

The Glue of Creation

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‘There is a time and a place appointed for everything’ – *Lehez rendition of the Christian Book of the Dead*

‘What you do not understand,’ the old man told him, ‘is the power of visual representation, of any kind. You seek to build a world based on the television, yet you know nothing about it. It is dangerous: you cannot control what you do not understand.’

‘But what exactly do you mean?’

‘Oh, how can I make you understand?’ the old man muttered, exasperated. He stared into the fire, and was silent for several minutes. ‘I think,’ he began at last, slowly, ‘yes, I think that I will tell you about Gadubehon. Then, perhaps, you will understand.’

He watched the fire a moment longer, then took off his glasses, put them in the case which he took from his breast pocket, and laid it on the table at his side. He settled deeper into the couch, resting his head against it, closed his eyes, and sighed. Then, hesitant at first, as if remembering something which happened a long time ago, which, as the teller relates it, becomes real once more, he began to speak.

‘Gadubehon was of the world, but was never at peace with it. He was an enigma, and, frightened of enigmas, people would not know him. How could anyone befriend such a one? He was so cold, distant, as if a ghost, a projection from elsewhere, elsewhere. He was an Oriental, yet he spoke only English, and that with a Scandinavian accent. He lived in London, worked in a small bookshop in the West end. He always sat in St. James’ Park on Saturdays, and stayed at home on Sundays. He very rarely went out except to go to work, as he detested company.

‘He was a completely inward-looking man, you see. It was almost as if no one else existed. He had only two interests in life: collecting glass marbles and photography. He was a rather good amateur photographer in fact, and it was very hard to tell which of the prints in his house he had bought, and which were photographs which he himself had taken.

‘It so happened that as he was feeding the pigeons in St. James’ Park the remains of his Saturday lunch one weekend, a gust of wind blew a small poster which had been lying underneath the bench out in front of him. The pigeons ignored it, but Gadubehon noticed the words “Oriental Print Sale” and stopped feeding the pigeons and leant down to pick up the poster. He read it thoroughly, and discovered that the next Monday afternoon there was to be a sale of a small private collection of early oriental prints in a local museum, quite close to the bookshop where he worked. The proceeds would be donated to the museum. Inexplicably, he felt compelled to go to the sale, although he was not particularly interested in oriental photography. He decided to go anyway, as perhaps he would find another print to add to his small collection.

‘Upon arriving at work on Monday morning, he asked for the afternoon off, and the shop’s owner, though surprised at such a request from Gadubehon who had not taken time off since his arrival at the shop some years earlier, granted the request.

‘At lunch time that day, Gadubehon left the shop as usual and went home for lunch. After the meal, he put on his coat and went to the bank where he withdrew twenty pounds. Then, he walked to the museum, a small local exhibit two streets from his house.

‘The sale was rather disappointing: Gadubehon found that all the good prints had already been reserved, and all that was still for sale was a small number of rather badly preserved photographs, many of the images unrecognisable. Nevertheless he continued to look in the hope of finding a good print which had been overlooked by the other buyers, and, sifting carefully through a green shoebox he made, almost at the bottom, a rather extraordinary discovery.

‘The photograph was of the Great Wall of China: Gadubehon deduced that much from the way it was built, although the photograph had been taken from close up. There was a strange blurred patch in the middle, and a faded date written in pencil on the back of which only the last two digits were visible: 40.

‘“This is rather strange”, Gadubehon thought, “for this could not be a day or a month, and a picture taken in 1940 would not be an early print”. He asked the man selling the prints about it, who said that he had not seen it before, and offered to sell it to him for five shillings. Gadubehon, intrigued by the photograph, took it, and returned to his house, wondering all the time about the picture, and stopping now and then to examine it.

‘It seemed to him when he examined the picture more closely that the blurred section of the picture was a silhouetted figure standing against the wall, but he could make no more of it.

‘That night, as he slept, he dreamt of the picture, and in his dreams it seemed to grow clearer, the silhouette turning into a man dressed in an ancient Chinese nobleman’s clothes, but he still could not distinguish the face of the man. He awoke several times during the night, and in the morning was very tired. He went to the bookshop as usual, but was unable to concentrate on his work, and finally, when he gave a customer the wrong book and overcharged her the owner of the shop told him to go home and rest. He did so reluctantly, and spent two hours walking around the streets before he finally entered the house; for he had seen the face of the man in the picture in his mind’s eye and it was his own.

‘When Gadubehon finally reentered his house it was early evening. He did not want to look at the picture again, but could not resist its strange attraction. He felt strangely insubstantial, as if he was slowly slipping away, dissolving in some way out of the world, travelling by degrees in an impossible direction.

‘Finally in despair he tore up the picture and at that instant he fell into unconsciousness.

‘When he awoke he was lying under a blue sky, on grass. He stood up and turned, and stared, fascinated, horrified, understanding and rejoicing at the same time. He was looking at the Great Wall of China. He looked down at himself. He was the nobleman. This was his time, his place, not twentieth century England. He was home at last, pulled by the strongest ties of all, ties of creation, all worked through a picture.’

‘But how do you know all this?’ asked the young man, ‘You cannot possibly know the whole story, especially the end. You said that Gadu... whatever, he was secretive, talked to no one. I think you’re making it all up.’

The old man opened his eyes and stared into the fire again, ignoring the other’s unbelieving stare. At length he turned back to the young man and regarded him gently with a hint of a smile. ‘I was the photographer,’ he said.