

CHAPTER XXIII

LAST DAYS

“If I read aught in Heaven,
Or Heaven write aught of fate, by what the stars,
Voluminous or single characters
In their conjunction met, give me to spell,
Sorrows and labours, opposition, hate
Attends thee; scorns, reproaches, injuries.”

— Milton, *Paradise Regained*

A few days after the diary closes, Dee's fourth son, Theodore, died. The boy was just over thirteen, perhaps at the Grammar School. Michael, we remember, had died at Mortlake seven years before, so the only sons left were Arthur and Rowland, both now grown almost to man's estate. Within about a year, Arthur married, and soon embarked on his successful career as a physician in London, Manchester, Moscow and Norwich, to which we can return later.

Arthur's wife was Isabella, daughter of Edmund Prestwich, Justice of the Peace, of Manchester, a member of a family whose name is perpetuated by a large district of the town. The marriage took place in 1602, when Arthur was twenty-four, his bride just under twenty. The young couple settled with or near his parents at first, and Dee had the joy of seeing grandchildren grow up around him. Four of Arthur's twelve children were born during the old man's life, and he pleased himself by drawing a horoscope for two of these, Margarita 1603, and Jane 1605, on the vellum leaves of a small square manuscript volume which still fills us with wonder at his boundless industry. It contains an anatomical drawing of the human body and tables of astrological signs for its different parts, aphorisms, studies of medicine, the actions of metals, and other hermetic notes. Arthur's horoscope, drawn and expounded by his father in the same book, is sufficiently remarkable, with its prophecy that he should have good fortune from a prince, and die abroad, a violent death. In the centre of the figure, Arthur himself has added the words “sententia patris mei de mea nativitate erat. Magna bona cum multis malis.” Arthur only added one horoscope, that of his seventh child, Isabel, born 1614; otherwise, as they appeared almost annually (twelve in eighteen years), he contented himself with simply writing names and dates on leaves of coarse paper, added to the beginning and end of his father's little commonplace book, which has been rebound roughly in cheap modern cloth.

Beyond these events, there is nothing to tell of the next three years, which are without a single jotting of his own in any of his diaries; but the old prejudices and suspicions must have revived in a very active and bitter form. The aged student could endure them less patiently than before. He had lost hope of outliving them; he had lost his Queen, who, though she had held out to him promises of preferment as unsubstantial as a mirage of the desert, had ever been friendly and kind; had constantly welcomed, nay, invited, him to her presence; and had apparently maintained her faith in him to the last. Burleigh's death in 1598, and now the Queen's, left him without patron and protector. Elizabeth died at Richmond on March 23, 1603, but Dee, presumably, was far away in Manchester, and

not near at hand at Mortlake, even had he been required. The course of the magnificent life was run, and no prognostications of her astrologer could put hope into the physicians and courtiers watching around that royal deathbed. The Queen was seventy, and had reigned for fifty-three years.

From King James there was nothing to be hoped for Dee, the man familiar with occult sciences. The Scotsman felt himself a special expert on the subject of witches, demons and magic. Had he not attended the infamous trials of 1590 and 1591? And was he not the author of a book intended to shatter the doubts of those who were still unconvinced of the infamy? He was aghast at the new and unorthodox views of apologists like Wier and Reginald Scot, and upon his accession promptly ordered *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), by the last named, to be publicly burned. James's *Demonologie* is a strange piece of reasoning, a plea, in fact, for the devil, with whom he seems to be on particularly intimate terms. "God's hangman" — that is the title awarded him — is, according to King James, able to return and reanimate any dead body. He announces his faith in the power of conjurers to invoke the devil when they choose, and to invest others with his spirit. He adjures all pious people to unite in exterminating and utterly destroying all persons so possessed: a somewhat unkind request, since he has previously allowed that such objects of reprobation are permitted to exist in order that the godly may be warned!

