurston proceeded to make some sort of toilet for the evening. He shaved and washed carefully; he put on a clean linen shirt and a dark lounge suit; he was unduly particular about

the fold of his tie; in several small ways he showed that he had a gentlemanlike love of cleanliness and orderly habits.

He did everything very slowly. It would have been evident to anyone who might have had an opportunity of watching him that he had no engagement to keep. In point of fact, he had few friends with whom he could have kept any engagement. He was, as he now never cared to remind himself, one of the very loneliest men living. For a while he had reminded himself of this pertinent truth somewhat often; then he wearied of the thought, and put it from him. The fact of the loneliness, however, remained.

Thurston lived in two rooms at the top of a house which stood in a quiet street near the British Museum—a street of an aspect so grey and pathetic that you wondered at first sight of it whether laughter or children's voices were ever heard there. The two rooms opened one into the other by means of a folding door. Thurston had furnished them himself when he first came to town.

One room contained a camp bedstead, a chest of drawers, a dressing-table, a wash-stand, a bath, and a hard-bottomed chair. The floor was stained and polished, and destitute of carpet; but there was a thick bearskin rug at the bedside. It was absolutely destitute of luxuries or of pictures, but it possessed a first-rate reading-lamp, attached to the wall at the head of the bed.

The other room knew the luxury of books; its walls were covered with them to half their height. The books related chiefly to philosophy, theology, history, metaphysics. There was little that was light, but a table was strewn with the reviews of several countries, all purchased second-hand and when a month old.

A desk, littered with papers, stood in the window; an arm-chair was placed near the hearth; two other chairs of an easyish sort occurred, sometimes here, sometimes there; a small table, big enough for one person to eat at, was in the middle of the room, which, unlike the sleeping-chamber, was softly carpeted and luxuriant in thick rugs.

It also possessed some luxuries in the way of pictures; but these, to the English eye of ordinary knowledge, were of a strange taste, being Japanese. One skilled in such matters might have told you that they were all by the most celebrated Japanese artists. Even then you would have felt some uneasiness at the prospect of being continually shut up in a room whose decorations were so purely Eastern.

In these two rooms Thurston had spent five years, every day corresponding to another day. He prepared his own breakfast when he wished for it; he read or wrote when he desired to do so; he lunched and dined out; he spent his evenings reading or thinking or dreaming. It was a strange life altogether; but it was his. But, then, the few people who knew Thurston said he was a strange man, a man who spoke little, laughed never, smiled seldom, and who was quite young, in spite of everything. In point of fact, he was twenty-seven years old.

At twenty-two he had left Oxford with some reputation as a scholar and a mystic, and had come to town with the set purpose of following a literary career. Whether he had any ambitions at that time is a debatable question. It is quite certain that at twenty-seven none of them had been carried out. He had a little money of his own—sufficient to pay his rent, his housekeeping expenses, his tailor's bills and so on; and there was, therefore, no need to keep his nose to the grindstone.

But he had made no name. He sometimes exhibited a rather heavy, rather pedantic, rather wearisome sort of article to one or other of the leading reviews—the sort of article which is spoken of with great respect by the critics, and read by only a few experts—but to the general public he was as unknown as an unborn babe.

The people who had any dealings with him said that he was unsociable; he had no conversation. If by any chance he was induced to lunch or dine with you, his sole notion seemed to be to get away as quickly as possible. It was evident that he was one of those men who like to be alone.

There were times, however, when Thurston felt his loneliness; and one of them was hanging heavily about him on this particular evening. He had found it difficult to write during the day; and more than once he had caught himself wishing that a friend would come in to break the solitude. But he would have been hard put to it to say where such a friend was to be found.

He never encouraged anyone to visit him at his rooms. One or two men—old college acquaintances—had tracked him down and called upon him, but quickly discovered that they were not wanted. It was not that Thurston wished to be rude; it was simply that a certain shyness and loneliness ran in his blood and his temperament, and made him incapable of entertaining his fellow-creatures. He was essentially an anchorite; and yet there were times when his flesh called for something which it would have found it hard to define in words.

