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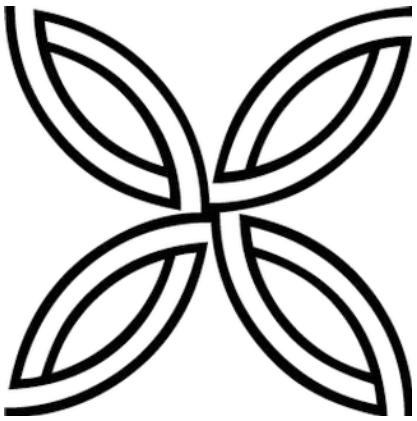

Introduction

Preface

The following pages may be regarded as a contribution towards that ‘History of Human Error’ which was undertaken by Mr. Augustine Caxton. I fear that many minds will have to devote all their energies to the work, if it is ever to be brought to completion; and, indeed, it may plausibly be argued that its completion would be an impossibility, since every generation adds something to the melancholy record—‘pulveris exigui parva munera.’ However this may be, little more remains to be said on the subjects which I have here considered from the standpoint of a sympathetic though incredulous observer. Alchemy, Magic, Witchcraft—how exhaustively they have been investigated will appear from the list of authorities which I have drawn up for the reader’s convenience. They have been studied by ‘adepts,’ and by critics, as realities and as delusions; and almost the last word would seem to have been said by Science—though not on the side of the adepts, who still continue to dream of the Hermetic philosophy, to lose themselves in fanciful pictures, theurgic and occult, and to write about the mysteries of magic with a simplicity of faith which we may wonder at, but are bound to respect. It has not been my purpose, in the present volume, to attempt a general history of magic and alchemy, or a scientific inquiry into their psychological aspects. I have confined myself to a sketch of their progress in England, and to a narrative of the lives of our principal magicians. This occupies the first part. The second is devoted to an historical review of witchcraft in Great Britain, and an examination into the most remarkable Witch-Trials, in

which I have endeavoured to bring out their peculiar features, presenting much of the evidence adduced, and in some cases the so-called confessions of the victims, in the original language. I believe that the details, notwithstanding the reticence imposed upon me by considerations of delicacy and decorum, will surprise the reader, and that he will readily admit the profound interest attaching to them, morally and intellectually. I have added a chapter on the ‘Literature of Witchcraft,’ which, I hope, is tolerably exhaustive, and now offer the whole as an effort to present, in a popular and readable form, the result of careful and conscientious study extending over many years.
W. H. D. A.

Introduction

PROGRESS OF ALCHEMY IN EUROPE.

The word χημεια—from which we derive our English word ‘chemistry’—first occurs, it is said, in the Lexicon of Suidas, a Greek writer who flourished in the eleventh century. Here is his definition of it:

‘ Chemistry is the art of preparing gold and silver. The books concerning it were sought out and burnt by Diocletian, on account of the new plots directed against him by the Egyptians. He behaved towards them with great cruelty in his search after the treatises written by the ancients, his purpose being to prevent them from growing rich by a knowledge of this art, lest, emboldened by measureless wealth, they should be induced to resist the Roman supremacy.’

Some authorities assert, however, that this art, or pretended art, is of much greater antiquity than Suidas knew of; and Scaliger refers to a Greek manuscript by Zozomen, of the fifth century, which is entitled ‘A Faithful Description of the Secret and Divine Art of Making Gold and Silver.’ We may assume that as soon as mankind had begun to set an artificial value upon these metals, and had acquired some knowledge of chemical elements, their combinations and permutations, they would entertain a desire to multiply them in measureless quantities. Dr. Shaw speaks of no fewer than eighty-nine ancient manuscripts, scattered through the European libraries, which are all occupied with ‘the chemical art,’ or ‘the holy art,’ or, as it is sometimes called, ‘the philosopher’s stone’; and a fair conclusion seems to be that ‘between the fifth century and the taking of Constantinople in the fifteenth, the Greeks believed in the possibility of making gold and silver,’ and called the supposed process, or processes, *chemistry* . The delusion was taken up by the Arabians when, under their Abasside Khalifs, they entered upon the cultivation of scientific knowledge. The Arabians conveyed it into Spain, whence its diffusion over Christendom was a simple work of time, sure if gradual. From the eleventh to the sixteenth century, alchemy was more or less eagerly studied by the scholars of Germany, Italy, France, and England; and the volumes in which they recorded both their learning and their ignorance, the little they knew and the more they did not know, compose quite a considerable library. One hundred and twenty-two are enumerated in the ‘Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa,’ of Mangetus, a dry-as-dust kind of compilation, in two huge volumes, printed at Geneva in 1702. Any individual who has time and patience to expend *ad libitum* , cannot desire a fairer field of exercise than the ‘Bibliotheca.’ One very natural result of all this vain research and profitless inquiry was a keen anxiety on the part of victims to dignify their labours by claiming for their

