

Gilbert
and
Edgar
on
Mars

Eric Brown



GILBERT AND EDGAR ON MARS

Copyright © 2009 by Eric Brown

COVER ART

Copyright © 2009 by J. K. Potter

The right of Eric Brown to be identified as Author of this Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Published in December 2009 by PS Publishing Ltd. by arrangement with the author. All rights reserved by the author.

FIRST EDITION

ISBN

978-1-906301-68-2 (Jacketed Hardcover)

978-1-906301-67-5 (Trade Hardcover)

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Printed in England by the MPG Books Group

PS Publishing Ltd / Grosvenor House / 1 New Road /
Hornsea, HU18 1PG / England

editor@pspublishing.co.uk / <http://www.pspublishing.co.uk>

|

The Man In Green

On a winter's evening towards the end of the year, when the warmth of the day had faded with the setting of the sun, there emerged from the hallowed portals of the Athenaeum three gentlemen of equal standing in the world of letters. If their literary stature was equal, however, the same cannot be said for their physical aspect. The first gentleman was as tall and spare as the third was small and round, and the citizen between them, while having the height of the first, had the girth and more besides of the third. To appropriate the quaint terminology of the book trade, he could be described as a substantial tome, shabby and slightly foxed, with rubbed edges and the appearance of being much read. He was known as G.K. to his friends, though the reading public of Great Britain, in the first third of the twentieth century, was more accustomed to the ubiquitous by-line of G.K. Chesterton.

3

The three men paused on the top step of the Athenaeum as if they had stopped of one accord, though the fact was that they all had their own private reasons. Shaw, the Fabian playwright, pulled from his waist-coat a pocket-watch and read the time with a frown; Wells, that indefatigable rationalist and secular propagandist, scanned the bustling street for any sign of a taxi cab; while Chesterton, literary journalist, Catholic apologist, fantastical novelist and paradoxical poet, was stopped in his tracks by a sight that his friends, in their preoccupation with more quotidian matters, had failed to observe. Above the higgledy-piggledy rooftops of London there blazed, with such a fanfare of primary colours, a sunset that seemed to promise fairyland or some Elysian portal to another and better world.

4 ∫ His breath was quite taken away by its glory, and he was suddenly overcome by the desire to repair to his favourite ale house and compose a heady poem all about sunsets, sacrament and salvation.

Shaw and Wells were taking their leave. "We live to fight another day, G.K.," said Wells with a twinkle in his eye, for they had been debating before an enraptured audience, with fiery rhetoric and good humour, how best to put the World to Rights.

"Our swords again will cross," added Shaw, "in the letters column of the Times, no doubt."

"No doubt," said Chesterton, and then, "I am in need of sustenance of a hoppish nature, and perhaps a beef sausage besides. I know you won't accompany me," he said to Shaw, a teetotaller and a vegetarian, "but perhaps you, Bertie?"

"Some other time, old boy," Wells said. "The little lady awaits."

Chesterton nodded and chewed on the overhang of his walrus moustache, and wondered who, on this occasion, the lit le lady might be.

“In that case,” he said without censure, lif ing his cane and pointing along the avenue as if leading a charge, “I will leave you to your amusement and hie my bones onward. I feel,” he mut ered to himself, as he waved farewell to his wrong-headed friends and sallied forth like a galleon put ing out to sea, “I feel the muse descending.”

And with his head down, the bet er to behold the fagstones beneath his feet, which were known to be treacherous at all times of year, and especially so now, he limped towards The Cheshire Cheese in Lit le Essex Street, mut ering opening lines describing gorgeous sunsets like celestial hosannas made visual.

The streets were crowded on this sixth day before Christmas, as the citizens of the isle were kow-towing in droves before the false god of commerce. For a man of Chesterton’s dimensions and legendary poor eye-sight it would have been a miracle had he negotiated his way without collision. It was therefore more surprising that, when he did collide with a fellow pedestrian, it was not his fault, though he was profuse in his pre-emptive apologies.

“Why, my dear sir! Clumsy of me! How clumsy! I was, as the poets say, away in a world of my own . . .” All this said while he was helping to his feet the diminutive gentleman who had just rebounded from Chesterton’s considerable bulk and landed on the seat of his pants.

“The fault was entirely my own, sir!” responded the f us-tered citizen, who was peering up through a pair of *pince nez* perched upon the bridge of his nose. “You see—how

shall I put it?—I was hoping to bump into you, though not literally. I was hurrying to accost you before the debate broke up, and then ask you a favour.”

