

THE THREE CHARACTERISTICS

By Aleister Crowley

[1902]

“LISTEN to the Jataka!” said the Buddha. And all they gave ear. “Long ago, when King Brahmadata reigned in Benares,¹ it came to pass that there lived under his admirable government a weaver named Suraj Ju² and his wife Chandi.³ And in the fulness of her time did she give birth to a man child, and they called him Perdu’ R Abu.⁴ Now the child grew, and the tears of the mother fell, and the wrath of the father waxed: for by no means would the boy strive in his trade of weaving. The loom went merrily, but to the rhythm of a mantra; and the silk slipped through his fingers, but as if one told his beads. Wherefore the work was marred, and the hearts of the parents were woe because of him. But it is written that misfortune knoweth not the hour to cease, and that the seed of sorrow is as the seed of the Banyan Tree. It groweth and is of stature as a mountain, and, ay me! it shooteth down fresh roots into the aching earth. For the boy grew and became a man; and his eyes kindled with the lust of life and love; and the desire stirred him to see the round world and its many marvels. Wherefore he went forth, taking his father’s store of gold, laid up for him against that bitter day, and he took fair maidens, and was their servant. And he builded a fine house and dwelt therein. And he took no thought. But he said: ‘Here is a change indeed!’

“Now it came to pass that after many years he looked upon his lover, the bride of his heart, the rose of his garden, the jewel of his rosary; and behold, the olive loveliness of smooth skin was darkened, and the flesh lay loose, and the firm breasts drooped, and the eyes had lost alike the gleam of joy and the sparkle of laughter and the soft glow of love. And he was mindful of his word, and said in sorrow, ‘Here is then a change indeed!’ And he turned his thought to himself, and saw that in his heart was also a change: so that he cried, ‘Who then am I?’ And he saw that all this was sorrow. And he turned his thought without, and saw that all things were alike in this; that nought might escape the threefold misery. ‘The soul,’ he said, ‘the soul, the I, is as all these; it is impermanent as the ephemeral flower of beauty in the water that is born and shines and dies ere sun be risen and set again.’

“And he humiliated his heart and sang the following verse:

Brahma, and Vishnu, and great Shiva! Truly
I see the Trinity in all things dwell,
Some rightly tinged of Heaven, others dully
Pitched down the steep and precipice of Hell.
Nay, not your glory ye from fable borrow!
These three I see in spirit and in sense,
These three, O miserable seer! Sorrow,
Absence of ego, and impermanence!

“And at the rhythm he swooned, for his old mantra surged up in the long-sealed vessels of subconscious memory, and he fell into the calm ocean of a great Meditation.

II.

“Jehjaour⁵ was a mighty magician; his soul was dark and evil; and his lust was of life and power and of the wreaking of hatred upon the innocent. And it came to pass that he gazed upon a ball of crystal wherein were shown him all the fears of the time unborn as yet on earth. And by his art he saw Perdu’ R Abu, who had been his friend: for do what he would, the crystal showed always that sensual and frivolous youth as a Fear to him: even to him the Mighty One! But the selfish and evil are cowards; they fear shadows, and Jehjaour scorned not his art. ‘Roll on in time, thou ball!’ he cried. ‘Move down the

¹ The common formula for beginning a “Jataka”, or story of a previous incarnation of Buddha. Brahmadata reigned 120,000 years.

² The Sun.

³ The Moon.

⁴ Perdurabo, Crowley’s motto.

⁵ Allan MacGregor Bennett (whose motto in the “Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn” was Iehi Aour, i.e. “Let there be light”), now Ananda Metteya, to whom the volume in which this story was issued is inscribed.

stream of years, timeless and hideous servant of my will! Taph! Tath! Arath!¹ He sounded the triple summons, the mysterious syllables that bound the spirit to the stone.

“Then suddenly the crystal grew a blank; and thereby the foiled wizard knew that which threatened his power, his very life, was so high and holy that the evil spirit could perceive it not. ‘Avaunt!’ he shrieked, ‘false soul of darkness!’ And the crystal flashed up red, the swarthy red of hate in a man’s cheek, and darkened utterly.