As Thurston drew on his overcoat a light tap came at his door, and he went across and opened it, not without some feeling of surprise that anyone should be there. In the faint light at the top of the landing he saw a man whom he did not recognise—a tall, sloping-shouldered man, whose back was somewhat bowed, whose knees bent in—a man who made a succession of angles in his clothes. Thurston could see that he was shabbily attired, that his hair was long, greasy, and unclean; he had a vague notion that an unwashed atmosphere hung heavily all round and about his visitor. He held the door half open, staring at the man; the man blinked at him.

"Mr. Thurston?" he said inquiringly.

"Well?" replied Thurston.

The man sighed heavily.

"I was sent to you, sir, by Mr. Evanson. I have something to show you which he thought you would like to see. He thought you might not be indisposed to buy it from me. May I come in and show it to you, Mr. Thurston?" said the man, indicating a small parcel which he carried in the crook of one arm.

"I am not disposed to buy anything," answered Thurston, keeping his place.

"But this, sir, is something very uncommon. It is seldom that any collector has such a chance of securing such a valuable curiosity," urged the visitor. "At any rate it will do you no harm to look at it, Mr. Thurston."

"Well," said Thurston, impassively and hesitatingly, "you may bring it in, then, but I really don't want to see it, and I shan't buy it, whatever it may be."

He turned away, and made preparations for lighting a lamp. The man with the parcel lingered at the threshold until the lamp had been placed on the centre table, and the apartment was bathed in a clear, powerful light.

"Now, then," said Thurston, still impassive as ever, "come forward, and let me see what it is! Mr. Evanson has no business to send you to me. I'm merely an acquaintance of his, and I'm certainly not a collector. What is it you have to show me?"

The untidy and unwashed person took small notice of this impatient outburst. He advanced to the table, placed his parcel near the lamp, and proceeded to divest it of its wrappings. He kept himself between Thurston and the parcel while this was going on, and he did not speak until he suddenly turned round, and said, with a note of pride and triumph in his voice:

"There, Mr. Thurston, look at that!"

Thurston, during the unfolding of the parcel, had fallen into a sort of day-dream. He came out of it with a start, and looked at the object which his visitor had placed on the table in the full light of the lamp. A sudden gleam came into his rather dull eyes; a sudden exclamation burst from his lips.

"Ah!" he said.

The man smiled, and rubbed his hands. He chuckled.

"I thought that would move you, Mr. Thurston!" he said. "It's a beauty, isn't it?"

Thurston made no answer to this. He advanced to the table and stood at its edge, contemplating the thing which his visitor had been so anxious to exhibit. He found himself staring at an ivory statue of the god Ganesha, and wondering at the exquisite beauty of the workmanship, the subtle tints of the ivory, the atmosphere of the mystic East, which its mere dumb presence suggested and conveyed.

It was not a thing of any great size—its height was some ten inches, its breadth six; a cigar-box would have held it. And to Thurston, steeped to the lips in the odour and colour of the Orient, it represented a world of art and of dreams. He stared at the god; the god stared at him out of a pair of amethyst eyes, cunningly set into the creamy white of the ivory. A strange intoxication stole into Thurston's soul. He heard himself presently talking in set fashion, calmly, methodically, as though he were in a shop, buying something. He heard his visitor's replies.

"You want to sell this?"

"Yes, sir, I want to sell it. I'll tell you how I came by it, too, Mr. Thurston. All's above-board; and Mr. Evanson, he knows me well, and knew me before I fell on hard times. It was this way, sir: My father was in the army at the time of the Mutiny, and he saw a good deal of fighting out in India—Delhi and Lucknow and elsewhere—and he brought home a good many curiosities, and that image amongst them. It's the image of some Hindu god, so I'm told, and, of course, anybody can see that the workmanship is excellent. My father gave it to me on his deathbed, and charged me never to part with it, because there's some legend about its bringing luck with it. But it's brought no luck to me," continued Thurston's visitor, with a dismal laugh. "I've been down on my luck for some time. However, it will bring luck if you're agreeable to buy it, sir. Perhaps that's where the luck comes in."