“A favour? Then ask. No man should be reluctant to request a genuine favour, just as no man should refuse at least to listen.” And as he spoke he screwed his monocle into his right eye and peered more closely at his interlocutor. There was something at once everyday and other-worldly about the man; that is to say, the familiarity lay in the fact that he wore a neat suit of green tweeds, though of such a pea-green hue as to suggest eccentricity, and the other-worldliness was due to the fact that he was of such minuscule proportions as to hint at his being the second cousin of an elf or a leprechaun.

“Well, to be perfectly blunt, sir, I have long been a devotee of your works. Indeed one might say your writing is something of a passion of mine.”

Chesterton harrumphed; he was of a mind to say that passion should be saved for Christ, or at least for good ale, but he held his tongue for fear of sounding immodest.

“The simple fact of the matter,” continued the man with the manner and mien of the leprechaun he so resembled, “is that I live close by and I possess a volume or two of your work, and I would be indebted to you if you might see your way to adding an inscription . . .” And he trailed off and blinked up at Chesterton with such an expression of pitiful supplication that the great man could hardly find it in himself to refuse.

“I have ten minutes,” he said, hoisting his cane. “Lead the way, good sir!”

The little man wrung his hands before his chest, and a tear appeared in the corner of his eye. “Why, my dear sir,

you have quite made my day. This way, if you would be so good, this way . . .”

And so saying he scurried of through the crowds with such alacrity that Chesterton had difficulty in locating the dwarf through the forest of marching arms and legs; when he did so, the man had paused at the entrance of a short alley or mews, and was gesturing for Chesterton to follow.

He did as he was bid, pulling his cape around his neck and hurrying to keep pace, though with shortness of breath and a recurrence of gyp from his swollen left foot.

All the while, the manikin was keeping up an effusive litany of gratitude; “Quite overwhelmed, my dear sir. It is not every day that one is graced by the company of such an illustrious scribe.”

“Come, come, sir,” said Chesterton with the shuffling discomfort of the over-praised. “I’m a journalist, no more—”

“No more?” said the little man, turning to look over his shoulder. “Why, you are much, much more in my eyes, sir.”

They had passed a good hundred yards down the darkened mews, between two blocks of town-houses that reared up on either hand like the walls of a natural canyon, and the man was approaching a great black door as he said, “Why, sir, I consider your *The War of the Worlds* a masterpiece of fantastic fiction.”

It would be an exaggeration to state that Chesterton was brought up short by the remark, at least physically—but for his momentum allowed no sudden halt—but mentally his humble satisfaction came to a stumbling pause; and he had the good grace to laugh. Why, how he would regale Wells with the story of the minuscule bibliophile’s error of identity at their next meeting!

7

“Yes, sir,” the little man went on, producing a great key from his coat-pocket and turning it in the lock of the sable door, “and *The Time Machine* quite held me spellbound. Now, welcome to my humble abode.”

He opened the door, stood aside, and gestured for Chesterton to enter.

The knot y problem of how to inform the man that he, Chesterton, was not whom he thought he was—viz., H.G. Wells—was so taxing his mind as he stepped past the fellow that he was quite oblivious of what he was stepping into. Every man when stepping over the threshold of a domicile expects, quite naturally, to find himself standing in some kind of hallway or vestibule; no man, when stepping over the threshold, expects to fetch up in a room flooded by a supernal, sourceless light; no man expects to be overcome with sudden and dizzying nausea, nor, for that matter, to experience a sudden buoyancy that leaves him with the impression of having shed a stone in weight.

All these things Chesterton experienced then; he was plunged into a strange state of semi-consciousness and collapsed in a swoon, aware that he had fallen, but feeling no impact. He saw a face peering down at him, a face similar to the little man's in its bald eggishness, but more pinched and uncharitable. Then beyond the face he made out rough stone blocks which brought to mind the walls of a castle, or even a dungeon—but which at any rate were certainly not the walls of a London town-house.

After that the visions became even more bizarre, if such were possible, for he would later swear that he was lifted and carried across a circular chamber in which he made out, arrayed around the circumference, a series of six cradles fashioned from brass or copper and each supporting the

withered carcass of a pale manikin with at enuated torsos and limbs, but with swollen crania like so many outsize ostrich eggs. In the centre of the room, though he passed it so rapidly that his startled senses might have been mistaken, he glimpsed what looked like a throne, or it might have been an electric chair, with suspended above it a crown—or then again it might have been the apparatus of electrocution . . . Then, before he could blink, he was borne out of this room and up something like a staircase, for his body was tilted backwards and he seemed to be ascending, and for the first time he was aware of voices about him. He heard what he thought was the voice of the little man, the agent of his abduction: “The transit seems not to have agreed with him. You’re right, to attempt the process now would be a mistake.”

Another voice took up: “A rest is what he needs. He’ll soon be well enough . . . just like the others. Here we go!”

