

CHAPTER V

THE SEARCH FOR A MEDIUM

“Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise
From outward things, whate’er you may believe
There is an inmost centre in us all
Where truth abides in fulness; and around
Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,
This perfect clear perception, which is truth.
A baffling and perverting carnal mesh
Binds it and makes all error; and to KNOW
Rather consists in opening out a way
Whence the imprisoned splendour may escape
Than in effecting entry for a light
Supposed to be without.”

— Browning, Paracelsus.

Dee had always, working with and under him, a number of young students and assistants, who were admitted more or less to his inner counsels. If they proved apt and diligent, he would reward them with promises of alchemical secrets, “whereby they might honestly live”; once he promised 100 pounds, “to be paid as soon of my own clere hability, I myght spare so much.” This was a very safe provison. Generous as he was, lavish to a fault, money never stuck near him, nor was it of the least value in his eyes, except as a means of advancing science and enriching others.

Naturally, jealousies arose among the assistants. They would suddenly depart from his service, and spread ignorant and perverted reports of his experiments. Roger Cook, who had been with his master fourteen years, took umbrage “on finding himself barred from vew of my philosophical dealing with Mr. Henrick.” He had imagined himself the chosen confidant, for to him Dee had revealed, December 28, 1579, what he considered a great alchemical secret “of the action of the elixir of salt, one upon a hundred.” Roger was now twenty-eight, “of a melancholik nature, and had been pycking and devising occasions of just cause to depart on the sudden,” for he was jealous of a newer apprentice. “On September 7th, 1581, Roger went for alltogether from me.” But it was not “alltogether,” for Roger returned when Dee was old and inform and poor, and remained serving him almost to the end. There was always something patriarchal in Dee’s care for the members of his large household, evidenced abundantly in his diary. No doubt their loyalty to him was often severely tried by harsh and cruel outside rumours, but as they knew and loved his real nature they only drew closer towards him.

A new phase of his character is now forced upon us. He has appeared hitherto as the man of learning, astronomer and mathematician, a brilliant lecturer and demonstrator, diligent in probing the chemical and alchemical secrets of which his vast reading, his foreign correspondence, and his unique library gave him cognisance. Interested in geographical discovery and history, a bibliographical and mathematical writer, his genuine contributions to science had been considerable. He had written upon navigation and history, logic, travel, geometry, astrology,

heraldry, genealogy, and many other subjects. He had essayed to found a National Library, and was contemplating a great work upon the reformation of the Calendar. But these purely legitimate efforts of his genius were discounted in the eyes of his contemporaries by the absurd suspicions with which his name had been associated ever since his college days. After his arrest and trial by Bonner, he never really succeeded in shaking off this savour of something magical. The popular idea of Dee in league with evil powers was, of course, the natural result of ignorance and dull understanding. To a public reared in superstition, untrained in reasoning, unacquainted with the simple laws of gravitation, the power to raise heavy bodies in the air at will, to see pictures in a simple crystal globe, or converse with projections of the air, to forecast a man's life by geometric or planetary calculations, and to discern the influence of one chemical or mineral substance upon another, seemed diabolically clever and quite beyond human agency. Even to study Nature and her secrets was to lay oneself open to the suspicion of being a magician. We must remember that in the early years of Queen Elizabeth's reign it was thought necessary to pass an Act of Parliament decreeing that all who practised sorcery causing death should suffer death; if only injury was caused, imprisonment and the pillory would be the punishment. Any conjuration of an evil spirit was to be punished by death as a felon, without benefit of clergy or sanctuary. Any discovery of hidden treasure by magical means was punishable by death for a second offence.

