

A CRYPTIC LITERATURE

By John Cremer



ALL great books from the Bible to "Don Quixote" are, as the scriptural phrase goes, "written within and without;" that is to say, they carry a meaning within them which does not always appear on their surface; and it frequently happens that books which are obviously designed as allegorical, for example "The Pilgrim's Progress," are in reality much less suggestive than those whose interior significance is less consciously designed by their writers. Few people will, however, be aware that there are large literatures still extant, the growth of a number of centuries, which depend wholly for their assumed importance on an inner meaning which differs from their outward sense, the latter in many cases being practically unintelligible by itself. One of these literatures is that which was concerned in the past with the transmutation of metals. The metamorphosis of radium has drawn attention once again to this old dream of alchemy, and it has been very properly pointed out by men of science, in reply to some enquirers, that the phenomenon in question does not give colour to those theories of transmutation which for many past generations enlisted the interest and commanded the convictions of notable persons all over Europe. Setting aside the question of the possibility, whether, that is to say, transmutation has been accomplished by any accident in the past or whether it will be discovered in the future, there is no more

singular literature than that of alchemy and it may well offer, even at the present day, some material for speculation to persons who, without any predisposition towards the so-called secret sciences, and believing most likely that no such sciences exist, are yet not wholly disassociated from an interest in old world curiosities of book-writing.

The secret sciences were presumably perpetuated by reception, as their name implies, in other words, by transmission from one person and generation to another. They suppose therefore custodians, without which such transmission would be impossible. On the face of alchemical literature the notion of this custody is plainly written; possibly it is the only thing which is plain or demonstrable concerning it. It forms part of a very large body of evidence that certain knowledge—whether actual or fanciful does not here signify—was handed down from a somewhat remote past through the period of the Middle Ages. Such knowledge was sometimes concerned with matters of experiment connecting in some way or another with the domain of physics, as, for example, in the case of alchemy; at other times it transmitted old ideas of philosophy; and in yet other cases religious beliefs of antiquity have, under one or other guise, and in any case with many corruptions, been apparently handed down. So far as the West is concerned, the literature of alchemy is in the main a Latin literature, and it rose up in Europe about the 10th century of the present era.

It could scarcely be regarded as new, for it had, setting China aside its Greek and Arabian antecedents, which take the technical subject back some hundreds of years; indeed, into proximity with the beginning of Christianity. But it assumed certain new characteristics when it put on a Latin garb, and we get into closer touch with its methods and have a better knowledge of those concerned in its production. From the tenth century to the end of the seventeenth, and even later, this literature was carried on without any interruption, using the same symbolic style, preferring the same claims, and being then, as it remains still, without any real meaning for the general world. No critical writers have ever taken hold of the gross fact of this literature and succeeded in explaining it on any principle of mere crass imposition, or forgery of the ordinary kind. They have seized upon it at certain periods, and have tried to show that the ignorance and credulity then prevailing created a demand for such books, and that the libraries supplied it then as they would do now if such a commodity were marketable. At the beginning of the seventeenth century there was some truth in this impeachment, and we may accept it sincerely as accounting for many so-called works of alchemy produced then and later. But it does not account for obscure Aramaic treatises which have never seen print, which have been put upon no market, and yet use the same symbolism and seem to repeat the same things. It does not account for the obscure alchemical poems containing the diaries of obscure and sometimes unknown workers which did not enter into daylight till they were brought forth by Ashmole the antiquary. It does not account for four centuries of production, and more even than this, between the period of the Latin Geber and that of Caxton, when there was no printing and no ready method of circulating manuscripts so that profit could be insured to their authors.

The same quality of criticism might point to the wider fact that alchemists, for obvious reasons, were often popular with princes, were honoured guests at

their courts, and this also admittedly explains much fraudulent pretension, yet such persons, well known exceptions set apart, were not the alchemists who created the literature of metallic transmutation. Few literatures have been more independent of patronage. Most of the works in question were either anonymous or passed under names which were obviously not those of their real authors. Where some courtly connection existed it produced the opposite effect to that which such criticism suggests. There is Arnold de Villa Nova, once a respected royal physician, who lost position, home, safety and ultimately life itself because of his devotion to a forbidden art. There is Raymond Lully, the so-called Jewish neophyte, not the *doctor illuminatus* of the *Ars Magna*, but that obscure and indeed concealed master about whom we know only on his own testimony what he suffered at the hands of royal avarice. Passing to later dates, there is here the gentleman from Scotland who was racked and imprisoned, suffering all martyrdom except its crown, because of the knowledge which he refused. Again there is the English adept whose name has never transpired, who describes himself as a wanderer upon the face of the earth, set apart by his secret from all common familiarity with men, and ever occupied in eluding his enemies. Later still there is the so-called Greek Archimandrite who, as if possessed by some missionary fever, travelled from place to place, exhibiting a mysterious gift of which we know only, that he gained nothing by it.

