

THE STONE
OF THE PHILOSOPHERS WHICH IS HIDDEN IN THE MOUNTAIN
OF
ABIEGNUS

“And a certain woman cast a piece of a mill stone upon Abimelech, and all to brake his skull.”—ANON.

“Whosoever shall fall upon this stone shall be broken; but upon whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to power.”—ANON.

“Qu’est-ce donc, en vérité, que ce pierre? C’est le fondement de la philosophie absolue, c’est le suprême et inébranlable raison.”—LEVI.

“One day when I was all alone
I found a wondrous little stone.
It lay forgotten on the road
Far from the ways of man’s abode.
When on this stone mine eyes I cast
I saw my Treasure found at last.
—O Stone, so red and rare and wise!
O fragment of far Paradise!”

MACHEN

THE STONE

OF THE PHILOSOPHERS WHICH IS HIDDEN IN

ABIEGNUS

THE ROSICRUCIAN MOUNTAIN OF INITIATION

HOLBEIN HOUSE suggests rather Hogarth. It is one of those sordid barracks where the Martinet of Realism, Society, pens his privates. Whoso sees an inhabitant thereof thenceforward for ever must believe in the predestination of the damned. Are we so far progressed as to interpret the saying "The Englishman's home is his castle" in the light of the fact that once a man lay dead in his room for seven weeks, all undisturbed?

Thus far the Socialist. To him enter a Man. Sayeth, the fate of men is naught; we measure mountain ranges by their peaks, not by their plains. And forthwith the man must seek in Holbein House for some crown of the age, some Venus floating new-born in that Dead Sea, some God new-lit upon that Limbo. As also it is written.

We follow him to its smallest garret, deserted by the rats, since they found nor room nor victual, but tenanted by men. Arthur Gray was a poet who had abandoned alike his father's favour and his jam factory. Caring for nothing but his books, he lived in Holbein House, year in, year out. Looking at the blank wall opposite, he had seen God face to face, and died. When he spoke he was not understood, for his words were the words of a dead God.

Basil Gray, his brother, had come hot-foot from West Africa to see him. Basil had just made the great march from Tetuan to Lagos, and the love of his only brother burnst strong in him, and the hunger for his face.

Basil, looking upon the blind face of the desert, his body withered in the furnace of the sand, had seen God face to face, and died.

Basil spoke, therefore, as a dead God speaks, and only children understood him.

At Gibraltar, on the way home, he had fallen in with Denzil Roberts, that foolish globe-trotter, secularist, and philanthropist-at-large. Denzil had just returned from a silly "sentimental journey" through Spain, and gazing on the sunset from the western tower of the Alhambra he had come nigh to seeing God.

Saddened and sane, he yet could recognize the magnificent insanity of Basil, and had come home with him to learn the way to the gate that men call Madness.

The fourth occupant of the room was Arthur's oldest friend—nay, master.

Desperate research, life risked again and again in strange ways, incomprehensible to the swinish multitude, steady purpose ever equilibrating each thought with its opposite, had brought him at the end to the mastery of things.

So earnestly would he gaze on God, and die, that God had given him of His own life, and sent him among men.

But men knew him not. Only the babes could understand his strange grave smile.

The fifth man was a classical scholar; much learning had made him mad. Yet, well as he knew Greek and Latin, he had not yet read enough to see therein the luminous image of the Creator.

Last was a doctor who, gazing ever on madness, had himself become mad. He, too, saw God, but, being already mad, died not. Men thought they understood him, and for that reviled him. Being mad, he did not care.

All these men smoked heavily, and the silence of the world lay upon the,

It was only when the Man and the Socialist, invisibly seeking some pinnacle in the plains of Holbein House, as Sigiri springs from the table of the central province of Ceylon, came upon them, that their influence woke them into life.

I will cause them to converse, said the Man (who was the Devil), as it were to take you upon an high mountain and show you all the kingdoms of the earth. I have seen them, said the Socialist. But, said the Man, things look very different from that height.

Poverty and vice are the same from any point of view, began the Socialist.

Listen! said the other.

Arthur Gray stretched his legs as well as the room would allow. Master, your pipe is out. Read us that yarn of your turn-to with Asmodee in Scotland. If ever a place seemed to defy God, "it is this, it is this, it is this." Tune our instruments, master!

The big man put away his pipe. Your brother, he said, will recognise the title.

And clearing his throat, he began:

هو الله الذى لا الله الا هو

OR THE DEVIL'S CONVERSION

I SEE o' nights among the whins
The Devil walking widdershins
As stony silent as the Sphinx
I sit upon the sandy links,
And listen to the glittering spell
Of Asmodee the Goat of Hell.

He conjures up the nights of gray
And cardinal in Dahomey,
Where before kings and caboceers
The flaming cat of Hell appears;
Where witches whirl their flapping teats
Still shrieking to the drum that beats
Its monstrous call to flesh of man
Hissing and bubbling in the pan——
"Hua is God" it spelt to me;
"There is none other God than He."

He conjures up the seas that swell
Before the hosts of Gabriel
Between the Lights in Ibis flight
Who whirls the Sword and Scales of Right.
The tall ship strikes: the rending roar
Of death devours the horrid war
Where men dash women to the deck,
Leave children wailing on the wreck. . . .
Behold the lightning's jagged flash
Spell out the signal with its lash——
“Hua is God” (it tore the sea)
“There is none other God than He.”

He conjures up the greasy glare
Of Rupert Street by Leicester Square
Whose sodden slaves with sweat and paint
Sicken the soul and make it gaint.
Build of the slimy scales of vice
One concentrated cockatrice!
“Think!” laughs the devil,, “everywhere
Is Rupert Street by Leicester Square.”
“True!” I replied, “it spells to me:
There is none other God than He.”

