

The Chinese Statue

~~statue~~ I sat in Soethbys admiring the little Chinese ~~statue~~ that was ~~the next item~~ to come ~~up~~ under the auctioneer's hammer. Lot 103 caused the sort of quite murmurs that always ~~preceded~~ ^{the high} ~~on the other~~ drama ~~that~~ ^{was} about to take place in the next few ~~seconds~~ ^{minutes}. I ~~glanced down at~~ ^{studied} my catalogue and read the detailed description of the piece and what was known of its history. It had been purchased ^{by what Soethbys described as a gentleman} in ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~18th~~ ^{18th} century and I couldn't ^{help} wondering what ^{little} had happened since then that had caused the Chinese statue to find its way to the auction rooms of Soethbys on that Thursday morning over one hundred years later. Lot No 103 belonged to the auctioneer, what Pam bid for this magnificent example of.....

as well as being a gentleman Sir Alexander Heathcote was an exact man. He was exactly six foot ~~two~~ ^{two} and a quarter inches tall, rose every morning at exactly seven o'clock, eat one two minute boiled egg, two pieces of toast with one spoonful of Coopers marmalade and one hot cup of tea. He left ~~for~~ ^{his home at exactly eight-twenty} and arrived at ~~exactly~~ ^{his desk at} eight fifty nine ~~and~~ ^{and} returned home at six o'clock.

He had been exact from an early age caused more by being the only ~~son~~ ^{son} of a General than his own inclination to accuracy. Unlike his father he chose a career in the ~~diplomatic~~ ^{diplomatic} service, an exacting job, and he progressed from ~~third~~ ^{first} secretary ^{in Calcutta} to second secretary ^{in Calcutta} in Vienna to first secretary in Rome to deputy Ambassador in Washington to ~~ambassador~~ ^{and finally minister} in Peking. He was delighted when Mr Gladstone asked him to go to Peking as he had for a long time made a more than amateur ~~study~~ ^{study} of art of the Ming dynasty. This would afford him, what he had ~~until then~~ ^{until then} considered ^{impossible} an opportunity to see ~~some~~ ^{some} of the great ^{previously observed}

Sir Alexander

When ~~he~~ arrived in Peking, a journey by sea and land that took nearly ~~two~~ months he presented his seals patent to the ~~Emperor~~ ^{Emperor Tzu-Li} and a personal letter ~~for~~ ^{for her private reading} from Queen Victoria, Empress of India. ~~While he was~~ ^{back} ~~can ducted~~ ^{walked as slowly as possible taking in} through the great halls of the palace he ~~noted~~ ^{the} magnificent collection of ming dynasty statues scattered around the ~~palace~~ ^{palace} in the same casual way one observes the Italian masters in Florence.

As ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~ambassador~~ ^{the minister} appointment was for only three years ~~he~~ ^{Sir Alexander} took no holidays, rather he used the time to leave the embassy ~~to~~ ^{behind him and travel into} the outlying countryside. On these trips he ~~was~~ ^{who acted as interpreter and guide} always accompanied by a Mandarin from the palace staff. It was on one such trip when passing through ~~a~~ ^{the muddy street of a} small village ~~called~~ ^{called}

~~a valley~~ ^{Pa Li Chuang} ~~lying in a hollow of some~~ ^{that} beautiful mountains ~~about~~ ^{about} fifty miles from Peking.

He ~~chanced upon a~~ ^{chanced upon a} craftsman's ~~for~~ ^{my party} working place. He stopped ~~to~~ ^{and I saw that they showed as far as his eye could see.} to admire the delicate pieces of ivory, although modern they were superbly executed, and the ~~ambassador~~ ^{minister} entered the establishment with

the thought of acquiring a small memento. The old craftsman bustled forward in his long ~~grey~~ ^{blue collar robe} and black hat, bowed very low and then ~~stood~~ ^{looked} up at the giant from England. The ~~ambassador~~ ^{minister} returned the

complement while the mandarin explained who Sir Alexander was and his desire ~~to~~ ^{he allowed to} see the work of the craftsman. The ~~ambassador~~ ^{minister} studied many ~~pieces~~ ^{of the} with admiration and praised the work of the little

old man. He once again bowed, and a ~~shy~~ ^{shy} smile revealed no teeth but genuine pleasure, and ~~the~~ ^{at Sir Alexander's compliments} pointing a finger to the back of the shop beckoned the two great men to follow him. It was a veritable

Aladdin cave, or to be more accurate ~~Yung Lo's~~ ^{Yung Lo's} cave and the ambassador could have happily

to each other through the interpreter and Si Alexander revealed his love and tiny knowledge of the Ming dynasty. The little craftsman face lit up again and ^{he spoke to the mandarin in a hushed voice. The mandarin nodded his agreement and translated.} I have your excellency a piece of Ming that you might care to see that has been in my family for over ~~an~~ hundred years.

