

**KAI LUNG'S GOLDEN
HOURS**

By Ernest Bramah

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With a Preface by
Hilaire Belloc

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PREFACE

Homo faber. Man is born to make. His business is to construct: to plan: to carry out the plan: to fit together, and to produce a finished thing.

That human art in which it is most difficult to achieve this end (and in which it is far easier to neglect it than in any other) is the art of writing. Yet this much is certain, that unconstructed writing is at once worthless and ephemeral: and nearly the whole of our modern English writing is unconstructed.

The matter of survival is perhaps not the most important, though it is a test of a kind, and it is a test which every serious writer feels most intimately. The essential is the matter of excellence: that a piece of work should achieve its end. But in either character, the character of survival or the character of intrinsic excellence, construction deliberate and successful is the fundamental condition.

It may be objected that the mass of writing must in any age neglect construction. We write to establish a record for a few days: or to send a thousand unimportant messages: or to express for others or for ourselves something very vague and perhaps very weak in the way of emotion, which does not demand construction and at any rate cannot command it. No writer can be judged by the entirety of his writings, for these would include every note he ever sent round the corner; every memorandum he ever made upon his shirt cuff. But when a man sets out to write as a serious business, proclaiming that by the nature of his publication and presentment that he is doing something he thinks worthy of the time and place in which he lives and of the people to

whom he belongs, then if he does not construct he is negligible.

Yet, I say, the great mass of men to-day do not attempt it in the English tongue, and the proof is that you can discover in their slipshod pages nothing of a seal or stamp. You do not, opening a book at random, say at once: "This is the voice of such and such a one." It is no one's manner or voice. It is part of a common babel.

Therefore in such a time as that of our decline, to come across work which is planned, executed and achieved has something of the effect produced by the finding of a wrought human thing in the wild. It is like finding, as I once found, deep hidden in the tangled rank grass of autumn in Burgundy, on the edge of a wood not far from Dijon, a neglected statue of the eighteenth century. It is like coming round the corner of some wholly desolate upper valley in the mountains and seeing before one a well-cultivated close and a strong house in the midst.

It is now many years—I forget how many; it may be twenty or more, or it may be a little less—since *The Wallet of Kai Lung* was sent me by a friend. The effect produced upon my mind at the first opening of its pages was in the same category as the effect produced by the discovery of that hidden statue in Burgundy, or the coming upon an unexpected house in the turn of a high Pyrenean gorge. Here was something worth doing and done. It was not a plan attempted and only part achieved (though even that would be rare enough to-day, and a memorable exception); it was a thing intended, wrought out, completed and established. Therefore it was destined to endure and, what is more important, it was a success.

The time in which we live affords very few of such moments of relief: here and there a good piece of verse, in *The New Age* or in the now defunct *Westminster*: here and

there a lapidary phrase such as a score or more of Blatchford's which remain fixed in my memory. Here and there a letter written to the newspapers in a moment of indignation when the writer, not trained to the craft, strikes out the metal justly at white heat. But, I say, the thing is extremely rare, and in the shape of a complete book rarest of all.

The Wallet of Kai Lung was a thing made deliberately, in hard material and completely successful. It was meant to produce a particular effect of humour by the use of a foreign convention, the Chinese convention, in the English tongue. It was meant to produce a certain effect of philosophy and at the same time it was meant to produce a certain completed interest of fiction, of relation, of a short epic. It did all these things.

It is one of the tests of excellent work that such work is economic, that is, that there is nothing redundant in order or in vocabulary, and at the same time nothing elliptic—in the full sense of that word: that is, no sentence in which so much is omitted that the reader is left puzzled. That is the quality you get in really good statuary—in Houdon, for instance, or in that triumph the archaic *Archer* in the Louvre. *The Wallet of Kai Lung* satisfied all these conditions.

I do not know how often I have read it since I first possessed it. I know how many copies there are in my house—just over a dozen. I know with what care I have bound it constantly for presentation to friends. I have been asked for an introduction to this its successor, *Kai Lung's Golden Hours*. It is worthy of its forerunner. There is the same plan, exactitude, working-out and achievement; and therefore the same complete satisfaction in the reading, or to be more accurate, in the incorporation of the work with oneself.