He conjures up the loathly rout
Of Christians crawling in and out,
A sight as lovely to the wise
As maggots in a maiden's eyes.
From chapel, church, and meeting-room
From brothel, hospital, and tomb,
From palace, gin-shop, workhouse, prison,
Factory, slum, their slime is risen.
The Devil said “Bestir thy wits!
Spew out those dysenteric——” “It's
A pity” (thus I cut him short)
“Your boyhood was so badly taught.
The riddle's simple—here's the key!
There is none other God than He.”
He conjures up the Universe,
Men bitter bad, and women worse.
The whole disgusting Pan is shown,
Filth from the spirit to the stone.
“Read that!” he yelled. “Your eyeballs squint,
But That is surely plain as print.”
“It is,” I said, “for all to see——
There is none other God than He.”

And now the Devil strides and spins
Most furiously widdershins,
He causes two deceitful moons
To dance upon the driving dunes.
“If all’s illusion, gentle youth,
All is the enemy of Truth.
Where are you now?” “My worthy friend!”
(I answered) “take it to the end.
I do not think you prove it quite
That truth and lies are opposite.
But upon This we can agree:
There is none other God than He.”

He wrote in flame upon the grass
“This person is a perfect ass.”
He vanished in a cloud of musk.
He sent the demons of the dusk
To ramp and rage about the links
To tease me—Me, the stony Sphinx!
I smiled; I bent them to my will;
I set them dancing deosil,
And singing with seraphic glee
“There is none other God than He.”

The devil saw that he had failed,
He came back very draggle-tailed;
And, poised above me in the air,
Whined “Mr. Sphinx, now, is it fair?
My business is to rack the bones
Of saints like you and Mr. Jones!
I’m paid to accuse the brethren, sir!”
“I do not blame you, Lucifer.
I take my pleasure in your frown
Because you ‘represent the Crown.’
And all your prattle means to me:
There is none other God than He.”

The Devil seemed to see the point.
Pleased that I did not say “Aroint!”
Pleased that in Asmodee I sight
Brave Lucifer, the Lord of Light,
Pleased with my Qabalistic pun
(Really a very clever one!),
Accepted all and none; became
A perfect vessel of the Flame.
He flapped his crooked and gloomy wing
And swore by God the Holy King

That all his malice should confine
Itself to this one sin of mine
And this alone, when neophytes
(Confused by the excess of lights)
Perceive not what they ought to see:
“There is none other God than He.”
Oh how the good converted Fiend
Worries those Postulants unweaned!
Though now he dances deosil
He poinds them many a purging pill.
He cleans them from their piggish food;
He brings them to beatitude.
“Hua is God!” quoth Asmodee:
“There is none other God than He.”

A silence ensued. At last, from Denzil: you mean very much what the Hindus mean by their doctrine of Maya?

Exactly so; but of course they cannot mean what they say. The thinkable is false. All our attempts to crystallize Truth in words are just as futile as the trickery by which the artist gets his sunlight effects with some dull ochre. The impression's good enough, maybe, at a distance, as an impression. Examine it close: it goes. God sees the clever composition; man sees the untidy brushwork. So logic destroys our religions, despite their truth.

But, said Denzil, surely it is better to get nearer truth. I hate all the evil that religion has wrought. As I looked on Granada and its cathedral, this is what I thought. Can you blame me?

And from a little leathern pocket-book he began to read these lines:

ON A PROSPECT OF GRANADA CATHEDRAL FROM
THE ALHAMBRA

BROWN bloated toad that squattest in the sun!
Loose thankless mouth whose greed is never done!
Old spider waiting with thy web aspin
Till all Granada thou hast gathered in!
The blood of bulls and goats would satisfy
Of old the hellish thirst of the Most High.
Well—at the worst Jehovah's altars smoke
And hiss with flesh of his own favoured folk.
But Thou, O Christ, dost glut thy lust refined
Upon the ravaged souls of all mankind.

An excellent photograph, said the big man. My own words just now were as strong, I think. Yet the one answer answers all.

Arthur Grey broke in. You should hear the whole story, he said. Look at the inmost as well as the middle. Under correction, sir (politely to the doctor), I find that human

beauty fades if we dissect the body. Yet your microscopist (in the first place) will find the detail of blood beautiful, just as I its banners in my lady's face. And in the second place, does the dissection table reveal all? Is there no spirit, lovely even to me, of which my lady's bones and nerves are but the weak expression?

So strongly do I agree with you, returned the madman, that I have written a poem on the unattractive subject of ovariectomy. It must not shock you; I am mad, and claim the immunities of my limitations. I say nothing of your spirit theory; to me, ignorant as I am, it seems easier to call a nerve God and so explain its functions, than to imagine a God using that nerve as an instrument. We can kill a nerve; can we then baulk God of His effects? This is no less blasphemous than to say we kill God when we cut the nerve. If a man understand not his brother whom he hath seen, how shall he understand God whom he hath not seen? Materialism is fertile, though it lead to its opposite. Theism is sterile. How would you treat an engine-driver who tried to make his engine go by prayer and philosophy? But I am mad. Here is my poem, then.

Having the memory of a madman, he recited it by heart.

OVARIOTOMY

I LOVE you, lass, and you alone.
What shall I say now death and life
Wrangle before the jasper throne
And cry to God to end the strife?
Kind words? a little good advice?
Patience, and fortitude, and prayer?
Tracts are so suitable, and nice?
“Dear child, there'll be no parting there!”?
O bourgeoisie! you read no doubt,
But you still have a lot to learn.
I am a lover, not a lout
My thoughts take quite another turn.
I who have bitten through your skin
Envy the surgeon who could dip
His deft and conscious fingers in
Your bowels, and twitch a scornful lip.
I would have paddled in you, played
Childlike and cloudless of your pain.
I would have kissed the wound, and made
A pleasant ripple in your brain.
Within the startling lovlier mouth
New-cut my brother torch should flare
And pour to ease its awful drouth
The poison of a Baudelaire.

O fool! not thus the Intimate
Gives up its secret to the soul.
Truth fled beyond, inviolate
And slips beside the glancing goal.

Who probes the body gains a fact,
Yet leaves an equal fact behind;
So gathering for the cataract
Roll up the rapid waves of mind.

Swift as the light at last they leap
Into the cavern of despair;
Of all their freshest force they keep
But froth and smoke and empty air.

