



Gilbert Keith Chesterton
Father Brown's
Memories



Kharkiv
«Folio»
2023

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THE RED MOON OF MERU

EVERYONE agreed that the bazaar at Mallowood Abbey (by kind permission of Lady Mouteagle) was a great success; there were roundabouts and swings and side-shows, which the people greatly enjoyed; I would also mention the Charity, which was the excellent object of the proceedings, if any of them could tell me what it was. However, it is only with a few of them that we are here concerned; and especially with three of them, a lady and two gentlemen, who passed between two of the principal tents or pavilions, their voices high in argument. On their right was the tent of the Master of the Mountain, that world-famous fortune-teller by crystals and chiromancy; a rich purple tent, all over which were traced, in black and gold, the sprawling outlines of Asiatic gods waving any number of arms like octopods. Perhaps they symbolized the readiness of divine help to be had within; perhaps they merely implied that the ideal being of a pious palmist would have as many hands as possible. On the other side stood the plainer tent of Phroso the Phrenologist; more austere decorated with diagrams of the heads of Socrates and Shakespeare, which were apparently of a lumpy sort. But these were presented merely in black and white, with numbers and notes, as became the rigid dignity of a purely rationalistic science. The purple tent had an opening like a black cavern, and all was fittingly silent within. But Phroso the Phrenologist, a lean, shabby, sunburnt person, with an almost improbably fierce black moustache and whiskers, was standing outside his own temple, and talking, at the top of his voice, to nobody in particular, explaining that the head of any passer-by would doubtless prove, on examination, to be every bit as knobby as Shakespeare's. Indeed, the moment

the lady appeared between the tents, the vigilant Phroso leapt on her and offered, with a pantomime of old-world courtesy, to feel her bumps.

She refused with civility that was rather like rudeness; but she must be excused, because she was in the middle of an argument. She also had to be excused, or at any rate was excused, because she was Lady Mouteagle. She was not a nonentity, however, in any sense; she was at once handsome and haggard, with a hungry look in her deep, dark eyes and something eager and almost fierce about her smile. Her dress was bizarre for the period; for it was before the Great War had left us in our present mood of gravity and recollection. Indeed, the dress was rather like the purple tent; being of a semi-oriental sort, covered with exotic and esoteric emblems. But everyone knew that the Mouteagles were mad; which was the popular way of saying that she and her husband were interested in the creeds and culture of the East.

The eccentricity of the lady was a great contrast to the conventionality of the two gentlemen, who were braced and buttoned up in all the stiffer fashion of that far-off day, from the tips of their gloves to their bright top hats. Yet even here there was a difference; for James Hardcastle managed at once to look correct and distinguished, while Tommy Hunter only looked correct and commonplace. Hardcastle was a promising politician; who seemed in society to be interested in everything except politics. It may be answered gloomily that every politician is emphatically a promising politician. But to do him justice, he had often exhibited himself as a performing politician. No purple tent in the bazaar, however, had been provided for him to perform in.

“For my part,” he said, screwing in the monocle that was the only gleam in his hard, legal face, “I think we must exhaust the possibilities of mesmerism before we talk about magic. Remarkable psychological powers undoubtedly exist, even in apparently backward peoples. Marvellous things have been done by fakirs.”

“Did you say done by fakers?” asked the other young man, with doubtful innocence.

“Tommy, you are simply silly,” said the lady. “Why will you keep barging in on things you don’t understand? You’re like a schoolboy

screaming out that he knows how a conjuring trick is done. It's all so Early Victorian—that schoolboy scepticism. As for mesmerism, I doubt whether you can stretch it to—”

At this point Lady Mounteagle seemed to catch sight of somebody she wanted; a black stumpy figure standing at a booth where children were throwing hoops at hideous table ornaments. She darted across and cried:

“Father Brown, I've been looking for you. I want to ask you something: Do you believe in fortune-telling?”

The person addressed looked rather helplessly at the little hoop in his hand and said at last:

“I wonder in which sense you're using the word 'believe.' Of course, if it's all a fraud—”

“Oh, but the Master of the Mountain isn't a bit of a fraud,” she cried. “He isn't a common conjurer or a fortune-teller at all. It's really a great honour for him to condescend to tell fortunes at my parties; he's a great religious leader in his own country; a Prophet and a Seer. And even his fortune-telling isn't vulgar stuff about coming into a fortune. He tells you great spiritual truths about yourself, about your ideals.”