Whereupon Chesterton found himself being manoeuvred through a narrow doorway and deposited on what felt like a bed. He glimpsed, before oblivion claimed him, two figures retreating from the room, the little man from the London street and someone who might have been his twin. The door of the room was closed, as were the shutters of his vision, and blessedly he saw no more.

II

Enter a Lunatic

He awoke with a start, and through his reviving mind there passed a succession of phantasmagorical images like the visions of a dream; except, where the visions of a dream wither elusively upon awakening, these images did nothing of the kind: rather they remained to haunt him like the stuff of nightmare.

He sat up with unaccustomed rapidity, experiencing again that queer buoyancy of body, and tried to blink away the scenes that floated in the little theatre of his mind's eye: the supernal chamber; the six pinioned gargoyles; the pinched visages of his captor and his cohort.

He was in a circular chamber circumscribed by mammoth stonework, upon a bed that was a mere block of some soft substance without linen or sheets. There was a large, circular window set into the circumferential wall, and he entertained the sudden fancy—going on the evidence

of the shape of the room and the maritime nature of the window—that he was imprisoned in nothing less than a lighthouse; though what spectral ship might have had its passage lighted in the centre of London was quite beyond his understanding.

Then his mind passed from his immediate personal plight and he thought of Frances, at home in Beaconsfield awaiting his return. He had promised to be home by eight, and something told him that this hour had passed already. His good lady, his anchor to this reality, would be beside herself with worry, and the thought caused Chesterton much distress.

His immediate goal, then, was to ascertain for what reason he had been duped, and then petition whoever had so cruelly tricked him to bring about his instant release. To this end he prepared himself, with a deep breath, to haul his bulk from the bed—and did so, almost falling forward onto the floor, as if gravity had played a trick and temporarily suspended its custodial grip.

He regained his balance and moved towards the window, noticing how swiftly he tripped, how his bulk, in this strange place, seemed not to possess its erstwhile laggardly mass. He felt lighter of body and limb, indeed much fitter, and the gout that had gnawed at his left foot seemed miraculously relieved.

He moved towards the circular portal, at once apprehensive and curious as to what he might behold. He gripped the stone sill and stared, for revealed was not a scene of commonplace bustling London but that of a great red desert, a scene of rolling sands and sculpted dunes that seemed all the more desolate for being so rudely coloured, as if on a whim a negligent artist had splashed the land

with rouge impasto instead of ochre. To his right the sun was rising, but where in days of yore he might have taken comfort from so familiar and reassuring a scene, there was something about this sunrise that was a parody of its earthly counterpart and therefore threatening: the sun was smaller than it should have been, and something in the atmosphere, perhaps, caused it to appear oblate and globular, like the imperfect sagging spheroid of an indolent glassblower.

Closer inspection told him that he was incarcerated in a high tower or minaret, at the foot of which sprawled the rude environs of a desert city, a topsy-turvy mass of disparate blocks cut through with open passageways or ginnels.

12 ∫ It appeared that the city was stirring to life, as strange cries rose to meet him, gut ural and staccato in their intensity, and upon the hot desert breeze waf ed a thousand scents, none of which were easily recognisable: the reek of burnt spices, heady sweet incense, and the adenoid-pinching punch of what might have been singed snuf . All this conspired to suggest that he was certainly no longer in London, or for that mat er anywhere else west of Suez—but what he saw presently, upon peering down into an alley thirty feet below, gave him pause to consider the notion that he was indeed nowhere on God’s good Earth.

Three f gures were passing along the alleyway, followed by a fourth; the f rst three citizens wore next to nothing in the way of civilised apparel—scant loin-cloths served to save embarrassment—which might have been suf cient cause for sensation but for a more amazing fact: the trio of tall, slim humanoids had f esh as red as blood. And

the fourth figure in the alley, as if to add to this polychromatic largesse, was green; moreover, it was green and huge and had sprouting from its prognathous jaw a pair of fearsome tusks.

The four citizens of this nightmare city soon passed from sight, leaving Chesterton wondering if his vision had temporarily failed him, or if his sanity had finally fled.

He was still debating this point when he heard a crash from the far side of the room, and he turned to see that a solid block of stone had dislodged itself from the wall and come tumbling into his cell. He had little time to register his surprise, or take in the daylight scene that showed through the manufactured opening, for a second later, framed within the perfect square like a portrait, a face appeared.

It was a face sufficiently human to cause a quickening of Chesterton's heart, a face in its late forties, at a guess, strong and tanned with a receding hairline and the sort of pencil-thin moustache made popular by the Hollywood matinee idols.

"Psst! We've no time to lose!" came the summons in a marked American accent.

