

***ERNEST  
BRAMAH***



***THE MIRROR  
OF KONG HO***

**Ernest Bramah**

# **The Mirror of Kong Ho**

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# INTRODUCTION

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ESTIMABLE BARBARIAN,—Your opportune suggestion that I should permit the letters, wherein I have described with undeviating fidelity the customs and manner of behaving of your accomplished race, to be set forth in the form of printed leaves for all to behold, is doubtless gracefully-intentioned, and this person will raise no barrier of dissent against it.

In this he is inspired by the benevolent hope that his immature compositions may to one extent become a model and a by-word to those who in turn visit his own land of Fragrant Purity; for with exacting care he has set down no detail that has not come under his direct observation (although it is not to be denied that here or there he may, perchance, have misunderstood an involved allusion or failed to grasp the inner significance of an act), so that Impartiality necessarily sways his brush, and Truth lurks within his inkpot.

In an entirely contrary manner some, who of recent years have gratified us with their magnanimous presence, have returned to their own countries not only with the internal fittings of many of our palaces (which, being for the most part of a replaceable nature, need be only trivially referred to, the incident, indeed, being generally regarded as a most cordial and pressing variety of foreign politeness), but also—in the lack of highly-spiced actuality—with subtly-imagined and truly objectionable instances. These calumnies they have not hesitated to commit to the form of printed books,

which, falling into the hands of the ignorant and indiscriminating, may even suggest to their ill-balanced minds a doubt whether we of the Celestial Empire really are the wisest, bravest, purest, and most enlightened people in existence.

As a parting, it only remains to be said that, in order to maintain unimpaired the quaint-sounding brevity and archaic construction of your prepossessing language, I have engraved most of the remarks upon the receptive tablets of my mind as they were uttered. To one who can repeat the Five Classics without stumbling this is a contemptible achievement. Let it be an imposed obligation, therefore, that you retain these portions unchanged as a test and a proof to all who may read. Of my own deficient words, I can only in truest courtesy maintain that any alteration must of necessity make them less offensively commonplace than at present they are.

The Sign and immutable Thumb-mark of, Kong Ho  
By a sure hand to the House of one Ernest Bramah.

## **THE MIRROR OF KONG HO**

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# LETTER I

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Concerning the journey. The unlawful demons invoked by certain of the barbarians; their power and the manner of their suppression. Suppression. The incredible obtuseness of those who attend within tea-houses. The harmonious attitude of a person of commerce.

VENERATED SIRE (at whose virtuous and well-established feet an unworthy son now prostrates himself in spirit repeatedly),—

Having at length reached the summit of my journey, that London of which the merchants from Canton spoke so many strange and incredible things, I now send you filial salutations three times increased, and in accordance with your explicit command I shall write all things to you with an unvarnished brush, well assured that your versatile object in committing me to so questionable an enterprise was, above all, to learn the truth of these matters in an undeviating and yet open-headed spirit of accuracy and toleration.

Of the perils incurred while travelling in the awe-inspiring devices by which I was transferred from shore to shore and yet further inland, of the utter absence of all leisurely dignity on the part of those controlling their movements, and of the almost unnatural self-opinionatedness which led them to persist in starting at a stated and prearranged time, even when this person had courteously pointed out to them by irrefutable omens that neither the day nor the hour was suitable for the venture, I have already written. It is enough to assert that a similar want of prudence was maintained on every occasion, and, as a result, when actually within sight

of the walls of this city, we were involved for upwards of an hour in a very evilly-arranged yellow darkness, which, had we but delayed for a day, as I strenuously advised those in authority after consulting the Sacred Flat and Round Sticks, we should certainly have avoided.

