Three Great Hoaxes of the War

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Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed.

On three notable occasions, since the war began, the credulity of the English people has passed all belief. The student of religious origins has probably noted that the hoaxes on all three occasions follow the generally accepted lines of demarcation, namely; legend, prophecy, and miracle.

It is now no secret that the famous legend of the "Russian Soldiers," that wonderful story of a million and a half Russian troops (with horses and artillery) smuggled through England in the dead of the night, was put about by the secret service to try to check the panic caused by the collapse at Mons. It was quite useless to point out to the English people that Archangel is served by a single line of rail, and that to ship even 10,000 troops would have strained the resources of the line for an entire summer. It was useless to ask why, having got all these troops on transports, the English did not sail them quietly down to the place where they were wanted, but went to the enormous and senseless trouble of disembarking them in England and embarking them again.

It was useless to make calculations; to show that as an English railway coach holds fifty men, and ten coaches make a pretty long train, it would have needed 3,000 trains to "flash by, with drawn blinds" for the men alone, and that the disguising of the horses, artillery, champagne and other necessary appurtenances of a Grand Ducal Russian army must have been a task worthy of Sherlock Holmes at his best.

One was always countered by the reply: "But Admiral X, or Captain Y, or Lord Z, or my Uncle Harry (as the case might be) saw them with his own eyes." The best of the joke was that the papers never printed a word of it, though the story was the sole topic of discussion for weeks.

The idea was to keep the whole thing a secret from the Germans! Ultimately, long after the yarn had been exploded—even among the semi-educated—The *Evening News* featured it as a "Strange Rumor" and one that might well be believed.

So much for legend: now for prophecy! The clairvoyants, astrologers, and psychics in England were of course besieged from the beginning. Everyone who was reputed to be able to "look into the seeds of time and see which grain will grow and which will not" [1] was immediately paid to do so.

But the clairvoyants were confronted with this difficulty: Current prophecy must always be conceded as rather a matter of faith. But if there could be found a prophecy, many years old, which had foretold the details of the war, foretold them accurately, then it would be safe to assume that the prophet who had foretold the beginning might foretell the end. This demand soon created the supply; several prophecies were discovered—Madame de Thebes and others—but they were all lacking in satisfactory details and antiquity, until the great and glorious find—the find of the Abbot Johannes.

The Sar Madan, a moderately good *littirateur* and a really fine critic (you can read all about him in Nordau's *Degeneration),* has, in his time, contributed much to the gaiety of the French people. Years ago, someone remarked to him in a cafe that his name was rather like that of the Assyrian, Beladan. Madan jumped at the idea and said that he was Beladan, in a new incarnation; after that he gave himself the title of Sar. He even conferred similar glories on his associates; hence his friends, who became Merodach-Jauneau, Belshazzar-

Dupont, and so on! Also he had announced himself to be a Rosicrucian—anything romantic and mysterious helps to work a clever trick—and published a book on the doctrines of that august Fraternity called *Le vice suprême,* rather as if a learned Presbyterian divine were to preach on "Why We Believe in the Mass."

The worthy Madan was therefore not taken very seriously by his contemporaries in France; but England nowadays will stand for anything, even cubists and futurists and vorticists. So the English lent a willing ear to the masterpiece of Madan. It appeared that the Sar—so he said—in going through some old papers of his father's, some ten years previously, had found a Latin prophecy of the Abbot Johannes. (There were two or three of these Abbots about 1600, but none of them were particularly prophetic!) Madan had made a translation, but did not, of course, produce the original for the inspection of experts. The prophecy is in the best allegorical style; all about a cock, and a lion, and an eagle, and a bear. The Kaiser is described unmistakably, owing to his withered arm, and the details of the war, down to the battle of the Marne, are given with an accuracy which reflects extraordinary credit on the seership of Johannes. After this point, however, he becomes a little indefinite and less careful of detail.

The present writer warned the Editor of *The Occult Review* that anything emanating from Madan could only be a jest, but was rebutted by the evidence of an alderman from Harrogate, who was said to have seen the original. "An alderman from Harrogate" only made it worse!

However, the story "got over" and went the rounds of the press, and was swallowed by everybody. It did not last very long, though, for that part of the prophecy dealing with events subsequent to the Marne, though vague, was not vague enough to prevent even the most faithful believers from perceiving that it was totally wrong!

But all this palls before the superb story of "The Bowmen." There is nothing to beat it in all the annals of mythopoeia.

