

# CHAPTER I

## BIRTH AND EDUCATION

“O Incredulities, the wit of fooles  
That slovenly will spit on all thinges faire,  
The coward’s castle and the sluggard’s cradle,  
How easy ‘tis to be an infidel!”

— George Chapman

It seems remarkable that three hundred years should have been allowed to elapse since the death of John Dee in December, 1608, without producing any Life of an individual so conspicuous, so debatable, and so remarkably picturesque.

There is perhaps no learned author in history who has been so persistently misjudged, nay, even slandered, by his posterity, and not a voice in all the three centuries uplifted even to claim for him a fair hearing. Surely it is time that the cause of all this universal condemnation should be examined in the light of reason and science; and perhaps it will be found to exist mainly in the fact that he was too far advanced in speculative thought for his own age to understand. For more than fifty years out of the eighty-one of his life, Dee was famous, even if suspected and looked askance at as clever beyond human interpretation. Then his Queen died. With the narrow-minded Scotsman who succeeded her came a change in the fashion of men’s minds. The reign of the devil and his handmaidens — the witches and possessed persons — was set up in order to be piously overthrown, and the very bigotry of the times gave birth to independent and rational thought — to Newton, Bacon, Locke.

But Dee was already labelled once and for all. Every succeeding writer who has touched upon his career, has followed the leaders blindly, and has only cast another, and yet another, stone to the heap of obloquy piled upon his name. The fascination of his psychic projections has always led the critic to ignore his more solid achievements in the realms of history and science, while at the same time, these are the only cited to be loudly condemned. The learned Dr. Meric Casaubon, who, fifty years after Dee’s death, edited his *Book of Mysteries* — the absorbing recital of four out of the six or seven years of his crystal gazing — was perhaps the fairest critic he yet has had. Although he calls Dee’s spiritual revelations a “sad record,” and a “work of darkness,” he confesses that he himself, and other learned and holy men (including an archbishop), read it with avidity to the end, and were eager to see it printed. He felt certain, as he remarks in his preface, that men’s curiosity would lead them to devour what seems to him “not paralleled in that kind, by any book that hath been set out in any age to read.” And yet on no account was he publishing it to satisfy curiosity, but only “to do good and promote Religion.” For Dee, he is persuaded, was a true, sincere Christian, his *Relation* made in the most absolute good faith, although undoubtedly he was imposed upon and deluded by the evil spirits whom he sometimes mistook for good ones.

It may be well here to remark that this voluminous *Book of Mysteries* or *True and Faithful Relation* (fol. 1659), from which in the following pages there will be found many extracts, abounds in tedious and unintelligible pages of what

Casaubon calls “sermon-like stuff,” interspersed with passages of extraordinary beauty. Some of the figures and parables, as well as the language used, are full of a rare poetic imagery, singularly free from any coarse or sensual symbolism. Like jewels embedded in dull settings, here and there a gem of loftiest religious thought shines and sparkles. There are descriptive touches of costume and appearance that possess considerable dramatic value. As the story is unfolded in a kind of spiritual drama, the sense of a gradual moving development, and the choice of a fitting vehicle in which to clothe it, is striking. The dramatis personae, too, the “spiritual creatures” who, as Dee believed, influence the destinies of man, become living and real, as of course they were to the seer. In many respects these “actions” were an exact counterpart of the dealings inaugurated by psychical scientists 275 years later, if we omit the close investigation for fraud.

Casaubon’s successor in dealing with the shunned and avoided subject of John Dee was Thomas Smith, Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, who, in 1707, wrote the first connected Life of him, in a book of the Lives of Learned Men. It was based upon some of Dee’s autobiographical papers, and out of a total of a hundred pages, gave fifty to letters already printed by Casaubon.

After this no sustained account of Dee’s romantic career is to be found outside the pages of biographical dictionaries and magazine articles, or among writers upon necromancy, hermetic philosophy, and alchemy. Many of these decorate their collections with apocryphal marvels culled from the well-worn traditional stories of Dee and his companion, Edward Kelley. Thus, throughout his lifetime and since, he has continued to run the gauntlet of criticism. “Old imposturing juggler,” “fanatic,” “quack,” are mild terms: in the *Biographia Britannica* he is called “extremely credulous, extravagantly vain, and a most deluded enthusiast.” Even the writer on Dee in the *Dictionary of National Biography* says his conferences with the angels are “such a tissue of blasphemy and absurdity that they might suggest insanity.” Many more such summary verdicts might be quoted, but these will suffice for the present.

It has been said that no Life of Dee exists. And yet the materials for such a Life are so abundant that only a selection can be here used. His private diary, for instance, if properly edited, would supply much supplementary, useful, and interesting historical information.