“Quite so,” said Father Brown. “That's what I object to. I was just going to say that if it's all a fraud, I don't mind it so much. It can't be much more of a fraud than most things at fancy bazaars; and there, in a way, it's a sort of practical joke. But if it's a religion and reveals spiritual truths—then it's all as false as hell and I wouldn't touch it with a bargepole.”

“That is something of a paradox,” said Hardcastle with a smile.

“I wonder what a paradox is,” remarked the priest in a ruminant manner. “It seems to me obvious enough. I suppose it wouldn't do very much harm if somebody dressed up as a German spy and pretended to have told all sorts of lies to the Germans. But if a man is trading in the truth with the Germans—well! So I think if a fortune-teller is trading in truth like that—”

“You really think,” began Hardcastle grimly.

“Yes,” said the other; “I think he is trading with the enemy.”

Tommy Hunter broke into a chuckle. “Well,” he said, “if Father Brown thinks they're good so long as they're frauds, I should think he'd consider this copper-coloured prophet a sort of saint.”

“My cousin Tom is incorrigible,” said Lady Mounteagle. “He’s always going about showing up adepts, as he calls it. He only came down here in a hurry when he heard the Master was to be here, I believe. He’d have tried to show up Buddha or Moses.”

“Thought you wanted looking after a bit,” said the young man, with a grin on his round face. “So I toddled down. Don’t like this brown monkey crawling about.”

“There you go again!” said Lady Mounteagle. “Years ago, when I was in India, I suppose we all had that sort of prejudice against brown people. But now I know something about their wonderful spiritual powers, I’m glad to say I know better.”

“Our prejudices seem to cut opposite ways,” said Father Brown. “You excuse his being brown because he is brahminical; and I excuse his being brahminical because he is brown. Frankly, I don’t care for spiritual powers much myself. I’ve got much more sympathy with spiritual weaknesses. But I can’t see why anybody should dislike him merely because he is the same beautiful colour as copper, or coffee, or nut-brown ale, or those jolly peat-streams in the North. But then,” he added, looking across at the lady and screwing up his eyes, “I suppose I’m prejudiced in favour of anything that’s called brown.”

“There now!” cried Lady Mounteagle with a sort of triumph. “I knew you were only talking nonsense!”

“Well,” grumbled the aggrieved youth with the round face. “When anybody talks sense you call it schoolboy scepticism. When’s the crystal-gazing going to begin?”

“Any time you like, I believe,” replied the lady. “It isn’t crystal-gazing, as a matter of fact, but palmistry; I suppose you would say it was all the same sort of nonsense.”

“I think there is a via media between sense and nonsense,” said Hardcastle, smiling. “There are explanations that are natural and not at all nonsensical; and yet the results are very amazing. Are you coming in to be operated on? I confess I am full of curiosity.”

“Oh, I’ve no patience with such nonsense,” spluttered the sceptic, whose round face had become rather a red face with the heat of his contempt and incredulity. “I’ll let you waste your time on your mahogany mountebank; I’d rather go and throw at coco-nuts.”

The Phrenologist, still hovering near, darted at the opening.

“Heads, my dear sir,” he said, “human skulls are of a contour far more subtle than that of coconuts. No coconut can compare with your own most—”

Hardcastle had already dived into the dark entry of the purple tent; and they heard a low murmur of voices within. As Tom Hunter turned on the Phrenologist with an impatient answer, in which he showed a regrettable indifference to the line between natural and preternatural sciences, the lady was just about to continue her little argument with the little priest, when she stopped in some surprise. James Hardcastle had come out of the tent again, and in his grim face and glaring monocle, surprise was even more vividly depicted. “He’s not there,” remarked the politician abruptly. “He’s gone. Some aged nigger, who seems to constitute his suite, jabbered something to me to the effect that the Master had gone forth rather than sell sacred secrets for gold.”

Lady Mounteagle turned radiantly to the rest. “There now,” she cried. “I told you he was a cut above anything you fancied! He hates being here in a crowd; he’s gone back to his solitude.”

“I am sorry,” said Father Brown gravely. “I may have done him an injustice. Do you know where he has gone?”

