

CHAPTER II

IMPRISONMENT AND AUTHORSHIP

“A man is but what he knoweth.” — Bacon

In December, 1551, Dee obtained, through the offices of Mr. (afterwards Sir) John Cheke, an introduction to Secretary Cecil and to King Edward VI. He had already written for and dedicated to the King two books (in manuscript): *De usi Globi Coelestis*, 1550, and *De nubium, solis, lunae, ac reliquorum planetarum*, etc., 1551. These perhaps had been sent to Cheke, the King's tutor, in the hope that they might prove useful lesson books. The pleasing result of the dedication was the gift of an annual royal pension of a hundred crowns. This allowance was afterwards exchanged for the rectory of Upton-upon-Severn, in Worcestershire, which Dee found an extremely bad bargain.

From the Beacon Hill above West Malvern Priory, the visitor may turn from inspection of the ancient British camp of Caractacus to admire the magnificent view; and across the level fields where the Severn winds, the tower of Upton church will be seen rising in the middle distance. Further west, if the day be clear, the more imposing towers of Tewkesbury and Cloucester may be discerned, while half a turn eastward will show Worcester Cathedral, not far away. Dee never lived in this beautiful place, although he was presented to the living on May 19, 1553. Even when the rectory of Long Leadenham, in Lincolnshire, was added to Upton, the two together were worth only about eighty pounds a year. Next year he declined an invitation to become Lecturer on Mathematical Science at Oxford, conveyed to him through “Mr. Doctor Smith” (Richard, D.C.L., 1528, the reformer), of Oriel College, and “Mr. du Bruarne,” of Christ Church. He was occupied with literary work, and in 1553 produced, among other things, a couple of works on *The Cause of Floods and Ebbs*, and *The Philosophical and Political Occasions and Names of the Heavenly Asterismes*, both written at the request of Jane, Duchess of Northumberland.

When Mary Tudor succeeded her young brother as queen in 1553, Dee was invited to calculate her nativity. He began soon after to open up a correspondence with the Princess Elizabeth, who was then living at Woodstock, and he cast her horoscope also. Before long he was arrested on the plea of an informant named George Ferrys, who alleged that one of his children had been struck blind and another killed by Dee's “magic.” Ferrys also declared that Dee was directing his enchantments against the Queen's life. Dee's lodgings in London were searched and sealed up, and he himself was sent to prison. He was examined before the Secretary of State, afterwards upon eighteen articles by the Privy Council, and at last brought into the Star Chamber for trial. There he was cleared of all suspicion of treason, and liberated by an Order in Council. August 29, 1555, but handed over to Bishop Bonner for examination in matters of religion. Bonner was apparently equally satisfied. Dee was certainly enjoined by him, at John Philpot's examination on November 19, 1555, to put questions as a test of his orthodoxy. He quoted St. Cyprian to Philpot, who replied: “Master Dee, you are too young in divinity to teach me in the matters of my faith, though you be more learned in other things.”

Dee deserves well of all writers and students for time everlasting because of his most praiseworthy efforts to found a State National Library of books and

manuscripts, with copies of foreign treasures, wherever they might be. On January 15, 1556, he presented to Queen Mary “a Supplication for the recovery and preservation of ancient writers and monuments.” Within a few years he had seen the monasteries dissolved and the priceless collections of these houses lamentably dispersed, some burned and others buried. He drew up a very remarkable address to the Queen dwelling on the calamity of thus distributing “the treasure of all antiquity and the everlasting seeds of continual excellency within this your Grace’s realm.” Many precious jewels, he knows, have already perished, but in time there may be saved and recovered the remnants of a store of theological and scientific writings which are now being scattered up and down the kingdom, some in unlearned men’s hands, some walled up or buried in the ground. Dee uses powerful arguments to enforce his plea, choosing such as would make the most direct appeal to both Queen and people. She will build for herself a lasting name and monument; they will be able all in common to enjoy what is now only the privilege of a few scholars, and even these have to depend on the goodwill of private owners. He proposes first that a commission shall be appointed to inquire what valuable manuscripts exist; that those reported on shall be borrowed (on demand), a fair copy made, and if the owner will not relinquish it, the original be returned. Secondly, he points out that the commission should get to work at once, lest some owners, hearing of it, should hide away or convey away their treasures, and so, he pithily adds, “prove by a certain token that they are not sincere lovers of good learning because they will not share them with others.” The expenses of the commission and of the copying, etc., he proposed should be borne by the Lord Cardinal and the Synod of the province of Canterbury, who should also be charged to oversee the manuscripts and books collected until a library “apt in all points” is made ready for their reception.