The first Parliament of James met on March 19, 1604. On the 27th a new and more stringent Act against Witchcraft was brought into the House of Lords. It was referred to the bishops, who discovered it was imperfect, and had a fresh one drawn. On June 9 the execrable Act that disfigured our statute book for 150 years became law. This haste, it was supposed, was used to meet offences exposed by the Scottish trials, now again evidently revived and much talked of in England. It is significant to remember that Shakespeare finished writing *Macbeth* in 1606. In what way Dee felt himself specially involved, unless by the publication, in 1603, of Harsnet's tirade against impostures and exorcists, it is hard to conjecture, but the times were ripe for him to make, at this identical moment, a passionate appeal to the King and Parliament. On June 5 he presented to James, in the Palace at Greenwich, a petition couched in the strongest and most piteous terms that any man could devise.

He urged upon the King

"to cause your Highnesse said servant to be tryed and cleared of that horrible and damnable, and to him most grievous and dammageable sclaunder, generally, and for these many yeares last past, in this kingdom rayseed and continued, by report and Print against him, namely that he is or hath bin a conjurer or caller or invocator of divels."

He went on to relate how he had published many times his "earnest apologies against the slander [one we remember in his preface to Billingsley's *Euclid* in 1570, and another, the letter to the Archbishop in 1595, he had republished in 1599 and 1603], and yet this ungodly and false report, so boldly, constantly and impudently avouched," has been uncontrolled and unpunished for so many years; and, moreover, in spite of all, some writer, either a "malicious forraine enemy or an English traytor to the flourishing State and Honor of the Kingdom," on January 7, 1592, had called him, John Dee, in print, "the conjuror of the Queen's Privy

Council.” It seems, therefore, very needful that the suppliant shall be brought to trial, for the credit of the Lords of the Privy Council as well as for his own.

“Therefore he offereth himself willingly to the punishment of Death, yea eyther to be stoned to death, or to be buried quicke, or to be burned unmercifully, if by any due, true, and just meanes, the name of conjuror, or caller, or invocator of Divels or damned Sprites, can be proved to have beene or to be duely or justly reported and told of him (as to have been of his doing) were true, as they have been told or reasonably caused any wondering among or to the many-headed multitude, or to any other whoseever else.”

Dee’s sympathies were so strongly with the unfortunate, persecuted, so-called witches, that he was willing to throw in his lot with them and share the same fate. He ends this extraordinary petition with “a great and undoubted hope” that the King will “soon redress his farder griefs and hindrances, no longer of him possibly to be endured, so long hath his utter undoing, by little and little, beene most unjustly compassed.”

Following up this petition, the poor man, grown desperate, three days later (June 8) presented an address in verse to Parliament, begging them to pass “an Act Generall against slander, with a special penal order for John Dee, his case.” He was far too much in earnest to be suspected of any humorous intention, but a thought of the needful reformation such an Act might have wrought in the country by this time cannot be suppressed. Certainly it would have been a more creditable piece of legislation than the Act which afforded such wicked and cruel pretext for espionage and terrorism, and for putting unfortunate lunatics — called witches — to death by hanging, burning and stoning by a mob.

It seems as if Dee’s ruined and beggared condition, the long procession of disappointments he had patiently borne, had entirely destroyed the sense of proportion in his mind between personal and public affairs. Continual brooding over the thought of the neglect, the suspicion, that his undeniable talents had undergone, the obstinate slander, ignorant incredulity, or flat denial of things in which he most truly put his faith, all distorted by his natural vanity and good opinion, seems to have convinced him that his crushed and melancholy fate was little short of a national disaster. This feeling had become an obsession.

There was unfortunately nothing in his halting verses to induce Parliament to pay any heed to a tiresome old petitioner, a survival from the last century and the last reign, who had outlived every contemporary inclined to believe in him, and whose course was now nearly run.

Nor did James respond in any way to his heartbroken petition. Robert Cecil, and all who wished to stand well with him, took their cue from the King, and Dee in his old age was left forsaken and alone.

The following is the address to Parliament: —

“TO THE HONORABLE ASSEMBLIE
OF THE COMMONS IN THE PRESENT PARLIAMENT.”