But if "magic" was tottering on its throne, the reign of alchemy was still uncontested. Belief in it was universal, its great votaries in the past were of all nations. St. Dunstan of Glastonbury, Roger Bacon, Raymond Lully, Canon George Ripley of Bridlington, Albertus Magnus, Cornelius Agrippa, Arnold de Villa Nova and Paracelsus, all their writings, and hundreds of others, Dee had in his library and constantly upon his tongue. Alchemy was not only a science, it was a religion and a romance. It was even then enduring the birth-throes and sickly infancy of modern chemistry, and the alchemists' long search for the secret of making gold has been called one of its crises. Long after this it was still an article of faith, that such a man as Robert Boyle did not deny. We cannot forget that even that great chemist, Sir Humphry Davy, revered the possibility, and refused to say that the alchemist's belief in the power to make gold was erroneous. How unlike Dante's keen irony of the dark and groping men who seek for "peltro," or tin whitened with mercury. But alchemy was bursting with many other secrets beyond the manufacture of gold. The spiritual element abounding in all minerals, and the symbolism underlying every actual substance, were deeply imbedded in it. It was a science of ideals. It ever led its followers on to scale illimitable heights of knowledge, for in order to surpass all material and rational nature, and attain the crowning end, did not God delegate His own powers to the sage? So the art of healing was thought the noblest, the most Godlike task, and no means of attaining hermetic wisdom were untried. The psychical world became every bit as real to these religious mystics as the physical and rational, which they understood so vaguely. Even the strange shapes which escaped from the retorts of the old alchemists were known to them as "souls." Their successors called them spirits. Paracelsus named them as mercury, and it was left to his pupil, Van Helmont, the true founder of all modern chemistry, to give the name of gas.

It is easy to see how Dee, the astrologer, grew into close touch with those psychic phenomena which, though they have become extremely familiar to us, as

yet continue to baffle our most scientific researches. When he first became conscious of his psychic powers, and how far he himself was mediumistic, is harder to discern. It is on May 25, 1581, that he makes in his diary the momentous entry: — "I had sightin Chrystallo offered me, and I saw." We may take it that he "saw" through a medium, for he never afterwards seems to have been able to skry without one. Perhaps his first crystal had then been given him, although, as we have seen, he already owned several curious mirrors, one said to be of Mexican obsidian such as was used for toilet purposes by that ancient race. He had made a study of optics, and in his catalogue of the manuscripts of his library are many famous writings on the spectrum, perspective and burning glasses, etc. Then came the trouble with Roger, "his incredible doggedness and ungratefulness against me to my face, almost ready to lay violent hands on me." Dee hears strange rappings and knockings in his chamber. A gentleman came from Lewisham to consult him about a dream many times repeated. Dee prays with him, and "his dream is confirmed and better instruction given." A mysterious fire breaks out for the second time in "the maydens" chamber at night. The knocking is heard again, this time accompanied with a voice repeated ten times. No words apparently, but a sound like "the schrich of an owl, but more longly drawn and more softly, as it were in my chamber." He has a strange "dream of being naked and my skyn all over wrought with work like some kinde of tuft mockado, with crosses blew and red; and on my left arm, abowt the arm in a wreath, these words I read: — 'Sine me nihil potestis facere.' And another the same night of Mr. Secretary Walsingham, Mr. Candish and myself." Then he was ten days from home, at "Snedgreene, with John Browne, to hear and see the manner of the doings." Evidently some remarkable manifestation. he was becoming more interested in psychic problems, but he was not able to proceed without a medium, and the right one had not yet appeared.

Meanwhile, he fills his diary with all manner of interesting news. Vincent Murphy, the "cosener" who had defamed him, and against whom in September, 1580, he had instituted a troublesome law-suit, was condemned by a jury at the Guildhall to pay 100 pounds damages. "With much adoe, I had judgment against him." Five or six months later, he agreed with Mr. Godolphin to release the cosener. Jean Bodin, the famous French writer on witches, and publicist, had come to England with "Monsieur," and Dee was introduced to him by Castelnau, the French ambassador, in the "Chamber of Presence at Westminster." Letters came from Doctor Andreas Hess, the occult philosopher, sent through Dee's friend, Richard Hesketh, agent at Antwerp. There are also letters from Rome. John Leonard Haller, of Hallerstein by Worms, came to him to say he had received instructions for his journey into "Quinsay [or Northern china], which jorney I moved him unto, and instructed him plentifully for observing the variation of the compassin all places as he passed." He notes, as if it were a common occurrence, a "fowl falling out" between two earls at Court, Leicester and Sussex [the Lord Chamberlain], tells how they "called each other traytor, wheruppon both were commanded to keepe to theyre chambers at Greenwich, wher the Court was." It sounds like a schoolboys' quarrel, but the royal schoolmistress would have them both know that they were in disgrace for a time. In July, there was an eclipse of the moon, but it was "clowdy, so as I could not perceyve it." In August, about half-past eight on the night of the 26th, "a strange Meteore in forme of a white clowde crossing galaxium, lay north and sowth over our zenith. This clowde was at length

from the S.E. to the S.W., sharp at both ends, and in the West it was forked for a while. It was about sixty degrees high, it lasted an howr, all the skye clere abowt and fayr star-shyne.”