Finally, Dee suggests that to him be committed the procuring of copies of many famous manuscript volumes to be found in the great libraries abroad: the Vatican Library at Rome, St. Mark’s at Venice, and in Bologna, Florence, Vienna, etc. He offers to set to work to obtain these, the expenses only of transcription and carriage to England to be charged to the State. As to printed books, they are to “be gotten in wonderfull abundance.” In this generous offer of his life to be spent in transcribing crabbed manuscripts, we cannot see the restless genius of John Dee long satisfied, but at any rate he proved himself not seeking for private gain.

Thus was the germ of a great National Library first started by the Cambridge mathematician, nearly fifty years before Thomas Bodley opened his unique collection at Oxford, and close upon 200 years before there was founded in the capital the vast and indispensable book-mine known to all scholars at home and abroad as the British Museum. The Historical Manuscripts Commission, whose labours in cataloguing private collections of archives are also foreshadowed in Dee’s supplication, only came into being with the appointment of Keepers of the Public Records, by an Act signalling the first and second years of Queen Victoria’s reign.

It is needless to say that nothing came of Dee’s very disinterested proposition. So he became the more industrious in collecting a library of his own, which soon consisted of more than 4,000 volumes, which were always at the disposal of the friends who came often to see him.

They came also for another reason.

Astrology was a very essential part of astronomy in the sixteenth century, and the belief in the controlling power of the stars over human destinies is almost as old

as man himself. The relative positions of the planets in the firmament, their situations amongst the constellations, at the hour of a man's birth, were considered by the ancients to be dominant factors and influences throughout his whole life. It is not too much to say that a belief in the truth of horoscopes cast by a skilled calculator still survives in our Western civilisation as well as in the East. Medical science today pays its due respect to astrology in the sign, little altered from the astrological figure for Jupiter, with which all prescriptions are still headed.

Dee, as one of the foremost mathematicians and astronomers of the time, and one employed by the Queen, became continually in request to calculate the nativity and cast a horoscope for men and women in all ranks of life. He has left many notes of people's births; his own children's are entered with the greatest precision, for which a biographer has to thank him.

When Elizabeth mounted with firm steps the throne that her unhappy sister had found so precarious and uneasy a heritage, Dee was very quickly sought for at Court. His first commission was entirely *sui generis*. He was commanded by Robert Dudley to name an auspicious day for the coronation, and his astrological calculations thereupon seem to have impressed the Queen and all her courtiers. Whether or no we believe in the future auguries of such a combination of influences as presided over the selection of the 14th of January, 1559, for the day of crowning Elizabeth in Westminster Abbey, we must acknowledge that Dee's choice of a date was succeeded by benign and happy destinies.

He was then living in London. We do not know where his lodging was, but several of the books belonging to his library have come down to us with his autograph, "Joannes Dee, Londini," and the dates of the years 1555, 1557, and 1558.

Elizabeth sent for him soon after her accession, and invited him to her service at Whitehall with all fair promises. He was introduced by Dudley, then and long afterwards her first favourite; so he was likely to stand well. "Where my brother hath given him a crown," she said to Dudley, or to Dee's other sponsor, the Earl of Pembroke, "I will give him a noble." This was the first of innumerable vague promises made, but it was long indeed before any real and tangible gift was conferred on the astrologer, although he was continually busied about one thing and another at the fancy of the Queen. The reversion of the Mastership of St. Catherine's Hospital was promised him, but "Dr. Willson politickly prevented me."