All this is not extravagant praise, nor even praise at all in the conventional sense of that term. It is merely a judgment: a putting into as carefully exact words as I can find the appreciation I make of this style and its triumph.

The reviewer in his art must quote passages. It is hardly the part of a Preface writer to do that. But to show what I mean I can at least quote the following:

“Your insight is clear and unbiased,” said the gracious Sovereign. “But however entrancing it is to wander unchecked through a garden of bright images, are we not enticing your mind from another subject of almost equal importance?”

Or again:

“It has been said,” he began at length, withdrawing his eyes reluctantly from an unusually large insect upon the ceiling and addressing himself to the maiden, “that there are few situations in life that cannot be honourably settled, and without any loss of time, either by suicide, a bag of gold, or by thrusting a despised antagonist over the edge of a precipice on a dark night.”

Or again:

“After secretly observing the unstudied grace of her movements, the most celebrated picture-maker of the province burned the implements of his craft, and began life anew as a trainer of performing elephants.”

You cannot read these sentences, I think, without agreeing with what has been said above. If you doubt it, take the old test and try to write that kind of thing yourself.

In connection with such achievements it is customary to-day to deplore the lack of public appreciation. Either to blame the hurried millions of chance readers because they have only bought a few thousands of a masterpiece; or, what is worse still, to pretend that good work is for the few and that the mass will never appreciate it—in reply to which it is sufficient to say that the critic himself is one of the mass and could not be distinguished from others of the mass by his very own self were he a looker-on.

In the best of times (the most stable, the least hurried) the date at which general appreciation comes is a matter of chance, and to-day the presentation of any achieved work is like the reading of Keats to a football crowd. It is of no significance whatsoever to English Letters whether one of its glories be appreciated at the moment it issues from the press or ten years later, or twenty, or fifty. Further, after a very small margin is passed, a margin of a few hundreds at the most, it matters little whether strong permanent work finds a thousand or fifty thousand or a million of readers. Rock stands and mud washes away.

What is indeed to be deplored is the lack of communication between those who desire to find good stuff and those who can produce it: it is in the attempt to build a bridge between the one and the other that men who have the privilege of hearing a good thing betimes write such words as I am writing here.

HILAIRE BELLOC

KAI LUNG'S GOLDEN HOURS

CHAPTER I

The Encountering of Six within a Wood

Only at one point along the straight earth-road leading from Loo-chow to Yu-ping was there any shade, a wood of stunted growth, and here Kai Lung cast himself down in refuge from the noontide sun and slept.

When he woke it was with the sound of discreet laughter trickling through his dreams. He sat up and looked around. Across the glade two maidens stood in poised expectancy within the shadow of a wild fig-tree, both their gaze and their manner denoting a fixed intention to be prepared for any emergency. Not being desirous that this should tend towards their abrupt departure, Kai Lung rose guardedly to his feet, with many gestures of polite reassurance, and having bowed several times to indicate his pacific nature, he stood in an attitude of deferential admiration. At this display the elder and less attractive of the maidens fled, uttering loud and continuous cries of apprehension in order to conceal the direction of her flight. The other remained, however, and even moved a few steps nearer to Kai Lung, as though encouraged by his appearance, so that he was able to regard her varying details more appreciably. As she advanced she plucked a red blossom from a thorny bush, and from time to time she shortened the broken stalk between her jade teeth.

“Courteous loiterer,” she said, in a very pearl-like voice, when they had thus regarded one another for a few beats of time, “what is your honourable name, and who are you who tarry here, journeying neither to the east nor to the west?”

“The answer is necessarily commonplace and unworthy of your polite interest,” was the diffident reply. “My unbecoming name is Kai, to which has been added that of Lung. By profession I am an incapable relater of imagined tales, and to this end I spread my mat wherever my uplifted voice can entice together a company to listen. Should my feeble efforts be deemed worthy of reward, those who stand around may perchance contribute to my scanty store, but sometimes this is judged superfluous. For this cause I now turn my expectant feet from Loo-chow towards the untried city of Yu-ping, but the undiminished li stretching relentlessly before me, I sought beneath these trees a refuge from the noontide sun.”