“The Honor due unto you all,
And reverence to you each one,
I do first yeeld most speciall;
Grant me this time to heare my mone.

“Now (if you write) full well you may,
Fowle sclandrous tongues and divelish hate,
And help the truth to beare some sway
In just defence of a good Name.

“In sundry sorts, this sclander great
(Of conjurer) I have sore blamde:
But wilfull, rash, and spiteful heat,
Doth nothing cease to be enflamde.

“Your helpe, therefore, by Wisdom’s lore,
And by your Powre, so great and sure,
I humbly crave, that never more
This hellish would I shall endure.

“And so your Act, with Honour great
All Ages will hereafter prayse;
And Truth, that sitts in Heavenly sear,
Will in like case your comforts rayse.

Most dutifully in all humilitie at your commandment, John Dee,
servant and Mathematician to his most royall Majestie.

An. 1604. Junij 8.”

Dee’s good name was one of his dearest possessions, but he had long seen it shadowed and dimmed. Another treasure — his “painful” Jane — the wife who had loyally cleaved to him through good and ill report, was to be the next of which he was to be bereft. She was so much his junior that he might reasonably have expected her to tend his declining years and to survive him. But it was thoroughly in keeping with her unselfish character and devoted life that her death came as a sacrifice to duty. In the spring of 1605, a terrible scourge of plague visited Manchester. She nursed her children safely through the epidemic, but fell a victim to it herself. She died and was buried on March 23 in the collegiate church of St. Mary. The old man had no heart to take up his pen and record her death. The bare fact is all we know, from another source; and the fate of all Jane’s children, save Arthur, is wrapped in a like mystery. At her death, Jane was a month under fifty years old; the twenty-seven years of her married life had been crowded years, the one thought in them all to watch over and ward her great childlike, learned, marvellous husband and her children. Now she passed the task on to her daughter Kate, who faithfully fulfilled it.

A few fragments of angelic visions, which after nearly twenty years were once again vouchsafed, are all that remain to tell of th last two years of the old man’s life.

Bartholomew Hickman was the skryer, and Dee was in London, “at Mrs. Goodman her house,” very ill. On March 20 and 29, Raphael appeared, to comfort him as regards his alarming symptoms of haemorrhage, and bade him use the medical skill that God had given him. Dee, in utter dejection, owned that he was beaten in his “great attempt to make the council privy of my beggary, and to offer

the Earl of Salisbury such my duties as I may perfect to his account.” He was right to hope nothing from the great Burleigh’s little-minded son. Robert Cecil lacked almost everything that had made William Cecil great, even a great sovereign to serve.

In July Dee was again in London, this time staying in Westminster, at the “Three Kings” in King Street. Katherine was with him, his devoted daughter, now a woman of twenty-six, apparently unmarried. Two companions or servants, Patrick Saunders and Thomas Turner, were in attendance. On the 9th, the angel Raphael came to the sad and broken old man of eighty, holding out promises and hopes that seem cruelly delusive. But Dee was still wrapped in that inviolable armour of faith or credulity that had already withstood so many severe shocks. Whether he now actually beheld Raphael, whether he still with his ears heard the angel’s voice, or whether only within his spiritual consciousness he felt the impulse and the message, is quite immaterial. But it is noticeable that there are now no descriptions of Raphael as an apparition. The message is all he heeds. As he is sinking slowly down into his grave from natural decay, there is a double and figurative meaning to be read into the angel’s words. Raphael bade him first believe that his perishing bodily frame shall be restored and made sound, for, however reluctant he at his great age may feel, he is to go shortly on a long journey to friends beyond the sea, where the secrets of wisdom, the philosopher’s stone, the book of St. Dunstan, and “that Jewel that was delivered,” shall be made known to him. He is not to go alone, for his good friend, John Pontoys, will come from Dantzic to be his stay and helper. “Therefore set thy things in order for thy Wardenship, and all thy other worldly affairs, as shortly as thou canst, by all means possible.” He is not to mistrust because of his physical weakness, for he shall have long life like Hezekiah, and instead of living in want or beholden to those who love him not, he shall be provided for where he shall be able to do God service. He shall enjoy fame and memory to the end, and Raphael will accompany him, as he did the young Tobias, on his journey. Perhaps Dee remembered the mystical words of Gabriel, used to him at Cracow in April of 1584, —