O fool! to deem dissection truth
And paint and patches but a blind!
The enthusiasm of a youth
Is worth the sage and cynic mind.

O Buddha! couldst thou nowhere rest
A pivot for the universe?
Must all things be alike confessed
Mere changes rung upon a curse?

I swear by all the bliss of blue
My Phryne with her powder on
Is just as false—and just as true—
As your disgusting skeleton.

Each to his taste: if you prefer
This loathy brooding on Decay,
I call it Growth, and lovelier
Than all the glammers of the day.

Which of us likes his house the best?
You who find filth on every floor?
I, in the privy who attest
A something worthy to adore?

The end is—you are always sick;
You always quarrel with your meat.
My raptures follow fast and thick:
I even tend to overeat.

You would not dally with Doreen
Because her fairness was to fade,
Because you knew the things unclean
That go to make a mortal maid.

I, if her rotten corpse were mine,
 Would take it as my natural food,
 Denying all but the Divine
 Alike in evil and in good.
 Aspasia may skin me close,
 And Lais load me with disease.
 Poor pleasures, bitter bargains, those?
 I still despise Diogenes.
 Why must the prig be still the judge?
 The Deadly-Livelies audit life?
 Ask of the drone about the drudge!
 Compute the mistress by the wife!
 Why? Because Jesus helps them to!
 Converted William snubs the King.
 No doubt the soapy godly crew
 Can turn their hands to anything!
 Alas! the days of Christ are gone:
 The callous King supports the snub:
 Campaspe's lips gush Lethe on
 The schoolboy-trickset in the Tub.
 O restless rats that gnaw the bones
 Of Aristophanes and Paul!
 Come up to me and Mr. Jones
 And see the rapture of it all!
 This moral sense is sorry stuff——
 You take the peas—give me the pod!
 Follow your fancy far enough!
 At last you surely come to God.

Who is Mr. Jones? asked Denzil. We have heard of him from our friend here already.

Mr. Jones, said the big man, is the Unutterable Tao.

Mr. Jones, said the doctor, is (on this illusory plane of Maya) one of the wonders of the world. He is never seen or heard, felt or smelt. Nor hath he been at any time tasted of any. Yet he is everywhere; in all, and causer of all, and apart from all. By profession he is a curator at the British Museum; but that is going very low indeed upon the plane of Maya.

I have already told you, said the big man, that Mr. Jones is the Unutterable Tao. Why not leave it at that?

I will, said Basil, if Arthur will read us something. I know what he was leading up to when our friend—played with his opponent's ball.

A brother is a dreadful handicap! sighed Arthur. Still, here you are!

And he read:

THE WIFE-BEATER

I BRUISED your body with the whip
Its wheals stand out in ridgéd azure.
The savage blood upon your lip
Images hurt, and hurt's erasure.

The pain transmuted into passion;
And passion's ruin was not pain;
But my pain wears another fashion;
My dead men do not rise again.

You hurt me, and the silent skin
Whispers no word of bleeding bruises;
Your subtle hate, your cunning skin
Brands and corrodes me where it chooses

I fear not them that kill the body,
But rather them that hurt the soul:
My soul with your disdain is bloody;
Your stripes are none to make me whole.

Could you but see my vitals torn,
My nerves on rack, my tortured spirit—
Of all the ills to mortals born
This is the sorest to inherit.

If you could see the branded token
Of your invisible whip, the scars
Of your intangible knife, the unspoken
Agonies, silent as the stars!

Then you should count the agéd lines
That wrinkle up my boy's blithe beauty:—
The Judge of all the Earth divines
My wrongs and yours, and does his duty.

For you in heaven shall bloom and burgeon,
And I in hell shall howl and groan.
Ah! God is an unskilful surgeon;
We both shall weep to be alone!

For we are one and may not part;
And though we hurt, we love, believe me!
Nor would I in my inmost heart
Of one of all your stabs bereave me.

No man can hurt the indifferent stranger,
 No woman wound the casual friend.
 There is a glory born of danger;
 What anger gat, desire may end.

Give me the phrenzy of your lip!
 My heart accepts your usurpature.
 Your body leaps beneath the whip;
 Our pain is in love's very nature.

It is enough. The woe is over,
 The woe begins; the vial brims,
 And all the anguish of your lover
 And you is hidden in wrestling limbs.

Drain the black cup of bruised blood!
 Its bitter shall beget devotion,
 And Bacchus sweep its frenzied flood
 Into the Eleusinian ocean!

Certainly, the plane is very low indeed. We hardly came here to learn that! said Basil indignantly. We all know that cold-blooded murder (even) may become a duty—witness Hodson and the pistolling of the Delhi Princes!

His brother laughed: I don't know about duty, but to murder *you* in cold blood would be a pleasure.

Dear old chap! responded Basil, with a warm pressure of the hand. Open the whisky, and you'll feel better!

Which being gone about, the irrepressible doctor broke in with a story of his youth.

I will never assent to murder, said he. It's inartistic. I dined forty years ago in the Apennines with an Italian Prince, and he entirely converted me. I put down his words in verse. They are being published by the Society for the Abolition of Capital Punishment. If a supreme aesthete like the Prince botches it (this is their idea) how much more must we detest the crude melodramas of the Law! The proceeds are to be devoted to the artistic education of the Common Hangman—as a palliative measure.

Wiertz and Beardsley, Sime and O'Sullivan? suggested the Scholar, separating his fingers widely to illustrate his "Three fingers only, please!" to their host.

Now, doctor, said Basil, your Italian Prince!

THE DISAPPOINTED ARTIST

SHALL we sit here? A lovely night!—
 What you were saying, though, is right:
 Man scorns repulsion and attraction;
 Woman is wholly reflex action.—
 I'll tell you of a splendid joke
 I had once. Have another smoke?

No? Well. I wanted to determine
Rightly the nature of the vermin.
(A pity scientific study
Makes the hands poisonous and bloody!)

You seen yon finger chaste and cool
That moonlight flings across the pool?
It seems to tempt a man to swim.
I have as sharp and straight and slim
A blade whose glamour makes one reel
And dazzles death upon the steel.
Oh! the stiletto! supple joy—
As if some soft Italian boy
With all his slender strength alive
Laughed in a deep Narcissus dive.