"What price do you set upon it?" asked Thurston mechanically.

"Well, sir, I, of course, don't know anything about these matters. I was recommended to take the carving to Mr. Evanson," said the man, "and he advised me to see you. I should be quite satisfied to take what he said he thought it was worth."

"What was that?" said Thurston.

"Twenty pounds, sir."

The man uttered these words with some anxiety, and his eyes fastened themselves on Thurston's face, as if to watch the effect. Thurston, however, was still fascinated by the ivory god, and neither eyes nor lips betrayed anything. He remained silent for some moments. At last he started, as from a reverie.

"I am quite prepared to accept Mr. Evanson's estimate of the carving's value," he said. "I will give you twenty pounds for it."

The man bowed his untidy head, and sighed deeply. It was evident that the prospect of immediate possession of twenty pounds was very grateful to him.

"Thank you, sir," he said.

Thurston went over to his desk, unlocked a drawer, and produced a cashbox, which, on examination, proved to contain twenty-two pound notes and gold. He counted out twenty to his visitor, put two pounds in his own pocket, restored the depleted cashbox to its drawer and locked it up again, and then, asking the vendor his name and address, wrote out a formal receipt. Five minutes later the unkempt person was descending the stairs, happy in the possession of a small fortune, and Thurston was left alone with the ivory god.

The clanging of the street door, far below, plunged the house into a weird silence. In its midst Thurston sighed deeply. There was a strange feeling within him that he had suddenly come into possession of something which he had been wanting all his life. It was akin to the feeling of the lover to whom the much-desired object of affection is at last given.

When the stranger first unwrapped the ivory god and revealed its strange charms to his eyes, Thurston became aware of a sense of satisfaction. This sense was now increasing to a point of something like delight. He drew in his nether lip, and began to utter a soft, sibilant sound, not unlike the purring of a cat. Not for many years had he experienced such a keen feeling of pleasure as that which now filled him.

He began looking about him for a suitable place wherein to enshrine his new acquisition. He glanced at the chimney-piece, already ornamented profusely with carvings from China, Japan, and India, with stones and vases from Peru, and turned away dissatisfied. The ivory god, he said to himself, must have a better setting than the chimney-piece offered. He wanted to have it near him while he wrote. There was something in the lines, in the dull white of the ivory, in the subtle purple tints of the amethyst eyes, which bade fair to soothe and to fascinate. He wished to have the ivory god upon his desk.

Looking about the room, he caught sight of a little triptych which he had bought years ago in Venice, admiring it more for the fineness of the wood and the carving than for the elementary art of the figure of Christ which was placed in the centre niche. Its dark wood, he thought, would make an admirable setting to the pallid tint of the ivory; and without hesitation he took it down from the wall, wrenched away the crucifix from the middle compartment, and installed the figure of the Hindu god in its place. Then he placed the triptych on the ledge above his desk, and stood back from it, admiring the bizarre effect. The amethyst eyes of the ivory god seemed to smile into his own.

