

CHAPTER XVIII

A ROYAL COMMISSION

“A wise man never goes the people’s way:
But, as the planets still move contrary
To the world’s motion, so doth he, to opinion.
He will examine, if those accidents
Which common fame calls injuries, happen to him
Deservedly or no? Come they deservedly,
They are no wrongs then, but his punishments:
If undeservedly and he not guilty,
The doer of them, first, should blush, not he.”

-Jonson, *The New Inn*

Dee had now abandoned all hope of recovering the two Midland parsonages, the small income of which was all that lay between him and utter dependence upon charity. His thoughts were now set on the mastership of St. Cross, at Winchester, a benefice which he had already, some twenty years before, petitioned the Queen to grant. Dr. Bennett, the present master, who had then obtained it, might now, he thought, fitly be made a bishop. The Countess of Warwick secured from the Queen a promise that Dee should have it, “if it were a living fit for me.” The Archbishop of Canterbury affirmed that it was most fit for Dee and Dee for it. The Lord Treasurer protested, “I will do what I can with her Majestie to pleasure you therein, Mr. Dee.” Lady Warwick, faithful to his cause, repeated her request the following year, and still there was no news of Bennett attaining a mitre. Dee went to Court at Nonsuch in August, and a day or two after his return dined, at Burleigh’s invitation, with the Lord Treasurer and his two sons, Sir Robert and Sir Thomas Cecil, at Mr. Maynard’s, at Mortlake. Burleigh also sent him venison and invited him again to meet Lord Cobham.

All promised their influence in obtaining for him the coveted Mastership. But it was another castle in the air. His friends were extremely good to him. In May, 1591, he says:

“Sir Thomas Jones, Knight (unaxed) offered me his castell of Emlyn in Wales to dwell in so long as he had any interest in it, whose lease dureth yet twelve yeres, freely with commodities adjoining unto it; and also to have as much mow land for rent as myght pleasure me sufficiently. The 27th day he confirmed the same his offer agayn before Mr. John Harbert, Master of the Requestes, in his hall at Mortlake, which his offers I did accept of and he was glad thereof.”

He could never have entertained the idea of going to live in Wales, but no doubt it was policy to accept all offers. Herbert was an old friend and neighbour. His daughter Mary and Arthur had played at a childish marriage years before. They seem to have been playfellows still, after the Dees’ long absence, for in this June an accident happened to Arthur “at Mr. Herbert’s, about sun setting.” He was “wounded in his hed by his wanton throwing of a brik-bat upright, and not well avoyding the fall of it again. The half-brick weighed 2 1/2 lb.” On May 3 of the

following year, Arthur aged thirteen, became a Westminster scholar. “Wensday at ten of the clock Arthur was put to Westminster Schole, under Mr. Grant and Mr. Camden.” He came back home in two or three weeks, perhaps only for a few days, and Dee in returning him to lessons wrote a characteristic letter to his friend, William Camden, the antiquary. It shows how carefully the father had studied the child’s health, abilities, and the quick temper, inherited from his mother. There is a tender touch in that mother’s forethought to furnish the boy with means towards a special cleanliness which the provision for ablutions at Westminster did not contemplate. The “little chest with lock and key” for the firstborn son to take to school is always a family event of magnitude.

“22 May 1592.

“Worshipfull Sir. I have here returned your scholer unto your jurisdiction, beseching you to shew your charitable affection towards him: he had more and in better order then he will recover speedily. Of your great skylle and faithfull industrie in your function, it is most certayne to your great credit and merit. Of the wonderfull Diversitie of Childrens Dispositions, much you can say by experience: but of myne (this Arthure) I am to request you to conceyve at my hands, that he is of an exceding great and haughty mynd naturally, ready to revendge rashly. The naturall inclination is to me evydent: as who hath [Sol] in horoscopo, and [Mars] in corde Leonis. Dictum sapienti sat esto: for vera curatura you may alter this naturall courage to true fortitude and not to frayle rash fancyes: Socrates did overcome by grace Divine and his industrie, his untowardness, signified by the Art physiognomicall — you know the historie. This spirituall grammaticall concords of good manners I have great care that all my imps may be instructed in, to the more apt and skilfull serving of our Creator. Syr, my wife hath delivered unto him some more apparayle and furniture in a little chest with lock and key, yea, and with some towales to wype his face on after the morning and other washings of hands and face: willing him to buy him a stone basen and a pott, or a potter, to have allways clene and wholsom water in for his use.

“The boy liketh abundance of meate well: but very bashfully he sayd that there proportion of Drinke is somewhat to[o] little. I pray you by discretion listen to the voyce and opinion of the rest of the counsellis within him, for now & in the summer seasons, the proportion of Drink naturally doth increase above winters appetite thereof.

