

My Wanderings in Search of the Absolute

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THE adventure of the Great Work is the only one worth while; for all others are but interludes in the sinister farce of Life and Death, which limits all merely human endeavour.

My father's favourite sermon taught me the above minor premise! He used to read that chapter in Genesis in which a string of worthies live for centuries and beget sons and daughters and die. Death makes life futile and fatuous.

This dumb despair is the black soil fertile for Romance. I could not bear to think of myself at all unless in the guise of a hero.

And, facts being so stolid, I must be mysterious. The Black Pope rather than the White: Parsifal of the Grail, not Siegfried of the Sword.

But oh! those facts. My natural bent was for mathematics and science; my mind is bitterly sceptical.

The late John Henry Cardinal Newman wished (as a boy) that the Arabian Nights were true; and feebly acquiesced in the blood of St. Januarius. Vox populi was really vox dei for him.

Distinguish me from his Eminence, in that I believed that the Arabian Nights *were* true. With a difference I believed that the philosophical basis of the fables was valid; that, all things being illusion, a man of sufficient knowledge, will, and imagination, could arrange his materials to compose any picture that pleased him.

In brief, the stories are not true? (Well I would make them true. Thus, especially with the uprush of vital energy at puberty, I deliberately invented myself as a romantic hero.

I featured a St. Bernard on mountains, or a bulldog, when I was the Young Man About Town. I became a secret Jacobite agent, and fought to restore Don Carlos on the Throne of Spain. I was a Highland Chieftain on the strength of a dubious great-grandmother.

What ridiculous nonsense!

No: I'm nearing sixty, and it wasn't nonsense at all!

But my hobby horse certainly bucked; I found myself in the dirty old ditch of mortality.

It happened at the beginning of my third year at Cambridge.

A trivial illness, but it led to the extraction of a tooth. They had economised on the nitrous oxide; and I came out of it into a universe which was nothing at all but Absolute Pain.

I think the experience gave the last shock to my conventional ideas of Reality.

"Black Magic"

ALL endeavour is in vain on this plane. I must find a permanent material on which to found my work.

I began to look for an "invisible world." Here scientific training helps. Science is wholly against materialism, as Huxley showed so finally.

Phenomena (which means "things shown") are nothing in themselves; they are only the supposed causes of change in the behaviour of our instruments.

More, the whole trend of research in the last century has been towards the symbolic and even mystical resolution of "hard facts of Nature."

Hertz, Roentgen, and Curie have turned all science into a sort of "Meccano" for budding mathematicians.

So there was no difficulty in presuming all kinds of unknown forms of energy capable of playing more tricks on "matter" than all *Arabian nights* even imagined.

My reading was already wide, and I soon found myself pasturing on the traditional stubble of antiquity. I read up "Black Magic" and Alchemy.

The former interested me hardly at all. The rumours of its wickedness were rubbish.

(This classical "Black Magic" has nothing to do with "Satanism"; little even with witchcraft. I knew at this time nothing of the Black Mass tradition, and the subject must be relegated to its proper chronological place.)

The rituals of the Grimoires are prayers fortified by formalities.

The appeal is to the biblical Jehovah, and sometimes also Jesus, but in detail.

The "Black Mass" of the Grimoires is often garbled, a jumble of learning and ignorance, and frequently puerile. But it is in essence simple piety, though not enlightened piety.

And there is nothing in it which would harm the most sensitive maiden or shock the most blameless archdeacon.

Alchemy is a very different matter. It is the mother of modern chemistry. Its professors were the most learned men of their time, as is evident from the virulence of their polemics. They did do things which we, even today, cannot copy.

I know a modern chemist who,, by their methods, made "fixed mercury", that is, made chemically pure mercury which was solid at the normal temperatures of air in England.

I believe that they made gold. I cannot imagine kings maintaining alchemists in luxury for years unless they got some tangible result.

But the jargon of the alchemists is baffling. To this day nobody knows whether the real interest of any given writer lay in the material chemistry, in exalted transcendental chemistry, or in exalted spiritual exercises.

I read and did not understand. Yet my reading was not in vain.

Thus, in the summer of 1898 I was in Zermatt. I joined a group of reprobates in a bier-halle one evening. I thought I would show off; I started to lay down the law on alchemy.

And—one of the symposium walked back to the hotel with me: disclosed that he was a trained alchemist!

My shame burns bitter to this hour. Yet that man's rising up at the impact of my idiot cox-combry was the answer of the masters to the honest despair of my soul!

I looked for him the next morning; but he had left the valley. I made frantic inquiries; I found the trail; I broke the record down the valley, and came up with him.

The Secret Order

This incident led to my initiation in a Secret Order, which is only important in my career because it furnished me with the framework of a magical alphabet which I have been able to develop into a universal language intelligible to the Taoists of China as to the Sufis and the Sidi Aissawa, because it instructed me in the elements of true "White Magic," but mostly, perhaps because it brought me into the sphere of radiance of Allan Bennett.

We called him the "White Knight," from "Alice Through the Looking Glass"—so lovable, so harmless, so unpractical! But he was a Knight, too! And white—there never walked a whiter man on earth. He never did walk on earth either!

A genius, a flawless genius! But a most terribly frustrated genius.