Concerning the real nature of the devices by which the ships are propelled at sea and the carriages on land, I must still unroll a blank mind until I can secretly, and without undue hazard, examine them more closely. If, as you maintain, it is the work of captive demons hidden away among their most inside parts, it must be admitted that these usually intractable beings are admirably trained and controlled, and I am wide-headed enough to think that in this respect we might—notwithstanding our nine thousand years of civilised refinement—learn something of the methods of these barbarians. The secret, however, is jealously guarded, and they deny the existence of any supernatural forces; but their protests may be ignored, for there is undoubtedly a powerful demon used in a similar way by some of the boldest of them, although its employment is unlawful. A certain kind of chariot is used for the occupation of this demon, and those who wish to invoke it conceal their faces within masks of terrifying design, and cover their hands and bodies with specially prepared garments, without which it would be fatal to encounter these very powerful spirits. While yet among the habitations of men, and in crowded places, they are constrained to use less powerful demons, which are lawful, but when they reach the unfrequented paths they throw aside all restraint, and, calling to their aid the forbidden spirit (which they do

by secret movements of the hands), they are carried forward by its agency at a speed unattainable by merely human means. By day the demon looks forth from three white eyes, which at night have a penetrating brilliance equal to the fiercest glances of the Sacred Dragon in anger. If any person incautiously stands in its way it utters a warning cry of intolerable rage, and should the presumptuous one neglect to escape to the roadside and there prostrate himself reverentially before it, it seizes him by the body part and contemptuously hurls him bruised and unrecognisable into the boundless space of the around. Frequently the demon causes the chariot to rise into the air, and it is credibly asserted by discriminating witnesses (although this person only sets down as incapable of denial that which he has actually beheld) that some have maintained an unceasing flight through the middle air for a distance of many li. Occasionally the captive demon escapes from the bondage of those who have invoked it, through some incautious gesture or heretical remark on their part, and then it never fails to use them grievously, casting them to the ground wounded, consuming the chariot with fire, and passing away in the midst of an exceedingly debased odour, by which it is always accompanied after the manner of our own earth spirits.

This being, as this person has already set forth, an unlawful demon on account of its power when once called up, and the admitted uncertainty of its movements, those in authority maintain a stern and inexorable face towards the practice. To entrap the unwary certain persons (chosen on account of their massive outlines, and further protected



from evil influences by their pure and consistent habits) keep an unceasing watch. When one of them, himself lying concealed, detects the approach of such a being, he closely observes the position of the sun, and signals to the other a message of warning. Then the second one, shielded by the sanctity of his life and rendered inviolable by the nature of his garments—his sandals alone being capable of overturning any demon from his path should it encounter them—boldly steps forth into the road and holds out before him certain sacred emblems. So powerful are these that at the sight the unlawful demon confesses itself vanquished, and although its whole body trembles with ill-contained rage, and the air around is poisoned by its discreditable exhalation, it is devoid of further resistance. Those in the chariot are thereupon commanded to dismiss it, and being bound in chains they are led into the presence of certain lesser mandarins who administer justice from a raised dais.

“Behold!” exclaims the chief of the captors, when the prisoners have been placed in obsequious attitudes before the lesser mandarins, “thus the matter chanced: The honourable Wang, although disguised under the semblance of an applewoman, had discreetly concealed himself by the roadside, all but his head being underneath a stream of stagnant water, when, at the eighth hour of the morning, he beheld these repulsive outcasts approaching in their chariot, carried forward by the diabolical vigour of the unlawful demon. Although I had stationed myself several li distant from the accomplished Wang, the chariot reached me in less than a breathing space of time, those inside assuming their fiercest and most aggressive attitudes, and as they came

repeatedly urging the demon to increased exertions. Their speed exceeded that of the swallow in his hymeneal flight, all shrubs and flowers by the wayside withered incapably at the demon's contaminating glance, running water ceased to flow, and the road itself was scorched at their passage, the earth emitting a dull bluish flame. These facts, and the times and the distances, this person has further inscribed in a book which thus disposes of all possible defence. Therefore, O lesser mandarins, let justice be accomplished heavily and without delay; for, as the proverb truly says, 'The fiercer the flame the more useless the struggles of the victim.'"