“Thus I am bold to cumber your wurship with these my speedy ragged lynes. And therein I besече you of one thing more, that his writing, both of roman and secretary hand decay not, but rather be amended: for a fayre writing is often tymes a good grace to matter very simple.

“Wherefore know that today they have at the right Wurshipfull Mr. Deans [Dr. Nowell’s] very honorable guests, and that this night it is intended that they will sup and lodge all night at Fullham. God bless your wurship and prosper you in all & ever your true and faithful wellwisher.

“John Dee.

“To the Worshipfull my singular friende Mr. Camden these be delivered.”

On New Years' Day, 1592, "at the sunrising exactly," Dee's third daughter was born. She was christened Frances on the afternoon of the 9th, and sent off with her nurse to Barn Elms the same day. In August her father notes, "Remember that all things is payd to our nurse at Barnes for the girle Francys Dee from hir birth untill the ende of her eighth month, lacking 12s., and on Sunday the 27th of this August we gave the nurse ten shillings. The eighth month ended the twelfth of this month." The child stayed on with her nurse till February 14 of the next year, when she was fetched home, "the woman very unquiett and unthankfull."

Two entries, "March 9, the Pryvy Seale at night," and March 16, "the great Seale," refer to a promise given by the Queen to Dee's cousin, Dr. William Aubrey, of Kew, now Vicar General and one of the Masters of Requests, about five rectories inthe Welsh diocese of St. Davids, which Dee was to have when they fell vacant. They were only worth 74 pounds 11s. 2d. in all, and Dee says he never received a penny from them.

Things were so desperate that at last, on November 9, 1592, he drew up a supplicattion which his friend, Lady Warwick presented the same day to the Queen at Hampton Court. This document, which Dee says Elizabeth took in her own hand to read herself, instead of handing it to a secretary, begged for a personal audit of, and investigation into, the state of his affairs. It is probably a unique petition, and in reading it we are scarcely astonished at the confidence with which the old astrologer, now grown old in the Queen's service, claims her consideration and provision. He appears to regard it as little less than a national reproach that a man of science like himself should be left in beggary. And so indeed it was. For thirty- four years had the Queen, true to the Tudor motto — to use everyone as a servant, to owe no gratitude, only acceptance or approval — spent promises upon him, but she had never given him a chance of providing for himself.

"Forasmuch as the intolerable extremitie of the injuries and indignities which your most excellent Majestie's faithfull and dutifull servant, John Dee, hath for some years last past endured, and still endureth, is so great and manifold as cannot in friefe be unto your Majestie expressed, neither without good prooffe and testimonie have credit with your Majesties, and because also without speedy and good redress therein performed, it is to be doubted that great and incredible inconveniences and griefs may ensue thereof in sundry sortes, (which yet may easily be prevented) your Majestie's foresaid most humble and most zealously faithfull servant beseecheth your Majestie to assign twoe or more meet and worthy persons, nobly and vertuously minded, who may and will charitably, indifferently, advisedly, and exactly, see, hear and perceive at the house of your Majestie's said servant in Mortlake, what just and needful occasion he hath thus to make most humble supplication unto your Majestie; and so of things there seen, heard, and perceived, to make true and full report and description unto your Majesty. And thus your Majestie's foresaid most dutiful servant beseecheth the Almighty God most mercifully, prosperously and always to bless and preserve your most excellent Majesty royal. Amen.

"A. 1592. Nov. 9."

The result of this unusual request was that two commissioners were at once appointed by the Queen. Within a fortnight Sir John Wolley, Secretary for the Latin Tongue to Queen Elizabeth, and one of her Privy Council, and Sir Thomas Gorges, Knight, of the Queen's Wardrobe, were seated in Dee's "late library room" at Mortlake, prepared to listen to his manifesto.

We may be sure he had long been preparing for this day. He seated the two gentlemen at a table in the middle of the room, placing near them a couple of other tables spread, one with letters and records of his "studious life for the space of a halfe hundred years, now by God's favour fully spent," the other, with all his own books, printed and manuscript, a complete author's collection of original works. At the suggestio of the commissioners he had occupied the space of thirteen days in preparing the autobiography which he called "The Compendious Rehearsall of John Dee, his dutifull declaration, etc.," so freely quoted in these pages. "It was in some order of method most briefly and speedily contribed against this day;" and in every respect, save that of chronological order, it is a pattern document. It gives the impression of having been written down in fragments, each incident or recital being complete in itself and most carefully dated, on a separate sheet of paper, and then the sheets shuffled and picked out by chance to follow each other for putting together. The story leaps from college day sin 1547 to travels in 1571, on to Christmas gifts in 1590, back to the Queen's visit in 1575, thence to his improsonment and appearance before the Star Chamber in 1555, and his reformation of the Calendar in 1582. He passes very lightly over his late travels abroad, merely ading that he "was very ungodly dealt withall, when I meant all truth sincerity, fidelity and piety towards God, my Queen and Country." The catalogue of his works is valuable, but it is unnecessary to print it in the present volume. He concludes his list of eight printed and thirty-six manuscript works ("some perfectly finished and some unfinished yet") with the very latest, the Compendious Rehearsall itself, adding that there were many other books, pamphlets and discourses not set down. He explains that the list is given neither "as they were written nor by order of yeares," but hastily as they came next to hand "out of diverse chests and baggs wherein they lay." He ends the chapter with a remarkable proof of the fecundity of his still active brain, in spite of his sixty-five years.

