

CHAPTER III

MORTLAKE

“In her princely countenance I never perceived frown toward me, or discontented regard or view on me, but at all times favourable and gracious, to the joy and comfort of my true, faithful and loyal heart.” — DEE, of Queen Elizabeth.

The promised benefice did not yet come, although Dee's friends at Court were all busy on his behalf. Either now or later, he was actually mentioned as Provost of Eton, and the Queen “answered favourably.” Mistress Blanche Parry and Mistress Scudamore, lady-in-waiting to Anne, Countess of Warwick, urged his claims for the Mastership of St. Cross at Winchester, which it was thought Dr. Watson would soon vacate. But all he seems to have obtained was a fresh dispensation from Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury, to enjoy the two Midland rectories for ten years. [

He continued his literary work, and beside writing new manuscript treatises, bethought himself of an old one, which although printed had not received great attention. This was the *Propoedeumata Aphoristica* (London, 1558), dedicated to his old and dear friend and fellow-student at Louvain, Mercator, “my Gerard,” as he affectionately calls him. In January, 1568, Dee presented a copy of a new edition, with an address to the studious and sincere philosophical reader, dated December 24, 1567, from “our museum” at Mortlake, to “Mr. Secretary Cecil, now Lord Treasurer.” Two copies were given at the same time to the Earl of Pembroke, one for him to use or give away at his pleasure, the other, by Cecil's advice, to be presented by him to the Queen. Within three days, Dee heard from Pembroke that she had graciously accepted and well liked his book. This gratifying information was rendered acceptable by a gift: — “He gave me very bountifully in his owne behalf xxlib. to requite such my reverent regard of his honour.” [An interview with the Queen followed on February 16, at 2 o'clock, when there was talk between them in the gallery at Westminster “of the great secret for my sake to be disclosed unto her Majesty by Nicholas Grudius, sometime one of the secretaries to the Emperor Charles V.” Of this alchemical secret, no doubt concerning transmutation, Dee writes after, “What was the hinderance of the perfecting of that purpose, God best knoweth.” [He was now over forty, and had a natural desire to range himself and house his library. Before 1570 he took up his abode with his mother, in a house belonging to her at Mortlake, on the river Thames. It was an old rambling place, standing west of the church between it and the river. Dee added to it by degrees, purchasing small tenements adjoining, so that at length it comprised laboratories for his experiments, libraries and rooms for a busy hive of workers and servants. Mrs. Dee occupied a set of rooms of her own. Nothing of the old premises now remains, unless it be an ancient gateway leading from the garden towards the river. After Dee's death the house passed through an interesting phase of existence, being adapted by Sir Francis Crane for the Royal tapestry works, where, encouraged by a handsome grant of money and orders from the parsimonious James, suits of hangings of beautiful workmanship were executed under the eye of Francis Cleyn, a “limner,” who was brought over from Flanders to undertake the designs. At the end of the eighteenth century, a large panelled room with red and white roses, carved and coloured, was still in existence. Early in the nineteenth century the

house was used for a girls' school, kept by a Mrs. Dubois.[Here Dee took up his abode. Its nearness to London and to the favourite places of Elizabeth's residence — Greenwich, Hampton Court, Sion House, Isleworth, and Nonsuch — was at first considered a great advantage, and the journey to and from London was almost invariably made by water. The Queen desired her astrologer to be near at hand. When he fell dangerously ill at Mortlake in 1571, after a tedious journey abroad into the duchy of Lorraine on some mysterious errand, Elizabeth sent down two of her own physicians, Doctors Atslowe and Balthorp, to attend him. Lady Sidney was also despatched with kind, and gracious, and "pithy" messages from the sovereign, and delicacies, "divers raretiess," were supplied from the royal table to supplement his mother's provision for the invalid. The Queen seems to have felt a special obligation to look after him, as she had sent him on some mission of her own, which probably we shall not be far wrong in thinking connected with Dee's alchemistic experiments. Every Court in Europe at this time had astrologers and alchemists in its employ, and the Queen and Burleigh were as anxious as Dee that he should really attain the ever-elusive secret of transmutation. Dee had of course carried the Queen's passport for himself and a couple of servants, with horses, and had obtained permits through foreign ambassadors in London to travel freely through various countries.[Dee was now bent on rather a strange form of public service. On October 3, 1574, he wrote a very remarkable letter to Lord Burleigh of four and a half folio pages in that best printed hand of his which offers no excuse for skipping. His own paramount deserts are very naturally one of the main subjects. He has spent all his money and all his life in attaining knowledge. "Certes, by due conference with all that ever I yet met with in Europe, the poor English Bryttaine (Il favorita di vostra Excellentia) hath carried the Bell away. God Almighty have the glory." If he had only a sufficiency of two or three hundred pounds a year, he could pursue science with ease. Failing that, there is another way. Treasure trouve is a very casual thing, and the Queen is little enriched thereby, in spite of her royal prerogative. No one knows this better than the Lord Treasurer. Now, if her Majesty will grant him, but Letters Patent under her hand and seal, the right for life to all treasure he can find, he promises to give Burleigh one half, and of course to render to the Queen and Commonwealth the proportion that is theirs. It is not the gold, as wealth, that appeals to this man of books and stars: —

"The value of a mine is matter for King's Treasure, but a pott of two or three hundred pounds hid in the ground, wall, or tree, is but the price of a good book, or instrument for perspective astronomy, or some feat of importance."

