

# ASPHODEL

A ROMANCE OF FAËRIE

By Oliver Raymond



*BENEDICTUS qui venit.*

So you see that after all our meeting miscarried, at which I promised to tell you of certain high consecrations which open the gates of Fairyland, not only bringing you to the threshold, but enabling you to pass beyond it, and to dwell at least for a time in that blessed country. But I say blessed, as you must know, not for what it is in itself but for all that it may haply lead to for those who know that there is something beyond dreaming, and that mystery is enclosed by mystery. Have you not remarked how difficult it is to tell secrets, even when you are face to face, and that you end either by saying something less than you first intended or something altogether different? It would have been the same if we had actually encountered in that hollow vale at moonrise, when I failed to come to the tryst. To speak the truth fully, I am pledged to keep certain secrets, because it has been written that no one can give the mystery to another. Or, if I am not pledged I am prevented, which is the same thing, and this also is why I was kept from the tryst.

But now the divided disc of the early moon, looking motionless in the zenith, casts no beam of light on the pale silver of the sea, which itself seems to diffuse a faint and ghostly radiance, prolonging the twilight westward after a broad, unbroken cloud has closed over the fading splendours of the departed sun.

The wind whispers strange passwords of initiation, and in the half-tones and remote reverberations of the tide, as it slips slowly outward, there is the suggestion of the doctrines which have been kept secret through the centuries. It is an hour of romance, of recollections and revelations. I feel that I can speak to you in part, and that you can listen wholly and in part understand. But it is granted that I must speak in images, for which reason I shall give you a parable, not of my own invention but as nearly as I read it myself in a stained parchment, containing the Book of Truth in the Art.

The Masters say that you can change the common metals into gold by means of Lunaria, since the Herb Moon has such virtues; but this I commend to your interpretation, because this herb is sacred to phantasy, which has a strange power in alchemy. There are also other plants which, albeit they are themselves perishable, will confer the gift of immortality on men and women. I have met with these great elixirs, and have drunk these juices of the amaranth, and it is therefore not without some personal knowledge that I cite here for your illumination so much of the history of Asphodel, a young spirit of the age, as may seem profitable to my judgment, and shall be possible in the elusive nature of things; for it is evident that I cannot give you the whole of his history, seeing that it is not my own, and of my own, even, I remember only a part—some heads of the later chapters, with

many breaks and intermissions. Moreover, all stories are endless.

They called his name Asphodel in the old fable, because he was both mortal and immortal, as you are also, or may be, if you are truly a child of wonder. I should have written of him in verses, except for the hardness of the time and its dislike of decorations in alphabets. It is said that he was beautiful, like a palm tree painted on the door of a great temple; and I know that he had many gifts, among which was that particular gift of wonder, without which you can receive no favour of the fairies. But you have been told already in your own books, and I do not seek to deceive you, that this endowment and those favours do not make for happiness, as we commonly understand it. The fairy gifts, more especially, produce an alteration in the heart like that of a man jaded by thought, for whom the first-hand enjoyment of the outside world is very nearly impossible. If you would share this imprescriptible prerogative of the birds and the other animals, among whom the natural man is included, I would recommend you, forsooth, not to go travelling in Fairyland, and to be careful how you turn the corner of certain streets, lest you get into strange places suddenly and find gardens where all the trees bring forth forbidden fruit.

I am not certain that Asphodel was a king's son according to the body, but there are also shadows of kings, and he may have come of this lineage; but it is enough that he was a child of wonder. This, you should know, was because he had a pure intelligence—in other words, one which was unsophisticated, direct and simple, simplicity being a great secret of wonder. Even as language is of the heart, so "wonder is of the soul," and is the soul in its first awakening. I would speak to you more fully on this subject if there were places for meeting in the universe, but we are walking on either side of a high wall which muffles our voices when sea and wind do not drown or carry them away. Well, the result of this simplicity was that Asphodel knew what he wanted, and those who know this will sooner or later learn whither they are going; for, maid

or man, wherever such an one would journey there shall a road be found. He was aware already that the forlorn mystery of enchantment lies on the other side of the hill: he thought of that land daily, and speculated whether it would be a good thing if a young neophyte or postulant might perchance enter it. He saw that it was veiled by many tears of heaven and many sighs of earth; he heard how the wind cries: "Waste, Waste!" about its borders; how the trees on the hither side answer: "The heaven for height and the earth for depth"; and how the sea in the live light from a distance shouts: "The heart of the King!" Sometimes his own heart responded vaguely the one word, "Unsearchable!" If you had asked him, he could not have said why before he went into Fairyland.