“I think so,” said his hostess equally gravely. “When he wants to be alone, he always goes to the cloisters, just at the end of the left wing, beyond my husband’s study and private museum, you know. Perhaps you know this house was once an abbey.”

“I have heard something about it,” answered the priest, with a faint smile.

“We’ll go there, if you like,” said the lady, briskly. “You really ought to see my husband’s collection; or the Red Moon at any rate. Haven’t you ever heard of the Red Moon of Meru? Yes, it’s a ruby.”

“I should be delighted to see the collection,” said Hardcastle quietly, “including the Master of the Mountain, if that prophet is one exhibit in the museum.” And they all turned towards the path leading to the house.

“All the same,” muttered the sceptical Thomas, as he brought up the rear, “I should very much like to know what the brown beast did come here for, if he didn’t come to tell fortunes.”

As he disappeared, the indomitable Phroso made one more dart after him, almost snatching at his coat-tails. “The bump—” he began.

“No bump,” said the youth, “only a hump. Hump I always have when I come down to see Mounteagle.” And he took to his heels to escape the embrace of the man of science.

On their way to the cloisters the visitors had to pass through the long room that was devoted by Lord Mounteagle to his remarkable private museum of Asiatic charms and mascots. Through one open door, in the length of the wall opposite, they could see the Gothic arches and the glimmer of daylight between them, marking the square open space, round the roofed border of which the monks had walked in older days. But they had to pass something that seemed at first sight rather more extraordinary than the ghost of a monk.

It was an elderly gentleman, robed from head to foot in white, with a pale green turban, but a very pink and white English complexion and the smooth white moustaches of some amiable Anglo-Indian colonel. This was Lord Mounteagle, who had taken his Oriental pleasures more sadly, or at least more seriously than his wife. He could talk of nothing whatever, except Oriental religion and philosophy; and had thought it necessary even to dress in the manner of an Oriental hermit. While he was delighted to show his treasures, he seemed to treasure them much more for the truths supposed to be symbolized in them than for their value in collections, let alone cash. Even when he brought out the great ruby, perhaps the only thing of great value in the museum, in a merely monetary sense, he seemed to be much more interested in its name than in its size, let alone its price.

The others were all staring at what seemed a stupendously large red stone, burning like a bonfire seen through a rain of blood. But Lord Mounteagle rolled it loosely in his palm without looking at it; and staring at the ceiling, told them a long tale about the legendary character of Mount Meru, and how, in the Gnostic mythology, it had been the place of the wrestling of nameless primeval powers.

Towards the end of the lecture on the Demiurge of the Gnostics (not forgetting its connexion with the parallel concept of Manichaeus), even the tactful Mr. Hardcastle thought it time to create a diversion. He asked to be allowed to look at the stone; and as evening was closing in, and the long room with its single door was steadily darkening, he stepped out in the cloister beyond, to examine the jewel by a better light. It was then that they first be-

came conscious, slowly and almost creepily conscious, of the living presence of the Master of the Mountain.

The cloister was on the usual plan, as regards its original structure; but the line of Gothic pillars and pointed arches that formed the inner square was linked together all along by a low wall, about waist high, turning the Gothic doors into Gothic windows and giving each a sort of flat window-sill of stone. This alteration was probably of ancient date; but there were other alterations of a quainter sort, which witnessed to the rather unusual individual ideas of Lord and Lady Mounteagle. Between the pillars hung thin curtains, or rather veils, made of beads or light canes, in a continental or southern manner; and on these again could be traced the lines and colours of Asiatic dragons or idols, that contrasted with the grey Gothic framework in which they were suspended. But this, while it further troubled the dying light of the place, was the least of the incongruities of which the company, with very varying feelings, became aware.

In the open space surrounded by the cloisters, there ran, like a circle in a square, a circular path paved with pale stones and edged with some sort of green enamel like an imitation lawn. Inside that, in the very centre, rose the basin of a dark-green fountain, or raised pond, in which water-lilies floated and goldfish flashed to and fro; and high above these, its outline dark against the dying light, was a great green image. Its back was turned to them and its face so completely invisible in the hunched posture that the statue might almost have been headless. But in that mere dark outline, in the dim twilight, some of them could see instantly that it was the shape of no Christian thing.