At this point the prisoners frequently endeavour to make themselves heard, protesting that in the distance between the concealed Wang and the one who stands accusing them they had thrice stopped to repair their innermost details, had leisurely partaken of food and wine, and had also been overtaken, struck, and delayed by a funeral procession. But so great is the execration in which these persons are held, that although murderers by stealth, outlaws, snatchers from the body, and companies of men who by strategy make a smaller sum of money appear to be larger, can all freely testify their innocence, raisers of this unlawful demon must not do so, and they are beaten on the head with chains until they desist.

Then the lesser mandarins, raising their voices in unison, exclaim, "The amiable Tsay-hi has reported the matter in a discreet and impartial spirit. Hear our pronouncement: These raisers of illegal spirits shall each contribute ten taels of gold, which shall be expended in joss-sticks, in purifying

the road which they have scorched, and in alleviating the distress of the poor and virtuous of both sexes. The praiseworthy Tsay-hi, moreover, shall embroider upon his sleeve an honourable sign in remembrance of the event. Let drums now be beat, and our verdict loudly proclaimed throughout the province."

These things, O my illustrious father (although on account of my contemptible deficiencies of style much may seem improbable to your all-knowing mind), these things I write with an unbending brush; for I set down only that which I have myself seen, or read in their own printed records. Doubtless it will occur to one of your preternatural intelligence that our own system of administering justice, whereby the person who can hire the greater number of witnesses is reasonably held to be in the right, although perhaps not absolutely infallible, is in every way more convenient; but, as it is well said, "To the blind, night is as acceptable as day."

Henceforth you will have no hesitation in letting it be known throughout Yuen-ping that these foreign barbarians do possess secret demons, in spite of their denials. Doubtless I shall presently discover others no less powerful.

With honourable distinction this person has at length grasped the essential details of the spoken language here—not sufficiently well, indeed, to make himself understood on most occasions, or even to understand others, but enough to perceive clearly when he fails to become intelligible or when they experience a like difficulty with him. Upon an earlier occasion, before he had made so much progress, being one day left to his own resources, and feeling an

internal lack, he entered what appeared to be a tea-shop of reputable demeanour, and, seating himself at one of the little marble tables, he freely pronounced the carefully-learned word “rice” to the attending nymph. To put aside all details of preparation (into which, indeed, this person could not enter) he waved his hand gracefully, at the same time smiling with an expression of tolerant acquiescence, as of one who would say that what was good enough to be cooked and offered by so entrancing a maiden was good enough to be eaten by him. After remaining in unruffled tranquillity for the full portion of an hour, and observing that no other person around had to wait above half that period, this one began to perceive that the enterprise was not likely to terminate in a manner satisfactory to himself; so that, leaving this place with a few well-chosen phrases of intolerable regret in his own tongue, he entered another, and conducted himself in a like fashion.... Towards evening, with an unperturbed exterior, but materially afflicted elsewhere, this person seated himself within the eleventh tea-shop, and, pointing first towards his own constituents of digestion, then at the fire, and lastly in an upward direction, thereby signified to any not of stunted intellect that he had reached such a condition of mind and body that he was ready to consume whatever the ruling deities were willing to allot, whether boiled, baked, roast, or suspended from a skewer. In this resolve nothing would move him, until—after many maidens had approached with outstretched hands and gestures of despair—there presently entered a person wearing the helmet of a warrior and the manner of a high

official, who spoke strongly, yet persuasively, of the virtues of immediate movement and a quiet and reposeful bearing.

Assuredly a people who devote so little attention to the study of food, and all matters connected with it, must inevitably remain barbaric, however skilfully they may feign a superficial refinement. It is said, although I do not commit this matter to my own brush, that among them are more books composed on subjects which have no actual existence than on cooking, and, incredible as it may appear, to be exceptionally round-bodied confers no public honour upon the individual. Should a favourable occasion present itself, there are many who do not scruple to jest upon the subject of food, or, what is incalculably more depraved, upon the scarcity of it.