There is a writer in England who is not very well known over here, but who is certainly among the first half-dozen living English authors. He is saturated with the love of mediaevalism and sacramentalism. His name is Arthur Machen. Falling upon evil times, he has had to write for *The Evening News.* In the course of this unhappy occupation, he read the famous *Weekly Dispatch* account of the retreat from Mons, which account was true, and caused the prosecution of the publishers. This was on Sunday morning, and he went to church later, and thought of the battle instead of the sermon. By and by he wrote a story on it called "The Bowmen." In a few words, this was his yarn:

> Five hundred British soldiers, the remains of a regiment, were covering the retreat from Mons. Disorganized and desperate, they saw annihilation approaching them in the shape of ten thousand pursuing cavalry. One of the men, who had been educated in Latin and the like, in the stress of emotion, found his mind wander back to a vegetarian restaurant in London where the plates had had on them a design of St. George and the motto *"Adsit Anglis Sanctus Georgius."* With involuntary piety he uttered this motto. A shudder passed through him; the noise of battle was soothed to a murmur in his ears; instead, he heard a great roar as of thousands of soldiers shouting the ancient battle-cries that rang out at Crecy and Poitiers and Agincourt! He also saw before him a long line of shining shapes, "drawing their yew bows to their ears, and stroking their ell-long shafts against the Germans."

It was then observed by all that the enemy was being swept away, not in single units but in battalions. In fact, they were slain to a man; and the British rear guard strolled off quietly in the wake of their army.

It is to be noted that the author very artistically refrained from trying to lend verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative by stating that the burying-parties found arrows in the dead Germans. He thought it too much mustard!

Well, he printed the story on September *29, 1914,* and thought that that would be the end of it. But no! A few days later *The Occult Review* and *Light* wrote to ask for his "authorities!" He replied that the old musty English ale at the "Spotted Dog" in Bouverie Street might know; if not, nobody did.

In a month or so, several parish magazines asked leave to reprint it; and *would* he write a preface giving the name of the soldier, and so on? He replied, "Reprint away; but as for the soldier, his name is Thomas Atkins of the Horse-Marines." The editor of one magazine replied (it was April, 1915, by now): "Pardon me, sir, if I appear to contradict you; but I know positively that the facts of the story are true; all you have done is to throw it into a literary form."

So they reprinted the story. But that was only the beginning of it. Variants began to appear. The soldier was an officer, and the picture of St. George a canvas instead of a plate. The dead Germans, too, were now found with arrow wounds—the very detail that Machen had rejected as too absurd. Then again in some accounts a cloud appears between the armies to conceal the British. This is obviously an echo from Exo-

dus. Sometimes the cloud disclosed shining shapes which frightened the chargers of the Uhlans. But April was to wane before the great transfiguration.

In May, Mr. A. P. Sinnett (the man who first wrote of the Blavatsky teacup fables)' had an article in *The Occult Review* saying: "Those who could see said that they saw `a row of shining beings' between the two armies."

Now Machen did say "a long row of shining shapes." In this phase one may find the *raison d'etre of* the last stage *of* the myth. Angels are still popular in England; fairies are dead, and saints are held a trifle Popish; St. George is only a name except to mediaevalists like Mr. Machen. So he drops out of the story. "The Bowmen" became *The Angels of Mons* and the story fairly took the bit between its teeth, and bolted. It was quoted in *Truth,* in *The New Church Weekly,* in *John Bull,* in *The Daily Chronicle,* in *The Pall Mall Gazette,* and in every case it was treated as a serious story.

Bishop Welldon, Bishop Taylor Smith (the Chaplain-General), Dr. Horton, Sir J.C. Rickett—all of them serious divines in England preached about it. Canon Hensley Henson said he didn't believe it, but we must remember that he has quite often been near trouble for holding heterodox opinions!

The Evening News has been bombarded with letters on the subject; even the Psychical Research Society has got into one of its usual muddles over it. In a word, despite Machen's repeated explanations and denials, the silly fancy is taken everywhere for established fact.

The only attempt to give details of the yarn from the front has been that of Miss Phyllis Campbell, who is very young and very beautiful, but who, if she had been wiser, would have given, as her authorities, soldiers who had figured on the Roll of Honor. That would have sounded better than "a soldier," or than "a wounded man of the Lancashires," or "an R.F.A. hero," or "a nurse."

England believes it all, and, as faith can move mountains, perhaps it can help the Allies to force the Rhine