“Foaming at the mouth the wretched Jehjaour clutched at air and fell prone.

III.

“To what God should he appeal? His own, Hanuman, was silent. Sacrifice, prayer, all were in vain. So Jehjaour gnashed his teeth, and his whole force went out in a mighty current of hate towards his former friend.

“Now hate hath power, though not the power of love. So it came about that in his despair he fell into a trance; and in the trance Mara² appeared to him. Never before had his spells availed to call so fearful a potency from the abyss of matter. ‘Son,’ cried the Accursèd One, ‘seven days of hate unmarred by passion milder, seven days without one thought of pity, these avail to call me forth.’ ‘Slay me my enemy!’ howled the wretch. But Mara trembled. ‘Enquire of Ganesha concerning him!’ faltered at last the fiend.

“Jehjaour awoke.

IV.

“‘Yes!’ said Ganesha gloomily, ‘the young man has given me up altogether. He tells me I am as mortal as he is, and he doesn’t mean to worry about me anymore.’ ‘Alas!’ sighed the deceitful Jehjaour, who cared no more for Ganesha and any indignities that might be offered him than his enemy did. ‘One of my best devotees too!’ muttered, or rather trumpeted, the elephantine anachronism. ‘You see,’ said the wily wizard, ‘I saw Perdu’ R Abu the other day, and he said he had become Srotapatti. Now that’s pretty serious. In seven births only, if he but pursue the path, will he cease to be reborn. So you have only that time in which to win him back to your worship.’ The cunning sorcerer did not mention that within that time also must his own ruin be accomplished. ‘What do you advise?’ asked the irritated and powerful, but unintelligent deity. ‘Time is our friend,’ said the enchanter. ‘Let your influence be used in the Halls of Birth that each birth may be as long as possible. Now the elephant is the longest lived of all beasts –’ ‘Done with you!’ said Ganesha in great glee, for the idea struck him as ingenious. And he lumbered off to clinch the affair at once.

“And Perdu’ R Abu died.

V.

“Now the great elephant strode with lordly footsteps in the forest, and Jehjaour shut himself up with his cauldrons and things and felt quite happy, for he knew his danger was not near till the approaching of Perdu’ R Abu’s Arahatsip. But in spite of the young gently-ambling cows which Ganesha took care to throw in his way, in spite of the tender shoots of green and the soft coconuts, this elephant was not as other elephants. The seasons spoke to him of change – the forest is ever full of sorrow – and nobody need preach to him the absence of an ego, for the brutes have had more sense than ever to imagine there was one. So the tusker was usually to be found, still as a rock, in some secluded place, meditating on the Three Characteristics. And when Ganesha appeared in all his glory, he found him to his disgust quite free from elephantomorphism. In fact, he quietly asked the God to leave him alone.

“Now he was still quite a young elephant when there came into the jungle, tripping merrily along, with a light-hearted song in its nucleolus, no less than a Bacillus.

“And the elephant died. He was only seventeen years old.

VI.

“A brief consultation; and the Srotapatti was reincarnated as a parrot. For the parrot, said the wicked Jehjaour, may live 500 years and never feel it.

“So a grey wonder of wings flitted into the jungle. So joyous a bird, thought the God, could not but be influenced by the ordinary passions and yield to such majesty as his own.

¹ Taphtatharath, the spirit of Mercury.

² The archdevil of the Buddhists.

“But one day there came into the jungle a strange wild figure. He was a man dressed in the weird Tibetan fashion. He had red robes and hat, and thought dark things. He whirled a prayer-wheel in his hands; and ever as he went he muttered the mystic words ‘Aum Mani Padme Hum.’¹ The parrot, who had never heard human speech, tried to mimic the old Lama, and was amazed at his success. Pride first seized the bird, but it was not long before the words had their own effect, and it was in meditation upon the conditions of existence that he eternally repeated the formula.