In the night-time, Asphodel found that he could get quite easily to the borders by thinking, but he could not get through the veil created by the tears of heaven and the sighs of earth, and, indeed, this barrier grew denser because of them, since earth and heaven have so much to mourn for in common. All men, however, have either been into fairyland, or are in course of going there, and the boy's turn was approaching. Those who have been acolytes at the altar will in time be advanced to the thurible, and after that we know that there are the great ordinations. I will tell you, therefore, what Asphodel did in his difficulty: desiring to know what hindered him, he put open the doors and windows of his house, says the fable. The reason is this, namely, that if the stars cannot come to a man it is certain that he must go to the stars; but in the last resource they come to him, as the moon did to Endymion. Now, it is a pity to go in search of that which will come itself and bring you. The secret is to be patient, wondering and watchful. You will have heard, even in this world, that it is right and a good custom to leave the departing spirit an easy means of egress; how much more, therefore, when you would welcome visitors from without, in which case it is certainly unwise to bar the doors, for there are few who will come in by the

windows. Outside these considerations, it is a salutary thing, at least, to pull up the blinds that the sun of glory may enter.

It fell at length upon a day that a stranger entered the house, and he consecrated Asphodel with a certain chrism—or *oleum dilucidum*—upon the eyes. The eyes of this stranger were all that could be seen by Asphodel, and his hands were all that touched him. And the stranger said: "Do not look outside your house for the treasure which is within doors."

That night Asphodel saw for the first time that the hill was quite near to his dwelling, so that the mountain does really come to the prophet. And he kept open the doors and the windows.

On the third day after, a second stranger entered and consecrated him on the ears and lips, as it seemed with another chrism—or *oleum translucidum*. The face of this stranger was all that could be seen by Asphodel, but the lips and the hands touched him, and the face was a face of vision. The stranger also said to him: "A man's dreams are things of his own household."

When the night fell Asphodel saw that his house stood on the slope of the higher side of the hill, and he had not been aware of this previously, yet things were vague in the mist. He heard also the murmur of many voices, with a few words distinguishable among them, and his own tongue seemed loosened, so that when one spoke he could answer. And he kept open the doors and the windows, yes, even from attic to basement.

He kept open house in this manner till the third day next after, when a third stranger entered and consecrated him on the forehead and on the feet with a very great and secret chrism—as it were, *oleum superlucidum ineffabile*. The entire stature and proportion of this stranger was then seen by Asphodel, like a soul of mournful and sublime mien after the passing of many purifications, and one unto another they gave and received a kiss of peace. The stranger also said to him, as one speaking from very far away: "To the opening of the gates; to the place of mournful gifts;

to see further; to feel more deeply; to know more truly; to hear what the world cannot listen to; to be conscious of the illusions and of that infinite which interpenetrates the illusion."

Thereupon Asphodel was aware that his house stood upon the crown of the hill, at which he was greatly astonished, because it had been unknown to him previously, and there was no need any longer to keep open the doors and the windows, seeing that no one could close them on account of the great company which ever went in and came forth of the first hierarchies of Faërie. At moon-rise that evening, Asphodel found that the mist had lifted, though it is certain that by reason of the tears of heaven and the sighs of earth, it was denser than ever on the other side of the hill, being the side which looks towards Egypt.

He remembered for the first time his early history, though the scene of it he could not remember. He knew that he was a child of mystery, and that he had been born into the place of a mystery. To his birth came a Fairy, who offered his father and mother a choice between two destinies—that the boy should be happy and not great, or great, but, after many manners, unhappy. And they made themselves the sponsors for this baptism of the spirit, choosing rather that he should grow up strange and illuminated in soul, but born to many ordeals of the greater infortunes. And the stars were dignified and afflicted, and set in the house of his life accordingly. He remembered that so far already his story had been very wonderful, but withal sad and haunted. Yet he did not doubt that if he should look back on it at the end of his pilgrimages, he would not repent the choice which had been made, because he also looked forward to victory. Then said a voice at his shoulder: "Be thankful that you have been kept from common things."

Asphodel was now a dweller in the Land of Faërie, which is also the Land of Wonder, the gift of wonder within him having become manifest without him. He saw that all Nature is enchantment, and, in spite of many wise men, that the world was made by magic,

which is the power of runes, rhythms, harmonies and secret measures. He saw also that there are many spheres of sorcery, and how men pass from one into another till they come at last where all bewitchment terminates; but of what follows no one sees anything in Fairyland, for it is far beyond all incantations.