He has spent twenty years in considering the subject; people from all parts have consulted him about dreams, visions, attractions and demonstrations of *sympathia et antipathia rerum*;" but it is not likley he would counsel them to proceed without permission from the State. Yet what a loss is here!

"Obscure persons, as hosiers or tanners, can, under color of seeking assays of metalls for the Saymaster, enjoy libertie to dig after dreamish demonstrations of places. May not I then, in respect of my payns, cost, and credit in matters philosophical and mathematicall, if no better or easier turn will fall to my Lot from her Majestie's hands, may I not then be thought to mean and intend good service

toward the Queen and this realm, yf I will do the best I can at my own cost and charge to discover and deliver true prooffe of a myne, vayn, or ore of gold or silver, in some place of her Grace's kingdom, for her Grace's only use?"

The Society of Royal Mines had been incorporated May 28, 1565, and the Queen had granted patents to Germans and others to dig for mines and ores. It was well known that the country abounded in hidden treasure. The valuables of the monasteries had been, in many cases, hastily buried before the last abbot was ejected at the dissolution. The subject had a special fascination for Dee, who was conscious of a "divining rod" power to discover the hiding places. He made a curious diagram of ten localities, in various counties, marked by crosses, near which he believed treasure to lie concealed. He ends his letter to Burleigh with a more practical and much more congenial request. He has been lately at Wigmore Castle, and has seen a quantity of parchments and papers from which he has copied accounts, obligations, acquittances. Will the Treasurer give him a letter to Mr. Harley, keeper of the records there, asking permission to examine them and report as to the contents? "My fantasy is I can get from them, at my leisure, matter for chronicle or pedigree, by way of recreation." So he ends with an apology for his long letter and is "you Lordship's most bownden John Dee."

Nothing seems to have resulted from this letter at the time; later he did receive a grant of royalties from a mine.

in 1575 Dee married. He seems to have had no time for such an event before. He was now in his forty-eighth year, and did not execute the fatal folly (which, in his Court life, he had seen many times exemplified) of committing the indiscretion first and informing the Queen after. He duly laid before her his intention, and received in return a "very gracious letter of credit for my marriage." He also had congratulatory epistles from Leicester and from Christopher Hatton.

The Queen, when out riding in Richmond Park with her lords and ladies, would sometimes pass through the East Sheen Gate, down the hill towards the river, and would stop at the house between Mortlake Church and the Thames, desiring to be shown the latest invention of her astrologer, or the newest acquisition of his library. On the afternoon of one such windy day in march, 1576, she arrived at a slightly unlucky moment, for Dee's young wife, after a year of marriage, had just died, and not four hours earlier had been carried out of the house for burial in the churchyard opposite. Hearing this, Elizabeth refused to enter, but bade Dee fetch his famous glass and explain its properties to her outside in the field. Summoning Leicester to her assistance, she alighted from her horse by the church wall, was shown the wonderful convex mirror, admired the distorted image of herself, and finally rode away amused and merry, leaving the philosopher's distress at his recent bereavement assuaged for the moment by such gracious marks of royal interest and favour. And so this wraith of Dee's first wife fades away in the courtly picture, and we do not even know her name.

He turned more than ever to literary work and followed up the scholastic books dedicated to the young King Edward VI. and the studies of astrological hieroglyphs with books of another kind. To this year of historical labours, perhaps, belongs a letter from Dee to his "loving friend," Stow, the historian. Contrary to Dee's careful practice, it is undated, save for day and month, "this 5th of December." He has evidently been the means of introducing a fellow-author in influential

quarters, for he says, "My friend, Mr. Dyer, did deliver your books to the two Earls, who took them thankfully, but, as he noted, there was no reward commanded of them. What shall be hereafter, God knoweth. So could not I have done." Then he adjures Stow to "hope as well as I," and turns from considering fruits to the sources of their toil. He sends a list of the various ports, including the Cinque Ports, that have a mayor or bailey, all except Gravesend, which has a portreeve. Stow may get fuller information, "the very true plat," from Lord Cobham's secretary. He returns a manuscript of Asser's Saxon Chronicle; "it is not of the best and perfectest copy. I had done it with it in an hour. If you have Floriacensis Wigornensis [the Chronicle of Florence of Worcester] I would gladly see him a little."