He was a man of science, Bernard Dyer's most promising student, but his appalling ill-health prevented his holding down a job, and he was desperately poor.

I got a room for him next to my flat in Chancery-lane, and settled down to pick his brains.

For he was known all over London as the one magician who could really do big-time stuff.

There was, for instance, a party at Sidney Colvin's. He was a collector of unusual people. The conversation turned upon the "blasting-rod," and somebody pooh-pooed it loudly.

Allan produced his pocket wand, a lustre from a chandelier, and pointed it at the incredulous one. Fifteen hours later the doctors got the doubter back to consciousness.

These are the simple facts. I loathe "making a story"; savagely skeptical and almost prudishly scientific, my mind resents even "artistic presentation" of phenomena. So I shan't do it.

Nor shall I plague my readers, and outrage my own scientific conscience, with theories about such happenings. What we need is more facts, better classified, before we start on gossamer hypothesis.

So, with the frequent aid of another member of the Order, I started the study and practice of magic under Allan Bennett.

I seem to have a natural gift for causing things to happen. We certainly got a lot of results, though I must admit that for the most part they were not what we aimed at.

My impression then was vaguely, and now is precisely, that somehow or other the performance of rituals with lights, colours, incense, bellowsings, mystic steps and gestures, knocks and similar accessories, somehow lets loose some unknown form of energy upon the world sense and even of inanimate objects.

Thus, people were always being taken ill or falling down in fits while passing up and down the stairs outside the flat.

On one occasion the furniture of the carefully-locked temple was thrown all over the room. We certainly saw figures trying to form themselves from the thick clouds of incense.

There was also a very definite fight with a black magician who managed to send me a vampire.

All these phenomena appear to me as mere effects of leakage of this unknown but extremely subtle and potent form of energy which is let loose by magical methods. Briefly, boy's blunders.

The White Art

But we did have some successes. Mainly, the preparation of perfectly efficient talismans which got on the job and stayed on the job.

And, in course in time, experience taught me how to manage things better.

But Allan, strangely enough it seems to me, lost interest rather than gained it as we acquired proficiency in the White Art. Frankly, I was annoyed.

More frankly still, I told him so. Most frankly of all he told me his reasons.

He trusted me with his secret, unguessed by any of his friends in London.

He didn't really care for Magic at all; he thought that it led nowhere.

He only cared for Yoga.

But this entails a digression. I have mentioned, rather casually, that I joined an Order. But, in its outer manifestations at least, it was not in the least the Order I wanted.

My first text-book of mysticism had been *The Cloud on the Sanctuary*, by Councillor von Eckartshausen. He wrote of a "community" (though its members never communicated) of men and women possessed of spiritual knowledge and secret powers beyond anything which we know as human.

They were pledged to use these attainments in the service of mankind.

Theirs was my own ambition and I was glad to pay that price. My early initiations had already purged me of

my selfish desire at the futility of things. It was the stultification of the whole evolutionary process that got my now well-consecrated goat!

But, while it was clear enough that the practical methods of these adepts were magical, their mode of self-development was of the mystical type. In other words, they were the European equivalents of Yogis.

At this stage I had taken a complete scunner at Yoga. The milk for Babes, or even the Guinness for Strength which I craved was not to be replaced by the bilge of the Toshophists.

I did not want to swing on a hook like a sirloin; nor was I motor-minded enough to acquire true devotion to Jaganath. (If you spell that Juggernaut, I shall scream!)

So Allan's disclosure of his secret addiction to Yoga sent his stock down on my ticker to some-where near the absolute zero of the air thermometer.

Yet the tale he had to tell was exciting enough.

I ought to premise that he suffered from one really terrific handicap—he was simply unable to visualise at all. If he were looking at a picture, a building or even the simplest geometrical pattern, and closed his eyes, no impression remained in his memory.

So when he did see a thing, it was at least objective, even though his impression of what he saw might be false. The above is important because of his first experience.

He had been told, at 8 or so, that the Devil would appear if one recited the Lord's Prayer backwards. Having the sceptical and practical mind of a man born with Scorpio rising, he said: "That is easy to do; I will do it."

He did it. He saw something and fled shrieking to his mother. But the experience probably gave him confidence in the existence of a something-other-than-the-world-of-sense.

At eighteen he had an accident—I should think almost unique. It determined his whole life.

Two of the most important stages in the Yoga training are called Atmadershana and Shivadarshana.

In the former, the *whole* universe grasped, firmly as an homogeneous unity and deprived of all its conditions or categories (such as the powers of its elements to impress the senses or other instruments of perception, and also its relations with space, time, and causality), is united with the pure Self of the *yogin*—equally purged of its conditions—in a single supreme Act. And this, although no subject or object remains, results in a *positive* state.

In the latter this state is annihilated.

In Allan Bennett, at eighteen, without training or preparation of any sort, this Shivadarshana spontaneously occurred!

He was, of course, instantly thrown out again. The effect, even upon the man well trained by years of arduous work, is absolutely blasting. It is a marvel that Allan survived, and kept his reason.

But he did: and sufficient memory of the event to swear to himself that "I will do nothing else in all my life but find how to get back to it."

Little thought I, when Allan told me this, that within a couple of years I should myself be started on the same climb.