I wish I could tell you properly of the great progress which this young neophyte made through the whole region, but, in the first place, the fable, as I read it, is unfinished, and, in the second, he is still on his journey, though it is now scarcely in Fairyland; and, lastly, I am oppressed too much with the many meanings that underlie all the stories I have met with not to lose sight of the narrative, or of what you would call the adventures, in the endeavour to explain its construction; and, therefore, I am an indifferent story-teller. In the same way, if I were asked to describe an opal I should begin to tell you its virtues and the scheme of symbolism which is contained in its colours. What is more, I do not wish to forestall your own history, in case you should understand me sufficiently and should yourself get into Fairyland. And I who love so well and know also in a measure those garden valleys, with all their wavering ways, assuredly hope that you will, as, indeed, I also believe it. As to this, I must tell you that a man enters Fairyland either by choice or necessity; if he is not born in it, he must get into it, just as the art of magic either finds a man holy or makes him so. I have already remarked that Asphodel is there no longer, and the reason for this is that no man ever stays there. I say this, confessing that I have sometimes questioned whether there is really a way out. I ask myself: Have we not all dwelt in it? Were we not born in it? Do we not die therein? The answer is, perhaps, that I have tarried a long time, and, indeed, in this respect, I have much to answer for, and to-day I am more self-weary than usual. Or perhaps those who have misused Fairyland become its prisoners and victims; for such misuse is possible. But all the great books

written by those who know, testify that, in the end, we come out of it; for, though it is a local habitation, it is not an abiding city. The old stories which we have all read in our childhood confirm this, though most of them deal with the borders. You will remember that the heroes always come back, which is true in its way, though what they do actually is to go forward.

Your adventures, when you reach it, will not of course be those of Asphodel, because every man maketh his own Fairyland, and his heart also comes to its own bitterness in doing so, as it fell out surely with him. But the heads of the stories are similar. Do you remember in the old, old fairy tales how the enchanted prince or princess, before they could be restored to their proper place and inherit their proper crown, had to be hurt, broken or wounded, after some manner, and were afterwards happy for ever. This is as much as they could say in the stories, which are like a man walking on his head, and what you must look to receive in Fairyland is a wound before you can be crowned; but with that hurt no one looks to live happily, however high he is throned, no, not till the ages of ages. They call it, I can scarcely say why, the orbicular wound: I have been suffering from it all my life, though it has never led me to Kingdom.

Before Asphodel got his own wound—in the first days of his sojourning—he had the experience of this suffering in others. There was the dolorous instance of a Prince of the Promontory, beyond which dwells the bound Lady of the Enchanted Rock, who is nourished by souls in the shape of clouds and birds. He had the fortune to love this lady, and was hurt grievously in the attempt to reach her. Of herself I can tell you nothing but that she would have loved him could he have saved her from that weariness. And now it goes hardly with him to save himself, for this kind of wound is hard of healing in Fairyland, as the old legends of the Morning Star might sufficiently tell you. Another instance was that of a young man of base birth who therefrom was endowed by his fairy with a miraculous gift,



namely, that the images of his mind became living things. It was these which turned to rend him. But the third—to make an end of these episodes—was that which befell a maiden. An evil witch out of malice decreed this curse upon her—that who ever did good to her should be the victim of evil fortune, but whoever loved her should die. There was one way to avert this destiny, and in the end she adopted it; that was to be wounded by one who loved her for one whom she did not love. I have never been able to learn why the tales of woman's trials in Fairyland are always so sad and heavy-hearted; but it is always and in every respect the land of desire, very far from the land of fulfilment.

You will begin to wonder why anyone should seek to enter it, and to weaken sensibly in your purpose. But the fact that you are wondering shows that you are already on the way, and, lest this should savour of a refinement, let me add that no man repents of his wounds or really desires their healing, except in the due time, and that this is the case with myself, though I shall never tell you how I came by the hurt which I have.