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“A home at distant Inglistan. An old lady, and a grey parrot in a cage. The parrot was still muttering inaudibly the sacred mantra. Now, now, the moment of Destiny was at hand! The Four Noble Truths shone out in that parrot’s mind; the Three Characteristics appeared luminous, like three spectres on a murderer’s grave: unable to contain himself he recited aloud the mysterious sentence.

“The old lady, whatever may have been her faults, could act promptly. She rang the bell. ‘Sarah!’ said she, ‘take away that dreadful creature! Its language is positively awful.’ ‘What shall I do with it, mum?’ asked the ‘general’. ‘Aum Mani Padme Hum,’ said the parrot. The old lady stopped her ears. ‘Wring its neck!’ she said.

“The parrot was only eight years old.

VII.

“‘You’re a muddler and an idiot!’ said the infuriated God. ‘Why not make him a spiritual thing? A Nat² lives 10,000 years.’ ‘Make him a Nat then!’ said the magician, already beginning to fear that fate would be too strong for him, in spite of all his cunning. ‘There’s someone working against us on the physical plane. We must transcend it.’ No sooner said than done: a family of Nats in a big tree at Anuradhapura had a little stranger, very welcome to Mamma and Papa Nat.

“Blessed indeed was the family. Five-and-forty feet³ away stood a most ancient and holy dagoba: and the children of light would gather round it in the cool of the evening, or in the misty glamour of dawn, and turn forth in love and pity towards all mankind – nay, to the smallest grain of dust tossed on the utmost storms of the Sahara!

“Blessed and more blessed! For one day came a holy Bhikkhu from the land of the Peacock,⁴ and would take up his abode in the hollow of their very tree. And little Perdu’ R Abu used to keep the mosquitoes away with the gossamer of his wings, so that the good man might be at peace.

“Now the British Government abode in that land, and when it heard that there was a Bhikkhu living in a tree, and that the village folk brought him rice and onions and gramophones, it saw that it must not be.

“And little Perdu’ R Abu heard them talk; and learnt the great secret of Impermanence, and of Sorrow, and the mystery of Unsubstantiality.

“And the Government evicted the Bhikkhu; and set guard, quite like the end of Genesis iii., and cut down the tree, and all the Nats perished.

“Jehjaour heard and trembled. Perdu’ R Abu was only three years old.

VIII.

“It really seemed as if fate was against him. Poor Jehjaour! In despair he cried to his partner, ‘O Ganesha, in the world of Gods only shall we be safe. Let him be born as a flute-girl before Indra’s throne!’ ‘Difficult is the task,’ replied the alarmed deity, ‘but I will use all my influence. I know a thing or two about Indra, for example —’

“It was done. Beautiful was the young girl’s face as she sprang mature from the womb of Matter, on her life-journey of an hundred thousand years. Of all Indra’s flute-girls she played and sang the sweetest. Yet ever some remembrance, dim as a pallid ghost that fleets down the long avenues of deodar and moonlight, stole in her brain; and her song was ever of love and death and music from beyond.

“And one day as she sang thus the deep truth stole into being and she knew the Noble Truths. So she turned her flute to the new song, when – horror! – there was a mosquito in the flute. ‘Tootle! Tootle!’ she began. ‘Buzz! Buzz!’ went the mosquito from the very vitals of her delicate tube.

“Indra was not unprovided with a disc.¹ Alas! Jehjaour, art thou already in the toils? She had only lived eight months.

¹ “O the Jewel in the Lotus! Aum!” The most famous of the Buddhist formularies.

² The Burmese name for an elemental spirit.

³ The Government, in the interests of Buddhists themselves, reserves all ground within 50 feet of a dagoba. The incident described in this section actually occurred in 1901.

⁴ Siam.

IX.

“How you bungle!” growled Ganesha. “Fortunately we are better off this time. Indra has been guillotined for his dastardly murder; so his place is vacant.” “Eurekas!” yelled the magus, “his very virtue will save him from his predecessor’s fate.”