Thurston tore himself away from his treasure at last, and went out to dine. He walked through the gloom of the badly-lighted London streets, until he came to the quiet restaurant wherein a certain corner had come to be almost sacred to him. He ate and drank mechanically and sparingly. A small quantity of plainly cooked food satisfied him at all times; he drank no wine or spirits or ale; after dinner he smoked a cigarette to the accompaniment of a cup of coffee, and glanced over his evening newspaper, handed to him by a waiter who knew him for an old and regular customer. Altogether he spent an hour at this restaurant; and on this particular evening there was an itching desire within him all the time to get back to his rooms. He wanted to examine the ivory god again, to look at it, to wonder about it. It was with a feeling of relief and of anticipation of coming pleasure that he finally paid his bill and went quickly away. Thurston shut himself into his room with a great sense of satisfaction. He was alone in the midst of five millions of people—alone with the only things for which he cared, his books and his curiosities. Other men might dine and wine, go to theatres, balls, social functions. He cared for none of these things. He knew joys which were far deeper, far better worth having, and he could command their presence whenever he pleased to do so. So he fastened his outer door, drew a warm curtain over the inner one, turned up his lamp, and stirred his fire, and looked round about him with a sense of comfort. He saw the ivory god shining in the triptych above his desk, and caught the gleam of its amethyst eyes; and he was once more aware of the feeling that it in some strange way rounded off his life. He was glad to have it and to see it there, sitting above his altar like a presiding deity.

Thurston's next proceedings were significant and explanatory. He divested himself of his overcoat, and of the smartish morning-coat beneath it, and slipped into an old velvet jacket of undoubted antiquity; and, that done, he exchanged his boots for a comfortable and well-worn pair of slippers. And then, having made sure of his preliminaries, he unlocked a cupboard and produced a small decanter of curious shape, half filled with a golden-brown liquid, which seemed to sparkle and coruscate in the lamplight.

He set it on the table in the centre of the room, placed a glass of singular beauty—a deep crystal bowl set in twisted columns—at its side, and proceeded to heat water in a kettle. When the water was heated he made a careful mixture of it and the golden-brown liquid in the glass; and after that he curled himself up in an easy-chair facing the ivory god, with the glass and the decanter at his side.

Thurston had become a slave to the opium habit. Beginning the use of that attractive and insidious drug as a cure for some slight complaint, he had increased his doses, until at twenty-seven he made no excuses to himself for consuming it in large quantities.

During the day he took it in the form of pills, each containing a few grains; at night, following the example of De Quincey, he indulged in laudanum negus, sometimes sitting up until the grey of the morning broke in upon his dreams and fantasies.

He had long since relinquished all thought of giving up the habit. It had destroyed his moral courage once and for all, and had taken complete possession of him, mentally and physically. Under the influence of opium he was indifferent to everything in the world; and it was rarely that its influence was not upon him.

As the subtle charm of the drug stole through his brain, Thurston yielded himself up to the dreams which it induced.

His eyes were fixed on the ivory god. He began to speculate on its history, on the strange things which those amethyst eyes must have seen, on the deeds of blood, the mystic panorama of Eastern life, with its gorgeous colouring, its strange suggestion, which they must have watched unmoved. The phantasmagoria of a hundred worlds began to float, and finally to crystallise, before him.

In his estimation the carving was hundreds upon hundreds of years old. It must certainly have had its original abiding place in temple or palace, and of itself formed some part of the gorgeous picture which was rapidly shaping itself in Thurston's imagination.

Thurston's evenings were usually spent in a dream of bliss which was itself a source of deep mental content. He was surprised, on this occasion, to find that contemplation of the ivory god was leading him into a state of unusual unrest.

A strange desire to sit down at his desk—literally at the feet of the god—and write, filled him with strenuous force. It was years since he had ever written anything at night, and the mere thought of doing so now made him almost afraid. But the fear vanished quickly; and he was presently conscious of nothing but that he was shortly going to sit down at his desk. It was as if the ivory god had laid some command upon him. He turned up the flame of his spirit-lamp, heated more water, and mixed himself more of the drug. A little later he found himself laying out paper on his blotting-pad, and examining the nib of a pen. And after a time, as if it had been the most natural thing in the world, he settled himself in his elbow-chair, and after one long, searching look at the ivory god, he dipped his pen in the ink and began to write:

"This is the Story of the Loves and Hates of Men and Women that have long been Dust; the Story of a Day when the Red Earth was Young, and the Gods sat steadfast in their Places; the Story of a Time and Times; and behold it has never been told to Human Ear till Now!"