I used to poise its light aloft
Above Carlotta sleepy-soft.
The dusky gold enamoured eyes
And bloom of down would harmonzie.
She used to scold it in pretence
Of envy of its excellence.
We laughed—but not at the same joke.
All girls are blind with their own smoke.
A man may come, his lazy day,
Cuddle and coo an hour away,
Yet in his heart is bound to feel:
“No woman’s worth an inch of steel.”

Woman has always played the sphinx.
An open secret! How the minx
Covers her single aim, poor saint!
With many a foxy futile feint.
The same thing civilized or wild:
“I want a man: I want a child.”

Man has a real secret—kept
Close as a Rosy Cross adept!
The safer that the sapient sheep
Have never guessed he’d one to keep.
Unveil the Pyramid of Stone!
He simply wants to be alone.

Women suspect it. Tell one that
To change her to a frenzied cat!
'Tis the one cliff where all their waves
Break back to spurned and shattered graves.

A man (at heart they're well aware)
May love, maybe! can never care.

I bore you with an old fool's prosing?
No? I was right, then, in supposing
Modern conditions hamper youths
Who seek to grasp these simply Truths.

But to my yarn. Carlotta lay
So sleepy-soft one summer's day
That really I could not resist it.
I took the dagger out and kissed it.
Like a cat's tongue that daintily laps,
I slipped it in between her paps.

At first, of course, the shrieking swerves
One's thought: it irritates the nerves;
And out of tone the laughter lies
At the poor innocent's surprise.
But soon there triumphs cool and clean
The touching pathos of the scene.
No word of anger, be assured!
A strange soft wonder, long immured
Within her, lit her lovely face
With something of Our Lady's grace.
"What did you kill me for, my Lord?"
As if my answer must accord
With some most lucid miracle
Of love too sweet to think or tell.
"Kiss me again before I die!"
And, as I kissed her, tenderly
Shone like pale flames the sullen spheres
Of dewy light, of eager tears.
She touched my soul's divinest chord:
"I am so happy, dear my Lord."
And, breaking to the spirit bliss,
"I go, dear. O so keen to kiss
Our baby when I get to God!"

Charming! Why, damn it now! that's odd.
I'm surely in my dotage, Dick!
A sniveller makes me fairly sick.
—Well, here's the Devil in Eden still;
No good we do but turns to ill:
Art's but a crust o'er nature's chasms.
Death caught her with his comic spasms.
They turned her fairly inside out,

Jerking her legs and arms about
Like a damned dancing marionette.

I could not light my cigarette:
I started laughing. Laugh? I laughed—
I rocked my body fore and aft—
I fairly yelled! To crown the event
Her wonder at my merriment:
That beat the band. I really wonder
However I came to, by thunder!—
Ha! Ha! You hear—it somehow jars.
Bad art, my boy! The Devil mars
Our best. You want a tender gray,
Prepare your palette half the day,
Take brush, and find to your surprise
The snout of scarlet stab your eyes.
Bad art, my boy! I never cared
To try the piece again.

—We've aired
Our dinner. By the way, though, here
You are. That's it! How smooth and clear
The moonlight runs from point to hilt!
Steel in the end beats silver-gilt!
Well, there's an end of my cigar:
The girls will wonder where we are.

Strange! how this question of motive deceives historians—and others! said the scholar. Froude was hardly a fool; but his Henry the Eighth is incredible. So is the conventional monster. I for one shall not be surprised at the Day of Judgement to hear that the Constantine of Protestantism was actuated by some quite simple motive like suppressed vegetarianism.

Very likely it never happened at all, said Denzil thoughtfully. Nothing ever did. Look at the Christ-myth. The Trial and Death and so on—mere stage-directions from a ritual of Mithraism. . . .

But who was Mithras? asked the big man. Like any other question, it goes on for ever, till you get to the big question.

With your answer to it, said Basil.

On the question of motive, though, said the Doctor, I like your theory of Messalina as an ascetic. Since the divine consciousness only appears as the negation of the human, and is only to be attained by wearing out all the sensation-points, till no response occurs to any stimulus—

Nonsense! interjected the big man, one can control them, not destroy them. Only morbid “Union with God” is attained by fast, vigil, scourging, and the like.

Morbid or no, continued the doctor, most saints have used this method. What I was about to say was that since we wish to overcome the body by fatigue, we shall do just as wisely to seek Union with God in excessive debauch. If done with the same purpose, and sleep successfully banished, the same result will occur. If your Messalina failed—well, what does the poet say? Try, try, try again! Read us your verses, Jack!

And with a disdainful glance at his clothes, as much as to say “Where’s my toga?” the scholar began:

THE RETURN OF MESSALINA

FROM the marsh of the Maremma the malaria is drawn
By the gray and chilly breezes of the autumn and the dawn
In the silence as we shiver who is yonder that we see
With the hair fallen loose about her, with the stole about her knee?
All her flesh is loose and fallen, and her eyes are wet and wild,
And she staggers as she wallows like a woman big with child.
How she gasps and stares about her! How she shivers! Are the hosts
Of her lovers there to haunt her, life’s lupanar thick with ghosts?
How her teeth are clenched with horror! How her lips are curled and wried
As she staggers to the palace weary and unsatisfied!

Surely I have done the utmost! (all the demon in her wails)
Is it spirit that disdains me? Is it only flesh that fails?
Did Danae win to slumber at the thrust of griveous gold?
Did the Bull bring Pasiphae to the palace of the cold?
Could the sea avail to Sappho drifting dead upon the foam?
What shall save me, Messalina, save the majesty of Rome?
Shall I wreck my life with roses, hurt my flesh with flames and rods?
All is vain!—for I have conquered both the mortals and the Gods.
In the garden of Priapus, in the land of lost desire,
I have made myself a monster and my soul a snake of fire.
Ho! it stings me! Ho! it poisons! all the flesh is branded through,
Branded with the steel of Vulcan, with the lava’s deadly dew.
All the kisses of the satyr, all the punishments of Pan,
All Eros hath given of arrows to the eyes of maid and man,
At their lips and live I suffered—I have borne me as a queen:
Hear the roar of after aeons that acclaim me Messaline!
Woe is me! the waves of ages—icier, icier as they roll—
May not cover up my stature, may not quench this devil-soul.