Dee made a journey into Huntingdonshire, by St. Neots, to Mr. Hickman's at Shugborough, in the county of Warwick. Young Bartholomew Hickman was afterwards to become the companion and servant of his old age, and manifested some slight mediumistic powers. On the way home, a month or two later, Dee rode into Sussex to Chailey, probably to the glass workds there. The Queen and “Monsieur” were at Whitehall.

A pretty little scene was enacted at Mortlake at the New Year, when “Arthur Dee and Mary Herbert, they being but 3 yere old, the eldest of them, did mak as it were a shew of childish marriage, of calling each other husband and wife.” Then Dee essays a harmless little play upon words. “The first day Mary Herbert cam to her father's house at Mortlake, the second day she came to her father's hosue at East Shene.” Mrs. Dee went the same day to see the baby Katherine at Nurse Garret's, and Mistress Herbert went with her. So the two families were in great unity.

Sir George Peckham, who sailed with Sir Humphrey Gilbert, came to consult Dee about exploration in North America, and promised a share in his patent of the new lands. He also sent down his sea-master, Mr. Clement, and another gentleman, Mr. Ingram, to see the mathematician. For Sir John Killigrew, Dee devised “a way of protestation to save him harmless for compounding for the Spaniard who was robbed: he promised me fish against Lent.” Haller came again to get instructions how to transfer his money to Nuremburg, and to get letters of introduction to Constantinople. By him, Dee sent letters to correspondents in Venice, where the German explorer was to winter.

Mr. Newbury, who had been in India, came early in the New Year. Dee recounts how the stage in that well-known old London place of amusement, the Paris Garden, on Bankside, Southwark, fell down suddenly while it was crammed with people beholding the bear-baiting. “Many people were killed thereby, more hurt, and all amazed. The godly expound it as a due plague of God for the wickedness there used, and teh Sabbath day so profanely spent.” Sunday was the great day for the bear-fights.

“1583. — Jan. 23. Mr. Secretarie Walsingham cam to my howse, where by good luk he found Mr. Awdrian Gilbert, and so talk was begonne of Northwest Straights discovery.

“Jan. 24. Mr. Awdrian Gilbert and John Davis went by appointment to Mr. Secretary, to Mr. Beale his house, where only we four were secret, and we made Mr. Secretarie privie of the N.W. passage, and all charts and rutters were agreed uppon in generall.

“Feb. 3. Mr. Savile, Mor. Powil the younger, travaylors, Mr. Ottomeen his sonne cam to be acquaynted with me.

“Feb. 4. Mr. Edmunds of the Privie Chamber, Mr. Lee, Sir Harry Lee, his brother, who had byn in Moschovia, cam to be acquaynted with me.

“Feb. 11. The Queene lying at Richmond went to Mr. Secretarie Walsingham to dynner; she coming by my dore graciously called me to her, and so I went by her horse side as far as where Mr. Hudson dwelt.

“Feb. 18. Lady Walsingham cam suddenly to my house very freely, and shortly after that she was gone, cam Syr Francis himself, and Mr. Dyer.

“March 6. I and Mr. Adrian Gilbert and John Davis did mete with Mr. Alderman Barnes, Mr. Townson and Mr. Yong and Mr. Hudson, about the N.W. passage.

“March 17. Mr. John Davys went to Chelsey with Mr. Adrian Gilbert to Mr. Radforths, and so, the 18th day from thence, to Devonshyre.

“April 18. The Queene went from Richmond toward Greenwich, and at her going on horsbak, being new up, she called for me by Mr. Rawly his putting her in mynde, and she sayd ‘quod defertur non aufertur,’ and gave me her right hand to kisse.”