After that came a long night of work—of work such as Thurston had never before done in his life. It was ten o'clock when he wrote the first words on the top sheet of the pile of manuscript paper which he had laid ready to hand. As each successive hour struck on the silver-voiced clock on the chimney-piece it did but interrupt the gentle scribbling of a rapidly-moving pen.

On Thurston's left hand stood the spirit-lamp, the kettle, the decanter, the glass! now and then he turned to these things and mixed the drug. On his right hand there gradually accumulated a pile of closely-written manuscript. Above him, the amethyst eyes grew purple in the lamplight, the ivory god stared into the gloom beyond the writer's head.

The grey light stole through the cracks and crannies of the shutters, and found Thurston still writing. Much later, the old woman who acted as bedmaker and charwoman knocked loudly at the outer door. Thurston shouted to her to go away and leave him alone; and his pen travelled on and on as if it would never stop.

It was about three days after this that a famous publisher, with whom Thurston was acquainted in slight fashion, was somewhat astonished to find the latter

waiting for him in his private room. He stared at Thurston curiously, noting with the keen eye of a practical man of the world that his visitor wore a strange expression, and seemed to be wrapped in an atmosphere of mystery.

He was shaved and washed, and wore his best garments; but there was a strange pallor on his face, a strange light in his eyes, and his voice was as unnaturally steady as the cold, almost lifeless hand which he placed within the publisher's palm.

The publisher, who had never been able to understand Thurston's strangeness of manner, reverted to an earlier suspicion, and wondered if his visitor had been drinking; but he failed to perceive either twitch or tremor in face or hand, and his visitor's voice was even and firm to the verge of monotony.

"Some time ago," said Thurston, "you were good enough to suggest to me that I should write a romance of Eastern life. It seemed to you that I possessed the necessary knowledge of the East to attempt such a book."

"Quite so," said the other. "I don't know any man better fitted. You've been working in that direction all your life, haven't you? In fact, it's been a wonder to me that you never thought of the thing yourself."

Thurston produced a parcel of manuscript.

"I have here," he said, "a considerable portion of such a work. There is much that I might say to you about it, but at present I prefer not to say anything. Yes, it is not ordinary work, and I should like some assurance from you that it shall be read for you by some one competent to judge of its merits."

"I'll give it to Flintford to read," said the publisher. "How does his name strike you? He's about the best man I can think of."

"I am quite prepared to accept Mr. Flintford's judgment," replied Thurston. "Indeed, I intended suggesting his name to you. Then I will leave this portion of the manuscript with you?"

"Do," answered the publisher. "I'll send it on to Flintford by special messenger at once, and ask him to read it. About the rest of the book, now—"

"The remaining portion," said Thurston, "will be delivered to you when it is written." And with that and a frigid shaking of the publisher's outstretched hand he went away, walking through the outer office, as one of the clerks said, like a ghost.

The next morning Flintford walked into the publisher's office, looking very much excited.

"I say!" he exclaimed. "Where did you get that manuscript which you sent me yesterday? And have you got the rest?"

"Well, what of it?" asked the publisher, ignoring the second part of the question. "Is it good stuff? Will it do? Would it sell?"

"Good! My dear sir, it is the most wonderful piece of imaginative work I ever read in my life. It is amazing, stupendous—quite confusing in its brilliance. I began it last night. I went on reading it until breakfast-time this morning," answered Flintford. "I never read anything quite like it. Indeed, I wouldn't have believed that we had a brain amongst us that could have imagined such a work. Look here! You know I am by no means an enthusiastic person. Well, this book, if it keeps up that level all through, is the biggest find of the last half-century. For sheer imagination the man beats Poe hollow!"

"You think it will make a hit?" inquired the publisher.

"It is the greatest thing I ever had put before me," answered the critic. "I cannot understand the power in it. Who is the man? How does he come to be able to re-create Hindu life as it must have been thousands of years ago? Where did he get such an overwhelming imagination? There's something that's almost unholy, unearthly, about the whole thing. It is a great book—a rare book. I should like to see the author."