I should be honored said the ~~ambassador~~ ^{minister}. It is I who should be honored your excellency and the little man nearly ran out of the ^{back door} ^{neatly talking over a tray dog} towards an ~~old peasant~~ ^{old peasant} house a few yards away. The ~~ambassador~~ ^{minister} and the mandarin remained in the work as Si Alexander realized the old man would never have considered inviting his honored guest into his humble home until they had known each other for some considerable time and only then when he had been invited to Si Alexander's home first. A few minutes passed before the little ~~blue~~ ^{blue} figure came running back clinging onto something that by its very holding had to be a treasure. He passed the piece over ~~to the~~ ^{for the} ~~ambassador~~ ^{Si Alexander} to study. ~~His~~ ^{His} mouth opened wide with excitement. The little statue no ~~smaller~~ ^{taller} than six inches in height was of the emperor Kung and as fine an example of Ming as the Ambassador had ever seen. He felt confident the ^{one of} craftsman had been the great Pen Q and the date around the turn of the ninth century. ~~The~~ Its only ~~fault~~ ^{blemish} was that its base on which such ^{statues} ^{usual} ^{rest} was missing ~~its base~~ ^{the} and a small ivory stick protruded from ~~the~~ ^{the} bottom. ~~It took nothing away~~ ^{Although} from the beauty of the piece. ^{but in the eyes of Si Alexander} The craftsman's eyes glowed at the pleasure his honored guest showed ~~at the piece~~ ^{as he studied} ~~the~~ ^{the} very imperial. You ~~like the piece~~ ^{think the piece is good} asked the craftsman. Its magnificent the ~~ambassador~~ ^{minister} replied.

the minister

No, No said ~~the Ambassador~~, though in truth the little craftsman knew the great man was only being kind for Sir Alexander was already holding the ~~statue~~ ^{light} ~~and~~ ^{showing} the same love as the old man had for it.

The ~~Ambassador~~ ^{minister} smiled down at the craftsman and handed back the masterpiece and then uttered perhaps the only un diplomatic ~~words~~ ^{feelings} he had ever ~~said~~ ^{revealed} in forty one years of serving his Queen. 'How I wish that it was mine' he regretted the ~~statement~~ immediately he had ~~spoken~~ ^{spoken} them because he knew only too well the Chinese custom that if anyone ~~says~~ ^{honours} something the gift will grow in the eyes of ~~his~~ ^{his fellow men} by giving it.

A sad look came over the face of the little old craftsman as he handed over the ~~statue~~ ^{figure} to the ambassador.

No, No I was only joking and Sir Alexander quickly ~~handed the~~ ^{returning the} ~~piece~~ ^{back} to his own ^{humble}.

You would dishonour my home if you do not take it your excellency the old man said and the mandarin nodded his agreement. to some time ~~for his~~

The Ambassador ~~was~~ ^{remained} silent. I have dishonoured my own home Sir he replied quietly ~~and left with the~~ mandarin.

The little craftsman bowed. I must fix a base on it he said or you will not be able to place on view. He turned round and opened an ~~large wooden box~~ ^{old pegbox chest} that must have obtained a ~~hundred~~ ^{hundred of} bases for his statues. The old man rummaged around and picked ~~at~~ ^{out} rather large ugly one that the ambassador did not care for ~~and the little craftsman bowed Sir Alexander~~ ^{but although he did not know it this was the} but it would be a perfect fit. ~~and~~ ^{and} Sir Alexander remained in an embarrassed silence.

The ~~Ambassador~~ ^{minister} took the gift and lined helplessly ~~and~~ ^{one again}

accompanied by the Mandarin set out once again to see the craftsman. When Sir Alexander entered the workshop he remembered so well, the old man looked up from his ~~bench~~ ^{bench} and stumbled towards him ~~and could not see~~ ^{and} recognise his guest until he could almost touch him and then he bowed.

I have returned Sir to repay my debt

there was no need your excellency. I am honored that the little statue ^{is} in your great home.