One morning the whole Court and the Privy Council were put into a terrible flutter by a simple piece of what was common enough in ancient times and in Egypt — sympathetic magic. A wax image of the Queen had been found lying in Lincoln's Inn Fields, with a great pin stuck through its breast, and it was supposed undoubtedly to portend the wasting away and death of her Majesty, or some other dreadful omen. Messenger after messenger was despatched to summon Dee, and bid him make haste. He hurried off, satisfied himself apparently of the harmless nature of the practical joke, and repaired, with Mr. Secretary Wilson as a witness of the whole proceedings and a proof of all good faith, to Richmond, where the Queen was. The Queen sat in that part of her private garden that sloped down to the river, near the steps of the royal landing-place at Hampton Court; the Earl of Leicester (as Dudley had now become) was in attendance, gorgeous and insolent as ever; the Lords of the Privy Council had also been summoned, when Dee and Mr. Secretary expounded the inner meaning of this untoward circumstance, and satisfied and allayed all their fears. Something about the calm attributes of this seasoned and

travelled scholar seemed always to give moral support to the Queen and her household; this is only the first of many occasions when he had to allay their superstitious fright. That she felt it essential to keep him within reach of herself may have been one reason for not giving him the appointments for which he, and others for him, constantly sued. Dee was not an easy person to fit into a living: he required one with no cure of souls attached; for this, he says, "a cura animarum annexa, did terrifie me to deal with them." He is called a bachelor of divinity by Foxe in 1555, and as a matter of fact he does, both in 1558 and in 1564, add the letters S. D. T. to his name in his printed works. This degree also was not from Cambridge. At last he grew tired of waiting, and a certain restlessness in his character, not incompatible with the long patience of the true follower of science, drove him again abroad. His intention was to arrange for printing works already prepared in manuscript. To search among out-of-the-way bookmongers and book-lovers in high-walled German towns, for rare treasures wherewith to enrich his native country, was another magnet that drew his feet. In February, 1563, after he had been thus employed for more than a year, he wrote from the sign of the Golden Angel, in Antwerp, to Cecil, to ask if he was expected to return to England, or if he might remain to oversee the printing of his books, and continue his researches among Dutch books and scholars. He had intended, he says, to return before Easter, but this was now impossible, owing to printer's delays. When we remember that a hundred years had barely elapsed since the first metal types had been cast and used in a hand press, it is not wonderful that Dee's treatise, with its hieroglyphic and cabalistic signs, took long to print. He announces in the letter to Cecil a great bargain he has picked up, a work, "for which many a learned man hath long sought and dayley yet doth seek," upon cipher writing, viz. *Steganographia*, by the famous Abbot Trithemius of Wurzburg. It is the earliest elaborate treatise upon shorthand and cipher, a subject in which Cecil was particularly interested. It was then in manuscript (first printed, Frankfort, 1606). Dee continues that he knows his correspondent will be well acquainted with the name of the book, for the author mentions it in his Epistles, and in both the editions of his *Polygraphia*. He urges its claims upon the future Lord Treasurer, already a statesman of ripe experience, in the following words: "A boke for your honor or a Prince, so meet, so nedefull and commodious, as in human knowledge none can be meeter or more behovefull. Of this boke, either as I now have yt, or hereafter shall have yt, fully wholl and perfect, (yf it peas you to accept my present) I give unto your Honor as the most precious juell that I have yet of other mens travailes recovered."

He then goes on to beg the minister and Secretary of State to procure for him that "learned leisure (*dulcia illa ocia*) the fruit whereof my country and all the republic of letters shall justly ascribe to your wisdom and honorable zeal toward the advancement of good letters and wonderful, divine, and secret sciences." Dee had copied in ten days, "by continual labour," about half of the book: a Hungarian nobleman there has offered to finish the rest, if Dee will remain in Antwerp and direct his studies for a time.

"Of this boke the one half (with contynual labour and watch, the most part of 10 days) have I copyed oute. and now I stand at the curtesye of a nobleman of Hungary for writing furth the rest; who hath promised me leave thereto, after he

shall perceyve that I may remayne by him longer (with the leave of my Prince) to pleasure him also with such pointes of science as at my handes he requireth.

