

# Estranged Specie

*a note to the reader of this book, by Wallace Henry*

In invoking the cipher Ernest Bramah, I would begin with an epigram: "Even the classics become obscure in the dark." Jorge Luis Borges assures me – and I must take him at his word – that everything I know of Bramah outside his work is apocryphal. So, inured with time to the ways of the layman, utilizing a mind sessile and disabled from time and the drudgery of dividend management, I look upon the manuscript that has come into my hands with wonder: *The Blade In Oxford*. It purports to be a collection of stories, which constitute a single story. It purports to be published by one Shady Lane Press of London in 1919. And it purports to be authored, from the obscurity of seclusion and incongruous manufacture, by that literary portrait of mystery, Ernest Bramah.

How has a given ignoramus of a bibliophile such as myself come to handle this manuscript, supposedly lettered by the hand of a master stylist? It is by the most convoluted caprice of fate: the means of that online auctioneer, eBay. A small oaken end-table purchased from Great Plains with the intention of antiquing demanded a confoundable surcharge in shipping and handling, and an aspect of this was the packing used to cushion the item in transit. Traditionally done in straw, bubble wrap, foam, or innumerate swatches of scrap fabric, the table was instead packed into its crate with mangled books, mostly trade paperbacks with the front covers removed (a telltale mark of publishing graft). Among Apocalyptic thrillers and selections from political commentators billed with their pointed, crude slogans, I found a buckram-bound volume all but crumbling at the boards, the book you now hold in your hands.

This work knows no edition and scant readers, though its ideas seem to have resonated throughout the century past. Showing a ridiculous amount of invention, suitable in scope if not in vector to the prose stylist, *The Blade In Oxford* will puzzle the critic for some time. Although most expertise exceeds mine, I would immediately cite a few perhaps unconscious followers: Wodehouse, Rohmer, Chesterton. I suppose I should begin to explain.

*The Blade In Oxford* deals with a direct predecessor to Dr. Fu Manchu, an unaging Chinese malefactor named Dr. Bu. Of the Asian multitude raised on grass seed and put to the till by dictators, or those fortunate enough to be scattered to the winds of peace, Dr. Shaojiao Bu is the secret ruler, and through criminal syndicates and government affiliations he bears the authority, poise, and ineluctable obstinacy stereotypical of his race. A wizard and alchemist of megalomaniac thrust, Dr. Bu is especially noted for the “mesmeric pervolutions of his eyes.” The inaugural story, “The Nine Faces of the Warlock,” finds Bu abroad in Vienna, masterminding a plan to steal the Spear of Destiny – a relic said to grant power over all – and replace it with a forgery. But, in the midst of the theft, Bu and his bravos find themselves thwarted by interloper John Miggins, who avails himself of the sacred blade:

*“Loud reports sounded as they busied themselves about the coach. ‘It is valuable! and he wants it! and would kill you for it!’ Avato cried. Striking the flanks of the horses, Miggins admitted, ‘Such an explanation serves the limited ambitions of our central nervous systems. And it is compensatory that I have impressive repertoires of behavior concerning our escape.’”*

Miggins, a privateer and atavistic cult leader thinking to have found “the Infinite Hieroglyphic Key,” must now leave his Forest Club, an order of slavish upper-class popinjays, and his home town Mapperly, a sort of rural Xanadu, to flee Bu’s hand. He takes his brilliant subaltern Avato in his flight, “novel perils blooming at every side,” as they attempt to learn more of their [Yellow M]enacing foe.

Our heroes are not heroes: rather, aberrant men on the run who cannot help solving mysteries. Miggins is – in the frenetic business of surviving Bu’s nemesis – part detective, part adventurer, and completely given in to vice. His proclivity for red wine, pecuniary “evidence” and, as he says it, “*gamahuche!* the Frenchman’s delight,” contaminate *TBIO*’s galvanic central conflict with diversionary folly. Consider this passage from “The Jack–Hammer of Hades”:

*“...it was heard often of Miggins that he prized rickys over all beverage, even the red wine. ‘May God or Whomever save the rogue who offers me a libation of inferior quality,’ he would boast, shaking his fist ruefully at the would-be malefactor. But such invective often gave way to rhapsody, as was the*

*case to-day. 'The charged Mohammed,' Miggins loosely enunciated, proffering a small amount upon his servile man-Italian, Avato, who perched upon the bar-stool like a capuchin. 'It is the tipple of heroes and questers, and those who undertake long journeys...'"*

The style of such passages may lead one to immediately question authorship, though he in meanwhile on complex and pleasurable paths. "The Black Ampoule," something of a homage to Poe, finds Miggins investigating a murder, of which he is the chief suspect, in incognito, assuming the identity of a prominent French inspector. In "The Deliberation of the Fluid," Miggins and Avato split their association to join the feud-parties of rival Bavarian towns, but merely as a means of remunerating their company. Though Miggins is equanimous in the distribution of treasure, the hyper-capable Avato is perhaps the greater thief in the stories – he who in even-handed larceny "chooses to avail himself also of the nailed-down, as an indication of circumstantial bondage best remedied."

Just as disguise is a frequent feature of *TBIO's* episodes, time is also given to Miggins' fraternal pursuits. The "Goldenrods" and "Pussywillows" of his quasi-Masonic Forest Club prove to be, in their illimitable naiveté and spontaneity, the equals of Bu's global network and inexhaustible henchmen. Their intervallic jokes and animadversions provide respite from the action-paced truculence. And even fantasy cannot be stemmed in this multifarious work. In "Return From The Woods, M'Lady," Miggins tangles with "Sabu," a mythical forest god who traps young women. Here Bramah finds a perverse delight in killing off his aristocratic beauties:

*"Avato, what is awry here?" Miggins implored. "I am piqued." He indicated a pink bit of puff-pastry on the road, which led the eye to a nude maiden splayed on her back, her eyes the color of a pure spring.*

*"Alas, her spirit has followed the milky path of the waterbird," Avato, now attending to the form, provided helpfully.*

Even in the throes of delight at a work so obviously aimed at Bramah's devoted readership, I would pose three questions.

One: why a new work, new characters, unaffiliated with Bramah's corpus? Though the plot may at first seem a synthesis of Kai Lung's adventures and Max Carrados' puzzles, and glancing similarities could be surmised with *The Secret*

*of the League*, this work is a *Unikat*, and completely incongruous of origin and literary climate.

Two: while not a genre piece, there is an eclecticism to *TBIO* that is not professionally coalesced. Loose wording and fitful density make this work inconsistent at best, and one fears it was published in rough form, and for vanity. Does this bespeak the legacy of Bramah?

Three: the prescience of this unread book, even in light of its derivation, is remarkable. *TBIO*'s waggish, well-spoken rake (Vance's Cugel), the supernaturally gifted servant (Wodehouse's Jeeves), the composite crimelord manqué (Rohmer's Dr. Fu Manchu), and their hyperbolic, cliché-filled conflict all bear intonations of today's best-seller list or, worse, Hollywood, as opposed to the cool considerations of Bramah's regular protagonists. Is this anachronism fraudulent?

I have devoted no little thought to this, though I will spare you it. Suffice it that the more I attempt conclusion, the less clear the physical and thematic evidence seems... In the dark, as I am, I must assume it is Bramah, and I must enjoy, as I hope you do, the ten wondrous stories that follow. I find myself an old man who forgets, and yet still dreams. Or, as John Miggins better puts it, "Night makes everything more tolerable."