Let us take the palpable fact of this strange literature of the centuries, and assume that the men who wrote these books were members of some secret fraternity, speaking a common language by which at any time and in any place they could communicate with one another: assuming this, the mere existence of the literature becomes comparatively intelligible. We can understand it, that is to say, in a vague and general manner—whether the transmutation of metals was actually the object in view, or whether this ostensible design covered a different purpose, as has

been occasionally suggested. We may not know why the writers had recourse to such devices, whether from motives of propaganda—that there might be ever a witness in the outside world to attract from generation to generation those who might be fitted for the purpose—or for some less accountable reason. We may not know, even upon the last supposition, why the “Ordinal” of Thomas Norton should have remained, as it did, entombed for centuries, yet we do grasp a certain clue by which we can see why there was this continuity of purpose going on age in and age out, ever saying the same thing, yet ever saying it differently, and at the same time revealing nothing that was intelligible to the unversed mind.

When we add to the palpable fact what is known only to those who have penetrated beneath the surface in search of some meaning running through the immense cryptic literature, namely, that, however absurd in its purpose, it proceeds on methodical lines which connect it, symbolism interweaved with symbolism, with other similar literatures, dealing with other alleged sciences, we find ourselves confronted by what is at least a strange literary problem. If we admit, therefore, that it is quite possible, and is, in fact, more easy to account for a long sustained cryptic literature by means of a secret initiation, we must admit what follows therefrom, namely, the existence of secret orders in the Western world, whereby the knowledge, real or illusive, was from time to time imparted. If we read the literature of alchemy we shall find that most of its professors affirm that the art is impossible without an instructor.

The literature of alchemy does not stand alone in its testimony to the existence of a perpetuated knowledge, but it is the most consistent, evident and striking witness. There is much the same conclusion to be drawn from the proper study of old books, and especially of old manuscripts on magic. During the narrow period of its existence this must be also admitted of kabalism, and even astrology is not altogether silent. As to the strength and significance of the testimony there has been great mis-

conception among the critics of all schools indifferently, and, of course, nothing follows from the fact of initiation except the existence of initiation. It is not an apology for the secret sciences to admit that they were studied in secret and so perpetuated to modern times; it simply relieves an existing department of human interest and inquiry from the charge of complete fatuity. In an ordinary subject it would not be needful to insist on such a point, but no person can approach these questions without being misconstrued.

But if we elect to set apart the voice of the literature, we shall find history itself begin to speak, though, as with the books of the adepts, it is at best somewhat vaguely. Age after age, in the old ages of intolerance, before judge and inquisitor all over Europe, went on the great merciless, intolerable, persecution of wizard and sorcerer, and age after age the one patent fact which it did elicit for all that have eyes to see, was, that whether within the body in corporate assembly or without the body, if we prefer to speak in language which approximates to that of the believer, in the collective hallucinations of dream and vision, or what not, assemblies were secretly held in the past by adepts and their pupils, equipped with the most elaborate devices of mask and pantomime. It can serve no purpose to challenge this in the name of criticism. It is wholly natural and even inevitable, that persecuted people should unite in secret; they have done it in all ages of the world. And if we say that these assemblies connected with others of an earlier date and kind, we shall not go beyond the bounds which have been defined, at least tentatively, and with no little show of research and reason, by independent investigators.

About the period of the Renaissance there seems to have been marked activity on the part of these secret fraternities, and again about the period of the French Revolution. There is no need here to discuss in the second case the extent to which the adept became a political conspirator. The history of most esoteric association, for whatever purpose instituted, has from time to time

exhibited this tendency, the political connection becoming stronger and closer as we recede in time till we reach the antique civilisations in which the governing classes had the whole custody of science and power, when the so-called adept was also priest and king.

Let us add that if there be any foundation for the indirect rumours which reach one from time to time, it

would seem to follow that secret association of this kind has continued to the present day, even in England. The fact, if it be a fact, does not, of course, justify the existence of the secret sciences, nor perhaps the recrudescence of interest in such subjects which is a characteristic of to-day, but it certainly lends an additional interest to their historical aspects.