‘sciences, falsely so-called,’ a venerable and mysterious origin. They accordingly asserted that the founder or creator was Hermes Trismegistus, whom some of them professed to identify with Chanaan, the son of Ham, whose son Mizraim first occupied and peopled Egypt. Now, it is clear that any person might legitimately devote his nights and days to the pursuit of a science invented, or originally taught, by no less illustrious an ancient than Hermes Trismegistus. But to clothe it with the awe of a still greater antiquity, they affirmed that its principles had been discovered, engraved in Phœnician characters, on an emerald tablet which Alexander the Great exhumed from the philosopher’s tomb. Unfortunately, as is always the case, the tablet was lost; but we are expected to believe that two Latin versions of the inscription had happily been preserved. One of these may be Englished as hereinunder:
1. I speak no frivolous things, but only what is true and most certain.
2. What is below resembles that which is above, and what is above resembles that which is below, to accomplish the one thing of all things most wonderful.
3. And as all things proceeded from the meditation of the One God, so were all things generated from this one thing by the disposition of Nature.
4. Its father is *Sol* , its mother *Luna* ; it was engendered in the womb by the air, and nourished by the earth.
5. It is the cause of all the perfection of things throughout the whole world.
6. It arrives at the highest perfection of powers if it be reduced into earth.
7. Separate the earth from the fire, the subtle from the gross, acting with great caution.
8. Ascend with the highest wisdom from earth to heaven, and thence descend again to earth, and bind together the powers of things superior and things inferior. So shall you compass the glory of the whole world, and divest yourself

of the abjectness of humanity.
9. This thing has more fortitude than fortitude itself, since it will overcome everything subtle and penetrate everything solid.
10. All that the world contains was created by it.
11. Hence proceed things wonderful which in this wise were established.
12. For this reason the name of Hermes Trismegistus was bestowed upon me, because I am master of three parts of the philosophy of the whole world.
13. This is what I had to say concerning the most admirable process of the chemical art.

These oracular utterances are so vague and obscure that an enthusiast may read into them almost any meaning he chooses; but there seems a general consensus of opinion that they refer to the ‘universal medicine’ of the earlier alchemists. This, however, is of no great importance, since it is certain they were invented by some ingenious hand as late as the fifteenth century. Another forgery of a similar kind is the ‘Tractatus Aureus de Lapidis Physici Secretis,’ also attributed to Hermes; it professes to describe the process of making this ‘universal medicine,’ or ‘philosopher’s stone,’ and the formulary is thus translated by Thomson:

‘ Take of moisture an ounce and a half; of meridional redness—that is, the soul of the sun—a fourth part, that is, half an ounce; of yellow sage likewise half an ounce; and of auripigmentum half an ounce; making in all three ounces.’

Such a recipe does not seem to help forward an enthusiastic student to any material extent.

THE EARLIER ALCHEMISTS.

It is in the erudite writings of the great Arabian physician, Gebir—that is, Abu Moussah Djafar, surnamed *Al Sofi* , or The Wise—that the science of alchemy, or chemistry (at first the two were identical), first assumes a definite shape. Gebir flourished in the early part of the eighth century, and

wrote, it is said, upwards of five hundred treatises on the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life. In reference to the latter mysterious potion, which possessed the wonderful power of conferring immortal youth on those who drank of it, one may remark that it was the necessary complement of the philosopher's stone, for what would be the use of an unlimited faculty of making gold and silver unless one could be sure of an immortality in which to enjoy its exercise? Gebir's principal work, the 'Summæ Perfectionis,' containing instructions for students in search of the two great secrets, has been translated into several European languages; and an English version, by Richard Russell, the alchemist, was published in 1686.

Gebir lays down, as a primary principle, that all metals are compounds of mercury and sulphur. They all labour under disease, he says, except gold, which is the one metal gifted with perfect health. Therefore, a preparation of it would dispel every ill which flesh is heir to, as well as the maladies of plants. We may excuse his extravagances, however, in consideration of the services he rendered to science by his discovery of corrosive sublimate, red oxide of mercury, white oxide of arsenic, nitric acid, oxide of copper, and nitrate of silver, all of which originally issued from Gebir's laboratory.

Briefly speaking, the hypothesis assumed by the alchemists was this: all the metals are compounds, and the baser contain the same elements as gold, contaminated, indeed, with various impurities, but capable, when these have been purged away, of assuming all its properties and characters. The substance which was to effect this purifying process they called the philosopher's stone (*lapis philosophorum*), though, as a matter of fact, it is always described as a *powder* —a powder red-coloured, and smelling strongly. Few of the alchemists, however, venture on a distinct statement that they had discovered or possessed this substance.

The arch-quack Paracelsus makes the assertion, of course; unblushing mendacity was part of his stock-in-trade; and he pretends even to define the methods by which it may be realized. Unfortunately, to ordinary mortals his description is absolutely unintelligible. Others there are who affirm that they had seen it, and seen it in operation, transmuting lead, quicksilver, and other of the inferior metals into ruddy gold. One wonders that they did not claim a share in a process which involved such boundless potentialities of wealth!

Helvetius, the physician, though no believer in the magical art, tells the following wild story in his 'Vitulus Aureus': On December 26, 1666, a stranger called upon him, and, after discussing the supposed properties of the universal medicine, showed him a yellow powder, which he declared to be the *lapis* , and also five large plates of gold, which, he said, were the product of its action. Naturally enough, Helvetius begged for a few grains of this marvellous powder, or that the stranger would at least exhibit its potency in his presence. He refused, however, but promised that he would return in six weeks. He kept his promise, and then, after much entreaty, gave Helvetius a pinch of the powder—about as much as a rape-seed. The physician expressed his fear that so minute a quantity would not convert as much as four grains of lead; whereupon the stranger broke off one-half, and declared that the remainder was more than sufficient for the purpose. During their first conference, Helvetius had contrived to conceal a little of the powder beneath his thumb-nail. This he dropped into some molten lead, but it was nearly all exhaled in smoke, and the residue was simply of a vitreous character.