Stow, like Dee, was a Londoner and, within a year or two, of the same age. He had already published his Annals of England, which had then gone through four editions.

Dee now began to keep a diary of his doings, written in the pages and margins of three fat quarto almanacs, bound in sheepskin and clasped. Quotations have perhaps already shown that his style, his spelling, his use of words, is that we expect from a man of his wide culture and reading. He was of the new learning, though before Shakespeare and Bacon. He had also two or more distinct handwritings, a roman hand with neat printed letters, and a scribbling hand. In the former all his manuscript works and his letters are written; his diary is in the last. This diary was quite unnoticed until about 1835, when the almanacs were discovered at Oxford in the Ashmolean Library, having been acquired by Elias Ashmole, a devout believer in hermetic philosophy and collector of all alchemical writings. They were transcribed (very inaccurately) by J.O. Halliwell and printed by the Camden Society in 1842.

The books contain a strange medley of borrowings and lendings, births and deaths, illnesses, lawsuits, dreams and bickerings; observations of stars, eclipses and comets, above all of the weather (for Dee was a great meteorologist), of horoscopes, experiments in alchemy and topographical notes. Here are some of the earliest entries: —

"1577. Jan. 16. The Earl of Leicester, Mr. Philip Sidney, and Mr. Dyer, etc., came to my house." This was Edward Dyer, Sidney's friend, afterwards to be dramatically associated with Dee and Kelley in their reputed discovery of the secret of making gold. "Feb. 19th. great wynde S.W., close, cloudy. March 11. My fall upon my right knucklebone about 9 o'clock. Wyth oyle of Hypericon in 24 hours eased above all hope. God be thanked for such his goodness to his creatures! March 12. Abrahamus Ortelius me invisit Mortlakii." This interesting visit from the great Dutch map-maker is entirely omitted in the printed diary. "May 20. I hyred the barber of Chyswick, Walter Hooper, to kepe my hedges and knots in as good order as he seed them then, and that to be done with twice cutting in the year, at the least, and he to have yearly five shillings and meat and drink."

Then he speaks of a visitor, Alexander Simon, who comes from Persia, and has promised his "service" on his return, probably to assist with information on Eastern lore and wisdom. His friend and neighbour, William Herbert, sends him notes upon his already published Monas. Another work is ready for press, and he is constrained to raise money, whether for the printing or other expenses. In June he borrowed 40 pounds from one, 20 pounds from another, and 27 pounds upon "the

chayn of gold.” On August 19, his new book is put to printing (one hundred copies) at John Day’s press in Aldersgate.

This was another of those works, so pithy and so alive in their remarkable application to the future, which have fallen with their author into undeserved neglect. Dee had made suggestions about supplying officers of the army with perspective glasses as part of their equipment. Now his friendship with the Gilberts, Davis, Hawkins, Frobisher, and others off the great sea-captains, drew his attention to the sister service and the sea power of “this blessed isle of Albion.” He had spent most of the previous year (1576) in writing a series of volumes to be entitled “General and Rare Memorials pertayning to the perfect art of Navigation.” The first volume, *The British Monarchy, or Hexameron Brytannicum*, was finished in August. It was dedicated to Christopher Hatton in some verses beginning: —

“If privat wealth be leef and deere
To any wight on British soyl,
Ought public weale have any peere?
To that is due all wealth and toyle.

Whereof such lore as I of late
Have lern’d, and for security,
By godly means to Garde this state,
To you I now send carefully.”

The intention is better than the lines. Dee was no poet, and even a bad versifier, but he would not have been a true Elizabethan had he not on special occasions dropped into rhyme, like the rest of his peers.

The second volume, *The British Complement*, “larger in bulk than the English Bible,” was written in the next four months and finished in December. It was never published; its author tells us it would cost many hundreds of pounds to print, because of the tables and figures requisite, and he must first have a “comfortable and sufficient opportunity or supply thereto.” The necessary funds were never forthcoming, and the book remained in manuscript. A considerable part of it is devoted to an exposition of the “paradoxall” compass which its author had invented in 1557.

The third volume was mysterious; it was to be “utterly suppressed or delivered to Vulcan his custody.” The fourth was *Famous and Rich Discoveries*, a book, he thinks, “for British Honour and Wealth, of as great godly pleasure as worldly profit and delight.” It was a work of great historical research which never saw the light.