It is the object of this work to present the facts of John Dee’s life as calmly and impartially as possible, and to let them speak for themselves. In the course of writing it, many false assertions have disentangled themselves from truth, many doubts have been resolved, and a mass of information sees the light for the first time. The subject is of course hedged about with innumerable difficulties; but in spite of the temptations to stray into a hundred bypaths, an endeavour has been strictly made to do no more than throw a little dim light on the point where the paths break off from the main road. If, at the end of the way, any who have persevered so far, feel they have followed a magnetic and interesting personality, the labour expended will not have been in vain. With a word of apology to serious historical readers for the incorrigibly romantic tendency of much of the narrative, which, in spite of the stern sentinel of a literary conscience, would continually reassert itself, the story of our astrologer’s strange life may now begin.

John Dee was the son of Rowland Dee; he was born in London, according to the horoscope of his own drawing, on July 13, 1527.

His mother was Jane, daughter of William Wild. Various Welsh writers have assigned to Dee a genealogical descent of the highest antiquity, and the pedigree which he drew up for himself in later life traces back his family history from his grandfather, Bedo Dee, to Roderick the Great, Prince of Wales. All authorities agree that Radnor was the county from whence the Dees sprang.

Rowland Dee, the father, held an appointment at Court, as gentleman server to Henry VIII., but was very indifferently treated by the King. This may partly account for the persistence with which Dee exhibited before Queen Elizabeth his claims to preferment at her hands. To be in habitual attendance at Court in those days, however, bred in men a great desire for place, and a courtier was but a mendicant on a grand scale.

The boy, John Dee, was early bred in "grammar learning," and was inured to Latin from his tender years. Perhaps he was not more than nine or ten when he was sent to Chelmsford, to the chantry school founded there seven years before the great school at Winchester came into existence. The master who presided over Dee's school hours in Essex was Peter Wilegh, whom the chantry commissioners in 1548 reported as a man "of good conversation" who had kept the school there for sixteen years. Dee has always been claimed by the Grammar School at Chelmsford as one of their most famous alumni, whose extraordinary career with its halo of mystery and marvel they perhaps feel little qualified to explore. Dee's testimony that at Chelmsford he was "metely well furnished with understanding of the Latin tongue" is an unconscious tribute to Peter Wilegh's teaching.

In November, 1542, Dee, being then fifteen years and four months old, left Chelmsford to enter at St. John's College, Cambridge, where, as he tells us in his autobiography, he soon became a most assiduous student. "In the years 1543, 1544, 1545, I was so vehemently bent to studie, that for those years I did inviolably keep this order: only to sleep four houres every night; to allow to meate and drink (and some refreshing after) two houres every day; and of the other eighteen houres all (except the tyme of going to and being at divine service) was spent in my studies and learning." Early in 1546 he graduated B.A. from St. John's College. At the close of the same year, Trinity College was founded by Henry VIII., and Dee was selected one of the original Fellows. He was also appointed under-reader in Greek to Trinity College, the principal Greek reader being then Robert Pember. The young Fellow created the first sensation of his sensational career soon after this by arranging some of the (*Eirene* — Peace) of Aristophanes, in which he apparently acted as stage manager and carpenter.

For this play he devised a clever mechanical and very spectacular effect. Trygaeus, the Attic vine-dresser, carrying a large basket of food for himself, and mounted on his gigantic beetle or scarab (which ate only dung), was seen ascending from his dwelling on the stage to enter the palace of Zeus in the clouds above. One has only to think of the scenic effects presented by Faust and Mephistopheles at Mr. Tree's theatre, for instance, to realise how crude and ineffective these attempts must have been; but thirty or forty years before Shakespeare's plays were written, so unusual an exhibition was enough to excite wild rumours of supernatural powers. We hear no more of theatrical performances, although several references in his after-life serve to show that his interest in the English drama, about to be born,

lagged not far behind that of his greater contemporaries. He does mention, however, a Christmas pastime in St. John's College, which seems to have been inspired by this same dramatic spirit. Of details we are totally ignorant; he only relates that the custom of electing a "Christmas Magistrate" was varied at his suggestion by crowning the chosen victim as Emperor. The first imperial president of the Christmas revels in St. John's College "was one Mr. Thomas Dunne, a very goodly man of person, stature and complexion, and well learned also," evidently a presence fit for a throne. Dee adds: "They which yet live and were hearers and beholders, they can testifie more than is meete here to be written of these my boyish attempts and exploites scholasticall."

He turned to sterner studies, and became a skilful astronomer, taking "thousands of observations (very many to the hour and minute) of the heavenly influences and operations actual in this elementall portion of the world." These he afterwards published in various "Ephemerides."

In May, 1547, Dee made his first journey abroad, to confer with learned men of the Dutch Universities upon the science of mathematics, to which he had already begun to devote his serious attention. He spent several months in the Low Countries, formed close friendships with Gerard Mercator, Gemma Frisius, Joannes Caspar Myricaëus, the Orientalist Antonius Gogava, and other philosophers of world-wide fame. Upon his return to Cambridge, he brought with him two great globes of Mercator's making, and an astronomer's armillary ring and staff of brass, "such as Frisius had newly devised and was in the habit of using." These he afterwards gave to the Fellows and students of Trinity College; he cites a letter of acknowledgment from John Christopherson (afterwards Bishop of Chichester), but upon search being made for the objects recently, through the kindness of the Master, it appears they are not now to be found. Dee returned to Cambridge in the year 1548 to take his degree of M.A., and soon after went abroad. "And never after that was I any more student in Cambridge." Before he left, he obtained under the seal of the Vice-Chancellor and Convocation, April 14, 1548, a testimonial to his learning and good conduct, which he proposed to take with him abroad. Many times did he prove it to be of some value.