“Behold Perdu’ R Abu then as Indra! But oh, dear me! what a memory he was getting! ‘It seems to me,’ he mused, ‘that I’ve been changing about a lot lately. Well, I am virtuous – and I read in Crowley’s new translation of the Dhammapada² that virtue is the thing to keep one steady. So I think I may look forward to a tenure of my Mahakalpa in almost Arcadian simplicity. Lady Bhavani, did you say, ‘boy’? Yes, I am at home. Bring the betel!’ ‘Jeldi!’ he added, with some dim recollection of the British Government, when he was a baby Nat.

“The Queen of Heaven and the Lord of the Gods chewed betel for quite a long time, conversed of the weather, the crops, the affaire Humbert, and the law in relation to motor-cars, with ease and affability. But far was it from Indra’s pious mind to flirt with his distinguished guest! Rather, he thought of the hollow nature of the Safe, the change of money and of position; the sorrow of the too-confiding bankers, and above all the absence of an Ego in the Brothers Crawford.

“While he was thus musing, Bhavani got fairly mad at him. The Spretæ Injuria Formæ³ gnawed her vitals with pangs unassuageable: so, shaking him quite roughly by the arm, she Put It To Him Straight. ‘O Madam!’ said Indra.

“This part of the story has been told before – about Joseph; but Bhavani simply lolled her tongue out, opened her mouth, and gulped him down at a swallow.

“Jehjaour simply wallowed. Indra had passed in seven days.

X.

“There is only one more birth,” he groaned. “This time we must win or die.” “Goetia⁴ expects every God to do his duty,” he excitedly lunographed to Swarga.⁵ But Ganesha was already on his way.

“The elephant-headed God was in great spirits. ‘Never say die!’ he cried genially, on beholding the downcast appearance of his fellow-conspirator. ‘This’ll break the slate. There is no change in the Arupa-Brahma-Loka!’⁶ ‘Rupe me no rupes!’ howled the necromancer. ‘Get up, fool!’ roared the God. ‘I have got Perdu’ R Abu elected Maha Brahma.’ ‘Oh Lord, have you really?’ said the wizard, looking a little less glum. ‘Ay!’ cried Ganesha impressively, ‘let Aeon follow Aeon down the vaulted and echoing corridors of Eternity: pile Mahakalpa upon Mahakalpa until an Asankhya⁷ of Crores⁸ have passed away: and Maha Brahma will still sit lone and meditate upon his lotus throne.’ ‘Good, good!’ said the magus, ‘though there seems a reminiscence of the Bhagavad-Gita and the Light of Asia somewhere. Surely you don’t read Edwin Arnold?’ ‘I do,’ said the God disconsolately, ‘we Hindu Gods have to. It’s the only way we can get any clear idea of who we really are.’

“Well, here was Perdu’ R Abu, after his latest fiasco, installed as a Worthy, Respectable, Perfect, Ancient and Accepted, Just, Regular Mahabrahma. His only business was to meditate, for as long as he did this, the worlds – the whole system of 10,000 worlds – would go on peaceably. Nobody had better read the lesson of the Bible – the horrible results to mankind of ill-timed, though possibly well-intentioned, interference on the part of a deity.

“Well, he curled himself up, which was rather clever for a formless abstraction, and began. There was a grave difficulty in his mind – an obstacle right away from the word ‘Jump!’ Of course there was really a good deal: he didn’t know where the four elements ceased, for example:⁹ but his own identity was the real worry. The other questions he could have stilled; but this was too near his pet Chakra.¹⁰ ‘Here I am,’ he meditated, ‘above all change; and yet an hour ago I was Indra; and before that his flute-girl; and then a Nat; and then a parrot; and then a Hathī – “Oh, the Hathis pilin’ teak in the sludgy, squdgy creek!” sang Parameshvara. Why, it goes back and back, like a biograph out of order, and there’s no sort of connection between one and the other. Hullo, what’s that? Why, there’s a holy man near that Bo-Tree. He’ll tell me what it all means.’ Poor silly old Lord of the Universe! Had he carried his memory back one more step he’d have known all

¹ A whirling disc is Indra’s symbolic weapon.