Nevertheless, there are exceptions of a highly distinguished radiance. Among these must be accounted one into whose presence this person was recently led by our polished and harmonious friend Quang-Tsun, the merchant in tea and spices. This versatile person, whose business-name is spoken of as Jones Bob-Jones, is worthy of all benignant respect, and in a really enlightened country would doubtless be raised to a more exalted position than that of a breaker of outsides (an occupation difficult to express adequately in the written language of a country where it is unknown), for his face is like the sun setting in the time of harvest, his waist garment excessive, and the undoubted symmetry of his middle portions honourable in the extreme. So welcome in my eyes, after witnessing an unending stream of concave and attenuated barbarian ghosts, was the sight of these perfections of Jones Bob-

Jones, that instead of the formal greeting of this Island—the unmeaning “How do you do it?”—I shook hands cordially with myself, and exclaimed affectionately in our own language, “Illimitable felicities! How is your stomach?”

“Well,” replied Jones Bob-Jones, after Quang-Tsun had interpreted this polite salutation to his understanding, “since you mention it, that’s just the trouble; but I’m going on pretty well, thanks. I’ve tried most of the advertised things, and now my doctor has put me practically on a bread-and-water course—clear soup, boiled fish, plain joint, no sweets, a crumb of cheese, and a bare three glasses of Hermitage.”

During this amiable remark (of which, as it is somewhat of a technical nature, I was unable to grasp the contained significance until the agreeable Quang-Tsun had subsequently repeated it several times for my retention), I maintained a consistent expression of harmonious agreement and gratified esteem (suitable, I find, for all like occasions), and then, judging from the sympathetic animation of Jones Bob-Jones’s countenance, that it had not improbably been connected with food, I discreetly introduced the subject of sea-snails, preserved in the essence of crushed peaches, by courteously inquiring whether he had ever partaken of such a delicacy.

“No,” replied the liberal-minded person, when—encouraged by the protruding eagerness of his eyes at the mention of the viand—I had further spoken of the refined flavour of the dish, and explained the manner of its preparation. “I can’t say that I have, but it sounds

uncommonly good—something like turtle, I should imagine. I'll see if they can get it for me at Pimm's."

This filial tribute goes by a trusty hand, in the person of one Ki Nihy, who is shortly committing himself to the protection of his ancestors and the voracity of the unbounded Bitter Waters; and with brightness and gold it will doubtless reach you in the course of twelve or eighteen moons. The superstitious here, this person may describe, when they wish to send messages from one to another, inscribe upon the outer cover a written representation of the one whose habitation they require, and after affixing a small paper talisman, drop it into a hole in the nearest wall, in the hope that it may be ultimately conveyed to the appointed spot, either by the services of the charitably-disposed passer-by, or by the intervention of the beneficent deities.

With a multiplicity of greetings and many abject expressions of a conscious inferiority, and attested by an unvarying thumb-mark.

KONG HO. (Effete branch of a pure and magnanimous trunk.)

To Kong Ah-Paik, reclining beneath the sign of the Lead Tortoise, in a northerly direction beyond the Lotus Beds outside the city of Yuen-ping. The Middle Flowery Kingdom.

## **LETTER II**

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Concerning the ill-destined manner of existence of the hound

Hercules. The thoughtlessly-expressed desire of the entrancing maiden and its effect upon a person of susceptible refinement. The opportune (as it may yet be described) visit of one Herbert. The behaviour of those around. Reflections.

VENERATED SIRE (whose large right hand is continuously floating in spirit over the image of this person's dutiful submission),—

Doubtless to your all-consuming prescience, it will at once become plain that I have abandoned the place of residence from which I directed my former badly-written and offensively-constructed letter, the house of the sympathetic and resourceful Maidens Blank, where in return for an utterly inadequate sum of money, produced at stated intervals, this very much inferior person was allowed to partake of a delicately-balanced and somewhat unvarying fare in the company of the engaging of both sexes, and afterwards to associate on terms of honourable equality with them in the chief apartment. The reason and manner of this one's departure are in no degree formidable to his refined manner of conducting any enterprise, but arose partly from an insufficient grasp of the more elaborate outlines of a confessedly involved language, and still more from a too excessive impetuosity in carrying out what at the time he believed to be the ambition of one who had come to exercise a melodious influence over his most internal emotions. Well remarked the Sage, "A piece of gold may be tried between the teeth; a written promise to pay may be disposed of at a sacrifice to one more credulous; but



what shall be said of the wind, the Hoang Ho, and the way of a woman?"