On mentioning this circumstance to his visitor, he explained that the powder should have been enclosed in wax before it was thrown into the molten lead, to prevent the fumes of the lead from affecting it. He added that he would come

back next day, and show him how to make the projection; but as he failed to appear, Helvetius, in the presence of his wife and son, put six drachms of lead into a crucible, and as soon as the lead was melted, flung into it the atoms of powder given to him by his mysterious visitor, having first rolled them up in a little ball of wax. At the end of a quarter of an hour he found the lead transmuted (so he avers) into gold. Its colour at first was a deep green; but the mixture, when poured into a conical vessel, turned blood-red, and, after cooling, acquired the true tint of gold. A goldsmith who examined it pronounced it to be genuine. Helvetius requested Purelius, the keeper of the Dutch Mint, to test its value; and two drachms, after being exposed to aquafortis, were found to have increased a couple of scruples in weight—an increase doubtlessly owing to the silver, which still remained enveloped in the gold, despite the action of the aquafortis.

It is obvious that this narrative is a complete mystification, and that either the stranger was a myth or Helvetius was the victim of a deception.

The recipes that the alchemists formulate—those, that is, who profess to have discovered the stone, or to have known somebody who enjoyed so rare a fortune—are always unintelligible or impracticable. What is to be understood, for example, of the following elaborate process, or series of processes, which are recorded by Mangetus, in his preface to the ponderous ‘Bibliotheca Chemica’ (to which reference has already been made)?

1. Prepare a quantity of spirits of wine, so free from water as to be wholly combustible, and so volatile that a drop of it, if let fall, will evaporate before it reaches the ground. This constitutes the first menstruum.

2. Take pure mercury, revived in the usual manner from cinnabar; put it into a glass vessel with common salt and distilled vinegar; shake violently, and when the vinegar turns black, pour it off, and add fresh vinegar. Shake again,

and continue these repeated shakings and additions until the mercury no longer turns the vinegar black; the mercury will then be quite pure and very brilliant.
3. Take of this mercury four parts; of sublimed mercury (*mercurii meteoresati* —probably corrosive sublimate), prepared with your own hands, eight parts; triturate them together in a wooden mortar with a wooden pestle, till all the grains of running mercury disappear. (This process is truly described as ‘tedious and rather difficult.’)
4. The mixture thus prepared is to be put into a sand-bath, and exposed to a subliming heat, which is to be gradually increased until the whole sublimes. Collect the sublimed matter, put it again into the sand-bath, and sublime a second time; this process must be repeated five times. The product is a very sweet crystallized sublimate, constituting the *sal sapientum* , or wise men’s salt (probably calomel), and possessing wonderful properties.
5. Grind it in a wooden mortar, reducing it to powder; put this powder into a glass retort, and pour upon it the spirit of wine (see No. 1) till it stands about three finger-breadths above the powder. Seal the retort hermetically, and expose it to a very gentle heat for seventy-four hours, shaking it several times a day; then distil with a gentle heat, and the spirit of wine will pass over, together with spirit of mercury. Keep this liquid in a well-stoppered bottle, lest it should evaporate. More spirit of wine is to be poured upon the residual salt, and after digestion must be distilled off, as before; and this operation must be repeated until all the salt is dissolved and given off with the spirit of wine. A great work will then have been accomplished! For the mercury, having to some extent been rendered volatile, will gradually become fit to receive the tincture of gold and silver. Now return thanks to God, who has hitherto crowned your wonderful work with success. Nor is this wonderful work enveloped in Cimmerian darkness; it is clearer than the sun, though preceding writers have sought to impose

upon us with parables, hieroglyphs, fables, and enigmas.
6. Take this mercurial spirit, which contains our magical steel in its belly (*sic*), and put it into a glass retort, to which a receiver must be well and carefully adjusted; draw off the spirit by a very gentle heat, and in the bottom of the retort will remain the quintessence or soul of mercury. This is to be sublimed by applying a stronger heat to the retort that it may become volatile, as all the philosophers affirm:
‘ Si fixum solvas faciesque volare solutum,
Et volucrum figas faciet te vivere tutum.’
This is our *luna* , our fountain, in which ‘the king’ and ‘the queen’ may bathe. Preserve this precious quintessence of mercury, which is exceedingly volatile, in a well-closed vessel for further use.
8. Let us now proceed to the production of common gold, which we shall communicate clearly and distinctly, without digression or obscurity, in order that from this common gold we may obtain our philosophical gold, just as from common mercury we have obtained, by the foregoing processes, philosophical mercury. In the name of God, then, take common gold, purified in the usual way by antimony, and reduce it into small grains, which must be washed with salt and vinegar until they are quite pure. Take one part of this gold, and pour on it three parts of the quintessence of mercury: as philosophers reckon from seven to ten, so do we also reckon our number as philosophical, and begin with three and one. Let them be married together, like husband and wife, to produce children of their own kind, and you will see the common gold sink and plainly dissolve. Now the marriage is consummated; and two things are converted into one. Thus the philosophical sulphur is at hand, as the philosophers say: ‘The sulphur being dissolved, the stone is at hand.’ Take then, in the name of God, our philosophical vessel, in which the king and queen embrace each other as in a bedchamber, and leave it till the water is converted into earth; then peace is concluded