The ~~ambassador~~ ^{minister} could think of no words adequate to form a reply and mealy requested the old man should accompany him on a small journey.

The old man obeyed without question and the three men set out ^{on donkeys towards the north} ~~together~~ They travelled far over ~~several hours~~ ^{at Ma Tien} and now into the hills. Behind the craftsman workshop and when they reached the village they were met by another mandarin who bowed low to the ~~ambassador~~ ^{minister} and ~~asked him~~ ^{requested Sir Alexander} to continue his journey with him. They walked to the far end of the village and ^{stopped} ~~came~~ to a hollow in the hill with a magnificent view of the valley. Before them stood a newly completed small house of the most perfect ^{Two black dogs stood outside the house} ~~amenity~~. The little old craftsman was mystified ^{by what was happening} and the ~~ambassador~~ ^{minister} turned to him and said. A small ~~and~~ ^{meager} gift and my feeble attempt to return in kind. The old man stared at the beautiful little house, fell on his knees and begged forgiveness. The mandarin raised him from the ground explaining to the old man ^{that} the Emperor ^{ex. the} himself had agreed to the ~~ambassador's~~ ^{minister's} request. A smile of joy came over the face of the craftsman and they all returned ^{happy back} to his workshop. The two men parted, now satisfied and the ~~ambassador~~ ^{minister} returned to his embassy ^{he had} that night content that ~~he~~ ^{he} had purged his mistake.

and awarded him the sword of China and a grateful Queen added the K.C.V.O to his already long list of decorations. After a few weeks back at the Foreign Office clearing the China desk, he retired to his native Yorkshire, the only English ^{country} where its inhabitants still believe they must be born and die in the same place — not unlike the Chinese. ^{So Alexander and Lady Heathcote} ~~He~~ spent ~~the~~ last years in the home of ~~his~~ ^{the mummy} late father with his wife and the little ming ~~statue~~ emperor. The statue was placed on the mantelpiece in the front room for all to observe and admire.

Being an exact man he wrote a long and detailed will in which clear instructions were left as to what must happen to the little statue. ^{after he had died} He bequeathed it to his first son and requested that he do the same ^{and leave} and ^{the statue to the first son and it} was only to be sold if the family reputation ^{was at stake} ~~was at stake~~. Sir Alexander Heathcote died at exactly twelve o'clock on his ^{seventieth} ~~eighty~~ birthday.

His first born son Col James Heathcote was serving his Queen in the Crimea at the time ~~when~~ he came into possession of the ming emperor. The Colonel was a fighting man who had little interest in culture but even he could see the heirloom was no ordinary treasure and ^{some} loaned it to the regimental mess so that it could be displayed in the ^{for his brother officers to enjoy} ~~officers~~ dining room.

When James ^{Heathcote} became Colonel of the Regiment the emperor sat proudly on the table ~~as~~ along with the trophies won at Waterloo, Sappatapol, Crimea and Madrid. And there it stayed until the Colonel's retirement to his ^{father's house in} native Yorkshire when once again ^{the ming emperor} ~~he~~ returned to the mantelpiece of the Heathcote home. The Colonel was not a man to disobey his late father even in death and left clear instructions that the heirloom must ^{always} ~~be~~ passed on to the firstborn of

a soldier's death, he just fell asleep one night by the fire, the Yorkshire post on his lap.

The Colonel's first born, the Rev ~~the~~ ~~Richard~~ Alexander Heathcote was at the time presiding over a small flock at a Parish Church of Much ~~Waltham~~ ~~Waltham~~ in ~~Essex~~ ~~Essex~~. The son having buried his father with military honours placed the little ming emperor on the mantelpiece in the vicarage. Few of the locals could appreciate the masterpiece but one or two old ladies were heard to remark on ~~the~~ delicate ~~and~~ craftsmanship. And it was not until the Rev became the Very Rev and the little statue found its way into the Bishop's palace did it generally gain ~~the~~ full recognition. Many of those who visited the Palace and ~~and~~ ~~heard~~ ^{heard} the story of how his grandfather the ~~Ambassador~~ ^{Minister} had acquired the little piece ~~and~~ ^{and the Bishop would add a} knowledgeable comment on the disparity between the great statue and its base. It always made a good after-dinner story.