Here’s the palace. I must enter sly and secret as a thief.
I would rather blazon, blazon, this my night beyond belief.
I, a worn Suburrian Venus reeking with a fouler foam,
Sucked within me in the darkness the virility of Rome.
Now’s the light, the light accurséd: I must get me to the feast,
Stupefy this Panic spirit, throw a posset to the beast.

—Hail, ye Gods! ye Gods infernal! here salutes ye Hercules!
I am come to bring my spirit free of ye and forth of these.
I am Orpheus! I will charm ye, bring Eurydice to light——
Ah, my lords! Alas the omen! who shall turn me all to right?
Who of all our proud Olympus shall avail me or befriend?
Ah, my lords! but I am weary.

See ye any one the end?

Nay! we saw her grope and stumble for the secret sidelong door,
Lift the latch with trembling fingers, pass within and be no more.
There we stood and worshipped sadly (for the cry had touched us home),
Worshipped till the gray was azure as the sun rekindled Rome.

You may be right, said Basil, in thinking as you evidently do that much of the ceremonial debauchery of the Pagan worships was a true mystical process. Indeed, at this day there are many cults in India (also, I believe, in the South Seas) of what is called Vamacharya. Religious frenzy is invoked by the aid of the Erotic and Bacchic frenzies mingled with that of the Muse of the Tom-Tom. Soma, bhang, arraq, and the Uniting of the Lingam and the Yoni! All, mind you, by a most elaborate ritual.

But, on the other hand, there is perfect purity of thought in much of the avowedly Phallic symbolism of the world. For just as the sexual pleasure is entirely in a class by itself among (or rather, above) physical pleasures; so is Samadhi—union with God—in a class by itself among (or rather, above) mental pleasures. Who, therefore, would make an hieroglyph of the latter formless ecstasy can do no better than by drawing a picture of the former, under the image of its physical instrument.

Hence the Rose and Cross, Sphinx and Pyramid, Sulphur and Salt, Black and White Pillars of the temple—in short, all the “pairs of opposites” in the world. (Politely, to the big man.) As you were saying just now.

Their literature? hinted the scholar.

Basil took up the glove. The Eastern is such a paradox that one hates to lay down the law. A Sufi (for example) no doubt writes erotic verse for the divine reason I have stated; but also, I believe him to be very glad of the excuse, because he is just as dirty-minded a beast as you and I.

I suspect the semi-erotic verse more than that which is uninctured. Why conceal your meaning under a symbol and then go on to explain it all? If language is valid, why use the symbol? If invalid, why use it at all?

Thus I can believe the Song of Solomon (unadulterated filth, with not a word about Yoga) to be a purely mystic treatise; but if the writer had inserted the inane “explanations” which pollute our Bibles—Christ and the Church, and that stuff—faugh!—I should certainly have thought he was trying to palm off his purulence under the guise of religion.

An Oriental Kensit! cried the scholar.

Just so, and the pious prurient would buy it and taboo “Dolores” added Arthur Gray.

Well, judge this! concluded Basil. It’s a pretty free adaptation from the Arabic—or what passes for Arabic in Marocco! he contemptuously added.

And diving into his shooting-jacket, he produced and read:

INSPIRATION

O DESERT sand! how still and prone the large-eyed boy upon thy breast
Lies in El Maghrab’ in the West, and makes his low luxurious moan!
How still the stars that watch above! how his lover, lapsed for joy
To death upon the dying boy, the boy dissolved and lost in love!
Even as a serpent in the grass their passion stole upon them there
Within the warm ambrosial air, the intoxicating midnight mass.
The pale boy lifted high the cup; the swarthy priest insanely poured
That utmost unction of the Lord, that only Gods might drink it up.
Wherefore indeed the holy Jinn that have embraced “addin Islam”
Arose from their colossal calm, and smote the paramours of sin.
Shrieking they fled, and all was still; the perfume of the place was spilt
Even on the domes of ivory gilt that soar on Allah’s holy hill.
I saw the threescore iron kings smite thrice upon the Burning Throne
Till Mecca’s black enchanted stone resolved the rapture of their wings.
The proud Emirs bowed low before the awful fervour of the wind
That rose their steely flight behind, and set him lion-like to roar.
And as the Dervish howls and whirls its savour catches him and lifts
His soul (beyond the mind that drifts) into the Treasure House of Pearls.
Even to the icy solitude of death a gust of scent is borne
An herald of the awaking morn to that unhappy brotherhood;
An herald of the healing kiss of maids with eyes of white and black
Whose heavenly kips shall woo them back into a bright eternal bliss.
O laughter of delicious boys that bring the cup and pour the wine
And with their rosy limbs entwine fresh garlands of mirific joys!

The boy is prone upon the stand; he lies as one who nestles in
Some arbour delicate of sin built by the Everlasting Hand.
His lover is the Open Eye, that kindles Light within the Abyss,
And wakes with His immortal kiss enthusiastic energy.
Weep Thou again, O weeping One! Thy tears that gush within the goal
Are songs that shudder in the soul, and springs that gladden at the sun.
They flood me with irradiate tunes of life and ecstasy and light
As though some misty maid of night were girded with a million moons.
They make my pulsing blood to pour in rhythmic throbs of music rare;
My songs shall course the choral air from Mazaghan to Mogador.
And leaping all the lesser bars I shall become the One and All,
And cry the cross-dissolving call, and lose myself among the stars.

This is indeed paradox, cried the scholar. You embolden me to read my “Mask of Gilt.” I defy the subtlest of you to find a moral or a hieroglyph in it; so according to you it must be the only decent poem read yet.

You are itching to read it, said the big man, for you love the bestial. We are fairly trapped. Open the window, some one, and remember that He is God alone, and that there is none other God than He!