“Happy is he that hath his skirts tied up and is prepared for a journey, for the way shall be open unto him, and in his joynts shall there dwell no wearinesse. His meat shall be as the tender dew, as the sweetness of a bullock’s cud. For unto them that have shall be given, and from them that have not shall be taken away. For why? The burr cleaveth to the willow stem, but on the sands it is tossed as a feather without dwelling. Happy are they that cleave unto the Lord, for they shall be brought unto the storehouse, and be accounted and accepted as the ornaments of his beauty.”

[The old man penned on a slip of paper some notes to aid his failing memory when next he should see his instructor. In two days, on July 11, he was able to put the questions.

What country shall he go to?

The answer is, where he will. “Thou hast been a great traveller, and it is referred to thy own choice,” subject to divine approval. Dee suggests Germany, and receives consent.

Whom shall he take with him besides John Pontoys? What about his daughter Katherine, and the young man, Patrick Saunders?

The answer is very emphatic. It shows how dependent the old man had become upon this elder daughter of his old age. "John Dee, thou of thyself dost best know that without thy daughter, thou canst not be without her."

Certainly he could not part from Katherine, even with Pontoys as his "speciall comfort and aid," and the "honest and well-disposed young man," Saunders, who had been sent on purpose to go with him.

What about books and appurtenances? Is Mr. Bardolf to go? What shall Arthur do in his intended travel? "Shall I ever return to England, and shall I keep a title to enjoy my house when I do return?" Will the King grant a licence, or will it not be another disappointment, like so many that have gone before?

It is all a vain and illusory and impossible chimera. The only journey left for the old man to take was the one to "that undiscovered bourne from whence no traveller returns." Still, the wonderful visions perhaps brought him ecstatic hours. His brain was yet strong and clear, less worn out than his body, but like all old people, he lived over again and loved to dwell upon the past. A few days later he sat talking after dinner to Bartholomew "of divers my doings with Mr. Kelley." He had forgotten little of these dazzling experiences, and perhaps to while away the time he read his precious diaries over and over again. But of later events his memory was failing: "I asked Bartholomew if he had ever seen my jewel that was brought since it was set in gold [this had been done more than twenty years before], and he thought that he had not seen it." Surely tactful politeness on Bartholomew's part. "Whereupon I went speedily to my chest, unlocked it, and took it out, and undid the case and set the stone in his due manner."

Soon Raphael appeared in the stone, and Dee heard his voice, promising that the powder (i.e., Kelley's powder) which he was keeping — "the which thou dost make account of as no better but dust" — should be turned to its right use.

Is it possible that the old belief in the golden secret had at last been killed? The powder was now but dust, as the old man would soon become, and as all his fixed dreams of projection had ever been.

The last entry in the spiritualistic diary was made on September 7, 1607, but whether Dee was at Mortlake or in London cannot be said. Pontoys had arrived. He was anxious to know if he would be thought fit to serve Dee in Bartholomew's absence. Also he earnestly desired to know his guardian angel, and he would fain hear also "the end of the Polish troubles."

Captain Langham, it is hoped, is going to lend 100 pounds; if not, Pontoys will set to work "to win some help for money by distillations and alchemical conclusions." Poverty is again stretching her gaunt fingers over this fond dreamer of gold. He had missed his "silver double gilt bell salt" and many other things from his house. He is "bereaved of his own goods." The truth was that Arthur had secretly taken them away to sell or pawn, in order to provide necessities for the family. Dee has been expecting a sum of money from the Emperor Rudolph, how much he does not know. But Raphael tells him to "let it go and speak no further of it. The Emperor of all emperors will be thy comfort. Thou hast no more need of him [Rudolph], only to keep good will and friendship betwixt him and thee." [Then Raphael fades into the eternal invisible, and the last word of the angelic visions is written.