A few yards away, on the circular path, and looking towards the great green god, stood the man called the Master of the Mountain. His pointed and finely-finished features seemed moulded by some skilful craftsman as a mask of copper. In contrast with this, his dark-grey beard looked almost blue like indigo; it began in a narrow tuft on his chin, and then spread outwards like a great fan or the tail of a bird. He was robed in peacock green and wore on his bald head a high cap of uncommon outline: a head-dress none of them had ever seen before; but it looked rather Egyptian than Indian. The man was standing with staring eyes; wide open, fish-

shaped eyes, so motionless that they looked like the eyes painted on a mummy-case. But though the figure of the Master of the Mountain was singular enough, some of the company, including Father Brown, did not look at him; they still looked at the dark-green idol at which he himself was looking.

"This seems a queer thing," said Hardcastle, frowning a little, "to set up in the middle of an old abbey cloister."

"Now, don't tell me you're going to be silly," said Lady Mounteagle. "That's just what we meant; to link up the great religions of East and West; Buddha and Christ. Surely you must understand that all religions are really the same."

"If they are," said Father Brown mildly, "it seems rather unnecessary to go into the middle of Asia to get one."

"Lady Mounteagle means that they are different aspects or facets, as there are of this stone," began Hardcastle; and becoming interested in the new topic, laid the great ruby down on the stone sill or ledge under the Gothic arch. "But it does not follow that we can mix the aspects in one artistic style. You may mix Christianity and Islam, but you can't mix Gothic and Saracenic, let alone real Indian."

As he spoke, the Master of the Mountain seemed to come to life like a cataleptic, and moved gravely round another quarter segment of the circle, and took up his position outside their own row of arches, standing with his back to them and looking now towards the idol's back. It was obvious that he was moving by stages round the whole circle, like a hand round a clock; but pausing for prayer or contemplation.

"What is his religion?" asked Hardcastle, with a faint touch of impatience.

"He says," replied Lord Mounteagle, reverently, "that it is older than Brahmanism and purer than Buddhism."

"Oh," said Hardcastle, and continued to stare through his single eyeglass, standing with both his hands in his pockets.

"They say," observed the nobleman in his gentle but didactic voice, "that the deity called the God of Gods is carved in a colossal form in the cavern of Mount Meru—"

Even his lordship's lecturing serenity was broken abruptly by the voice that came over his shoulder. It came out of the darkness of the museum they had just left, when they stepped out into the cloister.

At the sound of it the two younger men looked first incredulous, then furious, and then almost collapsed into laughter.

"I hope I do not intrude," said the urbane and seductive voice of Professor Phroso, that unconquerable wrestler of the truth, "but it occurred to me that some of you might spare a little time for that much despised science of Bumps, which—"

"Look here," cried the impetuous Tommy Hunter, "I haven't got any bumps; but you'll jolly well have some soon, you—"

Hardcastle mildly restrained him as he plunged back through the door; and for the moment all the group had turned again and were looking back into the inner room.

It was at that moment that the thing happened. It was the impetuous Tommy, once more, who was the first to move, and this time to better effect. Before anyone else had seen anything, when Hardcastle had barely remembered with a jump that he had left the gem on the stone sill, Tommy was across the cloister with the leap of a cat and, leaning with his head and shoulders out of the aperture between two columns, had cried out in a voice that rang down all the arches: "I've got him!"

In that instant of time, just after they turned, and just before they heard his triumphant cry, they had all seen it happen. Round the corner of one of the two columns, there had darted in and out again a brown or rather bronze-coloured hand, the colour of dead gold; such as they had seen elsewhere. The hand had struck as straight as a striking snake; as instantaneous as the flick of the long tongue of an ant-eater. But it had licked up the jewel. The stone slab of the windowsill shone bare in the pale and fading light.

"I've got him," gasped Tommy Hunter; "but he's wriggling pretty hard. You fellows run round him in front—he can't have got rid of it, anyhow."

The others obeyed, some racing down the corridor and some leaping over the low wall, with the result that a little crowd, consisting of Hardcastle, Lord Mouteagle, Father Brown, and even the undetachable Mr. Phroso of the bumps, had soon surrounded the captive Master of the Mountain, whom Hunter was hanging on to desperately by the collar with one hand, and shaking every now and then in a manner highly insensible to the dignity of Prophets as a class.

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