Right as usual, said the scholar. It’s a true story, in a way. I’ve seen the mask myself, and I believe it.

THE GILT MASK

In Florence in the days of old there dwelt a craftsman pale and grim.
The Devil entered into him, and fanned his soul with plumes of gold.

He offered all he chose to ask. “O snatch this itching soul away,
So that thou animate my clay and finish me this magic mask!”

The Devil brought him graving tools; the first a ravening disease,
The cold corrupting masterpiece of Christ the god of weeping fools!

The second, bright as burning coal, a white and wanton wolf of sin
Who had an icy flame within the ulcer that she called her soul.

Long years he bent him to the task; he worked his torture and his lust
Out of the horror of the dust into the horror of the mask.

The mewling lecherous devils crept out of the strongholds of the hills,
And filled their blood with noisome thrills before the work of the adept.

The ghuls that gloat on corpses cold would gather, glutted with their meat,
And give it dead man’s chops to eat, and dead man’s bones to rub the gold;

While stinking goats and cats would come to link in infamies unheard;
While beat the witches oiled and furred their buttocks on the devil’s drum.

Yet still the dying craftsman strove to work his lust and pain within
The glittering avatar of sin that seemed to mock him as he wove.

At last his visage pale and grim lights with the laughter of the Pit.
The Devil comes and praises it, and lays a wreath of fire on him.

“Well hast thou wrought, O Florentine! Thy work hath gathered in its spell
The Daughters of the Lords of Hell, the Goddess-goats, the Women-swine!

“These shall adore it age by age; to these shall it give lust and force,
Absolve their spirits of remorse, and make them sage among the sage.

“Its eyes shall gleam when Borgia goes simpering to her stallion,
Her hair bedecked, her jewels on—to please her neighing, championing spouse.

“It shall smile loose on Katherine wallowing in the mire of blood,
Her lover’s cold congealing flood paying their silly hour of sin.

“Salammbô mated with an asp shall shudder at its leering face,
And kiss the gilded lips, and lace her serpent in a closer clasp.

“It shall inspire the dews of death that stand on Brinvilliers the smooth
And strangle all her woman’s ruth, envenoming the baby breath.

“It shall revolve to hellish bliss the water-torture and the wheel;
In all their pangs she shall not feel aught but my soul-devouring kiss.

“Its satyr lips shall writhe in prayer to nameless Nubian whores that mate
With swinish kisses to abate the black desire of Baudelaire.

“So after many a house of sin it finds at last a pungent home
Sweet as a poisoned honeycomb—a fairer fouler Katherine!

“With cooing laughter she shall press the monster to her golden teats,
Feed its desire on all her sweets with many a masterful caress.

“Its wisdom shall invigorate her soul to heights of hideous joy
To match her with the equal boy that shall be master of her fate.

“She shall attain a man to excel her strong satanic womanhood:
Their love shall break the mask of wood, reveal the authentic face of Hell.”

All this the craftsman heard with pride: he called: his sickness and his whore
Together at his vitals tore, and rent him that he laughed and died.

So with the last convulsive shred of spending life, his fingers fold
So subtly on that face of gold that all its peace is perfected.

* * * * *

And there it hangs, a thought obscene, to haunt our love with damnéd ghosts—
Hark to their execrable hosts exulting as I kiss Katrine!

It conquers? We will show it things memorial of its splendours gone,
Things grosser than it looked upon where Neva rolls or Tiber swings.

We shall exceed: its lips unclean shall answer at the Judgement Day:
“The greatest of them all, I say, were this my poet and his queen!”

Ah, God! we look upon the Thames: the Arno’s palaces are gone.
Dull glows the misty horizon with London’s stinking stratagems.

But lift the lid of earth and see the good flame gush and wrap us round!
For us, the Gods of the Profound, may England equal Italy.

And I who revelled with Faustine in Rome make madder music here
Who poise upon my bleeding spear the severed kisses of Katrine.

I eat her flesh: I drink her blood. God! could I love a woman more
By Arno’s flower-enamelled shore, or Father Tiber’s tawny flood?

And reeking with her lusty life I hack the gilded mask and burn
With joy and hate. Aha! to turn to my own guts the gluttoned knife!

O Satan! stand morose and cold above our bodies swimming thus
And plunge thy glory into us, and fan our death with plumes of gold!

Write with our blood before thee spilt on catafalque and catacomb
The dire monition of our doom, the story of the Mask of Gilt.

The paradox *is* right, by Heaven! exclaimed the big man. That poem is bad enough, but a long explanation—*qui s'excuse s'accuse*. Better look for God in the filth itself than in the lame excuse for it!

I once knew people as mad as that, said the Doctor. They were all right; they knew their own business; but they were misunderstood—and they're in the Asylum at this minute.

Misunderstanding! said the big man; why *will* people try to judge others? I know less of my own brain—and *à fortiori* of my brother's—than I do of an oyster. Yet I try to instruct my brother, and let the oyster gang his ain gait.

Read that jest of yours about the Qabalistic Rabbi! said Arthur.

I will. He was the dearest old man in the world; absolutely incapable of doing anything to shock the most puritanical. Yet his curious studies in the Zohar got him a reputation unfit even to speak of.

He was too innocent to guess what trouble he was making! Let it be a warning to us!

So he read:

THE RABBI MISUNDERSTOOD

“TEMURAH tells us—praise to Adonai!”
Rabbi Mephibosheth Ben Mordecai
Was wont to say, “that the Adepti see
S_a-M_a-D_{hi} equalized with S_o-D_o-M_y.
That transcends Short o' Face and Longnose both:
This is the deepest den of the Qliphoth.
Match them! the Tree of Life in Eden Bower
Grows balanced perfectly from root to flower.”
—This may be why the Reverend Mrs. Grundy
Called him a sodomite the other Sunday.

Good! chuckled Basil, when they had done laughing. If he'd worked that out as a boy, his alleged character might have forced him to its own path.