“The occupation is a dignified one, being to no great degree removed from that of the Sages who compiled The Books,” remarked the maiden, with an encouraging smile. “Are there many stories known to your retentive mind?”

“In one form or another, all that exist are within my mental grasp,” admitted Kai Lung modestly. “Thus equipped, there is no arising emergency for which I am unprepared.”

“There are other things that I would learn of your craft. What kind of story is the most favourably received, and the one whereby your collecting bowl is the least ignored?”

“That depends on the nature and condition of those who stand around, and therein lies much that is essential to the art,” replied Kai Lung, not without an element of pride. “Should the company be chiefly formed of the illiterate and the immature of both sexes, stories depicting the embarrassment of unnaturally round-bodied mandarins, the unpremeditated flight of eccentrically-garbed passers-by into vats of powdered rice, the despair of guardians of the street when assailed by showers of eggs and overripe lo-quats, or any other variety of humiliating pain inflicted upon the innocent and unwary, never fail to win approval.

The prosperous and substantial find contentment in hearing of the unassuming virtues and frugal lives of the poor and unsuccessful. Those of humble origin, especially tea-house maidens and the like, are only really at home among stories of the exalted and quick-moving, the profusion of their robes, the magnificence of their palaces, and the general high-minded depravity of their lives. Ordinary persons require stories dealing lavishly with all the emotions, so that they may thereby have a feeling of sufficiency when contributing to the collecting bowl.”

“These things being so,” remarked the maiden, “what story would you consider most appropriate to a company composed of such as she who is now conversing with you?”

“Such a company could never be obtained,” replied Kai Lung, with conviction in his tone. “It is not credible that throughout the Empire could be found even another possessing all the engaging attributes of the one before me. But should it be my miraculous fortune to be given the opportunity, my presumptuous choice for her discriminating ears alone would be the story of the peerless Princess Taik and of the noble minstrel Ch’eng, who to regain her presence chained his wrist to a passing star and was carried into the assembly of the gods.”

“Is it,” inquired the maiden, with an agreeable glance towards the opportune recumbence of a fallen tree, “is it a narration that would lie within the passage of the sun from one branch of this willow to another?”

“Adequately set forth, the history of the Princess Taik and of the virtuous youth occupies all the energies of an agile story-teller for seven weeks,” replied Kai Lung, not entirely gladdened that she should deem him capable of offering so meagre an entertainment as that she indicated. “There is a much-flattened version which may be compressed within

the narrow limits of a single day and night, but even that requires for certain of the more moving passages the accompaniment of a powerful drum or a hollow wooden fish.”

“Alas!” exclaimed the maiden, “though the time should pass like a flash of lightning beneath the allurements of your art, it is questionable if those who await this one’s returning footsteps would experience a like illusion. Even now—” With a magnanimous wave of her well-formed hand she indicated the other maiden, who, finding that the danger of pursuit was not sustained, had returned to claim her part.

“One advances along the westward road,” reported the second maiden. “Let us fly elsewhere, O allurer of mankind! It may be—”

“Doubtless in Yu-ping the sound of your uplifted voice—” But at this point a noise upon the earth-road, near at hand, impelled them both to sudden flight into the deeper recesses of the wood.

Thus deprived, Kai Lung moved from the shadow of the trees and sought the track, to see if by chance he from whom they fled might turn to his advantage. On the road he found one who staggered behind a laborious wheel-barrow in the direction of Loo-chow. At that moment he had stopped to take down the sail, as the breeze was bereft of power among the obstruction of the trees, and also because he was weary.

“Greeting,” called down Kai Lung, saluting him. “There is here protection from the fierceness of the sun and a stream wherein to wash your feet.”

“Haply,” replied the other; “and a greatly over-burdened one would gladly leave this ill-nurtured earth-road even for the fields of hell, were it not that all his goods are here contained upon an utterly intractable wheel-barrow.”

Nevertheless he drew himself up from the road to the level of the wood and there reclined, yet not permitting the wheel-barrow to pass beyond his sight, though he must thereby lie half in the shade and half in the heat beyond. "Greeting, wayfarer."