To contrive a pitfall for this short-sighted person's immature feet, certain malicious spirits had so willed it that the chief and more autumnal of the Maidens Blank (who, nevertheless, wore an excessively flower-like name), had long lavished herself upon the possession of an obtuse and self-assertive hound, which was in the habit of gratifying this inconsiderable person and those who sat around by continually depositing upon their unworthy garments details of its outer surface, and when the weather was more than usually cold, by stretching its graceful and refined body before the fire in such a way as to ensure that no one should suffer from a too acute exposure to the heat. From these causes, and because it was by nature a hound which even on the darkest night could be detected at a more than reasonable distance away, while at all times it did not hesitate to shake itself freely into the various prepared viands, this person (and doubtless others also) regarded it with an emotion very unfavourable towards its prolonged existence; but observing from the first that those who permitted themselves to be deposited upon, and their hands and even their faces to be hound-tongue-defiled with the most externally cheerful spirit of word suppression, invariably received the most desirable of the allotted portions of food, he judged it prudent and conducive to a settled digestion to greet it with favourable terms and actions, and to refer frequently to its well-displayed proportions, and to the agile dexterity which it certainly maintained in breathing into the contents of every dish.

Thus the matter may be regarded as being positioned for a space of time.

One evening I returned at the appointed gong-stroke of dinner, and was beginning, according to my custom, to greet the hound with ingratiating politeness, when the one of chief authority held up a reproving hand, at the same time exclaiming:

“No, Mr. Kong, you must not encourage Hercules with your amiable condescension, for just now he is in very bad odour with us all.”

“Undoubtedly,” replied this person, somewhat puzzled, nevertheless, that the imperfection should thus be referred to openly by one who hitherto had not hesitated to caress the hound with most intimate details, “undoubtedly the surrounding has a highly concentrated acuteness to-night, but the ever-present characteristic of the hound Hercules is by no means new, for whenever he is in the room—”

At this point it is necessary to explain that the ceremonial etiquette of these barbarian outcasts is both conflicting and involved. Upon most of the ordinary occasions of life to obtrude oneself within the conversation of another is a thing not to be done, yet repeatedly when this unpretentious person has been relating his experience or inquiring into the nature and meaning of certain matters which he has witnessed, he has become aware that his words have been obliterated, as it were, and his remarks diverted from their original intention by the sudden and unanticipated desire of those present to express themselves loudly on some topic of not really engrossing interest. Not infrequently on such occasions every one present has spoken at once with

concentrated anxiety upon the condition of the weather, the atmosphere of the room, the hour of the day, or some like detail of contemptible inferiority. At other times maidens of unquestionable politeness have sounded instruments of brass or stringed woods with unceasing vigour, have cast down ornaments of china, or even stood upon each other's—or this person's—feet with assumed inelegance. When, therefore, in the midst of my agreeable remark on the asserted no fragrance of the hound Hercules, a gentleman of habitual refinement struck me somewhat heavily on the back of the head with a reclining seat which he was conveying across the room for the acceptance of a lady, and immediately overwhelmed me with apologies of almost unnecessary profusion, my mind at once leapt to an inspired conclusion, and smiling acquiescently I bowed several times to each person to convey to them an admission of the undoubted fact that to the wise a timely omen before the storm is as effective as a thunderbolt afterwards.

It chanced that there was present the exceptionally prepossessing maiden to whom this person has already referred. So varied and ornate were her attractions that it would be incompetent in one of my less than average ability to attempt an adequate portrayal. She had a light-coloured name with the letters so harmoniously convoluted as to be quite beyond my inferior power of pronunciation, so that if I wished to refer to her in her absence I had to indicate the one I meant by likening her to a full-blown chrysanthemum, a piece of rare jade, an ivory pagoda of unapproachable antiquity, or some other object of admitted grace. Even this description may scarcely convey to you the real extent of