between the water and the fire—then the elements no longer possess anything contrary to each other—because, when the elements are converted into earth, they cease to be antagonistic; for in earth all elements are at rest. The philosophers say: ‘When you shall see the water coagulate, believe that your knowledge is true, and that all your operations are truly philosophical.’ Our gold is no longer common, but philosophical, through the processes it has undergone: at first, it was exceedingly ‘fixed’ (*fixum*); then exceedingly volatile; and again, exceedingly fixed: the entire science depends upon the change of the elements. The gold, at first a metal, is now a sulphur, capable of converting all metals into its own sulphur. And our tincture is wholly converted into sulphur, which possesses the energy of curing every disease; this is our universal medicine against all the most deplorable ills of the human body. Therefore, return infinite thanks to Almighty God for all the good things which He hath bestowed upon us.

9. In this great work of ours, two methods of fermentation and projection are wanting, without which the uninitiated will not readily follow out our process. The mode of fermentation: Of the sulphur already described take one part, and project it upon three parts of very pure gold fused in a furnace. In a moment you will see the gold, by the force of the sulphur, converted into a red sulphur of an inferior quality to the primary sulphur. Take one part of this, and project it upon three parts of fused gold; the whole will again be converted into a sulphur or a fixable mass; mixing one part of this with three parts of gold, you will have a malleable and extensible metal. If you find it so, it is well; if not, add more sulphur, and it will again pass into a state of sulphur. Now our sulphur will sufficiently be fermented, or our medicine brought into a metallic nature.

10. The method of projection is this: Take of the fermented sulphur one part, and project it upon two parts of mercury, heated in a crucible, and you will have a perfect metal; if its

colour be not sufficiently deep, fuse it again, and add more fermented sulphur, and thus it will gain colour. If it become frangible, add a sufficient quantity of mercury, and it will be perfect.

Thus, friend, you have a description of the universal medicine, not only for curing diseases and prolonging life, but also for transmuting all metals into gold. Give thanks, therefore, to Almighty God, who, taking pity on human calamities, hath at last revealed this inestimable treasure, and made it known for the common benefit of all.

Such is the jargon with which these so-called philosophers imposed upon their dupes, and, to some extent perhaps, upon themselves. As Dr. Thomson points out, the philosopher's stone prepared by this elaborate process could hardly have been anything else than *an amalgam of gold* . Chloride of gold it could not have contained, because such a preparation, instead of acting medicinally, would have proved a most virulent poison. Of course, amalgam of gold, if projected into melted lead or tin, and afterwards cupellated, would leave a portion of gold—that is, exactly the amount *which existed previously in the amalgam* . Impostors may, therefore, have availed themselves of it to persuade the credulous that it was really the philosopher's stone; but the alchemists who prepared the amalgam must have known that it contained gold.

[1]

It is well known that the mediæval magicians, necromancers, conjurers—call them by what name you will—who adopted alchemy as an instrument of imposition, and by no means in the spirit of philosophical inquiry and research which had characterized their predecessors, resorted to various ingenious devices in order to maintain their hold upon their victims. Sometimes they made use of crucibles with false bottoms—at the real bottom they concealed a portion of oxide of gold or silver covered with

powdered sulphur, which had been rendered adhesive by a little gummed water or wax. When heat was applied the false bottom melted away, and the oxide of gold or silver eventually appeared as the product of the operation at the bottom of the crucible. Sometimes they made a hole in a lump of charcoal, and filling it with oxide of gold or silver, stopped up the orifice with wax; or they soaked charcoal in a solution of these metals; or they stirred the mixture in the crucible with hollow rods, containing oxide of gold or silver, closed up at the bottom with wax. A faithful representation of the stratagems to which the pseudo-alchemist resorted, that his dupes might not recover too soon from their delusion, is furnished by Ben Jonson in his comedy of 'The Alchemist,' and his masque of 'Mercury vindicated from the Alchemists.' The dramatist was thoroughly conversant with the technicalities of the pretended science, and also with the deceptions of its professors. In the masque he puts into the mouth of Mercury an indignant protest:

' The mischief a secret any of them knows, above the consuming of coals and drawing of usquebagh; howsoever they may pretend, under the specious names of Gebir, Arnold, Lully, or Bombast of Hohenheim, to commit miracles in art, and treason against nature! As if the title of philosopher, that creature of glory, were to be fetched out of a furnace!'

But while the world is full of fools, it is too much to expect there shall be any lack of knaves to prey upon them!

IN THE MIDDLE AGES.

The first of the great European alchemists I take to have been

Albertus Magnus or *Albertus Teutonicus* (*Frater Albertus de Colonia* and *Albertus Grotus* , as he is also called), a man of remarkable intellectual energy and exceptional force of character, who has sometimes, and not without justice, been termed the founder of the Schoolmen. Neither the place nor the date of his birth is authentically known,

but he was still in his young manhood when, about 1222, he was appointed to the chair of theology at Padua, and became a member of the Dominican Order. He did not long retain the professorship, and, departing from Padua, taught with great success in Ratisbon, Köln, Strassburg, and Paris, residing in the last-named city for three years, together with his illustrious disciple, Thomas Aquinas. In 1260 he was appointed to the See of Ratisbon, though he had not previously held any ecclesiastical dignity, but soon resigned, on the ground that its duties interfered vexatiously with his studies. Twenty years later, at a ripe old age, he died, leaving behind him, as monuments of his persistent industry and intellectual subtlety, one-and-twenty ponderous folios, which include commentaries on Aristotle, on the Scriptures, and on Dionysius the Areopagite. Among his minor works occurs a treatise on alchemy, which seems to show that he was a devout believer in the science.