In Midsummer Term, 1548, he entered as a student at the University of Louvain, which had been founded more than a hundred years before in this quaint old Brabantian town of mediaeval ramparts and textile industries. At Louvain, Dee continued his studies for two years, and here he soon acquired a reputation for learning quite beyond his years. It has been presumed that he here graduated doctor, to account for the title that has always been given him. "Doctor Dee" certainly possesses an alliterative value not to be neglected. At Cambridge he was only M.A.

Long after, when he had passed middle life, and when his remarkable genius in every branch of science had carried him so far beyond the dull wit of the people who surrounded him that they could only explain his manifestations by the old cry of "sorcery and magic," Dee made a passionate appeal to the Queen, his constant patron and employer, to send two emissaries of her own choosing to his house at Mortlake, and bid them examine everything they could find, that his character might be cleared from the damaging charges laid against him. He prepared for these two commissioners, to whose visit we shall revert in its proper place, an autobiographical document of the greatest value, which he calls "The Compendious Rehearsal of John Dee: his dutiful declaration and proove of the course and race of

his studious life, for the space of half an hundred years, now (by God's favour and help) fully spent." It is from this narrative that the facts of his early life are ascertainable. Perhaps we discern them through a faint mist of retrospective glorification for which the strange streak of vanity almost inseparable from attainments like Dee's was accountable. But there is every reason to reply upon the accuracy of the mathematician's story.

"Beyond the seas, far and nere, was a good opinion conceived of my studies philosophicall and mathematicall." People of all ranks began to flock to see this wonderful young man. He gives the names of those who came to Louvain, a few hours' journey from Brussels, where the brilliant court of Charles V. was assembled, with evident pride. Italian and Spanish nobles; the dukes of Mantua and Medina Celi; the Danish king's mathematician, Mathias Hacus; and his physician, Joannes Capito; Bohemian students, all arrived to put his reputation to the test. A distinguished Englishman, Sir William Pickering, afterwards ambassador to France, came as his pupil to study astronomy "by the light of Mercator's globes, the astrolabe, and the astronomer's ring of brass that Frisius had invented." For his recreation, the teacher "looked into the method of civil law," and mastered easily the points of jurisprudence, even "those accounted very intricate and dark." It was at Louvain, no doubt, that his interest in the subject of alchemy became strengthened and fixed. Stories were rife of course of the famous alchemist, Henricus Cornelius Agrippa, who had died there, in the service of Margaret of Austria, only a dozen years or so before. Agrippa had been secretary to the Emperor Maximilian, had lived in France, London, and Italy, and Louvain, no doubt, was bursting with his extraordinary feats of magic.

The two years soon came to an end, and a couple of days after his twenty-third birthday, young Dee left the Low Countries for Paris, where he arrived on July 20, 1550. His fame had preceded him, and within a few days, at the request of some English gentlemen and for the honour of his country, he began a course of free public lectures or readings in Euclid, "Mathematice, Physice et Pythagorice," at the College of Rheims, in Paris, a thing, he says, which had never been done before in any university in Christendom. His audience (most of them older than himself) was so large that the mathematical schools would not hold them, and many of the students were forced in their eagerness to climb up outside the windows, where, if they could not hear the lecturer, they could at least see him. He demonstrated upon every proposition, and gave dictation and exposition. A greater astonishment was created, he says, than even at his scarabaeus mounting up to the top of Trinity Hall in Cambridge. The members of the University in Paris at the time numbered over 4,000 students, who came from every part of the known world. He made many friends among the professors and graduates, friends of "all estates and professions," several of whose names he gives; among them, the learned writers and theologians of the day, Orontius, Mizaldus, Petrus Montaneus, Ranconetus (Ranconnet), Fernelius, and Francis Silvius.

The fruit of these years spent in Louvain and Paris was that Dee afterwards maintained throughout his life a lively correspondence with professors and doctors in almost every university of note upon the Continent. He names especially his correspondents in the universities of Orleans, Cologne, Heidelberg, Strasburg, Verona, Padua, Ferrara, Bologna, Urbino, Rome, and many others, whose letters lay open for the inspection of the commissioners on that later visit already alluded to.

An offer was made him to become a King's Reader in mathematics in Paris University, with a stipend of two hundred French crowns yearly, but he had made up his mind to return to England, and nothing would tempt him to stay. He received other proposals, promising enough, to enter the service of M. Babeu, M. de Rohan, and M. de Monluc, who was starting as special ambassador to the Great Turk, but his thoughts turned back to England, and thither, in 1551, he bent his steps.