In the private diary, kept in the almanack from Venice throughout this last year, there is little beside the bare stroke marking the months off into weeks, as was

Dee's usual habit. The strokes are continued beyond the month of his death, December, 1608. The last written entry is on December 19, and is almost illegible. It is in the old man's hand and appears to read "tonitrum a Corffe."

On which day at the death of the old year, Dee's spirit joined those others that had always been so near to him, we do not know, or on what precise date he was buried in the chancel of the church standing so close to the house at Mortlake which had been his home for thirty years. The parish registers for five years are missing, and the stone which Aubrey says marked his grave has long since disappeared.

Fifty years later, John Aubrey talked to Goodwife Faldo, an old woman of eighty who had known him, and was shown a slab from which the brass had disappeared. She said that her mother had tended him in his sickness before he died in his own house in Mortlake, "next the house where the tapestry hangings are made." Evidently his last days were passed in the cottage which he had purchased many years before to add to the larger house, inherited from his mother. The old woman's gossip was interesting to Aubrey, for he was a grandson of Dee's cousin and neighbour, Dr. William Aubrey, the Master of Requests who had helped Dee to the Manchester post. She was full of marvellous stories, of course, for Dee's reputation for "magic" was impelled to survive him. But they were harmless stories enough: he had "layed a storm for Sir Everard Digby"; he had recovered a basket of clothes which she as a girl, and one of his younger daughters of her own age, had negligently lost together; he had bidden a butler who had lost his master's plate on a boat coming down from London by water to go back on a certain day, and he would see the man who had taken the wrong basket by exchange: the butler had done so and had found his plate; he had told a woman that she laboured under the evil tongue of an ill neighbour; he would not recover some lost horses, though he was offered several angels. He used to distil egg-shells, and kept a great many stills going. He had given and built the gallery to the church at Mortlake, and Goody Faldo's father was the carpenter that worked on it. "He was a great peacemaker, and if any of the neighbours fell out, he would never let them alone till he had made them friends." "A mighty good man he was."

The old woman remembered that he entertained the Polish ambassador not long before he died, and showed to him the eclipse of the sun, in a dark room. She could call to mind the stone upon his grave: it was between the tombstones of two other servants of Queen Elizabeth, Mr. Holt and Mr. Miles, upon both of which were brasses. The children, she said, dreaded him because he was accounted a conjurer, and yet whenever they strayed into the church, they would run straight to play upon his gravestone. There were steps at the upper end of the chancel when he was buried, but the minister laid them plain in Olver's days, and then the stone that covered Dr. Dee was removed. She could recall his appearance: a man tall and slender, clad in a gown like an artist's gown, with hanging sleeves and a slit.

These garrulous reminiscences give us a picture of the old philosopher's end more valuable than any mere formal entry of the date. Some day, however, it may be possible to recover that.

Meanwhile, Dee's memory may be entrusted to the kinder judges of to-day, who will be more charitable because more enlightened and less impregnated with superstition. They may see in him a vain, presumptuous and much deluded person, but at any rate they must acknowledge his sincere and good intentions; his personal piety; his uncommon purity of thought and mind. If, in his thirst for

knowledge of the infinite unknowable, he pushed back the curtain farther than was wise or justifiable, did he harm any one's reputation beside his own? Did he not suffer all the penalty in his own miserable failure, so far as comfort and prosperity in material things were concerned? In all the vague hopes held out by him to Queen, Princes and Emperors, of enriching them through his alchemical skill, he was no conscious charlatan, playing a part to lure them on, but a devout believer in man's power and purpose to wrest scientific secrets from the womb of the future. Can we look back upon the discoveries of three hundred years and feel his certainty was vain? The powers of electricity, the training to our uses that marvellous and long concealed agency and light; the healing virtues of radium, should be worth more to us than much manufactured gold.