From the marvellous stories of his thaumaturgic exploits which have come down to us, we may infer that he had attained a considerable amount of skill in experimental chemistry. The brazen statue which he animated, and the garrulity of which was so offensive that Thomas Aquinas one day seized a hammer, and, provoked beyond all endurance, smashed it to pieces, may be a reminiscence of his powers as a ventriloquist. And the following story may hint at an effective manipulation of the *camera obscura* : Count William of Holland and King of the Romans happening to pass through Köln, Albertus invited him and his courtiers to his house to partake of refreshment. It was mid-winter; but on arriving at the philosopher’s residence they found the tables spread in the open garden, where snowdrifts lay several feet in depth. Indignant at so frugal a reception, they were on the point of leaving, when Albertus appeared, and by his courtesies induced them to remain. Immediately the scene was lighted up with the sunshine of

summer, a warm and balmy air stole through the whispering boughs, the frost and snow vanished, the melodies of the lark dropped from the sky like golden rain. But as soon as the feast came to an end the sunshine faded, the birds ceased their song, clouds gathered darkling over the firmament, an icy blast shrieked through the gibbering branches, and the snow fell in blinding showers, so that the philosopher's guests were glad to fold their cloaks about them and retreat into the kitchen to grow warm before its blazing fire.

Was this some clever scenic deception, or is the whole a fiction?

A knowledge of the secret of the *Elixir Vitæ* was possessed (it is said) by *Alain de l'Isle* , or Alanus de Insulis; but either he did not avail himself of it, or failed to compound a sufficient quantity of the magic potion, for he died under the sacred roof of Citeaux, in 1298, at the advanced age of 110.

Arnold de Villeneuve , who attained, in the thirteenth century, some distinction as a physician, an astronomer, an astrologer, and an alchemist—and was really a capable man of science, as science was then understood—formulates an elaborate recipe for rejuvenating one's self, which, however, does not seem to have been very successful in his own case, since he died before he was 70. Perhaps he was as disgusted with the compound as (in the well-known epitaph) the infant was with this mundane sphere—he 'liked it not, and died.' I think there are many who would forfeit longevity rather than partake of it.

' Twice or thrice a week you must anoint your body thoroughly with the manna of cassia; and every night, before going to bed, you must place over your heart a plaster, composed of a certain quantity (or, rather, uncertain, for definite and precise proportions are never particularized) of Oriental saffron, red rose-leaves, sandal-wood, aloes, and amber, liquefied in oil of roses and the

best white wax. During the day this must be kept in a leaden casket. You must next pen up in a court, where the water is sweet and the air pure, sixteen chickens, if you are of a sanguine temperament; twenty-five, if phlegmatic; and thirty, if melancholic. Of these you are to eat one a day, after they have been fattened in such a manner as to have absorbed into their system the qualities which will ensure your longevity; for which purpose they are first to be kept without food until almost starved, and then gorged with a broth of serpents and vinegar, thickened with wheat and beans, for at least two months. When they are served at your table you will drink a moderate quantity of white wine or claret to assist digestion.'

I should think it would be needed!

Among the alchemists must be included *Pietro d'Apono* . He was an eminent physician; but, being accused of heresy, was thrown into prison and died there. His ecclesiastical persecutors, however, burned his bones rather than be entirely disappointed of their *auto da fé* . Like most of the mediæval physicians, he indulged in alchemical and astrological speculations; but they proved to Pietro d'Apono neither pleasurable nor profitable. It was reputed of him that he had summoned a number of evil spirits; and, on their obeying his call, had shut them up in seven crystal vases, where he detained them until he had occasion for their services. In his selection of them he seems to have displayed a commendably catholic taste and love of knowledge; for one was an expert in poetry, another in painting, a third in philosophy, a fourth in physic, a fifth in astrology, a sixth in music, and a seventh in alchemy. So that when he required instruction in either of these arts or sciences, he simply tapped the proper crystal vase and laid on a spirit.

The story seems to be a fanciful allusion to the various acquirements of Pietro d'Apono; but if intended at first as a kind of allegory, it came in due time to be accepted literally.