When I was in Marrakesh, they lynched a poor old man because their mosque had been defiled in some real and imaginary way (with which he had in any case nothing to do, having been paralyzed for years). The excuse was, on the soles of his feet the creases formed the word Allah, so that he always trod upon the name of God! They killed Burckhardt for that, by the way. A pure invention in both instances. I saw his feet, and they were just like anybody else's, only dirtier.

Poverty and paralysis were *his* crimes, I warrant ye, my masters! Anyway, it was a great joke, and I made a splendid Arabian Tale of it.

Read it! was the chorus.

Which he did.

THE MOSQUE BEWITCHED

AN aged sorcerer there dwelt within the town of Marrakesh
The fangs of Hell in life who felt twitching his soul out through the flesh.

Though not originally bad his moral ruin was complete:
His pious parents said he had the devil's claw-marks on his feet.

An outward wart upon the nose spells inward malice in the gizzard.
The path is easy, I suppose, for such an one to play the wizard.

In any case he took the risk, and left off things like soap and eating,
Till he could give the world a bisque, ten spells in thirty, and a beating.

Well at the age of eighty-eight he found himself the One-horse Wire
For the Jehannum Maiden Plate—by Satan, out of Lake o' fire.

So, calling Iblis of the Jinn (a god among the damnéd Ghebers!)
He offered up a final sin to play a last joke on the neighbours.

The deed was signed in fire and blood; and ere the morn was dewy wet
An hog for the Muezzin upstood, and chanted from the Minaret.

“There is no God! no God! (he sware) Mohammed was a charlatan!
Sleep is more excellent than prayer! and pork is pleasant in the pan!”

The elders knew that only one could crack such execrable quips.
They hurried off to have the fun of slicing him in little strips.

But Iblis met him with a grin worth ninety-nine per cent. per annum.
“You've missed the fun—but pray walk in!—we're off this minute to Jehannum!”

In sooth, the fiend's unseemly mirth moked all their wagging beard alike,
As from the bowels of the earth quacked an ironical “Labbaik!”

The moral is—if all your folk are sure you are a black magician
You may as well enjoy the joke; you cannot damage your position.

The moral is—when mothers crossed perform the usual Christian revel
And tell their children they are “lost,” they simply drive them to the devil.

What's “Labbaik”? asked Denzil.

The pious “Adsum” of the Pilgrim when he reaches the holy ground of Mecca. So
you may imagine the horror of the Muslim on hearing it float cheerfully up from Hell!

Talking of Black Magic, said the big man, the belief in it is probably as strong as ever.
I myself am inclined to laugh: “Who believes in Black Magic proves himself to be
bewitched!” I had a horrible case of it once—I shudder yet!

I could imagine the time when my poor friend's disease was epidemic; when the panic
madness seized even on the government——

I hae my doots! said the scholar. Popular beliefs furnish convenient stalking-horses for political subterfuge.

No! said the Doctor. Diseases of the mind as well as that of the body attack all classes. While man is as subject to suggestion as he is, the simulation of belief is almost surrender to the belief itself. Constantine probably became a real Christian in the end.

Tell us about your friend, though! from Basil.

“I hitched it into verse and good,” said the big man. But as it’s a tale with a moral, please imagine yourselves to be a set of children. I wrote it for them. Here goes!

THE SUSPICIOUS EARL

There was a poor bedevilled Earl
Who saw a Witch in every girl,
A Wehr-wolf every time one smiled,
A budding Vampire in a child,
A Sorcerer in every man,
A deep-laid Necromantic plan
In every casual word; withal
Cloaked in its black horrific pall
A Vehmgericht obscenely grim,
And all designed—to ruin him!

He saw in every passer-by
Black Magic and the Evil Eye,
Interpreting the simplest act
As being a Satanic Pact.
Of course at times there were a few
In some sort victims of the crew;
For when his Countess coughed or sneezed,
“Obsessed!” the poor old fellow wheezed.

He sought the Mighty Powers of Good,
Invoked the Great White Brotherhood.
Like smart and punctual business men,
They sent a man round there and then.
How gladly reverent doth he greet
The sage’s venerable feet!

But in a while suspicion grows.
“This fellow, now, by Jove, who knows?
Perhaps he too is in the Plot.
I like Scotch Whisky: he does not.
He prefers Job to Second Kings.
We disagree on many things.”

He sniffed around the Adept (who lay low).
He searched his luggage for his halo.
He asked him frequently to dine
Forgetting purposely the wine
(Though the arcana of Nibbana
Ignore the very name of Cana).
He could not pass a herd of swine
Without a hint; in fact, in fine,
He took His Silence as a sign:
“This is an Enemy of mine!”

To cut the story short, we skip
A year or two, and in we chip
(Invigorated by our rest)
Just where the jury at the 'Quest
At the Asylum duly find
“Suicide while of Unsound Mind.”

This time we skip from earth to heaven
God stands among the Spirits Seven.
The Seven Lamps about Him flame.
Myriad Archangels cry His name.
Millions of elders, prophets, preachers,
Saints, martyrs, virgins, hermits, teachers,
Angels, evangelists, apostles
All singing like a lot of throstles
All out of tune with one another,
And every one a Plymouth Brother,
With praise set heaven in a whirl.
Up slinks the poor bedevilled Earl,
Saved after all! The grateful tears
Course down his cheek for several years.
But when he pulls himself together
And gets accustomed to the weather
He wants to poke his fingers in
To see if God is genuine.
Too soon he stripped (this cunning clod!)
Gilt off the gingerbread of God;
And sipping his nepenthe clear,
Sniffed “Bah! plain gin and gingerbeer”
—That night he happened to be sick:
“Poisoned,” he yelled, “with Arsenic!”

He left—his boomerang suspicions
Created hosts of Black Magicians.
His leaky lordship they annoyed
All through the immeasurable void

—Until his pallid voice confessed
Himself in league with all the rest.

(The breathless children round me crowd.
I pause. At last one says aloud:
“But tell us how he got to glory!”
—I’m very sorry. That’s the story.

But what’s the moral? asks a big
Girl with the makings of a prig.
First. Golf is long, and life is fleeting:
Only one Bogey is worth beating.
Moral the Second (Quiet, girls!)
A sane square is worth ten mad earls.
And, most important, Number Three:
Every one must trust somebody.)