"I will try to get him here at three this afternoon," said the publisher. "Come in after lunch. I may tell you that he is a strange person--never done anything but an occasional article in the heavy reviews, but, I fancy, cram full of the East."

"That," said the critic, "is evident. I'll come at three."

At three o'clock Thurston was shown into the publisher's private room, and introduced to the great critic. Thurston, if possible, was more ghostlike than ever; more emotionless; more insensible to any outward influence. He sat with fixed passionless eyes, listening, while the critic praised his work and asked questions. It was not until all this had been said that he spoke.

"I think I may take you both into my confidence," he said. "I conclude, Mr. Mayne, that you will publish this book, and therefore I see no reason why you and Mr. Flintford should be kept in ignorance as to its real history. I may tell you that the story is not mine at all: it is being dictated to me. The circumstances are peculiar; but I feel sure that Mr. Flintford, with his knowledge of the East, will quite understand. I recently came into possession of an image of the god Ganesha, wonderfully wrought in ivory and adorned with amethyst eyes. The story of which you have read some portion is being dictated to me by this image, or, more probably, by this god represented by it. I think you will understand," he said, turning to Flintford with an air which had something appealing in it.

"Yes," said Flintford quietly, "I quite understand."

"I felt the influence of the god," continued Thurston, "as soon as I saw the image. It is a strange, a very fascinating influence. It impelled me to write against my will; and then I found that I was but a mouthpiece. Everything has been put into my lips—I should say, pen. Clearly, what I have written is the story of the image."

"And when," asked Flintford kindly, "when do you suppose the end of this story will be reached, Mr. Thurston?"

Thurston produced another packet of manuscript. He laid it on the publisher's desk.

"I believe," he said, "I believe the end will come to-night. If"—here he glanced from one face to the other—"if you would like to see the ivory statue, and could call to-morrow morning about noon, I will show it to you. It is certain that it possesses a strange influence."

When Thurston had gone away the two men looked at each other.

"Mad as a hatter!" said the publisher.

The critic shook his head.

"It seems strange," he said; "but, really, I don't think so. Does he drink?"

"I used to think he did," replied the publisher. "He has done work for me now and then, and he sometimes came here with all the symptoms of intoxication upon him, and yet he was always clear-headed and capable, if incoherent of speech."

What I don't understand just now is the frightful deliberation with which he speaks, the sort of unearthly coldness and composure of his manner. But—I say!—to tell us that the book is being dictated to him by an ivory statue: surely that is an evidence of insanity!"

"Oh, but then genius and insanity are closely allied," said Flintford. "Well, let us call upon him to-morrow. In the meantime I'll take the manuscript he left with you. I expect it will cost me another sleepless night. You can't get away from it when you once begin—its a live thing, Mayne."

"Come round about noon to-morrow," said Mayne.

It was half-past twelve next day when they climbed the stairs to Thurston's rooms. They knocked for some time at the outer door and evoked no answer; then Flintford climbed another flight of stairs and discovered the bedmaker woman, who resided nearer the sky, and appeared from a feast wherein onions had played a principal part.

"Mr. Thurston, sir? And indeed I 'aven't set eyes on 'im this morning, sir. Which 'is conduct 'ave of late been most extrordinary—me not being able to make no beds, nor nothink," said she. "A lit'ry gent, sir, which from long ixperience is very trying to anybody to deal with. You might knock again, sir; and if so as he doesn't answer, why, I must open the door with my key, and see if the poor gentleman isn't well, for never a word did he give me at ten o'clock."

When the door was opened at last, they found Thurston quite dead. His arms were crossed over the final page of his manuscript; his head was bowed upon them, as if, tired out with his long spell of labour, he had laid it down there and gone to sleep. Above him, the ivory god looked out of its amethyst eyes into the shadowy corner of the silent room.