I pass on to the great Spanish alchemist and magician, *Raymond Lully* , or Lulli, who was scarcely inferior in fame, or the qualities which merited fame, even to Albertus Magnus. He was a man, not only of wide, but of accurate scholarship; and the two or three hundred treatises which proceeded from his pen traversed the entire circle of the learning of his age, dealing with almost every conceivable subject from medicine to morals, from astronomy to theology, and from alchemy to civil and canon law. His life had its romantic aspects, and his death (in 1315?) was invested with something of the glory of martyrdom; for while he was preaching to the Moslems at Bona, the mob fell upon him with a storm of stones, and though he was still alive when rescued by some Genoese merchants, and conveyed on board their vessel, he died of the injuries he had received before it arrived in a Spanish port.
There seems little reason to believe that Lulli visited England about 1312, on the invitation of Edward II. Dickenson, in his work on ‘The Quintessences of the Philosophers,’ asserts that his laboratory was established in Westminster Abbey—that is, in the cloisters—and that some time after his return to the Continent a large quantity of gold-dust was found in the cell he had occupied. Langlet du Fresnoy contends that it was through the intervention of John Cremer, Abbot of Westminster, a persevering seeker after the *lapis philosophorum* , that he came to England, Cremer having described him to King Edward as a man of extraordinary powers. Robert Constantine, in his ‘Nomenclator Scriptorum Medicorum’ (1515), professes to have discovered that Lulli resided for some time in London, and made gold in the Tower, and that he had seen some gold pieces of his making, which were known in England as the nobles of Raymond, or rose-nobles. But the great objections to these very precise statements rests on two facts pointed out by Mr. Waite, that the rose-noble, so called because a rose was stamped on each side of it, was

first coined in 1465, in the reign of Edward IV., and that there never was an Abbot Cremer of Westminster.

Jean de Meung is also included among the alchemists; but he bequeathed to posterity in his glorious poem of the ‘Roman de la Rose’ something very much more precious than would have been any formula for making gold. In one sense he was indeed an alchemist, and possessed the secret of the universal medicine; for in his poem his genius has transmuted into purest gold the base ore of popular traditions and legends.

Some of the stories which Langlet du Fresnoy tells of *Nicholas Flamel* were probably invented long after his death, or else we should have to brand him as a most audacious knave. One of those amazing narratives pretends that he bought for a couple of florins an old and curious volume, the leaves of which—three times seven (this sounds better than twenty-one) in number—were made from the bark of trees. Each seventh leaf bore an allegorical picture—the first representing a serpent swallowing rods, the second a cross with a serpent crucified upon it, and the third a fountain in a desert, surrounded by creeping serpents. Who, think you, was the author of this mysterious volume? No less illustrious a person than Abraham the patriarch, Hebrew, prince, philosopher, priest, Levite, and magian, who, as it was written in Latin, must have miraculously acquired his foreknowledge of a tongue which, in his time, had no existence. A perusal of its mystic pages convinced Flamel that he had had the good fortune to discover a complete manual on the art of transmutation of metals, in which all the necessary vessels were indicated, and the processes described. But there was one serious difficulty to be overcome: the book assumed, as a matter of course, that the student was already in possession of that all-important agent of transmutation, the philosopher’s stone.

Careful study led Flamel to the conclusion that the secret

of the stone was hidden in certain allegorical drawings on the fourth and fifth leaves; but, then, to decipher these was beyond his powers. He submitted them to all the learned savants and alchemical adepts he could get hold of: they proved to be no wiser than himself, while some of them actually laughed at Abraham's posthumous publication as worthless gibberish. Flamel, however, clung fast to his conviction of the inestimable value of his 'find,' and daily pondered over the two cryptic illustrations, which may thus be described: On the first page of the fourth leaf Mercury was contending with a figure, which might be either Saturn or Time—probably the latter, as he carried on his head the emblematical hour-glass, and in his hand the not less emblematical scythe. On the second stage a flower upon a mountain-top presented the unusual combination of a blue stalk, with red and white blossoms, and leaves of pure gold. The wind appeared to blow it about very harshly, and a gruesome company of dragons and griffins encompassed it. Upon the study of these provokingly obscure designs Flamel fruitlessly expended the leisure time of thrice seven years: after which, on the advice of his wife, he repaired to Spain to seek the assistance of some erudite Jewish rabbi. He had been wandering from place to place for a couple of years, when he met, somewhere in Leon, a learned Hebrew physician, named Canches, who agreed to return with him to Paris, and there examine Abraham's volume. Canches was deeply versed in all the lore of the Cabala, and Flamel hung with delight on the words of wisdom that dropped from his eloquent lips. But at Orleans Canches was taken ill with a malady of which he died, and Flamel found his way home, a sadder, if not a wiser, man. He resumed his study of the book, but for two more years could get no clue to its meaning. In the third year, recalling some deliverance of his departed friend, the rabbi, he perceived that all his experiments had hitherto proceeded upon erroneous principles. He repeated them upon a different basis, and in

a few months brought them to a successful issue. On January 13, 1382, he converted mercury into silver, and on April 25 into gold. Well might he cry in triumph, ‘Eureka!’ The great secret, the sublime magistery was his: he had discovered the art of transmuting metals into gold and silver, and, so long as he kept it to himself, had at his command the source of inexhaustible wealth.

At this time Nicholas Flamel, it is said, was about eighty years old. His admirers assert that he also discovered the elixir of immortal life; but, as he died in 1419, at the age (it is alleged) of 116, he must have been content with the merest sip of it! Why did he not reveal its ingredients for the general benefit of our afflicted humanity? His immense wealth he bequeathed to churches and hospitals, thus making a better use of it after death than he had made of it in his lifetime. For it is said that Flamel was a usurer, and that his philosopher’s stone was ‘cent per cent.’ It is true enough that he dabbled in alchemy, and probably he made his alchemical experiments useful in connection with his usurious transactions.