"Although you are evidently a man of some wealth, we are for the time brought to a common level by the forces that control us," remarked Kai Lung. "I have here two onions, a gourd and a sufficiency of millet paste. Partake equally with me, therefore, before you resume your way. In the meanwhile I will procure water from the stream near by, and to this end my collecting bowl will serve."

When Kai Lung returned he found that the other had added to their store a double handful of dates, some snuff and a little jar of oil. As they ate together the stranger thus disclosed his mind:

"The times are doubtful and it behoves each to guard himself. In the north the banners of the 'Spreading Lotus' and the 'Avenging Knife' are already raised and pressing nearer every day, while the signs and passwords are so widely flung that every man speaks slowly and with a double tongue. Lately there have been slicings and other forms of vigorous justice no farther distant than Loo-chow, and now the Mandarin Shan Tien comes to Yu-ping to flatten any signs of discontent. The occupation of this person is that of a maker of sandals and coverings for the head, but very soon there will be more wooden feet required than leather sandals in Yu-ping, and artificial ears will be greater in demand than hats. For this reason he has got together all his goods, sold the more burdensome, and now ventures on an untried way."

"Prosperity attend your goings. Yet, as one who has set his face towards Yu-ping, is it not possible for an ordinary

person of simple life and unassuming aims to escape persecution under this same Shan Tien?"

"Of the Mandarin himself those who know speak with vague lips. What is done is done by the pressing hand of one Ming-shu, who takes down his spoken word; of whom it is truly said that he has little resemblance to a man and still less to an angel."

"Yet," protested the story-teller hopefully, "it is wisely written: 'He who never opens his mouth in strife can always close his eyes in peace.'"

"Doubtless," assented the other. "He can close his eyes assuredly. Whether he will ever again open them is another matter."

With this timely warning the sandal-maker rose and prepared to resume his journey. Nor did he again take up the burden of his task until he had satisfied himself that the westward road was destitute of traffic.

"A tranquil life and a painless death," was his farewell parting. "Jung, of the line of Hai, wishes you well." Then, with many imprecations on the relentless sun above, the inexorable road beneath, and on every detail of the evilly-balanced load before him, he passed out on his way.

It would have been well for Kai Lung had he also forced his reluctant feet to raise the dust, but his body clung to the moist umbrage of his couch, and his mind made reassurance that perchance the maiden would return. Thus it fell that when two others, who looked from side to side as they hastened on the road, turned as at a venture to the wood they found him still there.

"Restrain your greetings," said the leader of the two harshly, in the midst of Kai Lung's courteous obeisance; "and do not presume to disparage yourself as if in equality with the

one who stands before you. Have two of the inner chamber, attired thus and thus, passed this way? Speak, and that to a narrow edge.”

“The road lies beyond the perception of my incapable vision, chiefest,” replied Kai lung submissively. “Furthermore, I have slept.”

“Unless you would sleep more deeply, shape your stubborn tongue to a specific point,” commanded the other, touching a meaning sword. “Who are you who loiter here, and for what purpose do you lurk? Speak fully, and be assured that your word will be put to a corroding test.”

Thus encouraged, Kai Lung freely disclosed his name and ancestry, the means whereby he earned a frugal sustenance and the nature of his journey. In addition, he professed a willingness to relate his most recently-acquired story, that entitled “Wu-yong: or The Politely Inquiring Stranger”, but the offer was thrust ungracefully aside.

“Everything you say deepens the suspicion which your criminal-looking face naturally provokes,” said the questioner, putting away his tablets on which he had recorded the replies. “At Yu-ping the matter will be probed with a very definite result. You, Li-loe, remain about this spot in case she whom we seek should pass. I return to speak of our unceasing effort.”

“I obey,” replied the dog-like Li-loe. “What men can do we have done. We are no demons to see through solid matter.”

When they were alone, Li-loe drew nearer to Kai Lung and, allowing his face to assume a more pacific bend, he cast himself down by the story-teller’s side.

“The account which you gave of yourself was ill contrived,” he said. “Being put to the test, its falsity cannot fail to be discovered.”

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