“I assure you the meanes that I used to cumpas the knowledge where this man and other such are, and likewise of such book as this, as for this present I have advertisement of, have cost me all that ever I could here with honesty borrow, besydes that which (for so short a time intended) I thowght needefull to bring with me, to the value of xxlib. God knoweth my zeale to honest and true knowledg; for which my flesh, blud, and bones should make the marchandize, if the case so required.”

Dee did remain in the Low Countries; he completed his *Monas Hieroglyphica*, dated its prefatory dedication to the Emperor Maximilian II., at Antwerp, January 29, 1564, and added an address to the typographer, his “singular good friend, Gulielmo Silvio,” dated the following day. the book appeared in April, and he at once journeyed to Presburg, to present a copy to Maximilian. Its twenty-four theorems deal with the variations of the figure represented on our title-page, which may be roughly explained as the moon, the sun, the elements (the cross), and fire as represented by the waving line below. Dee says that many “universitie graduates of high degree, and other gentlemen, dispraised it because they understood it not,” but “Her Majestie graciously defended my credit in my absence beyond the seas.” On his return in June she sent for him to Court and desired him to read the book with her. Dee’s account of his regal pupil is given with much quaintness. “She vouchsafed to account herself my schollar in my book...and said whereas I had prefixed in the forefront of the book: *Qui non intelligit aut taceat, aut discat*: if I would disclose to her the secrets of that book she would *et discere et facere*. Whereupon her Majestie had a little perusion of the same with me, and then in most heroicall and princely wise did comfort and encourage me in my studies philosophicall and mathematicall.” [His escort had been required for the Marchioness of Northampton, who was returning from Antwerp to Greenwich. In return for this assistance the lady begged the Queen’s favour for her cavalier. elizabeth was always Dee’s very good friend, and she made a grant to him on December 8, 1564, of the Deanery of Gloucester, then void, but other counsels prevailed, and it was soon bestowed on some other man. No doubt the appointment would have given great offence, for the popular eye was already beginning to see in Dee no highly equipped mathematician, geographer and astronomer, but a conjuror and magisian of doubtful reputation, in fact, in the current jargon, one who “had dealings with the devil.” What there had been at this time to excite these suspicions beyond the fact that Dee was always ready to expound a comet or an eclipse, to cast a horoscope, or explain that the Queen would not immediately expire because a wax doll with a stiletto in its heart was found under a tree, it is hard to say. But that these rumours were extremely persistent is seen by the astrologer’s defence of himself in the “very fruitfull” preface which he, as the first mathematician of the day, was asked to write to Henry Billingsley’s first English translation of Euclid’s *Elements*, in February, 1570. This preface must be reckoned as one of Dee’s best achievements, although, as he says, in writing it, “he was so pinched with straightness of time that he could not pen down the matter as he would.” He points out that Euclid has already appeared in Italian, German, High Dutch, French, Spanish and Portuguese dress, and now at last comes to England.]

In spite of its ex parte nature, a study of this preface alone must convince any reader that the author was no charlatan or pretender, but a true devotee of learning, gifted with a far insight into human progress. He covers in review every art and science then known, and some “until these our daies greatly missed” (his comments on music and harmony are truly remarkable), and comes back to his own predilection — arithmetic, “which next to theologie is most divine, most pure, most ample and generall, most profound, most subtele, most commodious and most necessary.” He quotes Plato to show how “it lifts the heart above the heavens by invisible lines, and by its immortal beams melteth the reflection of light incomprehensible, and so procureth joy and perfection unspeakable.” Speaking of the refraction of light, he foreshadows the telescope as he describes how the captain of either foot or horsemen should employ “an astronomical staffe commodiously framed for carriage and use, and may wonderfully help himself by perspective glasses; in which I trust our posterity will prove more skilfull and expert and to greater purpose than in these days can almost be credited to be possible.” Then he alludes to a wonderful glass belonging to Sir William P., famous for his skill in mathematics, who will let the glass be seen. The passage seems to show that looking-glasses were not common, or that this particular one was a convex mirror.