While these every-day events were going on and being chronicled, Dee was also occupying himself with the search for a medium. He first tried one named Barnabas Saul (he seems to have been a licensed preacher), who professed himself an occultist. Saul gives news of buried treasure — great chests of precious books hidden somewhere near Oundle in Northamptonshire, but the disappointed book-lover finds the hoard an illusion. Then Saul, who slept in a chamber over the hall at Mortlake, is visited at midnight by “a spiritual creature.” The first real seance that Dee records, “Actio Saulina,” took place on December 21, 1581. The skryer was bidden to look into the “great crystalline globe,” and a message was transmitted by the angel Annael through the percipient to the effect that many things should be declared to Dee, not by the present worker, “but by him that is assigned to the stone.” After New Year’s tide, on any day but the Sabbath, the stone was to be set in the sun, the brighter the day the better, and sight should be given. The sitters might “deal both kneeling and sitting.” When we consider how very real to a devout person in the Middle Ages apparitions of the devil and of evil spirits were, there seems nothing at all extraordinary in Dee’s belief that good spirits also might be permitted to come to his call, for purposes of good. A month or two after this, Saul was indicted on some charge and tried in Westminster Hall, but, thanks to Mr. Serjeant Walmesley and a couple of clever lawyers, he was acquitted. There was an end of his clairvoyance, however: “he confessed he neyther herd or saw any spirituall crature any more.” If the accusation against him had been that of sorcery, he was wise to risk no further appearances in Westminster Hall. He seems to have spread abroad many false reports about Dee, who reproached him bitterly when he called at Mortlake a few months later. Dee had, however, gained psychical experience by these early and tentative experiments. The field was now open for a maturer applicant. When he arrived, he was to change the whole current of Dee’s life and outlook, to become at once a helper and a stumbling-block, a servant and a master, loving as a son, treacherous as only a jealous foe. It was a strange fate that sent Edward Kelley to Dee at this moment, when everything was ripe for his appearance. And it was characteristic of the man that he was ushered into Dee’s life under a feigned name. On March 8, two days after Saul had confessed he saw and heard no more of the spirits, Dee writes in his diary, “Mr. Clerkson and his frende cam to my howse.” He makes the visit very emphatic by repeating the information: “Barnabas went home abowt 2 or 3 o’clock, he lay not at my howse now; he went, I say, on Thursday, and Mr. Clerkson came.” At nine o’clock the same night, there was a wonderful exhibition of the aurora in the northern and eastern heavens, which Dee

describes minutely in Latin in the diary. The next day, March 9, he mentions Clerkson's friend by name as "Mr. Talbot," and shows how that individual appears to have begun ingratiating himself with his new patron by telling him what a bad man his predecessor was. Barnabas had said that Dee would mock at the new medium; Barnabas had "cosened" both Clerkson and Dee. This, Talbot professed to have been told by "a spiritual creature." The pair proceeded at once to business. On the 10th, they sat down to gaze into "my stone in a frame given me of a friend," with very remarkable results. Information was vouchsafed that they should jointly together have knowledge of the angels, if the will of God, viz., conjunction of mind and prayer between them, be performed. They were bidden to "abuse not this excellency nor overshadow it with vanity, but stick firmly, absolutely and perfectly in the love of God for his honour, together." There were forty-nine good angels, all their names beginning with B, who were to be answerable to their call. The first entry that Dee makes in his Book of Mysteries concerning Talbot is as follows: —

"One Mr. Edward Talbot cam to my howse, and he being willing and desyrous to see or shew something in spirituall practise, wold have had me to have done something therein. And I truely excused myself therein: as not, in the vulgarly accountd magik, neyther studied or exercised. But confessed myself long tyme to have byn desyrous to have help in my philosophicall studies through the cumpany and information of the blessed Angels of God. And thereuppon, I brought furth to him my stone in the frame (which was given me of a frende), and I sayd unto him that I was credibly informed that to it (after a sort) were answerable Aliqui Angeli boni. And also that I was once willed by a skryer to call for the good Angel Annael to appere in that stone in my owne sight. And therefore I desyred him to call him, and (if he would) Anachor and Anilos likewise, accounted good angels, for I was not prepared thereto.

"He [Talbot] settled himself to the Action, and on his knees at my desk, setting the stone before him, fell to prayer and entreaty, etc. In the mean space, I in my Oratory did pray and make motion to God and his good creatures for the furthering of this Action. And within one quarter of an hour (or less) he had sight of one in the stone."

The one to appear was Uriel, the Spirit of Light. On the 14th, the angel Michael appeared, and gave Dee a ring with a seal. Only on two other occasions does a tangible object pass between them. Dee was overjoyed at the success of his new "speculator" or "skryer"; the sittings were daily conducted until March 21, when the medium was overcome with faintness and giddiness, and Michael, who was conversing with him, bade them rest and wait for a quarter of an hour. The next day, Talbot departed from Mortlake, being bidden by Michael to go fetch some books of Lord Monteagle's which were at Lancaster, or thereby, and which would else perish.