BOOK 1. THE ENGLISH MAGICIANS

Chapter 1. Roger Bacon: The True And The Legendary

It was in the early years of the fourteenth century that the two pseudo-sciences of alchemy and astrology, the supposititious sisters of chemistry and astronomy, made their way into England. At first their progress was by no means so rapid as it had been on the Continent; for in England, as yet, there was no educated class prepared to give their leisure to the work of experimental investigation. A solitary scholar here and there lighted his torch at the altar-fire which the Continental philosophers kept burning with so much diligence and curiosity, and was generally rewarded for his heterodox enthusiasm by the persecution of the Church and the prejudice of the vulgar. But by degrees the new sciences increased the number of their adherents, and the more active intellects of the time embraced the theory of astral influences, and were fascinated by the delusion of the philosopher’s stone. Many a secret furnace blazed day and night with the charmed flames which were to resolve the metals into their original elements, and place the pale student in possession of the coveted *magisterium* , or ‘universal medicine.’ At length the alchemists became a sufficiently numerous and important body to draw the attention of the Government, which regarded their proceedings with suspicion, from a fear that

the result might injuriously affect the coinage. In 1434 the Legislature enacted that the making of gold or silver should be treated as a felony. But the Parliament was influenced by a very different motive from that of the King and his Council, its patriotic fears being awakened lest the Executive, enabled by the new science to increase without limit the pecuniary resources of the Crown, should be rendered independent of Parliamentary control.

In the course of a few years, however, broader and more enlightened views prevailed; and it came to be acknowledged that scientific research ought to be relieved from legislative interference. In 1455 Henry VI. issued four patents in succession to certain knights, London citizens, chemists, monks, mass-priests, and others, granting them leave and license to undertake the discovery of the philosopher's stone, 'to the great benefit of the realm, and the enabling the King to pay all the debts of the Crown in *real gold and silver* .' On the remarkable fact that these patents were issued to ecclesiastics as well as laymen, Prynne afterwards remarked, with true theological acridity, that they were so included because they were 'such good artists in transubstantiating bread and wine in the Eucharist, and were, therefore, the more likely to be able to effect the transmutation of base metals into better.'

Nothing came of the patents. The practical common-sense of Englishmen never took very kindly to the alchemical delusion, and Chaucer very faithfully describes the contempt with which it was generally regarded. Enthusiasts there were, no doubt, who firmly believed in it, and knaves who made a profit out of it, and dupes who were preyed upon by the knaves; and so it languished on through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It seems at one time to have amused the shrewd intellect of Queen Elizabeth, and at another to have caught the volatile fancy of the second Villiers, Duke of Buckingham. But alchemy was, in the main, the *modus vivendi* of quacks and cheats,

of such impostors as Ben Jonson has drawn so powerfully in his great comedy—a Subtle, a Face, and a Doll Common, who, in the Sir Epicure Mammons of the time, found their appropriate victims. These creatures played on the greed and credulity of their dupes with successful audacity, and excited their imaginations by extravagant promises. Thus, Ben Jonson's hero runs riot with glowing anticipations of what the alchemical *magisterium* can effect.

‘ Do you think I fable with you? I assure you,
He that has once the flower of the sun,
The perfect ruby, which we call *Elixir* ,
Not only can do that, but, by its virtue,
Can confer honour, love, respect, long life;
Give safety, valour, yes, and victory,
To whom he will. In eight-and-twenty days
I'll make an old man of fourscore a child....
' Tis the secret
Of nature naturized 'gainst all infections,
Cures all diseases coming of all causes;
A month's grief in a day, a year's in twelve,
And of what age soever in a month.'

The English alchemists, however, with a few exceptions, depended for a livelihood chiefly on their sale of magic charms, love-philters, and even more dangerous potions, and on horoscope-casting, and fortune-telling by the hand or by cards. They acted, also, as agents in many a dark intrigue and unlawful project, being generally at the disposal of the highest bidder, and seldom shrinking from any crime.

The earliest name of note on the roll of the English magicians, necromancers and alchemists is that of

ROGER BACON.

This great man has some claim to be considered the father of experimental philosophy, since it was he who first laid down the principles upon which physical investigation should be conducted. Speaking of science, he says, in

language far in advance of his times: ‘There are two modes of knowing—by argument and by experiment. Argument winds up a question, but does not lead us to acquiesce in, or feel certain of, the contemplation of truth, unless the truth be proved and confirmed by experience.’ To Experimental Science he ascribed three differentiating characters: ‘First, she tests by experiment the grand conclusions of all other sciences. Next, she discovers, with reference to the ideas connected with other sciences, splendid truths, to which these sciences without assistance are unable to attain. Her third prerogative is, that, unaided by the other sciences, and of herself, she can investigate the secrets of nature.’ These truths, now accepted as trite and self-evident, ranked, in Roger Bacon’s day, as novel and important discoveries.

