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MYSTERY OF ERNEST BRAMAH

From a Talk by
JOHN CONNELL
in the BBC Third
Programme



THE only known photograph of Ernest Bramah, taken about 1936

IN the summer of 1942 there died at Weston - super-Mare a Mr. E. B. Smith, a man in his seventy-fifth year—a man of quiet and secluded habits. Next day *The Times's* obituary of this elderly recluse extended to some three-quarters of a column. For Mr. E. B. Smith was known to the world as Ernest Bramah—a writer of delicate and markedly individual talent. No man ever kept more firmly and continually distinct the two parts of himself, the writer and his own private personality. No author in recent times so jealously or so successfully guarded his privacy. Ernest Bramah never received any of the glossy well-publicised prizes of his profession. He fended off the interviewers. Even his publishers did not see him for years at a time. During one period of his life he lived at Ravenscourt Park, within easy reach of all the literary lion-tamers in London; but somehow he eluded them. Even Sir John Squire, who was one of his keenest admirers, with whom he exchanged a long and stimulating correspondence, was never able to lure him to a meal or a meeting, in spite of the most zealous attempts. Appointments were even made by telephone; and then, at the last moment, most unfortunately Bramah was summoned away suddenly to the country.

"Like An Aged Mandarin"

There remains, however, by an odd chance, one photograph of him taken late in life. The fact that after so many years he had that photograph taken, the fact that he gave it to his last publisher, is perhaps a single, rather engaging inconsistency in the otherwise flawless pattern which he made of his life. In that photograph he looks for all the world like an aged Mandarin of ancient lineage and ripe culture. There is the high, domed forehead. There are the seams and the lines in the countenance, drawn by irony and pity and laughing wisdom. There is the sage humility and the gentle kindness; and there behind the owlish spectacles is the sudden, sharp and violently illuminating gleam of wit.

Bramah, in more than forty years of writing, attained great and merited distinction by the establishment and the unflagging manipulation of an ingenious but rigidly artificial convention of oriental story-telling. The China of which his "Kai Lung" tales are so undeviating an evocation lives and glows in your mind for ever once you have met it. That China—its people, its manners, its landscape—is as real and as comprehensibly Chinese as anything described by Peter Fleming or Robert Payne or Pearl Buck; and it is mercifully unaffected by contemporary political controversy. Hilaire

Belloc, who year after year was one of Bramah's stoutest and most generous champions, once wrote to the editors of a learned Chinese quarterly in Hong Kong to ask their views on Kai Lung. He never had any answer; and I am afraid there is not a scrap of evidence that Bramah ever went out of Europe in his life. I think we must accept it, therefore, that his knowledge and love of China and of things Chinese were products entirely of his own mind and temper.

The Books of Kai Lung

Bramah published, in all, four Kai Lung books. The first, *The Wallet of Kai Lung*, appeared in 1900; the last, *Kai Lung Beneath the Mulberry Tree*, in 1940. The two intermediate books appeared, *Kai Lung's Golden Hours* in 1922, and *Kai Lung Unrolls his Mat* in 1928. These four books together make up Ernest Bramah's highly individual contribution to lasting English literature. It is no small contribution. Published as they were at widely spaced intervals over forty years, they still show no shadow of deviation or loss of power. The last pages of *Kai Lung Beneath the Mulberry Tree* are as deft and as crystalline as the first of *The Wallet*.

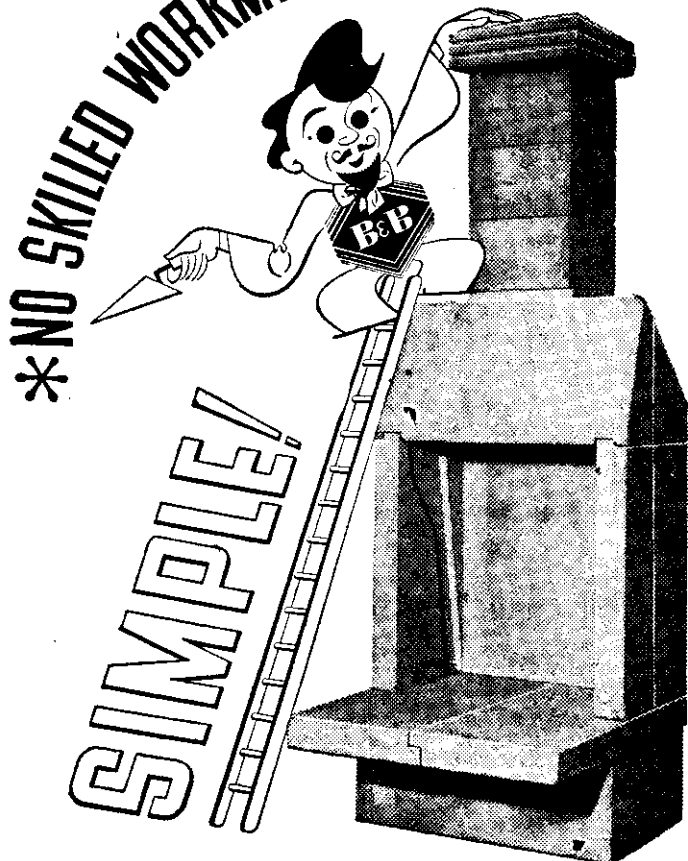
How unendurable is the position of a person who by the vicissitudes of fate is condemned to a detested lot! Why should the one who is speaking, owing to an irrational father's unbecoming whim, be on the point of an alliance with a penurious and intellectually moth-eaten writer of third-rate verse when she had long in secret fixed her hopes on the congenial image of a profound philosopher, who in addition to being in every way a more trustworthy guide would have been able to satisfy her most fanciful ambitions?

That was written in 1940. It has precisely the same flawless texture, its sentences are modulated in precisely the same rippling rhythm as those of this passage, which Bramah wrote more than forty years earlier:

"The unusual circumstances of the mat have already been put forth," said an elderly Mandarin of engaging appearance, "so that nothing remains to be made known except the end of our despicable efforts to come to an agreeable conclusion. In this we have been successful, and now desire to notify the result. A very desirable and not unremunerative office, rarely bestowed in this manner, is lately vacant, and taking into our minds the circumstances of the event, and the fact that Ling comes from a

(continued on next page)

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