² He abandoned this. A few fragments are reprinted, *supra*.

³ [“The affront to spurned beauty” – I.R.]

⁴ The world of black magic.

⁵ Heaven.

⁶ This highest heaven of the Hindu. “Formless place of Brahma” is its name.

⁷ “Innumerable”, the highest unit of the fantastic Hindu arithmetic.

⁸ 10,000. [10,000,000 – I.R.]

⁹ See the witty legend in the Questions of King Milinda.

¹⁰ Meditation may be performed on any of seven “Chakra” (wheels or centres) in the body.

about Jehjaour and the conspiracy, and that he was a Srotapatti and had only one more birth; and might well have put in the 311,040,000,000,000 myriads of aeons which would elapse before lunch in rejoicing over his imminent annihilation.

“Venerable Sir!” said Mahabrahma, who had assumed the guise of a cowherd, ‘I kiss your worshipful Trilbies:’¹ I prostrate myself before your estimable respectability.’ ‘Sir,’ said the holy man, none other than our Lord Himself! ‘thou seekest illumination!’ Mahabrahma smirked and admitted it. ‘From negative to positive,’ explained the Thrice-Honoured One, ‘though Potential Existence eternally vibrates the Divine Absolute of the Hidden Unity of processional form masked in the Eternal Abyss of the Unknowable, the synthetical hieroglyph of an illimitable, pastless, futureless PRESENT.

“To the uttermost bounds of space rushes the voice of Ages unheard of save in the concentrated unity of the thought-formulated Abstract; and eternally that voice formulates a word which is glyphed in the vast ocean of limitless life.² Do I make myself clear?’ ‘Perfectly. Who would have thought it was all so simple?’ The God cleared his throat, and rather diffidently, even shamefacedly, went on:

“But what I really wished to know was about my incarnation. How is it I have so suddenly risen from change and death to the unchangeable?’

“‘Child!’ answered Gautama, ‘your facts are wrong – you can hardly expect to make correct deductions.’ ‘Yes, you can, if only your logical methods are unsound. That’s the Christian way of getting truth.’ ‘True!’ replied the sage, ‘but precious little they get. Learn, O Mahabrahma (for I penetrate this disguise), that all existing things, even from thee unto this grain of sand, possess Three Characteristics. These are Mutability, Sorrow and Unsubstantiality.’

“All right for the sand, but how about Me? Why, they *define* me as unchangeable.’ ‘You can define a quirk as being a two-sided triangle,’ retorted the Saviour, ‘but that does not prove the actual existence of any such oxymoron.³ The truth is that you’re a very spiritual sort of being and a prey to longevity. Men’s lives are so short that yours seems eternal in comparison. But – why, *you’re* a nice one to talk! You’ll be dead in a week from now.’

“I quite appreciate the force of your remarks!’ said the seeming cowherd; ‘that about the Characteristics is very clever; and curiously enough, my perception of this has always just preceded my death for the last six goes.’

“Well, so long, old chap,’ said Gautama, ‘I must really be off. I have an appointment with Brother Mara at the Bo-Tree. He has promised to introduce his charming daughters —’

“Good-bye, and don’t do anything rash!’

“Rejoice! our Lord wended unto the Tree!⁴ As blank verse this scans but ill, but it clearly shows what happened.

XI.

“The ‘Nineteenth Mahakalpa’ brought out its April Number. There was a paper by Huxlananda Swami.

“Mahabrahma had never been much more than an idea. He had only lived six days.

XII.

“At the hour of the great Initiation,” continued the Buddha, in the midst of the Five Hundred Thousand Arahats, “the wicked Jehjaour had joined himself with Mara to prevent the discovery of the truth. And in Mara’s fall he fell. At that moment all the currents of his continued and concentrated Hate recoiled upon him and he fell into the Abyss of Being. And in the Halls of Birth he was cast out into the Lowest Hell – he became a clergyman of the Church of England, further than he had ever been before from Truth and Light and Peace and Love; deeper and deeper enmeshed in the net of Circumstance, bogged in the mire of Tanha⁵ and Avigga⁶ and all things base and vile. False Vichi-Kichi⁷ had caught him at last!