You do well to treat it lightly, said Basil. It’s the most terrible story I ever heard. A
fico for your tragedies of blood and bones!

Indeed, ’tis the one hopeless hell, added the Scholar. It is true? You knew the man?
I did, returned the big man. As nice a fellow as you could find in three continents.
And lost! lost! lost!

Oh! when will men be free of all this superstition? groaned Denzil.

Never, said the Scholar.

Now, said the big man.

I can’t see it, cried Denzil, but it shall be! it shall be! And he rolled off this great oath:

I SWEAR by all the stars that stream
Through all the lofty leaves of night:
I swear by the tremendous towers
That crown Granda’s vale of flowers:
I swear by their impending gleam,
The Sierra’s snowy swords of light!

By all the cruel and cold despair
That Christ hath brought upon the land:
By Mary and the false blind beastly
Lies of the prudish and the priestly:
By God and death and hate I swear
That man shall rise, shall understand.

I swear by this my lucid Eye
By all the freedom I have won,
That men shall learn to love and doubt,
Put faith and slavery to the rout,
And eagle-pinioned even as I
Soar to the splendour of the sun!

All right! all right! said the doctor, rather testily. But you want everybody to use your methods. Hurrah for Huxley! Down with Jesus! By heaven, your tyranny will soon be as bad as that of Rome or Geneva. Every man must find his own way to freedom.

Let me read to you about my mad friends. One of the most interesting cases of symbolic coitus I know of. The man wasn't of the hunting class; he was a head waiter, child of some Russian exiles of the so-called student persuasion, and his only notions of fox-hunting were taken from the Christmas numbers of the illustrated papers of his childhood.

Strange how things stick!

THE SYMBOLISTS

TITAN EVE was thewed and sinewed: all the blood of Mother Earth
Sang within her veins and gave her all the might of all her girth.
Vladimir was small and dainty like a fairy knight to brand
Greener circles with his dancing on the green enamoured land.
Strange that in the silent city, Eve should play the horsing mare,
Eve should whinny for a stallion, snuffing up the scented air;
Strange that breeched and scarlet-coated, brave with wealth of boot and spur,
He should hunt the fox Jehovah through the world astride of her.
But his whip! the flame that lashes blood from out her flanks afoam,
Strips the flesh and leaves the spirit bridle-free to gallop home!
But the screams of pain that stab him, drunk with lust of spur and rod,
As the rowels and the whalebone send his spirit back to God!

So in madness is attainment that inspirits and endures.
—Who are you to blame their folly, ask them to assent to yours?
Be ye sure, the Eye Unlidded measures by another rod!
Be ye sure, the human balance looks distorted to a God!
To yourselves be slaves and masters; stand or fall to self alone;
Human ethics will not loosen our Astarte's crimson zone.
You will never fit your forehead with your father's fancy hats:
You know more about salvation than the Reverend Robert Rats.

Well, you have most certainly met an unpleasant set of people, exclaimed the big man.
Can't we be a bit cheerful for a change? The night wears on: we must part.

I think you would like my Gipsy girl, said Denzil, without scruple or diffidence.

If she's a sane clean human being, we shall. So Arthur Gray voiced the general feeling.

Without further debate he set to.

LA GITANA

YOUR hair was full of roses in the dewfall as we danced,
The sorceress enchanting and the paladin entranced,
In the starlight as we wove us in a web of silk and steel
Immemorial as the marble in the halls of Boabdil,
In the pleasaunce of the roses with the fountains and the yews
Where the snowy Sierra soothed us with the breezes and the dews!
In the starlight as we trembled from a laugh to a caress
And the god came warm upon us in our pagan allegresse.
Was the Baile de la Bona too seductive? Did you feel
Through the silence and the softness all the tension and the steel?
For your hair was full of roses, and my flesh was full of thorns
And the midnight came upon worth a million crazy morns.
Ah! my Gipsy, my Gitana, my Saliya! were you fain
For the dance to turn to earnest?—O the sunny land of Spain!
My Gitana, my Saliya! more delicious than a dove!
With your hair aflame with roses and your lips alight with love!
Shall I see you, shall I kiss you once again? I wander far
From the sunny land of summer to the icy Polar Star.
I shall find you, I shall have you! I am coming back again
From the filth and fog to seek you in the sunny land of Spain.
I shall find you, my Gitana, my Saliya! as of old
With your hair aflame with roses and your body gay with gold.
I shall find you, I shall have you, in the summer and the south
With our passion in your body and our love upon your mouth—
With our wonder and our worship be the world aflame anew!
My Gitana, my Saliya! I am coming back to you!

The men breathed freer. So powerfully did the song lift them that through the open window all the fragrance of Spain and its roses seemed to flow into the room.

Only Arthur Gray never smiled.

The big man looked at him. What is it? he said sharply.

We are all Gods! (said Arthur) knowing good and evil, and that which is beyond. But I love Holbein House and London—dear vile London!

What can I do?

And he began mournfully to recite:

THE POET

BURY me in a nameless grave!
I came from God the world to save,
I brought them wisdom from above:
Worship, and liberty, and love.
They slew me for I did disparage
Therefore Religion, Law, and Marriage.
So be my grave without a name
That earth may swallow up my shame.

Arthur! said the big man, more tenderly than he had yet spoken, there was once a man like you. He wished your wish, not with tears, but with laughter; he had his wish, as you shall have yours. In spite of all, that nameless man is widely known as any in the world: they call him Jesus Christ. Now all the evil wrought by Jesus Christ is nothing to the wish of that unknown poet. From this pinnacle of Adeptship we weigh the Universe in other scales—but this doctrine is known to you and understood of you, and I need say no more.

Then said Arthur: Verily, all is Maya, all! He is God, and there is none other God than He!

In silence his guests went down the narrow stairs. Arthur Gray turned him to the window and looked out on the blank wall of Holbein House.

Well? said the Man.

But the Socialist had hanged himself in his own red necktie. He had seen God, and died.