Now, Asphodel came by his own after the following manner:—Once in every hundred years, says the old fable, it was the belief of a certain people which was curiously enchanted, for there are nations, as you will know, in Fairyland, and strange and wild enchantments; it was their belief, as I say, that one man must take upon himself, for their expiation, the sins of the country, and that this sacrifice must be voluntary. Moreover, he must be a stranger, that is to say, one who had not participated in the sins of the people. It is not known in these chronicles what would have happened had no sacrifice been forthcoming at the required time; there had, in the course of the ages, been many terrible suspensions and uncertainties, but if not in advance, and occasionally, as one might say, out of season, then in the last few breathless hours, before the close of the epoch, the desire of the nation was manifested, the throng—bewildered and foreboding—gave up the

one who would save them, who took upon himself the sins of the nation, surcharged in a solemn rite, receiving a mystical wound, and being put forth, as one who is accursed, over the borders.

Long already as it seemed to him, had Asphodel sojourned in Fairyland when he reached these regions, on a night that was very far spent, and saw a pallid concourse surging madly about a ghostly temple, crying that the veil was rent, that the sacred fire was failing, and that the stars would fall in the night-tide, for no stranger had offered himself. I must not tell you with what words this young pilgrim in ecstasy showed himself on the high steps leading up to the door of the temple or in what rites he participated behind the black veil, amidst shrouded figures moving under darkened lamps in the cloud of their thuribles. But I know that he came forth as a man who has seen with his own eyes the sorrow that is at the heart of Fairyland, which of all things in the four known worlds is the weariest of its own sorcery.

This, as nearly as can be told, is how Asphodel came by his wound of Faërie, after which he saw many thrones and dynasties, many worlds of initiation, that is, of entrance into things held secret, until at length he came into his own domain, and found that which awaited him. Now, there are kinds of kingship which, though not always in the same sense, are invariably heritages of woe; but that which is sown in Faërie is also reaped therein, and, knowing this, he accepted the kingship which fell to him and all its mournful eminence. It would have been no otherwise had he refused, save the longer sorrows, as I have found by my own researches into the Laws of Royal Succession in Fairyland, and into the means by which a mortal may become king of that country. It is quite certain that, after the proper conditions have been fulfilled, you may be king for the asking in Fairyland—king over the people who cry: "Give us houses to dwell in!"—king over those who cry to escape from their houses—and no man wants for palaces. O strange abodes of the soul! In truth, any peg will answer to hang a crown on,

And Asphodel dwelt long in the Land of Faërie, as in the world of vision, the first sphere beyond the threshold, the place of prophecy and divination, of many changes and conversions. But as before the beginnings of his wanderings, so then, he kept open the doors and windows, and thus he came gradually to know of the prospects which were beyond his abode, so that in the end, he went forth out of Fairyland to be healed of his wound, though I know not the day nor the hour. And this is rightly the end of the story.

Now, if you ask me whether there is another way, I can say only that I knew a monk who was at his vespers, and a great gallery opened in the convent, which led into a great chamber that had never been seen by man, but beyond this chamber the holiest of all monks had no need to seek further. This shows, at least, that it is better to chant your *Pater* than to set a platter on the roof and expect manna from heaven to fall thereon, albeit I have known of bread not made with hands which came down upon strange places where no one had looked for it.

Do not ask me at this time to speak more plainly, for I can only remember the heads of a certain thesis which was once affixed by a travelling student to the gates of a college at Salamanca, as follows:—

“In respect of all that which has been affirmed, truly or falsely, of that which has been called Faërie, I, *Frater Peregrinus*, maintain against all comers,

1. It is the place beyond the threshold.
2. It is the sphere of an experience.
3. It is the desire for a star spiritualised.

4. It is the memory of home.
5. It is the place of the soul's wandering, not of its rest.
6. It is the approximation of utterance towards the inexpressible.
7. It is also a house of prayer.
8. It is not without any man.
9. It has other names.

But this student was taken, and lest I also speak freely, I will now make an end of these testimonies with certain observations by way of caution to those, and you among them, who may still persevere in their design to enter Fairyland. You cannot hear the sea without feeling that beyond the great world there is one that is greater still. Its signs and omens and messages are written on all created things. Yet Fairyland is not the place of the illumination, for if this world is like darkness unto light, the other is like phosphorous to light. It is for this reason that all the adventures of King Arthur took place in Fairyland, except the quest of the Graal. But seeing that the locust has not eaten its years, in the end you shall get what you want therein in the way that you want it, and hold it so that you shall not weary. And so long as you have not entered may you have good news by the throstle, for there are many voices, and a green heart of the winning summer through all the livelong day, till the world shall be put to rest in rosemary and lavender. And when you have entered Fairyland, may the stars and the fairies have you in their blessed keeping for the great things that are to come. Meanwhile, let us make the most of one another, for we know not—indeed we know not. *Ite, missa est.*