“A man,” he says, “may be curstly afraid of his own shadow, yea, so much to feare, that you being alone nere a certain glasse, and proffer with dagger or sword to foyne at the glasse, you shall suddenly be moved to give back (in maner) by reason of an image appearing in the ayre betweene you and the glasse, with like hand, sword or dagger, and with like quickness foyning at your very eye, like as you do at the glasse. Strange this is to heare of, but more mervailous to behold than these my wordes can signifie, nevertheless by demonstration opticall the order and cause thereof is certified, even so the effect is consequent.”

This mirror was given to Dee not long afterwards.

From optics he passes on to mechanics, and mentions having seen at Prague mills worked by water, sawing “great and long deale bordes, no man being by.” He describes accurately a diving chamber supplied with air, and sums up some of the mechanical marvels of the world: — the brazen head made by Albertus Magnus, which seemed to speak; a strange “self-moving” which he saw at St. Denis in 1551; images seen in the air by means of a perspective glass; Archimedes’ sphere; the dove of Archytas; and the wheel of Vulcan, spoken of by Aristotle; and comes down to recent workmanship in Nuremberg, where an artificer let fly an insect of iron, that buzzed about the guests at table, and then returned “to his master’s hand agayne as though it were weary.” All these things are easily achieved he says, by “skill, will industry and ability duly applied to proof.” “But is any honest student, or a modest Christian philosopher, to be, for such like feats, mathematically and mechanically wrought, counted and called a conjuror? Shall the folly of idiots and the mallice of the scornfull so much prevaile that he who seeketh no worldly gaine or glory at their hands, but onely of God the Threasor of heavenly wisdom and knowledge of pure veritie, shall he, I say, in the mean space, be robbed and spoiled of his honest name and fame? He that seeketh, by S. Paul’s advertisement in the creatures’ properties and wonderfull vertues, to find juste cause to glorifie the eternall and Almightye Creator by, shall that man be condemned as a companion of Hell-hounds

and a caller and conjuror of wicked damned spirits?" Then he recounts his years of study, and asks, "Should I have fished with so large and costly a nett, and been so long time drawing, even with the helpe of Lady Philosophie and Queen Theologie, and at length have caught but a frog, nay a Devill?...How great is the blindness and boldness of the multitude in things above their capacitie!" [Then he refers to some who have appeared against him in print.

"O my unkind countrymen. O unnatural Countrymen, O unthankfull countrymen, O brainsicke, Rashe, spitefull and disdainfull countrymen. Why oppresse you me thus violently with your slaundering of me, contrary to veritie, and contrary to your own conscience? And I, to this hower, neither by worde, deede or thought, have bene anyway hurtfull, damageable, or injurious to you or yours! Have I so long, so dearly, so farre, so carefully, so painfully, so dangerously fought and travailed for the learning of wisdom and atteyning of vertue, and in the end am I become worse than when I began? Worse than a madman, a dangerous member in teh Commonwelath and no Member of the Church of Christ? Call you this to be learned? Call you this to be a philosopher and a lover of wisdom?"

He goes on to speak of examples before his time to whom in godliness and learning he is not worthy to be compared: — "patient Socrates," Apuleius, Joannes Picus and Trithemius, Roger Bacon, "the flower of whose worthy fame can never dye nor wither," and ends by summing up the people who can conceive nothing outside the compass of their capacity as of four sorts: — "vain prattling busybodies, fond friends, imperfectly zealous, and malicious ignorant." Of these he is inclined to think the fond friends the most damaging, for they overshoot the mark and relate marvels and wonderful feats which were never done, or had any spark of likelihood to be done, in order that other men may marvel at their hap to have such a learned friend.[The eloquent irony of this passage seems equalled only by its extraordinary universality, its knowledge of human character and its high philosophic spirit. At what a cost did a seeker after scientific truths follow his calling in the sixteenth century!