



The Conflagration in Ghargaroo



BY AMBROSE BIERCE

WHILE in Ghargaroo (said the Returned Traveler) I heard much of the great statesman and philosopher, Juptka-Getch, who was accounted the wisest person in the realm and was held in so high honor and esteem that none dared speak to him without permission of the sovereign. Having obtained this through the happy accident of having a wart on the left side of my nose, as had a cousin of the prime minister, I went humbly to the great man's dwelling, which to my astonishment I found to be an unfurnished cave in the side of a mountain. Inexpressibly surprised to observe that a favorite of the sovereign and the people was so meanly housed, I ventured, after my salutation, to ask how this could be so. Regarding me with an indulgent smile, the venerable man, who was about two hundred and fifty years old and entirely bald, explained.

"In one of our Sacred Books, of which we have three thousand," said he, "it is written, '*Goolooloo ek wakwah betenka,*' and in another, '*Jebeb uq seedroy im aboltraqu ocrux ti smelkit.*'"

Translated, these mean, respectively, "The poor are blessed," and, "Heaven is not easily entered by those who are rich."

I asked Juptka-Getch if his countrymen really gave to these texts a practical application in the affairs of life.

"Why, surely," he replied, "you cannot think us such fools as to disregard the teachings of our gods! That would be madness. I cannot imagine a people so mentally and morally depraved as that! Can you?"

Observing me blushing and stammering,

he inquired the cause of my embarrassment. "The thought of so incredible a thing confuses me," I managed to reply. "But tell me if in your piety and wisdom you really stripped yourself of all your property in order to obey the gods and get the benefit of indigence."

"I did not have to do so," he replied with a smile; "my king attended to that. When he wishes to distinguish one of his subjects by a mark of his favor, he impoverishes him to such a degree as will attest the exact measure of the royal approbation. I am proud to say that he took from me all that I had."

"But, pardon me," I said; "how does it occur that among a people which regards poverty as the greatest earthly good all are not poor? I observe here as much wealth and 'prosperity' as in my own country."

Juptka-Getch folded his legs across the back of his neck (an attitude which in Ghargaroo signifies profound reflection) and after a few moments answered: "The only person in this country that owns anything is the king; in the service of his people he afflicts himself with that burden. All property, of whatsoever kind, is his, to do with as he will. He divides it among his subjects in the ratio of their demerit, as determined by the waguks—local officers—whose duty it is to know personally everyone in their jurisdiction. To the most desperate and irreclaimable criminals is allotted the greatest wealth, which is taken from them, little by little, as they show signs of reformation."

"But what," said I, "is to prevent the wicked from becoming poor at any time? How can the king and his officers keep the unworthy, suffering the punishment and peril of wealth, from giving it away?"

"To whom, for example?" replied the illustrious man, taking the great toe of his right foot in his mouth, as is the fashion in Ghargaroo when awaiting an important communication. The respectful formality of the posture imperfectly concealed the irony of the question, but I was not to be silenced.

"One might convert one's property into money," I persisted, "and throw the money into the sea."

Juptka-Getch released the toe and gravely answered: "Every person in Ghargaroo is compelled by law to keep minute accounts of his income and expenditures, and must swear to them. There is an annual appraisal by the waguk, and any needless decrease in the value of an estate is punished by skinning the offender's legs. Expenditures for luxuries and high living are, of course, approved, for it is universally known among us, and attested by many popular proverbs, that the pleasures of the rich are vain and disappointing. So they are considered a part of the punishment, and not only allowed but required. A man sentenced to wealth who lives frugally, indulging in only rational and inexpensive delights, has his ears cut off for the first offense, and for the second is compelled to pass six months at court, participating in all the gaieties of the capital."

"Most illustrious of mortals," I said, turning a somersault—the Ghargarese manner of interrupting a discourse—"I am as the dust upon your beard, but in my own country I am esteemed no fool, and right humbly do I perceive that you are *ecxrop-tug nemk putlog peleemy*."

This expression translates, literally, "giving me a fill," a phrase without meaning in our tongue, but in Ghargarese appearing to imply incredulity.

"The gaieties of the king's court," I continued, "must be expensive. The courtiers of the sovereign's entourage, the great officers of the realm—surely they are not condemned to wealth, like common criminals!"

"My son," said Juptka-Getch, tearing out a handful of his beard to signify his tranquillity under accusation, "your doubt of my veracity is noted with satisfaction, but it is not permitted to you to impeach

my sovereign's infallible knowledge of character. His courtiers, the great officers of the realm, as you truly name them, are the richest men in the country because he knows them to be the greatest rascals. After each annual reapportionment of the national wealth he settles all the unallotted surplus upon them."

Prostrating myself before the eminent philosopher, I craved his pardon for my doubt of his sovereign's wisdom and consistency, and begged him to cut off my head.

"Nay," he said, "you have committed the unpardonable sin and I cannot consent to bestow upon you the advantages of death. You shall continue to live the thing that you are."

"What!" I cried, "is it thought in Ghargaroo that death is an advantage, a blessing?"

"Our Sacred Books," he said, "are full of texts affirming the vanity of life."

My astonishment was for some moments too great for words. When I had recovered the power of speech, I said, "Then I infer that the death penalty is unknown to your laws!"

"We have the life penalty instead. Convicted criminals are not only enriched, as already explained, but by medical attendance kept alive as long as possible. On the other hand, the very righteous, who have been rewarded with poverty, are permitted to die whenever it pleases them."

Juptka-Getch again crossed his feet upon the back of his neck in meditation, and presently said, "Do not the Sacred Books of your country teach the vanity of life, the blessedness of poverty and the wickedness of wealth?"

"They do, O Most Illustrious, they do."

"And your countrymen believe?"

"Surely—none but the foolish and depraved entertain a doubt."

"Then I waste my breath in expounding laws and customs already known to you. You have, of course, the same."

At this I averted my face and blushed so furiously that the walls of the cave were illuminated with a wavering crimson like the light of a great conflagration! Thinking that the capital city was ablaze, Juptka-Getch ran from the cave's mouth, crying, "Fire, fire!" and I saw him no more.