"The most part of all these here specified lye here before you on the table on your left hand; but by other books and writings of another sort (if God grant me health and life thereto of some ten or twelve years), I may hereafter make plain and without doubt this sentence to be true, Plura latent, quam patent." What other works he did accomplish in the sixteen years yet to run of his long life, he described in an Appendix to the Rehearsal, written about two years afterwards, and printed by Hearne, and by the Chetham Society at the end of the autobiographical narrative, to which he had already added a short chapter giving an account of the result of the Commissioners' visit, calling it "The Sequel of the Premisses."

To return to the day of the visit, November 22, 1592. The Queen's Secretary and the Gentleman of her Wardrobe arrived at Mortlake probably in the morning, and stayed to dinner. Having seated them at the tables in the library, Dee read to them, or related with the manuscript at hand, the story of the "halfe hundred" years spent in the attainment of "good learning," which he reckoned from his leaving Chelmsford Grammar School for Cambridge. It was, of course, drawn up with the

skill of a pratised author, divided into fourteen chapters, each with an attractive and pithy title. "Her Majesties specially Gracious and very Bountifull favours towards me used etc.," is by far the longest; the shortest is the twelfth: "The Resolution for Generall, very easy, and speedy Remedy in this Rare and Lamentable Case." The remedy he suggests is to make him either Master of St. Cross; Warden of Manchester; Provost of Eton; or Master of Sherborne, one of which posts had been already promised him four times in three years. The tenth chapter is "The hard making of provision for some hundred pounds [?a year] for the maintenance of me, my wife, our children and family for these three last years, and that but with a meane dyet and simple apparel: I having not one Peny of certaine Fee, revenue, stipend or Pension, either left me, or restored unto me, or of any yet bestowed on me." He shows how at his return three years before, he found himself penniless; cut off for ever from his two parsonages; disappointed as yet of the large yearly allowance promised him for his life from Bohemia. Probably on parting from the then affluent Kelley, some bond was entered into by him or by Rosenberg to transmit to him a share of the enormous profits they expected from the multiplication of the gold. "To save us from hunger starving," he had had to appeal to friends, and he records gratefully that some who had been unfriendly before he left came to his aid on his return. They "put to" their helping hands in many ways, and alredy he had received from them a sum of 500 pounds and more. Yet he has had to pawn his plate little by little until all was gone. "After the same manner went my wife's jewels of gold, rings, bracelets, chaines and other our rarities, under the thraldom of the userer's grips, till non plus was written upon the boxes at home." He has borrowed upon sureties, upon his personal bill of hand, upon his word, upon his promise, and he has run up accounts, so that now he is in debt for 333 pounds, beyond the 500 pounds. "The true accounts of all these gifts, loans, and debts upon score, talley, or book, is here before your Honours;" how the usurer devoureth him and how he is "dayly put to shame, may be seen." Other necessary expenses amounted to 267 pounds, so that he has spent but 566 pounds in three years for housekeeping," and that with great parsimony, and with gifts from good friends of "wine, whole brawnes, sheep, wheat, pepper, nutmegg, ginger, sugar, etc., and other things for the apparel of me, my wife and our children." He has mortgaged his house for 400 pounds, and now will have to sell it for half it cost to pay his debts, he and his family to become wanderers and homeless vagabonds, furnished only with bottles and wallets. What shall he do, he pitifully begs, that he may prevent his name being handed down to posterity as a warning to lovers and students of truth not to follow in his steps and be given to such disgraceful shifts and indignities? He ends with a passage of true eloquence:

"Therefore, seeing the blinded Lady, Fortune, doth not govern in this commonwealth, but justitia and prudentia, and that in better order thanin Tully's Republica, or Books of Offices, they are laid forth to be followed and performed: most reverently and earnestly (yea, in manner with bloody teares of heart), I and my wife, our seaven children and our servants (seaventeene of us in all), doe this day make our petition unto your Honours that upon all godly, charitable and just respects had of all that you have this day seene, heard, and perceived, you will make such report unto her most excellent Majestie (with humble request for speedy reliefe), that we be not constrained to do or suffer otherwise than becometh

Christian and true faithfull obedient subjects to do or suffer. And all for want of due mainteynance.”