The prejudice against Dee was so strong, and he was so much misunderstood, some persons openly attributing his works to other writers, others accusing him of selfishly keeping all his knowledge to himself, many perverting his meaning through ignorance, and again one, a Dutch philosopher, publishing a treatise which was in substance a repetition of his, that he determined to withhold his name from the publication. The anonymity is not, however, very well maintained, for Dee used the flimsy device of a preface to the reader by an “unknown friend,” in which all the griefs and ill usages of that “harmless and courteous gentleman,” “that extraordinary studious gentleman,” the author, are freely aired. Under the thin

disguise, Dee's high opinion of his own merits peeps, nay stares, out. Slanders have been spread against him, a damaging letter counterfeited by Vincent Murphy, his name and fame injured; he has been called "the arch-conjurer of the whole kingdom." "Oh, a damnable sklander," he bursts out, "utterly untrue in the whole and in every worde and part thereof, as before the King of Kings will appear at the dreadful day." It is no conceit on Dee's part, with his European reputation, to say that he "had at God his most mercifull handes received a great Talent of knowledge and sciences, after long and painful and costly travails." And he goes on to say that he is both warned by God and of his own disposition to enlarge the same and to communicate it to others, but now he finds himself discouraged; he cannot "sayl against the winds eye," or pen any more treatises for his disdainful and unthankful countrymen to use or abuse, or put his name to any writing. The unknown friend has no desire to flatter the studious gentleman, but considering all his contributions to learning, he may honestly say, without arrogancy and with great modesty, that "if in the foresaid whole course of his tyme he had found a constant and assistant Christian Alexander, Brytain should now now have been destitute of a Christian Aristotle"!

But he soon gets engrossed in his subject, which is to urge the importance of establishing "a Petty Navy Royall, of three score tall ships or more, but in no case fewer," of 80 to 200 tons burden, to be thoroughly equipped and manned "as a cinfirt abd safeguard to the Realme." He shows the security it would give to or merchants, the usefulness in "deciphering our coasts," sounding channels and harbours, observing of tides. Thousands of soldiers, he says, "will thus be hardened and well broke to the rage and disturbance of the sea, so that in time of need we shall not be forced to use all fresh-water Soldyers," but we shall have a crew of "hardy sea-soldyers" ready to hand. This is interesting as showing that the word "sailor" was not yet in use. Then he touches on the question of unemployment: "hundreds of lusty handsome men will this way be well occupied and have needful maintenance, which now are idle or want sustenance, or both." "These skilful sea-soldyers will be more traynable to martiall exploits, more quick-eyed and nimble [he quotes Pericles for this], than the landmen." The Petty Navy Royall, as apart from the Grand Navy Royall, will look after pirates, will protect our valuable fisheries, and generally serve us in better stead than four such forts as "Callys or Bulleyn." Coming to the financial side, he asserts that every natural born subject of this "British Empire" will willingly contribute towards this "perpetual benevolence for sea security" the hundredth penny of his rents and revenues, the five hundredth penny of his goods valuation, for the first seven years, and for the second seven the hundred and fiftieth penny and the seven hundred and fiftieth penny of goods valuation, the same, after fourteen years, to be commuted for ever to half the original contribution. He calculated this tax would amount to 100,000 pounds or over. If that is not sufficient, he would exact a second tax (exempting all such counties, towns, and the five ports, as have Letters Patent for such immunity) of the six hundredth penny of every one's goods and revenues. He would have twenty victualling ports, in every part of the kingdom, "the incredible abuses of purveyors duly reformed." He would have a stop put to carrying our gunpowder and saltpetre out of the realm. "Good God," he cries, "who knoweth not what proviso is made and kept in other Common Weales against armour carrying out of their Limits?" He speaks of many hundred pieces of ordnance lately carried out of the kingdom, so that we must make new;

and deplores the wholesale destruction of our forests and timber (which is needed for ships) to keep the iron works going. Then he foreshadows the Trinity House by asking for a “Grand Pilot generall of England.” He outlines a scheme of navy pensions, and in relation to the fisheries quotes sanitary statutes of Richard II. He devotes a chapter to the history of “that peaceable and provident Saxon, King Edgar,” his “yearly pastime of sailing round this island in summer, guarded by his fleet of 4,000 sail,” and speaks of the efficiency of Edgar’s navy and the maintenance of his forts upon the coast. Then he passes to his final argument. We must attain this “incredible political mystery” — the supermacy of our sea power. We must be “Lords of the Seas” in order that our “wits and travayles” may be employed at home for the enriching of the kingdom, that “our commodities (with due store reserve) may be carried abroad,” and that peace and justice may reign. “For we must keep our own hands and hearts from doing or intending injury to any foreigner on sea or land.”

Enough has been said of this book, perhaps, to show that it is a remarkable contribution towards the history of the navy and the fishing industries of Britain. It may be contended that if within twelve years England could offer a crushing defeat to the greatest sea power of the world, and establish herself mistress of the seas, she was not in need of theoretical advice from a landsman on the subject, but at any rate Dee’s treatise voices the ideals of the times, the hopes that inspired all true lovers of their country and of their Queen in the sixteenth century. In the thunders of the Armada they were to be realised.