He returned before long, and all through April, instructions were being given at the sittings for the future revelations. elaborate preparations were needed, and they were described in minute detail.

By April 29, a square table, "the table of practice," was complete. It was made of sweet wood, and was about two cubits high ("by two cubits I mean our usual yard"), with four legs. On its sides certain characters, as revealed, were to be written

with sacred yellow oil, such as is used in chruches. Each leg was to be set upon a seal of wax made in the same pattern as the larger seal, "Sigilla AEmeth," which was to be placed upon the centre of the table, this seal to be made of perfect, that is, clean purified wax, 9 inches in diameter, 27 inches or more in circumference. It was to be an inch and half a quarter of an inch thick, and upon the under-side was to be a figure as below.

It was a mystical sign, similar to those in use in the East, and also used by contemporary astrologers

[INSERT ILLUSTRATION]

The four letters in the centre are the initials of the Hebrew words, "Thou art great for ever, O Lord," which were considered a charm in the Middle Ages.

The upper side of the seal was engraved with an elaborate figure obtained in the following manner. First, a table of forty-nine squares was drawn and filled up with the seven names of God — "names not known to the angels, neither can they be spoken or read of man. These names bring forth seven angels, the governors of the heavens next unto us. Every letter of the angels' names bringeth forth seven daughters. Every daughter bringeth forth seven daughters. Every daughter her daughter bringeth forth a son. Every son hath his son."

The seal "was not to be looked upon without great reverence and devotion."

It is extremely curious and interesting to relate that two of these tablets of wax, "Sigillum Dei," and one of the smaller seals for the feet of the table, with a crystal globe, all formerly belonging to Dee, are still preserved in the British Museum, having come there from Sir Thomas Cotton's library, where the table of practice was also long preserved.

The spirits were kind enough to say: "We have no respect of cullours," but the table was to be set upon a square of red silk as changeable (i.e., shot) as may be, two yards square, and a red silk cover, with "knops or tassels" at the four corners, was to be laid over the seal, and to hang below the edge of the table. The crystal globe in its frame was then to be set upon the centre of the cover, resting on the seal with the silk between.

The skryer seated himself in "the green chair" at the table, Dee at his desk to write down the conversations. These were noted by him then and there at the time, and he is careful to particularise any remark or addition told him by the Ckryer afterwards. Once a spirit tells him: "There is time enough, and we may take leisure." Whereupon Dee conversed directly with the visitant; sometimes apparently only Talbot hears and repeats to him what is said. A golden curtain was usually first seen in the stone, and occasionally there was a long pause before it was withdrawn. Once Dee writes: "He taketh the darkness and wrappeth it up, and casteth it into the middle of the earthen globe." The spirits generally appeared in the stone, but sometimes they stept down into a dazzling beam of light from it, and moved about the room. On some occasions a voice only is heard. At the close of the action, the "black cloth of silence is drawn," and they leave off for the present.

There are very few comments or general impressions of the actions left by Dee, but on one occasion he does use expressions that show his analytical powers to have been actively at work to account for the phenomena. He brought his reason to bear upon the means of communication with the unseen world in a remarkable

manner. In speaking to the angels one day he said: "I do think you have no organs or Instruments apt for voyce, but are meere spirituall and nothing corporall, but have the power and property from God to insinuate your message or meaning to ear or eye [so that] man's imagination shall be that they hear and see you sensibly."

As Plotinus says, "Not everything which is in the soul is now sensible, but it arrives to us when it proceeds as far as sense."

The minute descriptions of the figures seen are of course characteristic of clairvoyant or mediumistic visions. In the case of Bobogel, the account of his "sage and grave" attire — the common dress of a serious gentleman of the time — may be quoted.

"They that now come in are jolly fellows, all trymmed after the manner of Nobilities now-a-dayes, with gylt rapiers and curled haire, and they bragged up and downe. Bobogel standeth in a black velvet coat, and his hose, close round hose of velvet upperstocks, over layd with gold lace. He hath a velvet hat cap with a black feather in it, with a cape on one of his shoulders; his purse hanging at his neck, and so put under his girdell. His beard long. He had pantoffolls and pynsons. Seven others are apparelled like Bobogel, sagely and gravely."