He was born at Ilchester, in Somersetshire, in 1214. Of his lineage, parentage, and early education we know nothing, except that he must have been very young when he went to Oxford, for he took orders there before he was twenty. Joining the Franciscan brotherhood, he applied himself to the study of Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic; but his genius chiefly inclined towards the pursuit of the natural sciences, in which he obtained such a mastery that his contemporaries accorded to him the flattering title of ‘The Admirable Doctor.’ His lectures gathered round him a crowd of admiring disciples; until the boldness of their speculations aroused the suspicion of the ecclesiastical authorities, and in 1257 they were prohibited by the General of his Order. Then Pope Innocent IV. interfered, interdicting him from the publication of his writings, and placing him under close supervision. He remained in this state of tutelage until Clement IV., a man of more liberal views, assumed the triple tiara, who not only released him from his irksome restraints, but desired him to compose a treatise on the sciences. This was the origin of Bacon’s ‘Opus Majus,’ ‘Opus Minus’ and ‘Opus Tertius,’ which he

completed in a year and a half, and despatched to Rome. In 1267 he was allowed to return to Oxford, where he wrote his ‘Compendium Studii Philosophiæ.’ His vigorous advocacy of new methods of scientific investigation, or, perhaps, his unsparing exposure of the ignorance and vices of the monks and the clergy, again brought down upon him the heavy arm of the ecclesiastical tyranny. His works were condemned by the General of his Order, and in 1278, during the pontificate of Nicholas III., he was thrown into prison, where he was detained for several years. It is said that he was not released until 1292, the year in which he published his latest production, the ‘Compendium Studii Theologiæ.’ Two years afterwards he died.

In many respects Bacon was greatly in advance of his contemporaries, but his general repute ignores his real and important services to philosophy, and builds up a glittering fabric upon mechanical discoveries and inventions to which, it is to be feared, he cannot lay claim. As Professor Adamson puts it, he certainly describes a method of constructing a telescope, but not so as to justify the conclusion that he himself was in possession of that instrument. The invention of gunpowder has been attributed to him on the strength of a passage in one of his works, which, if fairly interpreted, disposes at once of the pretension; besides, it was already known to the Arabs. Burning-glasses were in common use; and there is no proof that he made spectacles, although he was probably acquainted with the principle of their construction. It is not to be denied, however, that in his interesting treatise on ‘The Secrets of Nature and Art,’

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he exhibits every sign of a far-seeing and lively intelligence, and foreshadows the possibility of some of our great modern inventions. But, like so many master-minds of the Middle Ages, he was unable wholly to resist the

fascinations of alchemy and astrology. He believed that various parts of the human body were influenced by the stars, and that the mind was thus stimulated to particular acts, without any relaxation or interruption of free will. His ‘Mirror of Alchemy,’ of which a translation into French was executed by ‘a Gentleman of Dauphiné,’ and printed in 1507, absolutely bristles with crude and unfounded theories—as, for instance, that Nature, in the formation of metallic veins, tends constantly to the production of gold, but is impeded by various accidents, and in this way creates metals in which impurities mingle with the fundamental substances. The main elements, he says, are quicksilver and sulphur; and from these all metals and minerals are compounded. Gold he describes as a perfect metal, produced from a pure, fixed, clear, and red quicksilver; and from a sulphur also pure, fixed, and red, not incandescent and unalloyed. Iron is unclean and imperfect, because engendered of a quicksilver which is impure, too much congealed, earthy, incandescent, white and red, and of a similar variety of sulphur. The ‘stone,’ or substance, by which the transmutation of the imperfect into the perfect metals was to be effected must be made, in the main, he said, of sulphur and mercury.

It is not easy to determine how soon an atmosphere of legend gathered around the figure of ‘the Admirable Doctor;’ but undoubtedly it originated quite as much in his astrological errors as in his scientific experiments. Some of the myths of which he is the traditional hero belong to a very much earlier period, as, for instance, that of his Brazen Head, which appears in the old romance of ‘Valentine and Orson,’ as well as in the history of Albertus Magnus. Gower, too, in his ‘Confessio Amantis,’ relates how a Brazen Head was fabricated by Bishop Grosseteste. It was customary in those days to ascribe all kinds of marvels to men who obtained a repute for exceptional learning, and Bishop Grosseteste’s Brazen Head was as purely a fiction

as Roger Bacon’s. This is Gower’s account:
‘ For of the gretè clerk Grostest
I rede how busy that he was
Upon the clergie an head of brass
To forgè; and make it fortelle
Of suchè thingès as befelle.
And seven yerès besinesse
He laidè, but for the lachèsse
[3]
Of half a minute of an hour …
He lostè all that he hadde do.’
Stow tells a story of a Head of Clay, made at Oxford in the reign of Edward II., which, at an appointed time, spoke the mysterious words, ‘Caput decidetur—caput elevabitur. Pedes elevabuntur supra caput.’ Returning to Roger Bacon’s supposed invention, we find an ingenious though improbable explanation suggested by Sir Thomas Browne, in his ‘Vulgar Errors’:
‘ Every one,’ he says, ‘is filled with the story of Friar Bacon, that made a Brazen Head to speak these words, “ *Time is* .” Which, though there went not the like relations, is surely too literally received, and was but a mystical fable concerning the philosopher’s great work, wherein he eminently laboured: implying no more by the copper head, than the vessel wherein it was wrought; and by the words it spake, than the opportunity to be watched, about the *tempus ortus* , or birth of the magical child, or “philosophical King” of Lullius, the rising of the “terra foliata” of Arnoldus; when the earth, sufficiently impregnated with the water, ascendeth white and splendent. Which not observed, the work is irrecoverably lost.... Now letting slip the critical opportunity, he missed the intended treasure: which had he obtained, he might have made out the tradition of making a brazen wall about England: that is, the most powerful defence or strongest