XIII.

“Aye! The hour was at hand. Perdu’ R Abu was reincarnated as a child of Western parents, ignorant of all his wonderful past. But a strange fate has brought him to this village.” The Buddha paused, probably for effect.

¹ Feet.

² This astonishing piece of bombastic drivel is verbatim from a note by S.L. Mathers to the “Kabbalah Unveiled”.

³ A contradiction in terms.

⁴ Arnold, “Light of Asia”.

⁵ Thirst: i.e., desire in its evil sense.

⁶ Ignorance.

⁷ Doubt.

A young man there, sole among all them not yet an Arahats, turned pale. He alone was of Western birth in all that multitude.

“Brother Abhavananda,¹ little friend,” said the Buddha, “what can we predicate of all existing things?” “Lord!” replied the neophyte, “they are unstable, everything is sorrow, in them is no inward Principle, as some pretend, that can avoid, that can hold itself aloof from, the forces of decay.”

“And how do you know that, little Brother?” smiled the Thrice-Honoured One.

“Lord, I perceive this Truth whenever I consider the Universe. More, its consciousness seems ingrained in my very nature, perhaps through my having known this for many incarnations. I have never thought otherwise.”

“Rise, Sir Abhavananda, I dub thee Arahats!” cried the Buddha, striking the neophyte gently on the back with the flat of his ear.²

And he perceived.

When the applause and praise and glory had a little faded, the Buddha, in that golden delight of sunset, explained these marvellous events. “Thou, Abhavananda,” he said, “art the Perdu’ R Abu of my lengthy tale. The wicked Jehjaour has got something lingering with boiling oil in it, while waiting for his clerical clothes: while, as for me, I myself was the Bacillus in the forest of Lanka: I was the old Lady: I was (he shuddered) the British Government: I was the mosquito that buzzed in the girl’s flute: I was Bhavani: I was Huxlananda Swami; and at the last, at this blessed hour, I am – that I am.”

“But, Lord,” said the Five Hundred Thousand and One Arahats in a breath, “thou art then guilty of six violent deaths! Nay, thou hast hounded one soul from death to death through all these incarnations! What of this First Precept³ of yours?”

“Children,” answered the Glorious One, “do not be so foolish as to think that death is necessarily an evil. I have not come to found a Hundred Years Club, and to include mosquitoes in the membership. In this case to have kept Perdu’ R Abu alive was to have played into the hands of his enemies. My First Precept is merely a general rule.⁴ In the bulk of cases one should certainly abstain from destroying life, that is, wantonly and wilfully: but I cannot drink a glass of water without killing countless myriads of living beings. If you knew as I do, the conditions of existence: struggle deadly and inevitable, every form of life the inherent and immitigable foe of every other form, with few, few exceptions, you would not only cease to talk of the wickedness of causing death, but you would perceive the First Noble Truth, that no existence can be free from sorrow; the second, that the desire for existence only leads to sorrow; that the ceasing from existence is the ceasing of sorrow (the third); and you would seek in the fourth the Way, the Noble Eightfold Path.

“I know, O Arahats, that you do not need this instruction: but my words will not stay here: they will go forth and illuminate the whole system of ten thousand worlds, where Arahats do not grow on every tree. Little brothers, the night is fallen: it were well to sleep.”

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¹ “Bliss-of-non-existence.” One of Crowley’s Eastern names.

² The Buddha had such long ears that he could cover the whole of his face with them. Ears are referred to Spirit in Hindu symbolism, so that the legend means that he could conceal the lower elements and dwell in this alone.

³ Here is the little rift within the lute which alienated Crowley from active work on Buddhist lines; the orthodox failing to see his attitude.

⁴ A more likely idea than the brilliantly logical nonsense of Pansil, *supra*. [That is, in his *Notes to Ascension Day: Collected Works*, Vol. II, p. 192ff – I.R.]