The face vanished. Chesterton advanced cautiously across the room, lowered himself on hands and knees and peered through the hole. He was aware of the increased brilliancy of his poor heart, and he clutched in his pocket the large wooden crucifix—a present from Frances—and whispered a silent prayer.

The face appeared again, and along with it a hand, which flashed out with the strike of a cobra and fastened upon his upper-arm. "I said c'mon, man!"

Then he was pitched forward and at emptying to squeeze his bulk through the hole, impulse dictating he follow the impatient instructions while his rationality begged him to pause and consider the matter.

He eased his head and shoulders through the gap and made out his rescuer; the man stood below him, on an open staircase that wound itself helter-skelter fashion around the outside of the minaret. He wore a double-breasted suit of dark serge and a slouch hat perched on the back of his head.

The American took his arm again and pulled, and with much effort Chesterton found himself, not without discomfort, scraping through the scant opening and seconds later standing, dishevelled and sweating, on the vertiginous spiral staircase.

14 } “By all that’s scared how the deuce did you . . .” Chesterton began, gesturing back at the dislodged stonework.

His saviour gestured with a silver pistol. “A sonic blaster,” he explained pithily, and slipped it into his pocket. He was already descending the steps with the celerity of a tap-dancer; he looked back and briefly beckoned, whereupon Chesterton fought to banish his vertigo, pressed himself to the outer wall of the tower and stepped carefully in pursuit.

The desert sun was hot, and Chesterton not the most athletic of men, and the two factors conspired to leave him, when finally he made the street, gasping for every breath.

He pulled a bandangu g

They were standing in an alley, down which citizens both red and green were passing in great numbers, and all slowed to stare at the singular sight of two sweating humans in altercation.

“Dead right, chum,” came the cocksure reply. “Let’s move it.”

“You have,” gasped Chesterton, hurrying behind the rapidly departing figure, “a destination in mind, a bolt hole if you like?”

“Damned right I have. You don’t think I didn’t think of that?”

“Your double negative confuses comprehension,” Chesterton wheezed, “but I think my reply is no.”

“You Brits kill me,” laughed the American. “I’m trying to honourably save your life and you insist on splitting hairs.”

“And even though you might be trying to save my life,” Chesterton replied, “you Yankees think nought of splitting infinitives.”

“Touché, chum! Look, let’s talk literary style when we get out of this fix, okay?”

“I will,” Chesterton gasped, “relish the prospect.”

They had turned down a narrower alley, and turned again, and had left behind the gawping citizens of this colourful land; at least now they were quite alone, with no sign of being pursued. To Chesterton’s profound relief they slowed, though the American still kept up a healthy clip.

The alleyway came to an end, and before them was an open square filled with covered market-stalls and thronged with a multitude of tall citizens, red and yellow humanoids and green tusked beasts, and . . .

Chesterton stared. The American saw his consternation and grinned. "You'll be seeing much more of 'em before the journey's through."

"More of them . . ." echoed the English writer with incredulity, still staring across the market-place at a six-legged, turquoise-scaled lizard the size of an omnibus. It was hauling a cart which held a cage, and in the cage he made out a dozen pitiful-looking wretches both male and female, red and white and black of hue.

"Slaves," the American said.

"May God preserve us," Chesterton cried, and crossed himself. "What manner of hell have I stumbled into?"

The American chose to ignore the question. He took Chesterton's arm. "Okay, let's move it. We're almost home and dry. Just across the square and down that alley, see? Then we can rest up till sundown and the next stage of the journey."

Chesterton could only nod wordlessly, and follow the American in a breathless trot as he left the protection of the alley and crossed the milling square.

A thousand strange sights assailed him in that crossing, from the alien aspect of the coloured citizens seen at close quarters, to the variety of singular goods for sale on the stalls; cries battered his ears, smells invaded his nostrils, and the total effect was that of a sensory overload which left him begging for surcease and the sanctuary of their destination.

The American slipped down a sand-coloured alley, and then side-stepped and disappeared from sight. When Chesterton drew alongside, he made out a rough wooden door set flush into the mud-baked wall. It opened; the Yankee appeared briefly and dragged him into the cool shadows of a small room.

Seconds later a flask was thrust into his hand, and without need of instruction he drank deep of the coldest, cleanest water he had ever experienced, and seconds after that he collapsed in a dead faint.



Eric Brown began writing when he was fifteen and sold his first short story to *Interzone* in 1986. He has won the British Science Fiction Award twice for his short stories and has published over thirty books. His latest include the novel *Xenopath* and the children's book *Guilty*. He writes a monthly science fiction review column for the *Guardian*.

He is married to the mediaevalist Finn Sinclair, and has a daughter, Freya. His website can be found at: www.ericbrown.co.uk .