

Chu-Bu and Sheemish

By Lord Dunsany

It was the custom on Tuesdays in the temple of Chu-Bu for the priests to enter at evening and chant, "There is none but Chu-Bu."

And all the people rejoiced and cried out, "There is none but Chu-Bu." And honey was offered to Chu-Bu, and maize and fat. Thus was he magnified.

Chu-Bu was an idol of some antiquity, as may be seen from the colour of the wood. He had been carved out of mahogany, and after he was carved he had been polished. Then they had set him up on the diorite pedestal with the brazier in front of it for burning spices and the flat gold plates for fat. Thus they worshipped Chu-Bu.

He must have been there for over a hundred years when one day the priests came in with another idol, into the temple of Chu-Bu, and set it up on a pedestal near Chu-Bu's and sang, "There is also Sheemish."

And all the people rejoiced and cried out, "There is also Sheemish." Sheemish was palpably a modern idol, and although the wood was stained with a dark-red dye, you could see that he had only just been carved. And honey was offered to Sheemish as well as Chu-Bu, and also maize and fat.

The fury of Chu-Bu knew no time-limit; he was furious all that night, and next day he was furious still. The situation called for immediate miracles. To devastate the city with a pestilence and kill all his priests was scarcely within his power, therefore he wisely concentrated such divine powers as he had in commanding a little earthquake. "Thus," thought Chu-Bu, "will I reassert myself as the only god, and men shall spit upon Sheemish."

Chu-Bu willed it and willed it and still no earthquake came, when suddenly he was aware that the hated Sheemish was daring to attempt a miracle too. He ceased to busy himself about the earthquake and listened, or shall I say felt, for what Sheemish was thinking; for gods are aware of what passes in the mind by a sense that is other than any of our five. Sheemish was trying to make an earthquake too.

The new god's motive was probably to assert himself. I doubt if Chu-Bu understood or cared for his motive, it was sufficient for an idol already aflame with jealousy that his detestable rival was on the verge of a miracle. All the power of Chu-Bu veered round at once and set dead against an earthquake, even a little one. It was thus in the temple of Chu-Bu for some time, and then no earthquake came.

To be a god and to fail to achieve a miracle is a despairing sensation; it is as though among men one should determine upon a hearty sneeze and as though no sneeze should come; it is as though one should try to swim in heavy boots or remember a name that is utterly forgotten: all these pains were Sheemish's.

And upon Tuesday the priests came in, and the people, and they did worship Chu-Bu and offered fat to him, saying, "O Chu-Bu who made everything," and then the priests sang, "There is also Sheemish," and again the people rejoiced and cried out, "There is also Sheemish"; and Chu-Bu was put to shame and spake not for three days.

Now there were holy birds in the temple of Chu-Bu, and when the third day was come and the night thereof, it was as it were revealed to the mind of Chu-Bu, that there was dirt upon the head of Sheemish.

And Chu-Bu spake unto Sheemish as speak the gods, moving no lips nor yet disturbing the silence, saying, "There is dirt upon thy head, O Sheemish." All night long, he muttered again and again, "There is dirt upon Sheemish's head." And when it was dawn and voices were heard far off, Chu-Bu became exultant with Earth's awakening things, and cried out till the sun was high, "Dirt, dirt, dirt, upon the head of Sheemish," and at noon he said, "So Sheemish would be a god." Thus was Sheemish confounded.

And with Tuesday one came and washed his head with rose-water, and he was worshipped again when they sang "There is also Sheemish." And yet was Chu-Bu content, for he said, "The head of Sheemish has been defiled," and again, "His head was defiled, it is enough." And one evening, lo! there was dirt on the head of Chu-Bu also, and the thing was perceived of Sheemish.

It is not with the gods as it is with men. We are angry one with another and turn from our anger again, but the wrath of the gods is enduring. Chu-Bu remembered and Sheemish did not forget. They spake as we do not speak, in silence yet heard of each other, nor were their thoughts as our thoughts. We should not judge them by merely human standards. All night long they spake and all night said these words only: "Dirty Chu-Bu," "Dirty Sheemish." "Dirty Chu-Bu," "Dirty Sheemish," all night long. Their wrath had not tired at dawn, and neither had wearied of his accusation. And gradually Chu-Bu came to realise that he was nothing more than the equal of Sheemish. All gods are jealous, but this equality with the upstart Sheemish, a thing of painted wood a hundred years newer than Chu-Bu, and this worship given to Sheemish in Chu-Bu's own temple, were particularly bitter. Chu-Bu was jealous even for a god; and when Tuesday came again, the third day of Sheemish's worship, Chu-Bu could bear it no longer. He felt that his anger must be revealed at all costs, and he returned with all the vehemence of his will to achieving a little earthquake. The worshippers had just gone from his temple when Chu-Bu settled his will to attain this miracle; now and then his meditations were disturbed by the now familiar dictum, "Dirty Chu-Bu," but Chu-Bu willed ferociously, not even stopping to say what he longed to say and had already said nine hundred times, and presently even these interruptions ceased.

They ceased because Sheemish had returned to a project that he had never definitely abandoned, the desire to assert himself and exalt himself over Chu-Bu by performing a miracle, and the district being volcanic he had chosen a little earthquake as the miracle most easily accomplished by a small god.

Now an earthquake that is commanded by two gods has double the chance of fulfilment than when it is willed by one, and an incalculably greater chance than when two gods are pulling different ways; as, to take the case of older and greater gods, when the sun and the moon pull in the same direction we have the biggest tides.

Chu-Bu knew nothing of the theory of tides, and was too much occupied with his miracle to notice what Sheemish was doing. And suddenly the miracle was an accomplished thing.

It was a very local earthquake, for there are other gods than Chu-Bu or even Sheemish, and it was only a little one as the gods had willed, but it loosened some monoliths in a colonnade that supported one side of the temple and the whole of one wall fell in, and the low huts of the people of that city were shaken a little and some of their doors were jammed so that they would not open; it was enough, and for a moment it seemed that it was all; neither Chu-Bu nor Sheemish commanded there should be more, but they had set in motion an old law, older than Chu-Bu, the law of gravity that that colonnade had held back for a hundred years, and the temple of Chu-Bu quivered and then stood still, swayed once and was overthrown, on the heads of Chu-Bu and Sheemish.

No one rebuilt it, for nobody dared go near such terrible gods. Some said that Chu-Bu wrought the miracle, but some said Sheemish, and thereof schism was born; the weakly amiable, alarmed by the bitterness of rival sects, sought compromise and said that both had wrought it, but no one guessed the truth that the thing was done in rivalry.

And a saying arose, and both sects held this belief in common, that whoso toucheth Chu-Bu shall die or whoso looketh upon Sheemish.

That is how Chu-Bu came into my possession when I travelled once beyond the Hills of Ting. I found him in the fallen temple of Chu-Bu with his hands and toes sticking up out of the rubbish, lying upon his back, and in that attitude just as I found him I keep him to this day on my mantelpiece, as he is less liable to be upset that way. Sheemish was broken, so I left him where he was.

And there is something so helpless about Chu-Bu with his fat hands stuck up in the air that sometimes I am moved out of compassion to bow down to him and pray, saying, "O Chu-Bu, thou that made everything, help thy servant."

Chu-Bu cannot do much, though once I am sure that at a game of bridge he sent me the ace of trumps after I had not held a card worth having for the whole of the evening. And chance could have done as much as that for me, but I do not tell this to Chu-Bu.