God takes even his own Ambassadors but not before he had allowed Bishop Heathcote to complete a will leaving the statue to his son with ~~the~~ ^{exact} ~~his~~ ^{repeated} great grandfather's instructions. The Bishop's son ~~was a serving officer in~~ Captain James Heathcote was a serving officer in his grandfather's regiment so the emperor returned to the mess table where in ~~his~~ ^{his} absence the Regimental trophies had been joined by ones from I/yres, the Marne, and Mons. The Regiment were once again at war with Germany and young Captain ^{James} Heathcote was killed on the beaches of Dunkirk and died intestate. But English law, the known wishes of the great, great, grandfather and common sense prevailed and the little emperor came into possession of ~~the~~ ^{the Captain's} first born of Alex Heathcote who ^{was unfortunately} ~~unfortunately~~ ^{and} ~~unlike~~ his proud ancestors had little desire

When Captain James had been so tragically killed, Alexander's mother lavished everything on the boy that her ^{maire} income would allow. It didn't help and it provable wasn't entirely young Alex's fault that he grew up to be ^{in his grandmother's words} ~~such~~ a selfish, unbearable, little brat.

Once Alex ^{had} left school, only moments before he would have been expelled, he found he could never hold down a job for more than a few weeks while always spending a little more than he and finally his mother could cope with. The dear lady, sensing she could take no more of this life, gave up the ghost and joined all the other Heathcotes not in Yorkshire but in Heaven.

In the swinging sixties when Casinos opened in Britain Alex was convinced he was made for life. He developed a system for roulette for ^{with} which you just couldn't lose. He did, so he refined the system and promptly lost ~~some~~ ^{so} more and refined the system again and ~~made~~ ^{against} against his losses. Why not, if the worse came to the worse he could always dispose of the little ming statue.

The worse did come to the worse as each of Alex's refined systems lost him more and more until the Casino owners began to press him for payment, making threats that did not appeal to Alex. When ~~he~~ ^{one morning} finally received a solicitors letter concerning a debt of some ten thousand pounds and the threat of a writ to follow if the matter wasn't dealt with within fourteen days he caved in. After all, his great-great-grandfather's institutions were very ~~great~~ ^{great}, the ming statue was to sold if the family reputation was ^{ever} at stake.

Alex picked up the little statue from the

what ever you advice said Alex

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handiwork, at least having the grace to feel sad at the loss of the family heirloom. He took a taxi to Bond Street and carried the little statue into Sothebys to be put up for auction.

The Head of the Oriental Dept came to the front desk to talk to Mr Heathcote holding the little masterpiece in his hands.

It will take a few days to ~~get an estimate~~ ^{that can't even be seen on a cursory glance} of its ~~true~~ value he declared ^{but this is a fine and} piece as we have ever ^{come under the hammer} put up for auction.

That's no problem as long as you can let me know ^{its value.} within fourteen days.

Oh certainly said the expert, I could let you know by Friday. Of course you won't want the statue cutered with the hammer.

Alex returned to Bond Street on the Friday with a large smile on his face. He ~~told~~ ^{must be} the statue ~~was~~ (worth more than £10,000 and it would provable ~~be~~ fetch enough to cover all his debts and leave him a little over to try out his new refined, refined system. He had during the week contacted all his creditors and without exception they were happy to wait to hear the result of the experts opinion.

^{again} Alex thanked his great, great, grandfather as he once climbed the steps of Sothebys. He asked the girl on reception if he could speak to the head of the oriental department. She picked up an internal phone and the expert appeared a few moments later at the front desk with a rather sad look on his face. Alex's heart sank as he listened to the words of the ~~expert~~ head of the oriental department.

A nice little piece, the emperor, but undoubtedly a fake, provable about two hundred, two hundred and fifty years old but only a copy of the original I'm afraid. Copies were often made because....

seven hundred ^{points}, eight hundred at the most.
 Enough to buy a gun and some bullets thought
 Alex ^{immediately} as he turned and started walking away

'I wanted si', said the expert
 Yes, yes, sell the bloody thing said Alex
 who didn't even turn ^{back} to face him. This time Alex did turn
 No si, what I wanted was, ~~(Alex turned)~~
 and stared at him

I was nearly going to ask si if you had
 ever considered selling the base

The Base said Alex
 the base si, its magnificent ^{tenth century} ~~(undoubtedly)~~
 a work of genius.

At the auction at Sotheby's (that
 the expert turned out to right in his assessment. I
 obtained the little emperor myself for seven
 hundred and twenty guineas while the base was
 acquired by an American gentleman of not unknown
 patentage for ~~£~~42,000 guineas.

The base was a genuine